



National Coordinator for Security and  
Counterterrorism  
*Ministry of Justice and Security*

# Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 51

December 2019

## Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

*Radicalisation - Extremism - Terrorism*



Current threat level:  
**Significant**



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# 1. Threat level

On the basis of DTN51, the current threat level is 'significant' (level 3). At the time of publication of the previous threat assessment in June 2019, the threat level was 'substantial' (level 4). There remains a significant terrorist threat, as a number of incidents and arrests, including several in the Netherlands, have shown. A terrorist attack is therefore conceivable. The most likely scenario is an attack by a lone actor or a small group, with jihadist or other extremist motives.

There is still a jihadist movement in the Netherlands, comprising individuals and possibly small groups that pose a terrorist threat. For instance, on 25 November 2019 two men from Zoetermeer were arrested on suspicion of preparing a terrorist attack. It is also conceivable that the Netherlands could be the target of an attack planned from abroad by ISIS or al Qa'ida. However, there are no firm indications of this at the present time.

### Attacks

Jihadist attacks are still being carried out sporadically in Europe. Attacks are also being prevented. But in terms of the severity and scope of the attacks, the situation is different from the 2015-2017 period. Several European countries suffered attacks during those years, while in the Netherlands things remained peaceful in that period. By contrast, it was 2018 that proved to be a significant year for jihadist or suspected jihadist attacks in this country. And on 18 March 2019 there was a suspected terrorist attack in Utrecht which killed four people. This attack might have been inspired by jihadist motives.

### Right-wing extremism

There are concerns in Dutch society about the threat of right-wing extremism. These concerns arose after the right-wing terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand and were heightened by subsequent cypcat attacks in the United States (El Paso) and Europe (Oslo and Halle). However, these concerns are not a true reflection of the actual threat. The far-right movement in the Netherlands is small, fragmented and almost entirely non-violent. But in the Netherlands too there is a risk that a lone right-wing extremist or a violent cypcat could be inspired by an attack like the one in Christchurch.

### Returnees

The developments in northern Syria following Turkey's offensive may increase the threat posed by ISIS in the longer term. There is a chance that ISIS will make use of this opportunity to regroup. ISIS members could also escape from detention and clandestinely return to Western Europe, where they could pose a threat. These are individuals who spent years with ISIS and continued to fight with the group until it was militarily defeated. It can be assumed that most of these returnees have not renounced ISIS's violent ideology and that they have experience with weapons, explosives and extreme violence. They could continue to pose a threat in the longer term, even if they serve a prison sentence after their return.

### Level 3

Threat level 3 has existed since 2016, when a new five-level system was introduced (see addendum). The threat level is an assessment of the current situation and how that situation is likely to evolve. The current situation of continuing terrorist threat is in keeping with level 3: the threat of terrorism in the Netherlands is still significant. Level 4 reflects a more acute situation, in which there is a heightened likelihood of an attack occurring in the Netherlands.



## 2. The terrorist threat to the Netherlands



The main terrorist threat continues to be posed by jihadists, particularly ISIS supporters. The Dutch jihadist movement, which lacks charismatic leaders, is reorienting itself amid pressure from the authorities. However, the presence of jihadists in the Netherlands continues to pose a threat. As stated in DTN50, in 2018 and 2019 there have been, by Dutch standards, an unprecedented number of incidents that may be connected to jihadism. These incidents include not only a number of planned (but prevented) attacks, but also an actual attack in Utrecht. The suspect is thought to have had terrorist, possibly jihadist motives. The arrest on 25 November 2019 of two suspects from Zoetermeer reaffirms the conceivable threat posed by the Dutch jihadist movement. They are alleged to have been planning an attack with bomb vests and one or more car bombs. So far the police investigation has not yet discovered what the intended target was. No weapons or explosives were found when the suspects were arrested.

### **Dutch jihadist movement**

The jihadist movement in the Netherlands consists of over 500 people who support the jihadist-Salafist ideology. In addition there are more than 150 people with a connection to the Netherlands living in Syria or neighbouring countries, who travelled there previously with jihadist intentions. The movement in the Netherlands is a dynamic collection of individuals and networks with no hierarchy and little structure. There are few charismatic leaders and only a limited number of people who act as a driving force.

### **Government measures proving effective**

For several years now, the jihadist movement has only seldom engaged in any public activity. Various networks are struggling to establish a lasting presence. Some jihadists are reluctant to place themselves in the spotlight by carrying out activities or taking a leadership role, for fear of attracting too much attention from the authorities. The measures taken by the government are having an increasing effect on the movement. Repressive measures in particular, such as arrests and convictions, electronic ankle tags, restraining orders and exclusion orders disrupt jihadists' contacts and activities, especially in the short term. The pressure from the authorities threatens their cohesion and effectiveness, and may also reduce the appeal of jihadism to potential new supporters. There are potential unintended side effects of the pressure exerted by the authorities, such as the possible further radicalisation of certain jihadists, the avoidance of contact with the

authorities by jihadists and their families, and the negative effects of terrorist detention.

### **Arrests disrupt Dutch-language pro-ISIS online landscape**

Official ISIS propaganda has become less conspicuous in the online world of Dutch jihadists. The volume of material has declined, as has its accessibility. This is partly because ISIS itself is producing far less propaganda, and partly because its distribution has been disrupted by arrests.

#### **Dutch jihadists propagate theological or political message online.**

Dutch jihadists who are active online use language that is often not recognisable as jihadist to the uninitiated. Most online initiatives by Dutch jihadists avoid any direct reference to ISIS and instead are mainly concerned with spreading self-produced, easily accessible content which is predominantly theological in nature. Sometimes this content is more orthodox; other times, it has a much more political thrust. Some of these online jihadist initiatives, such as ‘Talab al-’Ilm’ and ‘Onze Religie Publicaties’, were set up fairly recently, but others, like ‘ahl as-Soennah Publicaties’, have been in existence for years. With their accessible, politicised message, jihadist-oriented initiatives such as ‘Content 4 Muslims’, ‘Tegen Boerkaverbod’ and ‘Al-risâlah’ reach thousands of followers on mainstream social media like Facebook. Pages like these refer not only to the ideas of prominent international jihadist ideologists, but frequently also to Dutch-language lectures and comments by Dutch Salafist preachers such as Fouad el Bouch, alias Abou Hafs, and Abdul-Jabbar van de Ven. Comments and lectures by Fouad Belkacem, the currently detained leader of Sharia4Belgium, are also regularly disseminated by these initiatives. In Dutch jihadist circles, these preachers are afforded a certain amount of esteem and legitimacy, as are certain social and educational initiatives and institutions, such as the El Tawheed Mosque in Amsterdam and Eindhovense Moslim Jongeren.

### **Progress in criminal cases**

The higher number of incidents in 2018 and 2019 has led to several court cases in which jihadists have been brought to trial. On 19 August 2019 a pro forma hearing took place in the case of the Arnhem cell (arrests of 27 September 2018). The Public Prosecution Service announced that the members of the cell had sufficient quantities of fertiliser and chemicals in

their possession to make half a kilo of explosives. The suspects' mental health is yet to be assessed, and the merits of the case will not be heard until mid-2020. The person suspected of carrying out the attack in Utrecht on 18 March 2019 also appeared in court, at an initial pro forma hearing on 1 July 2019. The Public Prosecution Service has a 'strong indication' that he acted with terrorist intentions, based on two handwritten texts and on the nature of the attack. This suspect will also undergo a psychological assessment.

On 23 July two returnees, Reda N. and Oussama A., were sentenced to four-and-a-half years and six-and-a-half years in prison, respectively. The latter was convicted not only of participating in a terrorist organisation and engaging in preparatory acts for a terrorist offence, but also of committing a war crime: the dissemination of a photo in which he posed beside a crucified man. Another returnee from Syria, Maseh N., was given a lower sentence: three years in prison. In his case the court took into account the fact that he had left Syria voluntarily and renounced ISIS's ideology. The Public Prosecution Service has demanded five-year prison sentences in the case of three suspects from West-Brabant on trial for preparing a terrorist attack. Jawed S., the man who stabbed two people at Amsterdam Central Station on 31 August 2018, was sentenced on 14 October 2019 to 26 years in prison on two counts of attempted murder with terrorist motives. Lastly, on 18 November Junaid I. was sentenced to 10 years in prison for preparing to commit murder with terrorist motives. S. and I. are extremist Muslims from Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively, though they are not known to be linked to the jihadist movement. Both planned their acts as revenge for the Mohammed cartoon competition that Geert Wilders had been intending to organise in autumn 2018. I. was arrested before he could proceed with any act of violence.

## **Mental health of terrorism suspects**

In various recent terrorism cases there has been some discussion about the mental state of the perpetrators or suspected perpetrators and whether their acts should indeed be considered terrorism. In the case of Malek F., who stabbed several people in The Hague on Liberation Day in 2018, the court held that there was no terrorist motive and that the perpetrator's actions were the result of a psychotic disorder. It was said that his radical and extremist thoughts 'were prompted' by his paranoid psychosis. Experts believe that in many cases it is impossible to draw a binary distinction

between ‘true terrorists’ and people suffering from a mental disorder. Instead they hold that multiple motives may underlie a decision to carry out an attack.

Detained terrorists influence each other and form new networks

Previous DTNs have discussed the advantages and risks of the Dutch system of terrorist detention. The fact that terrorist detention is limited to only two facilities, in Vught and Rotterdam, prevents jihadists from recruiting more people. However, in these two facilities, prisoners exert a negative influence on each other and networks are formed that remain relevant after individuals’ release. These new networks may strengthen the jihadist movement in the Netherlands in the short or long term. The new connections could also galvanise existing networks or give rise to jihadist networks abroad that pose a threat to the Netherlands. Moreover, prisons can be a place where attacks are planned, or even be the target of an attack.

### **Dutch jihadist travellers**

Despite the developments in northern Syria, the numbers of jihadist travellers from the Netherlands (as recorded by the AIVD) remain virtually unchanged. The number of jihadist travellers to Syria/Iraq remains at around 300; the number of returnees is around 60. Little is known about the few dozen Dutch jihadist travellers who may still be with ISIS in Syria and Iraq. It is unclear whether they have a combat role in ISIS’s insurgency there. Some of the Dutch jihadist travellers are in the Idlib region and may have joined al Qa’ida affiliate HTS. After a period of renewed violence due to an offensive by the Syrian regime, since the end of August the situation has grown calmer following a truce. Until recently the several dozen Dutch jihadist travellers and their children were able to live their lives in that region in relative peace. They could however become displaced in the coming months if a new Syrian offensive were to start.

### **Situation in Syrian detention camps**

As far as is known, no Dutch jihadist travellers have escaped from detention as a result of the recent developments in northern Syria since the beginning of the Turkish military operation in October 2019. Many details have emerged recently about the deterioration of the security situation, particularly in the al-Hol (or al-Hawl) reception camp, where ISIS’s influence is growing. The poor security situation in the camps enables ISIS to exert significant influence on the people living there. The number of guards is

said to be insufficient to keep the large number of detained women under control: there are 400 guards and thousands of women. There is a part of the camp housing the female foreign jihadist travellers – renamed ‘Mount Baghuz’ (the place where ISIS was militarily defeated) – where allegedly no guards have set foot in three months. A recent attempt to search this part of the camp for weapons almost led to a massive and violent uprising. The presence of firearms in the camp is already a fact. Meanwhile there is rising discontent – and anger – among the women regarding the humanitarian situation. The more radical women are said to be imposing ‘caliphate’ norms on other women in the camps, in some cases through violence. The number of violent murders in the camps has risen recently, including the murder of Iraqi and Syrian detainees and civilians by foreign fighters. Violence against guards is also on the rise. It has proven relatively easy for women to escape the camps or to have money or goods smuggled into the camps. As the humanitarian situation deteriorates, the risk increases that more women will attempt to escape or to leave the camps in other ways. In an audio message of 16 September 2019 former ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called on followers to liberate detained ISIS supporters. The fate of jihadist prisoners – in the Netherlands and elsewhere – continues to be a frequent topic of discussion on Dutch jihadist online platforms.

### Threat posed by returnees

On 22 November The Hague Court of Appeal ruled that the government is not required to make an active effort to bring 56 children of ISIS women to the Netherlands. As a result, it is unlikely that a large group of women and children will come to the Netherlands from Syria in the near future. On 19 November two female jihadist travellers returned to the Netherlands via Turkey. One of them was being held in aliens detention in Turkey and returned in accordance with existing policy, escorted by the Royal Military and Border Police. The other woman was expelled to the Netherlands by Turkey with her two children after her Dutch nationality had been revoked on 30 October 2019.

As described in earlier DTNs, future returnees may pose a threat. In many cases they will have spent a considerable amount of time in terrorist groups and gained combat experience. Often they will have been exposed to extreme violence and instructed in the jihadist ideology of violence. It is also likely that they will have gained experience in the use of weapons and

explosives. Female jihadists also pose a potential violent threat. There are a number of known cases of women who were involved in threatened attacks in Europe. In addition, women in jihadist networks pose an indirect threat. For instance, they can carry out support tasks, indoctrinate their children with jihadist ideology, raise money for the jihadist struggle and produce and disseminate propaganda. There are no recent examples of women being involved in planning attacks in the Netherlands. Jihadist women in this country mainly pose an indirect threat. There are no indications that any women who might return in the future would differ significantly from the jihadist women already in the Netherlands, in terms of the direct violent threat they pose. However, some women could serve to bolster the movement – particularly after having spent time in detention – on account of their experiences in Syria, the status this confers on them, long-term indoctrination and exposure to violence. Other women, by contrast, may end up renouncing jihadism, precisely because of their negative experiences. Returnees – whether male or female – will be arrested and prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service, which means they will spend time in detention before returning to society. If Dutch jihadist travellers remain in detention or reception camps in Syria, this may also pose risks to security, including that of the Netherlands. Under these circumstances new terrorist networks could form. Given the uncertain situation in northern Syria, it is conceivable that both male and female jihadist travellers could escape or be freed. They could then rejoin terrorist organisations, and there will likely be less oversight and control over their activities. They could also return to the Netherlands under the radar.

## Terrorist financing

### Possible link between care fraud and terrorism

A noticeable increase in reports of unusual transactions involving healthcare institutions, home care organisations and various forms of personal budgets prompted the Dutch Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) to conduct a further investigation in 2018. The FIU has since identified more than 250 transactions involving healthcare funds on the part of persons who may be connected to terrorist financing. Some of these transactions entail large cash withdrawals by healthcare institution staff members. Such transactions are considered unusual by banks, and they may point to healthcare funds being used as a source of terrorist financing. If the FIU

suspects a criminal offence, the cases are handed over to the relevant investigative authority.

### Six arrests for terrorist financing

In early November, six men were arrested in the Netherlands and Belgium as part of an international investigation into terrorist financing. They are suspected of having handed money to ISIS fighters or associates in Turkey and Syria in 2013 and 2014. The money was allegedly raised by a foundation for the purpose of 'providing aid to war victims'. It is thought that the foundation raised at least €200,000 in donations in the Netherlands, through events and fundraisers. More than €130,000 in cash is thought to have been withdrawn and taken to Syria by the suspects. The rest of the money is believed to have been used to pay for travel costs, and one of the suspects is thought to have transferred part of the money to another foundation, linked to him. He is therefore also suspected of embezzlement. The investigation was prompted by an AIVD official report in spring of 2018.

### Fundraising for ISIS women in Syrian camps

There are fundraising initiatives on the instant messaging platform Telegram for female relatives of ISIS fighters and their children who are in Kurdish detention camps in Syria. As these people might be jihadist travellers, this could fall under terrorist financing.

## Right-wing terrorism

A right-wing terrorist attack in the Netherlands by a lone actor is conceivable. This assessment is mainly based on the possibility that a Dutch lone actor could become radicalised (online) and commit an act of violence inspired by right-wing extremism. Right-wing extremist groups in the Netherlands are marginal and non-violent. Right-wing terrorist violence in other European countries does not automatically lead to attacks in the Netherlands.

### Risk of copycat attacks following Christchurch

The perpetrators of attacks in El Paso, Oslo and – most recently – Halle, were strongly inspired by the right-wing terrorist attacks by Brenton Tarrant in Christchurch. The danger of copycat behaviour following the attacks in New Zealand, as noted in DTN50, has thus become a real risk. Like Tarrant, both the attacker in El Paso (20 deaths) and the attacker in Oslo announced their

attacks on an international online forum. They too evoked ‘replacement theory’ – a popular notion in right-wing extremist circles – to justify their right-wing terrorist attacks. The premise of this theory is that a major demographic shift is taking place in the Western world, whereby the European population is being ‘replaced’ due to increasing migration as a result of deliberate policy decisions on the part of the political elite. It is striking that, in addition to traditional right-wing themes, the manifestos of the Christchurch and El Paso attackers also contained elements that are often seen as ‘leftist’, such as criticism of the international private sector and a focus on ecology. The latter is, however, also an element of right-wing extremist ideology. Dutch people are also active on online forums such as 4chan, 8kun and Endchan where, alongside a wide variety of other content, a great deal of right-wing extremist content is shared. In the Netherlands, too, there are signs of right-wing extremist radicalisation. It is partly for this reason that it cannot be ruled out that a Dutch lone actor may become radicalised, online or offline, and commit an act of terrorism.





### 3. Threat to the West

## Attacks

In the period under review, the jihadist terrorist threat to Europe has scarcely resulted in any attacks. In late June there was an incident in a French prison which the authorities qualified as attempted murder with terrorist intent. There was also a possible terrorist attack, carried out by a perpetrator who is thought to have acted alone: a police employee stabbed four colleagues to death in Paris on 3 October 2019. On 29 November a jihadist killed two people in London. He was subsequently overpowered on London Bridge and killed by the police. Various parties – whether ISIS, al Qa’ida or loosely affiliated supporters – still possess the will to carry out attacks. This threat has mainly been visible due to several thwarted attacks in recent months.

## Arrests

Various people were arrested in Europe on suspicion of preparing acts of terrorism. Several were arrested in the United Kingdom, and in Belgium one person was arrested on suspicion of preparing an attack on the US embassy. In late July six persons were arrested in Germany; the two main suspects are still detained. During those arrests explosives were said to have been found, as well as knives. In France, two prisoners and one ex-prisoner were suspected of preparing attacks. The police found homemade weapons in the prisoners’ cells. In Sweden a man from Kazakhstan was arrested on suspicion of preparing an attack on a large shopping centre in Stockholm.

## Potential attackers continue to receive instructions via the internet

Potential attackers are still being directed by ISIS supporters online. An example is a 16-year-old Bulgarian who was inspired by ISIS and planned an attack. He was given detailed instructions while making preparations, and was able to produce large quantities of explosives aided by publicly accessible videos.

## Threat to Europe posed by al Qa'ida

Besides ISIS, al Qa'ida and its various affiliates continue to seek to carry out attacks targeting Europe, and thus possibly also the Netherlands. Al Qa'ida has bases of operations in Syria and other countries, facilitation networks in Turkey and other countries, and networks of supporters in most Western countries.

## Threat of right-wing extremism in Europe

In the period under review, various acts of extremist violence were committed outside the Netherlands with right-wing extremist motives: a political murder with right-wing extremist motives in Kassel (Germany), an attack with right-wing extremist motives in El Paso (US), a failed attack by a right-wing extremist terrorist in Oslo (Norway), and a failed attack on a synagogue and two murders by a right-wing extremist terrorist in Halle (Germany). These attacks should first and foremost be viewed in a local and national context. In recent years, the European Union and the United States have seen an increase in right-wing extremist violence. However, broadly speaking, the threat posed by violent right-wing extremism in Europe can be considered to be low. As several right-wing terrorist attacks have been carried out by people who were inspired by the Christchurch attacker, his pamphlet or similar ideologies (online and offline), it is conceivable that more copycat attacks could follow in the period ahead.



## 4. International developments

## ISIS leader al-Baghdadi killed

The death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a US army operation on 27 October 2019 is a major setback for ISIS. Many ISIS supporters had sworn an oath of allegiance to the so-called ‘caliph’. However, the consequences of al-Baghdadi’s death for ISIS should not be overestimated. ISIS will not disappear. The group may have lost its leading figure, but ISIS’s underground jihadist struggle in its heartland (Syria and Iraq) continues. It is possible that individual ISIS supporters will seize on his death as an opportunity to take revenge and carry out attacks.

## ISIS in Syria and Iraq

ISIS may use the developments in northern Syria to its advantage. Due to Turkey’s offensive in October 2019 and the withdrawal of the United States’ forces, the Kurdish SDF/YPG militants have lost their hold on northern Syria. This has led to an amorphous situation in a large part of this region, which may give ISIS the opportunity to regroup. Members could also escape from detention and clandestinely return to Western Europe, where they could pose a threat.

Following its military defeat, ISIS is continuing its fight underground in Iraq and Syria and regularly carries out attacks in both countries. However, campaigns to ramp up the number of attacks have only been intermittently successful due to the constant military pressure on the group.

## ISIS turns its focus to Turkey

An ISIS video released on 10 July 2019 shows members pledging their allegiance to al-Baghdadi on behalf of the ‘province of Turkey’ (‘Wilayah Turkey’). The video also contains threats to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The emergence of this ‘province’ is a relatively recent development. ISIS first referred to the ‘province’ in late April 2019 in a video featuring al-Baghdadi. The video from July is the first to be released from within the ‘province’. The establishment of the ‘province’ shows that ISIS is focusing more on Turkey. It remains unclear whether the new ‘province’ and the explicit threats to Erdoğan in the video will herald new ISIS attacks in Turkey. Recent developments in northern Syria in the wake of Turkey’s offensive may affect ISIS’s orientation as regards Turkey, although how is not yet clear.

## ISIS active in southern Caucasus

ISIS is working to gain a foothold in the southern, Asian part of the Caucasus. As part of a propaganda campaign in which ISIS 'provinces' throughout the 'caliphate' swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi, a video was released on 2 July suggesting that ISIS also has a presence in Azerbaijan. Recently, ISIS supporters from Azerbaijan and Georgia have travelled to Syria and Iraq. ISIS is probably using these networks to gain influence in the strategically situated southern part of the Caucasus.

## ISIS and al Qa'ida in southern Asia

In Afghanistan ISIS continues to carry out attacks, often claiming large numbers of victims. There are growing rumours concerning ISIS Khorasan's ambitions to follow the lead of ISIS in Syria and direct or carry out attacks outside the region. Indonesia arrested a terrorist suspect believed to be a member of a cell whose leader was likely involved with ISIS in Afghanistan. In the US too, suspects were arrested who were thought to have links with ISIS Khorasan.

Despite the outcome of the talks between the US and the Taliban and confirmation by the US of the death of Hamza bin Laden, al Qa'ida is still a significant factor in Afghanistan. This is not due to its size, which is limited, but rather to the influential position the group occupies in the multifaceted terrorist landscape in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al Qa'ida's strong links with the Taliban also play an important role. Al Qa'ida still sees Afghanistan as a safe haven for its leadership. At the same time, the Taliban are not distancing themselves from al Qa'ida and continue to celebrate attacks like 9/11 in their propaganda.





## 5. Extremism, radicalisation and polarisation

## Right-wing extremism

Offline the Dutch right-wing extremist scene is characterised by fragmentation, weak leadership, personal animosity and the absence of a consistent organisational structure. Far-right and right-wing extremist organisations in the Netherlands together have a few hundred members. The right-wing extremist movement, which is almost entirely non-violent, encompasses a range of ideologies, including neo-Nazism, the counter-jihad movement and identitarianism. The scene is increasingly under the sway of the alt-right and its white identity politics. Although the right-wing extremist movement is fragmented, links do exist between individuals and organisations.

## Right-wing extremism online

During the mass influx of refugees into Europe in 2015 and 2016, the Netherlands witnessed a huge increase in right-wing extremist content online. This was especially evident on the social media pages of several right-wing extremist and far-right activist groups, such as Pegida, Identitair Verzet, NVU, Erkenbrand and Voorpost, which are primarily active on the major platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The growth in right-wing extremist content on these groups' websites has all but stagnated over the past few years, as has the brief uptick in the number of online followers.

Dutch right-wing extremists are currently also more active internationally outside far-right and right-wing extremist groups, and this is where they are looking for right-wing extremist content. They are using alternative social media platforms as a back-up or substitute for the major, mainstream platforms or in addition to these platforms. Alternative forums, platforms and chat apps are less restrictive than Facebook, Twitter and Google when it comes to extremist or violent content. They include 4chan, 8kun (formerly 8chan), Endchan, various gaming forums, Gab (an alternative to Twitter), Minds and VKontakte (VK) (as alternatives to Facebook), Telegram (as an alternative to WhatsApp) and BitChute (as an alternative to YouTube). However, these alternative platforms are also coming under increasing social and political pressure to remove right-wing extremist content. To achieve the greatest possible reach, most Dutch far-right and right-wing extremist activist groups are also active on the major platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram.

Influenced by social media, right-wing extremist ideology is reaching an international community online. Right-wing extremists from many, mainly Western countries maintain contact with one another via international web forums or chat apps, such as the above-mentioned 4chan, 8kun, Endchan and Telegram. The media and the authorities have tightened their focus on platforms like these in the wake of the Christchurch attacks. The attacker used these forums to publish his manifesto so that it could be read by as many like-

minded people as possible. There is an ongoing discourse on these forums that encourages and glorifies violence. A fascination for computer games and weapons is also evident. Users often share memes – ‘humorous’ images promoting racism, homophobia, misogyny, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Many worship right-wing terrorists like Christchurch attacker Brenton Tarrant and Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in attacks in Norway in 2011, and they often quote Hitler and Nazi ideology. These international, primarily English-language platforms can fuel rapid radicalisation and violence. It is clear that Dutch right-wing extremists are active on these forums and apps, but the sheer quantity of messages and their fast turnover makes it difficult to get a full picture of the Dutch presence. The forums are easily accessible and members can remain anonymous: registration is not necessary and users can hide their location.

### **Pegida’s ‘repeat activism’**

Small far-right and right-wing extremist groups continue to demonstrate and engage in intimidating and radical activities at asylum seekers centres and mosques. This sparks anti-fascist and left-wing extremist reactions, such as counterdemonstrations. In confrontations between the two sides, it would appear that left-wing extremists are still more likely to turn violent than their right-wing extremist counterparts. Far-right and right-wing extremist demonstrations and other activities continue to cause concern and unrest in Muslim communities. It is interesting to note that on 15 June Turkish Muslims were present at a Moroccan mosque in Eindhoven where a dozen activists from the far-right, anti-Islam group Pegida were handing out flyers in a manner designed to provoke a reaction. Pegida frontman Edwin Wagensveld was attacked by a number of counterdemonstrators. With its ‘repeat activism’, carrying out small-scale demonstrations again and again, his activist group can achieve maximum polarisation of a group of Muslims using minimal resources, generating significant media attention.

### **Kick Out Black Pete meeting attacked**

Standing up for aspects of a children’s celebration like St Nicholas Day can lead to public violence, as was the case during a meeting in The Hague on the evening of Friday 9 November. The background of the dozens of Black Pete supporters who violently disrupted a meeting of the group Kick Out Black Pete (KOZP) is still unknown. This attack cannot be viewed in isolation from the anger directed by disgruntled members of the public towards the

municipality of The Hague which, in line with the national St Nicholas parade, had proposed having only Pete characters with soot marks instead of the traditional black-faced Petes at the local parade. Two days before the violent attack these plans had already led to a heated demonstration in Scheveningen, where hundreds of people had gathered to express their unwillingness to give up their traditions, like New Year's Eve bonfires, Christmas and Black Pete. Leaving aside the local aspect of the protest, the violence clearly illustrates the hatred that opponents of the traditional St Nicholas celebrations trigger among a group of mostly white Dutch people. Given that a small group of anti-Black Pete activists have pledged to continue calling for Black Pete to be banished from all parades in the coming years, it seems unlikely that appeals for moderation and reason will lessen the polarisation surrounding this cultural battle. Since 2018, additional unrest has been caused by the presence of football hooligans at various parades.

### **Left-wing extremism and climate activism**

Unlike the fragmented and marginally organised far-right and right-wing extremist groups in the Netherlands, activists on the left of the spectrum manage to work together on various themes, such as the climate. The fervour of protest movements abroad, especially in the United Kingdom and Germany, where thousands of people have taken to the streets, has swept into the Dutch climate activism landscape. These protests have inspired several hundred people to join the movement in the Netherlands in an attempt to raise political and social awareness of the urgency of climate measures by lawful means, such as demonstrations. These new activists are mainly students (including some from abroad) and young people who are becoming politically active for the first time. Activist movements are now also engaging in what they refer to as non-violent civil disobedience. Large-scale blockades by Extinction Rebellion in Amsterdam during an international week of protests beginning on 7 October 2019 show how such movements condemn violence but are nevertheless prepared to disrupt public order, break the law and be arrested.

For many years now, known Dutch activists in left-wing extremist, animal rights and climate protection circles have been maintaining contact with activists in other countries both online and off. This has led to international campaigns in the Netherlands, such as the occupation of a pig farm in

Boxtel last May. It is thought that foreign activists take a harder line than their Dutch counterparts, blurring the boundary between lawful activism and extremism. Sixty-seven people, mostly from abroad, appeared in court for their role in the campaign. At the same time, Dutch activists have taken part in campaigns in other countries. In a new development, certain left-wing extremist activist groups that used to focus on other areas – such as anti-fascism and asylum and immigration policy – are adopting the narrative and strategy of climate activism groups. Although left-wing extremist groups take part in climate protests and lawful resistance, to a limited extent they also continue to pursue a more covert, extremist *modus operandi*, for example by engaging in sabotage.

### Response to ‘burka ban’

So far the ban on face coverings in certain public spaces – popularly referred to as the ‘burka ban’ – has mainly had a mobilising effect online. Shortly before the ban came into force on 1 August 2019, social media interest in the new regulations suddenly surged following a report in the *Algemeen Dagblad* newspaper in which a spokesperson for the Public Prosecution Service confirmed that citizen’s arrests of nikab wearers were permitted. A tweet by Freedom Party (PVV) leader Geert Wilders (818,000 followers) expressing sympathy for such initiatives led to online tensions between supporters and opponents of the new law, with some right-wing populist social media pages hinting at the possibility of citizen’s arrests and other ways that members of the public might take the law into their own hands. In response to this, jihadists and Salafists mounted a number of online and offline initiatives, such as setting up neighbourhood watch groups. On the day the ban was introduced, a threat to the Netherlands was posted on the pro-ISIS channel *GreenBirds*. Jihadists also made threats against Geert Wilders. However, there are no indications that the people behind these messages pose a real threat.

A few nikab wearers decided to protest the ban by travelling in nikab on public transport. The online dynamics did not lead to a large turnout at demonstrations against or in favour of the burka ban. Although right-wing populist and right-wing extremist online forums hinted at people taking the law into their own hands to enforce the new legislation, the general public have so far not shown much willingness to act. In the weeks following the launch of the ban, Salafists and jihadists continued to

mobilise Muslims online, for example by using the internet to expose people who had allegedly been harassing nikab wearers. Partly because the national government and local authorities have no uniform narrative about the importance of enforcing the law, it remains a topic that can cause strong polarisation in Dutch society. Extremist forces on both sides (Salafist-jihadist and right-wing extremist) will continue to seize on this issue to raise their respective profiles. That said, the ban on face covering affects few people directly due to the tiny number of nikab wearers in the Netherlands (around 200). The polarised landscape both online and offline means that an incident in a public space could become a problem that escalates beyond a matter of public order and ignites a broader ideological debate.

### **Anti-government sentiment plays role in protests against policy**

Recently, strong anti-government sentiment has played a role in various, sometimes large-scale protests against certain government policies. Examples include demonstrations by farmers and construction workers. Known extremist groups have been attempting to link up with the protesters at these events, albeit with little success. Similar anti-government sentiment was apparent at earlier protests against the construction of wind farms. Although most local activist groups protest in a peaceful and legal manner, in recent years resistance has taken on extremist forms in Groningen and Drenthe, including sending threatening letters to people and dumping asbestos. Multiple arrests have been made in these cases. Activists from varying backgrounds are bound not by ideological convictions, but rather by personal interests, local 'Not In My Backyard' (NIMBY) sentiments and troubled relations between the authorities and the general public. A perceived lack of dialogue and concern for public interests fuels anti-government sentiment and reinforces the urge to organise resistance through alternative channels, taking a bottom-up approach.

## Salafism

### Salafist influences on informal education

In response to a section in the annual report of the AIVD about ‘radical influences in education’, the NRC newspaper and the current affairs programme Nieuwsuur investigated Salafist influences on informal, out-of-school education and on formal education. In a broadcast on 10 September 2019 and in news stories about non-formal education, Nieuwsuur and NRC confirmed a number of worrisome elements and developments already identified by the AIVD and the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV). The most troubling of these is that of Salafist agitators systematically spreading intolerant, anti-integrationist and anti-democratic ideas among children and young people in out-of-school religious education. In practice this means that an unknown number of Dutch children are learning from an early age that Muslims should harbour ‘hatred’ towards or ‘shun’ non-Muslims, Muslims who think differently, Dutch society and the democratic legal order. An empirical study by the Verwey-Jonker Institute confirmed the findings of NRC/Nieuwsuur regarding out-of-school education within the Utrecht-based Salafist organisation alFitrah. The AIVD and NCTV had already indicated that, when actively propagated among children and young people, these Salafist dogmas could eventually lead to radicalisation. From this perspective, the AIVD and NCTV are treating the activities of Salafist agitators as a threat to the democratic legal order and thus to national security. From the same security perspective, earlier this year the AIVD and NCTV – each in its own capacity – drew attention to Cornelius Haga Lyceum (CHL), a secondary school where Salafist agitators were coming together with the intention of instilling Salafist doctrine in children in a similar manner. The difference between this situation and what NRC/Nieuwsuur uncovered about informal education is that CHL is funded by the government, meaning that the state has a duty to intervene in the event of suspected wrongdoings. Formally, out-of-school Koran classes do not fall under government responsibility.

### Salafist agitators in the Netherlands

There are thought to be a few dozen Salafist agitators active in the Netherlands who exert a relatively strong influence for the reasons set out below. The agitators make use of a network of Salafist religious institutions that dominate the available content online and often also offline too. This



infrastructure has been built up mainly by a number of Dutch Syrians over the past few decades. For example, NRC/Nieuwsuur drew attention in their investigation to the prominent role of the Dutch Syrian Ahmed Salam in Tilburg and his son Suhaib, who is active in Utrecht. Salafist agitators in the Netherlands also exert influence for other reasons. A number of them have taken courses on religion in Medina (Saudi Arabia), and some Dutch Muslims therefore consider them to have religious authority. The majority of the agitators grew up in the Netherlands, attended Dutch schools and speak fluent Dutch. Thanks to a common background, these multilingual agitators with roots in the Netherlands are easily able to connect with young Dutch Muslims, apparently more easily than can older imams and mosque leaders. On the face of it, they are role models of integration and assimilation. However, as emerged from the NRC/Nieuwsuur investigation, their strategy, agenda and message are completely at odds with the basic values of the Dutch democratic legal order. Within Sunni Islam, contemporary Salafism is still regarded as a relatively small and radical offshoot. In absolute terms there are still few supporters of Salafist doctrine, including in the Netherlands. But as the NRC/Nieuwsuur investigation showed (in the broadcast and report of 10 September 2019), its influence is much greater than the figures would suggest. The disproportionately large reach of Salafism in the Netherlands is due primarily to the role of the agitators and the activities they engage in.

### Gulf States fund Dutch Salafist infrastructure

For decades now the Dutch Salafist infrastructure has been receiving financial support from the Middle East, especially from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. Salafist institutions have used this money to purchase real estate. As could be seen in Nieuwsuur, religious teaching materials have been produced in Dutch using Saudi funds and made available for free for informal Koran classes. The Salafist network in the Netherlands is also actively collecting money and raising funds from other sources. Their systematic activities have enabled the agitators to make Salafist doctrines mainstream, at least as far as the Dutch-language internet. Young Muslims searching the internet for answers to their questions about Islam will likely encounter the Salafist perspective.

### Salafism in Western Europe

Consensus has grown among security analysts in Europe that the active dissemination of Salafist dogma is a threat not only to security but also to integration and good citizenship. Most Western European countries are witnessing similar developments in terms of Salafism and agitators, although Salafist influence and networks take different forms in each country depending on which immigrant groups are present and other national specifics. A number of authoritative scientific reports published in 2018 – such as ‘The Factory of Islamism’ (‘La fabrique de l’islamisme’) by Hakim El Karoui, Institut Montaigne – show that the systematic spreading of intolerant, anti-integrationist and anti-democratic ideas by Salafists has a deeply polarising effect on society in Western European democracies. Ultimately this can also affect security due to the risk of radicalisation. There is a consensus that this is an extremely complex subject because it involves so many different factors: ideological and political influence exerted from the Middle East, religion, education, society, integration and security. Experts in Europe have concluded that the complexity of this issue not only demands the permanent involvement of experts in various fields but also a whole-of-government approach where civil servants focusing on security, integration and education work together long-term with religious and migrant communities at national and local level.

### About the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands

The Netherlands uses a system of threat levels that indicate the likelihood of a terrorist attack. The National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) publishes the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN) three times a year. The DTN presents a broad outline of the threat to the Netherlands posed by domestic and international terrorism. The DTN is based on information from the intelligence and security services, the police, public sources and foreign partners, and on analyses by embassy staff.



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