



Nationaal Coördinator
Terrorisbestrijding en Veiligheid
Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid

Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 53

October 2020

Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

Radicalisation - Extremism - Terrorism



Current threat level:
Significant

1. Threat level

On the basis of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN) 53, the threat level is currently set at 3. A terrorist attack in the Netherlands is conceivable. At present, there are individuals and groups in the Netherlands that are becoming radicalised – or that are highly radicalised already – and pose a threat. Although there are no indications that anyone in the Netherlands is planning an attack, it remains conceivable that a lone actor could try to carry out one. In recent years, the majority of attacks in Europe have been carried out by lone actors whose extremist mindset may go hand in hand with psychosocial or psychological issues. The threat level is based on the elements set out below.

The Dutch jihadist movement

This year, the immediate violent threat posed by the Dutch jihadist movement appears to have diminished somewhat. The movement is both socially and ideologically fragmented and lacks charismatic leadership, a hierarchy or a strong structure. The movement is also feeling the pressure of repressive government measures, which have sapped its motivation to take action. Some Dutch jihadists still seek to carry out an attack in the Netherlands but they are not acting on this intention at present. However, vigilance is still required regarding lone actors from this movement. The threat may increase again over time, as a result of individuals being released from terrorist wings of prisons, jihadists returning from foreign conflict zones or developments at home and abroad. The next few years will be decisive for the jihadist movement. If it continues to disintegrate, this could lead to the movement shrinking and to a less receptive environment for potentially violent jihadists returning to society from prison. Continued pressure from the authorities can further this process.

Attacks

Small-scale attacks and arrests in Europe show that the jihadist threat has not disappeared, but the situation is not comparable to the 2014-2017 period, when substantially more attacks were taking place, some of which were large-scale and

complex. It is notable that, despite the fact that more attacks took place in the first half of 2020 than in the whole of 2019, they resulted in half the number of fatalities. At present most attacks appear to be improvisational in nature. It is likely that small-scale attacks of this kind, with a limited impact, will continue to be carried out in Europe, including in the Netherlands.

Global jihadism

ISIS has been more active in Syria and Iraq compared to last year, although the group's strength is nowhere near where it was at the height of the 'caliphate'. ISIS's more distant 'provinces' are also continuing in their efforts to raise their profile. Both ISIS and al Qa'ida frequently exploit local and regional circumstances, which can be accompanied by a struggle for influence and violent conflict between the two groups. Jihadists from Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), an al Qa'ida-affiliate in the Sahel, are focused primarily on their own immediate, local interests. In time, the groups could raise their profile in the West by carrying out attacks or by attracting more followers in this part of the world, but this is not the case at present.

Right-wing extremism

It is conceivable that a far-right lone actor could carry out a copycat attack inspired by an attack like the one in Christchurch in March 2019. The Dutch far-right landscape is mostly non-violent, marginal, fragmented and lacking in charismatic leaders. There is a significant amount of right-wing activity online, however. In addition, there are individuals in right-wing, identitarian and anti-government circles who sometimes make violent threats, both online and offline. So far, these threats have not been acted upon.

2. The terrorist threat to the Netherlands

Jihadists still constitute the principal terrorist threat to the Netherlands. The Dutch jihadist movement is both socially and ideologically fragmented, lacking strong leaders and agitators and continues to suffer the negative impact of pressure from the authorities. Some supporters are engaged in jihadist activity, such as producing and spreading propaganda and fundraising for jihadists abroad. Preparing attacks is fairly exceptional. In 2018 and 2019 several Dutch jihadists were arrested on suspicion of preparing an attack, and lone actors carried out terrorist attacks at Amsterdam Central Station in August 2018 (the attacker had no links to the Netherlands) and in Utrecht in March 2019, but in 2020 there has been no evidence that jihadists in the Netherlands are preparing attacks. In 2020, the immediate violent threat posed by the Dutch jihadist movement appears to have abated somewhat. This trend is not new, having already begun before the measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 were introduced.

The threat situation is changeable, however, and in due course, the threat could increase once more. Some Dutch jihadists still seek to carry out an attack in the Netherlands. Attacks carried out in Europe between 2014 and 2017 were regularly celebrated by Dutch jihadists. In addition, returning jihadists with significant experience, knowledge, capabilities and potential motivation to commit violent acts in the Netherlands can also pose a threat. There are still over 100 Dutch jihadist travellers in Syria and Iraq who may return and could pose a threat. There are also dozens of jihadists being held in terrorist wings of Dutch prisons. Although, in Western countries, recidivism is relatively rare among people convicted of terrorist offences, they can nevertheless pose a threat. What is more, imprisonment can also offer an opportunity for reflection.

There is also an element of unpredictability in this regard: it is not always possible to predict whether a jihadist will ultimately turn to violence, especially if they are acting alone. Most contributions to the jihadist cause are non-violent, but sometimes individual jihadists seek to commit violence, or actually do so. However, it is difficult to predict whether a

particular individual will become violent, and if so, when. Finally, there are still concerns about lone actors whose extremist ideology goes hand in hand with psychological problems.

The Dutch jihadist movement

The jihadist movement in the Netherlands consists of over 500 individuals who adhere to a jihadist Salafist ideology. Most are members of loosely organised social networks, but there are also jihadists who have no social connections to other jihadists. The movement is feeling the pressure of repressive government measures, which have sapped their motivation to instigate jihadist initiatives and take action. An increasing level of awareness of security issues also plays a role in this regard. Furthermore, the movement has lost key instigators in recent years due to travelling to jihadist conflict zones, imprisonment or a simple lack of motivation. Internal conflict over the issue of *takfir* (the practice of branding other Muslims heretics) also continues to play a role. This conflict creates ideological and social divisions between groups of jihadists. The next few years will be decisive for the jihadist movement. If it continues to disintegrate, this could lead to the movement shrinking and to a less receptive environment for jihadists returning to society from prison. Continued pressure from the authorities can further this process.

Jihadist mainstream

As reported in DTN52, the jihadist movement in the Netherlands has a 'mainstream' comprising several networks which have been linked to one another for many years. Yet at the same time, it should be noted that these networks lack hierarchy and structure. Together, the members of these networks are responsible for many of the activities carried out by jihadists in the Netherlands: creating and disseminating propaganda, *dawah* work, fundraising (often for imprisoned jihadists and jihadist travellers) and social activities. This mainstream movement also has a female counterpart comprising several dozen members. Although there are no indications that these women are involved in planning attacks,

they do pose an indirect threat. They espouse the jihadist ideology, support or encourage their jihadist spouses and raise their children with extremist, violent ideology.

Less evidence of online jihadism

In recent months, there seems to have been a decline in the number of active, public Dutch-language jihadist Facebook pages and in the level of activity on these pages and on Telegram. Due to the undiminished importance of online propaganda for maintaining the jihadist movement and the usefulness and potential reach of both platforms, jihadists will continue to actively use social media to spread their messages. Online jihadism is facing growing restrictions, however, thanks in part to the willingness of Facebook and Telegram to take action against extremist users. Government intervention is also relevant in this regard. In recent years, several individuals – some very young – have been arrested on suspicion of disseminating terrorist propaganda and managing jihadist social media channels. As a result of the restrictions being imposed on such social media channels, jihadists build in fail safes, such as backup channels. They also scope out other chat applications.

Online, Dutch jihadists primarily focus on current events in order to keep their followers energised and explain trends. Popular issues in this regard include women and children in reception camps in Syria, the arrest or release of Islamic clerics in Saudi Arabia, COVID-19, social trends and political issues such as the Parliamentary Committee on Undesirable Influence Exerted from Unfree Countries (POCOB). In addition to these topics, discussions of the legitimacy of active participation in a democracy, the glorification of the jihadist cause and the concept of *takfir* continue to play a prominent role in Dutch-language jihadist discourse online.

Ideological conflict remains relevant

For several years now, a fierce theological discussion has been raging among jihadists worldwide regarding the concept of *takfir*. This is also the case for jihadists in the Netherlands. The

strongest proponents of *takfir* are followers of the Saudi scholar Ahmad ibn Umar al-Hazimi. They are quicker to brand other Muslims heretics than other jihadists. In that sense, they are more extreme than jihadists who are oriented towards ISIS. That does not mean, however, that supporters of al-Hazimi pose a greater violent threat than those of ISIS. Al-Hazimi is estimated to have a few dozen followers in the Netherlands. This debate, which has caused division within the movement, also means that groups of jihadists who disagree or even denounce one another as heretics become socially estranged. Within the female mainstream too, the matter of who qualifies as a 'true Muslim' is the subject of heated debate. This discussion has led to a deep-seated ideological split between networks into a pro-ISIS group and a pro-Al Hazimi group.

Risks associated with the influence exerted by jihadist and Salafist youth workers

In the summer of 2018, one of the terrorist suspects from the 'Arnhem group' (see the section on 'Prosecution and imprisonment') worked in Dutch care institutions for vulnerable young people. Despite the fact that he failed a background check due to a conviction for attempting to travel to a conflict zone in Syria, he still was able to find employment by committing identity fraud. In addition, there are several other youth workers who are known to have a jihadist or Salafist background. There is a risk that these individuals will have a negative influence on young people.

Prosecution and imprisonment

In recent months, there have been various court cases against individuals suspected of terrorist activities, including preparing terrorist attacks. In June, a returnee was sentenced to four years in prison for being a member of a terrorist organisation and planning an attack. On 8 October, in the major trial involving the six-man 'Arnhem group', the court handed down sentences of between 10 and 17 years. The six were being tried on charges of preparing a multi-target attack in the Netherlands involving a car bomb, Kalashnikov assault rifles,

handguns, hand grenades and bomb vests. The Public Prosecution Service has stated that the police infiltrated the group prior to their arrest on 27 September 2018. Although various studies suggest that few individuals in the West convicted of terrorist offences go on to reoffend, the cell in question comprises three such individuals, who were previously convicted for attempting to travel to a jihadist conflict zone.

Infiltration was also used as a tactic in another major investigation, which led to the arrest of two men in Zoetermeer in November on suspicion of preparing an attack. The announcement of the use of undercover police officers could mean that jihadists will become more distrustful of outsiders. Most jihadists are already on high alert in this regard.

There are still several dozen suspected and convicted jihadists being held in the terrorist wings at Vught and Rotterdam prison. These jihadists form new networks and can negatively influence each other. These networks extend beyond the scope of the terrorist wings and can persist even after individuals have been released. The high population density of these wings means that it is difficult for staff to gain insight into how such networks arise and to come up with regimes tailored to individual prisoners. As a result, wing capacity has been increased, while a dedicated terrorist wing for female prisoners has been established at Zwolle prison.

Dutch jihadist travellers

The number of Dutch jihadist travellers (as documented by the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD)) remains virtually unchanged. The total number of individuals who have travelled to Syria and Iraq remains at around 305. Some 100 of these travellers have been killed, and 60 have returned to the Netherlands (most of them in the early stages of the conflict). In total there are around 120 jihadist travellers from the Netherlands still in Syria and Iraq. Approximately 40 of these individuals (all adults) are currently in camps or in detention in northeastern Syria. Around 20 travellers are now

in Turkey. Another 30 or so are still part of jihadist groups in northwestern Syria. There are at least 210 minors with at least one Dutch parent who are still in the region, including 75 minors in reception camps in northeastern Syria.

Dutch jihadist travellers in Syria

The conditions in the camps where the women and children in question are living remain dire. Food and water are in short supply; hygiene is poor, and there is a lack of medical care. In addition, the first cases of COVID-19 have already been confirmed at camp Al Hawl. In June, the Kurdish authorities carried out inspections in the section of the camp reserved for foreigners. The details of the women staying there were registered and biometric data collected. The inspections are possibly linked to the transfer of some of the women and their children to the Al Roj reception camp, which has better security. In recent months, several women have escaped from Al Hawl – in some cases, with their children – and been smuggled to the northern Syrian region of Idlib, where various opposition groups (including jihadist ones) are active. Since that area is relatively peaceful, they can go about their lives without much disruption. The question is whether, in those circumstances, they would wish to return to the Netherlands. The situation in the region is changeable, however (see chapter 3).

There are few new developments with regard to male jihadist travellers in detention. Around 15 men with a link to the Netherlands are currently detained in Syria. There have been several incidents and escape attempts but, as far as is known, no Dutch nationals have been involved. It is unlikely that ISIS currently has the capacity to mount an attack to facilitate a large-scale prison escape in the Kurdish area of Syria.

So far, there has been little change in the stance taken by European countries regarding the repatriation of their nationals from reception and detention centres in Syria and Iraq. Some children, primarily orphans, have been repatriated in recent months. On 22 June, 10 children were repatriated to

France, for instance. Children are potentially susceptible to radicalisation and recruitment due to negative experiences in the camps. For the time being, it does not look likely that Western jihadist travellers in the region will be brought before the courts there. Various EU countries, including the Netherlands, support the principle of travellers being brought to justice in Iraq.

Threat from returnees

In 2020 an individual returned to the Netherlands from Syria via Turkey. The threat posed by returnees has not changed: as explained in previous editions of the DTN, returnees do pose a potential threat. This is due to factors such as the amount of time they have spent in terrorist groups, combat experience, witnessing and carrying out acts of excessive violence and long-term immersion in violent jihadist ideology. Female jihadists and returnees also pose a potential threat, although their potential for violence is estimated to be lower than that of male jihadists and returnees. Due to their status and experience, female returnees can come to occupy a prominent place in the Dutch jihadist movement. In addition, they have sometimes spent considerable time in the conflict zone, where they have been exposed to violence and have potentially received weapons training. It is conceivable that they may exert a negative influence on jihadist women in the Netherlands, potentially magnifying the threat these women pose.

Dutch jihadist travellers being held in detention or in reception camps in northeastern Syria also pose a security risk. They may join terrorist groups upon their release or escape. This may make it difficult to keep track of their activities. Freed jihadist travellers could also return to the Netherlands clandestinely.

It is also possible that some returnees have become disillusioned with ISIS and have turned their backs on the jihadist movement. According to the AIVD a number of returning jihadists who are not in prison have distanced

themselves from their former jihadist network and no longer adhere to jihadist ideology. These people most likely pose a very limited threat, if any, to national security. The Belgian security services and the British authorities describe a similar situation. In addition, the involvement of returnees in jihadist attacks in Europe in recent years has been extremely limited.

Involvement of Dutch jihadists with travellers based abroad

Jihadists in the Netherlands remain in contact with like-minded individuals living in the conflict zone. Many follow the news about the situation in Syria and the camps. Within Salafist and jihadist networks, various online initiatives are continuing to highlight the circumstances of women and children in Syrian-Kurdish camps. Money is also being raised to support them and finance possible escapes. At present, fundraising activities are only focused on women and children and not on male jihadists. Transferring money to jihadist travellers is a criminal offence.

Individuals arrested on suspicion of terrorist financing and breaches of the Sanctions Act

In late June the Fiscal Information and Investigation Service (FIOD) arrested Samir A., who was suspected of terrorist financing and breaching the Sanctions Act. The investigation was launched on the basis of previous media reports which, among other things, contained allegations that A. was attempting to help women and children in ISIS territory. Since his initial involvement with the Hofstad Network, A. has become a central figure in the jihadist movement in the Netherlands. Previously, a 32-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of breaching the Sanctions Act, engaging in illegal *hawala* banking and money laundering. A. is suspected of receiving money from various people, including family members and acquaintances of women who travelled to Syria and Iraq to wage jihad, several of whom are now being held in camps. The money would then be transferred to these women via *hawala* banking. The *hawala* banking is suspected to have been carried out without a licence by another suspect. In

principle, providing banking services without a licence is a criminal offence in the Netherlands.

The profile of the Netherlands

Two years after the riots in Pakistan in response to the Mohammed cartoon competition organised by Freedom Party (PVV) leader Geert Wilders, the republication of the cartoons by *Charlie Hebdo* in France and anti-Islam demonstrations in Scandinavia led to more protests in the country. During these protests, it once again became apparent that, in Pakistan, the Netherlands is still linked with blasphemy in the public imagination. This view is shared by Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which claimed responsibility for the attack on *Charlie Hebdo's* editorial team in Paris in January 2015. As a result of the cartoons being republished, the group once again called for attacks on members of the magazine's editorial team and on other Europeans thought to have insulted Islam, including Geert Wilders.

Threat of right-wing violence is conceivable

A terrorist attack on the part of known right-wing extremist groups is not expected in the Netherlands, but it is conceivable that a lone individual from this country could become radicalised online. This is shown by the right-wing terrorist attack in Christchurch on 15 March 2019, which led to a number of copycat attacks in the US, Germany and Norway in the same year. Recent studies show that, in terms of right-wing extremist violence, 2019 was not a particularly violent year in Western Europe when compared to other years.

A year and a half after the Christchurch attack, the threat of such an attack in the Netherlands still remains limited, but conceivable. The known far-right and right-wing extremist groups remain marginal, fragmented and lacking in charismatic leaders. At most, they attempt to capitalise on current social trends and protests (see chapter 4). Online activities are a special case in this regard, however. On the internet, communication is spread out and fragmented across various channels. In addition, there is a whole new generation who

have grown up with the internet and communication apps. They have little interest in joining what they see as old-fashioned groups, but they do encounter right-wing extremist ideology on channels such as Telegram, Instagram and Discord. Indeed, it is this limited appeal of small, known right-wing extremist groups that can lead Dutch nationals to become radicalised online without attracting the attention of the authorities. This can help create a social ecosystem where there is a low threshold for discussing violent acts.

Various European countries have observed that neo-Nazis are taking part in paramilitary exercises in training camps in Eastern Europe and Russia. These camps are said to be run by the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), a neo-Nazi group which was classified as a foreign terrorist organisation by the US on 6 April 2020. There are no indications that Dutch nationals have taken part in such training.

3. Threat to the West

More jihadist attacks but fewer victims

Jihadists in the West carried out more attacks in the first half of this year than in the whole of 2019, but with fewer victims. The attacks were small-scale in nature and occurred mainly in France and the United Kingdom; the countries in Europe where the most jihadist attacks have taken place in the past 15 years. On 20 June, six people were stabbed in Reading, three of them fatally. This modus operandi is not new. Attacks in the West are simple in nature, in that they are primarily carried out by lone actors who are influenced by propaganda from groups such as ISIS, but not directed by them. This is one of the reasons the number of victims has been relatively low; indeed, there is even evidence of a slight downward trend in this regard. Casualties have fallen by a third, while the number of fatalities has decreased by roughly half. For lone actors of this kind the embrace of extremist ideology may go hand in hand with psychosocial or psychological issues. A report by Europol shows that the image of a fragmented jihadist movement as one with few leaders and agitators, mainly concerned with facilitating activities and in a state of reorientation following the fall of the ISIS 'caliphate', applies not only to the Dutch jihadist movement, but to jihadist movements across the whole of Europe. That said, given the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq, the status of ISIS and the continued power of the jihadist message, it is likely that Western countries will continue to face small-scale attacks of this kind.

Attack plans often uncovered by the authorities

In addition to actual attacks, arrests also show that the jihadist threat is still present in Europe. Although the attacks carried out in the West are small in scale, the police and security services continue to uncover plans for large-scale attacks. These mostly involve several suspects who form a cell and work together to prepare an attack. In June, Europol reported that arrests had thwarted 14 jihadist attacks in 2019, as opposed to 16 in 2018 and 11 in 2017. One example of this is the arrest of five Tajiks who were preparing an attack in Germany that took place in the period covered by the previous DTN. This group intended to attack a US military base in

Germany, as well as a German critic of Islam. The cell was believed to be in contact with members of ISIS in Syria and Afghanistan, at least one of whom is said to have encouraged the suspects to carry out the attack. Groups and individuals have also been arrested on suspicion of preparing jihadist attacks in other countries in 2020, including the United Kingdom, Spain and France. In addition, several people in Europe have been arrested on suspicion of recruiting on behalf of ISIS, or in order to benefit the group.

Following the collapse of the 'caliphate', the threat of an attack by ISIS has diminished, but has not disappeared. Successful jihadist attacks since 2018 have almost always been small-scale attacks committed by lone actors, and the authorities have often managed to arrest various lone actors and groups before they could carry out an attack. Taken together, these facts demonstrate that the police and security services are often able to detect attack preparations at an early stage, particularly when those preparations involve multiple people and more complex attack methods.

ISIS still aspires to carry out attacks in Europe

ISIS still aspires to carry out attacks in European countries. To that end, the group is attempting to establish structures and networks in which sympathisers and adherents in Europe can play a role and be brought into contact with members of ISIS in Syria. These structures and networks may make use of the knowledge and experience of long-standing jihadist networks in Europe. On 31 August 2020 three jihadists were arrested in North Macedonia. They were part of an ISIS-allied jihadist cell and were suspected of preparing an attack. They had previously travelled to Syria and had been subsequently sentenced and imprisoned in North Macedonia. Frustrated jihadist travellers of this kind represent a potential violent threat. In the past, jihadists in the Balkans and associated jihadist networks were primarily focused on their own region. It is conceivable that they are now also looking to other parts of Europe. Jihadists in the western Balkans can make use of a wide range of contacts to do this, including in Western Europe.

Al Qa'ida still wishes to carry out attacks, despite deaths of leaders

Al Qa'ida's wish to carry out an attack in a Western country or on a Western target elsewhere did not lead to any violent incidents in the period under review. Al Qa'ida publishes a regular English-language online magazine aimed at jihadists around the world. The second issue, which was published in June, was notably up to date on recent issues, with the main article dedicated to social unrest in the US. With several of its leaders having been killed, the group is now less able to carry out attacks abroad, and the operational capabilities of al Qa'ida in Syria have probably been impacted in the short term. In countries in the western part of the Sahel, the jihadists of the al Qa'ida-affiliate JNIM, which focuses on local targets, form the biggest threat (see chapter 3).

The threat from far-right terrorism in Europe

In Europe, the threat from far-right terrorism is generally low. However, the internet – where people often express more radical opinions than they would in the physical world – remains an important factor in the dissemination of radical and violent ideologies, often across borders. This is how the small neo-Nazi, accelerationist online movement Feuerkrieg Division (FKD) came to be placed on the UK's list of terrorist organisations. It is not an organisation in the traditional sense, but rather a collection of individuals spread across different countries who look to make online connections via fluid associations united by a shared fascist and neo-Nazi ideology. UK Counter Terrorism Policing believes that right-wing terrorism poses a limited threat.

Court cases against the suspects of the most prominent right-wing terrorist attacks in New Zealand, the US and Germany in 2019 have now either begun or have concluded. The Christchurch attacker, Brenton Tarrant, for instance, was sentenced to life in prison, with no prospects of an early release.

Impact of COVID-19 on the terrorist threat

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the terrorist threat. As reported in DTN52, the likelihood of attacks with a large number of victims has declined in the short term, given that many soft targets like events, museums, churches and stadiums are now closed or only accessible to small numbers of people. The measures taken by authorities around the world to combat COVID-19 and the drop in international travel have also restricted jihadists' freedom of movement, albeit temporarily. It should be pointed out, however, that there have been no large-scale attacks in Europe since 2017. The likelihood of small-scale attacks with few victims does not seem to have declined as a direct result of COVID-19. A combination of extremist ideology, possible psychosocial or psychological issues and measures relating to COVID-19 may result in lone actors actually turning to violence sooner than they otherwise would.

In an international context, various parties have called for the pandemic to be exploited for terrorist purposes. ISIS, for instance, has repeatedly called on its sympathisers to carry out attacks because security services are not at full capacity and because in the current circumstances an attack would have even more of an impact. Right-wing terrorists – primarily in the US – have called for the virus to be used as a biological weapon. Several attacks related to COVID-19 have also been prevented in the US. The suspects were allegedly seeking to carry out attacks inspired by a combination of far-right ideology and various conspiracy theories. Calls for such attacks in Europe have been very limited.

In due course, the negative socioeconomic and political consequences of the pandemic are likely to prove more significant in terms of how the threat evolves than these calls for violence. Social cohesion could become threatened as a result of pressure from the politicisation and economic impact of the pandemic, creating more scope for extreme viewpoints. This has already been seen in the rise of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments in recent years. This trend will probably

continue, as will assaults on the liberal international legal order, individual democracies and the rule of law. As a result of worsening circumstances, individuals may grow more susceptible to psychosocial and psychological issues, but also become more vulnerable to radicalisation. There is also the risk of an increase in extremist or terrorist violence (or the threat of it) stemming from anti-government sentiment. Groups in various countries are attempting to use COVID-19 to exploit existing social and political fault lines, local conflicts, poor governance and other grievances.

4. International developments

ISIS continues to pursue underground conflict in Syria and Iraq

In spring 2020, ISIS was more active in Syria and Iraq than in 2019. However, the organisation does not have the strength it did during the height of the 'caliphate'. ISIS is now focusing primarily on gaining ground in Syria and Iraq. The group's resurgence has not come as a surprise to many. On the one hand, the factors underlying the organisation's previous success – such as endemic corruption, the systematic political exclusion of Sunni Muslims in the two countries, lawlessness, systemic violence (including state violence) and a lack of socioeconomic prospects – have not gone away. All this makes for an ideal breeding ground for new recruits.

On the other hand, ISIS is exploiting the military vacuum that opposition forces have allowed to form through the further withdrawal of Western troops, for instance. After ISIS's defeat, scaling down the military presence made sense. The anti-ISIS coalition needed to be restructured in light of the need to combat an enemy that had increasingly gone underground. The remaining US military units are focused more on Iran and Shiite militias allied with Iran, than on actively combating ISIS. Without US military support and intelligence, however, the Iraqi armed forces are barely a match for ISIS. Furthermore, as a result of low oil prices the Iraqi state is struggling to cover its expenditure, including military spending. In addition, measures taken to combat COVID-19 are making it difficult for the Iraqi army to undertake large-scale military offensives: in an attempt to halt the spread of infection, the army has been split up into smaller units. So far, COVID-19 seems to have had less of an impact on ISIS, as their fighters have been living in isolation and operating in small units for years.

Internal conflicts and a lack of cooperation are also an issue within the anti-ISIS coalition. Kurdish parts of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are more preoccupied by Turkish military operations in northern Syria than by ISIS, for instance. In Iraq, political rivalries have stood in the way of military cooperation between the official Iraqi army and the primarily

Shiite militias that make up the Popular Mobilization Forces. Coordinated operations are few and far between. Partly as a result of the poor cooperation between the Iraqi army and the peshmerga from the Kurdish Autonomous Region, ISIS has become more active, particularly in disputed 'article 140' territories that border the region. Apart from its ongoing underground conflict in Syria and Iraq, ISIS is also attempting to increase its capacity to carry out attacks in self-declared distant 'provinces' such as Afghanistan, parts of East Asia and parts of Africa, in order to strengthen its image as a strong, global organisation.

Relative peace in Idlib

In Idlib, the last large region of northwestern Syria under the control of opposition fighters, the situation in recent months has remained relatively unchanged. Offensives by the Syrian regime have put pressure on the area held by the jihadist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – the strongest jihadist group in Idlib – and diminished its size. Since March, a ceasefire has been in place between Russia, which supports the Syrian regime, and Turkey, which supports some Syrian armed groups in this region. Since then, the conflict has died down, but it is unclear how long this ceasefire will last. If the conflict between the regime and opposition forces escalates once more, it is likely that some male Dutch jihadist travellers will take part in the fighting and, as a result, be killed or fall into the hands of the Syrian regime. It is also likely that some of the European jihadist travellers will cross into Turkey, with a view to returning to Europe. Other travellers did this before the creation of the ISIS 'caliphate', and this route became even more common after its collapse. The border between Syria and Turkey has always been porous. If such a scenario were to occur, it is possible that Dutch jihadist travellers could start showing up at Dutch diplomatic missions in Turkey.

The pressure on al Qa'ida in Idlib comes from a range of sources, including the advancing forces of the Syrian regime and its allies, offensives by other jihadist groups, and US air strikes. In late June, the long smouldering tensions between

the jihadist combat groups HTS and Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD) in northwestern Syria spilled over into a fierce confrontation that lasted several days. The direct cause of this was the defection of a former follower of HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani to THD. A deeper cause of this confrontation, however, is the differing stances taken by the two groups with regard to the ceasefire agreed by Turkey and Russia. THD, which is allied to al Qa'ida, rejects the ceasefire, whereas HTS is complying with it and – as the stronger combat group – is also attempting to force others into taking a more restrained approach.

Finally, al Qa'ida veteran Khalid al-Aruri was killed in a US drone attack on his car in northwestern Syria. Several leading figures within the higher ranks of al Qa'ida in northwestern Syria have been killed in recent years. It is likely that their deaths have reduced al Qa'ida's strength in northwestern Syria and limited the potential threat of an attack targeting the West as a result.

Changes in Afghanistan benefiting anti-Western groups

The security situation in Afghanistan is shifting in the favour of parties espousing an anti-Western doctrine. The Taliban concluded an agreement with the US and shortly thereafter proceeded to intensify its campaign of violence primarily targeting the Afghan authorities with whom, under the terms of the agreement, they should be seeking rapprochement. Since February, ISIS Khorasan, ISIS's 'province' in Afghanistan, has been carrying out more and more attacks, despite setbacks such as the arrest of leading figures. Both the Taliban and the Taliban-allied Haqqani network benefit from the further undermining of the Afghan government's authority. The same applies to ISIS Khorasan. These shared interests mean that opportunistic coalitions sometimes arise between these groups, which have led to attacks in Kabul, for instance, as well as the complex operation to free ISIS and Taliban prisoners in Jalalabad on 4 August. The Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) deems it likely that the Haqqani network was closely involved in this attack, which was claimed

by ISIS Khorasan and which led to the escape of at least 100 ISIS Khorasan and several dozen Taliban and Haqqani network fighters. The current developments do not directly represent an increased threat to Dutch interests in the region. They are alarming, however, given that the US and the coalition have begun reducing troop and personnel numbers, the coalition is carrying out significantly fewer offensives and the Afghan defence and police forces continue to come under pressure from attacks by the Taliban.

West Africa as an area of expansion for al Qa'ida and ISIS

The resurgence and spread of jihadist violence in the western Sahel states of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger reported in DTN52 continues. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), an umbrella organisation comprising jihadist groups loyal to al Qa'ida with a strong foothold in the Sahel, is continuing to expand its influence and remains the biggest threat in the region. Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), considered by ISIS to be its West African 'province', is also attempting to expand its influence over an increasingly large area. These groups are dominated by local and regional agendas; the global jihadist ideologies of their parent organisations play less of a role. Hostility towards the West is directed at France and its Western allies in order to drive their military presence and influence out of the region. So far, military operations have not been sufficient to contain the jihadist threat, and the groups are continuing to expand southwards. A relatively large-scale attack on security forces in Côte d'Ivoire on 11 June 2020 – the first major attack in the country since 2016 – is a strong indication that extremist violence could spill over into countries on the West African coast. The local authorities attributed the attack to JNIM. Such a spillover would increase the threat to Western interests and individuals in West Africa. The majority of Dutch interests in West Africa are in the coastal countries.

On 3 June 2020 the emir of al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Algerian national Abdelmalek Droukdel, was killed in a French attack, together with some close followers.

Droukdel was part of al Qa'ida's senior leadership. At regional level, he was head of the North African al Qa'ida branch that was heavily involved in the conflict in the Sahel, where AQIM supports its 'subsidiary', JNIM. The impact of his death on the threat posed will be limited. However, under a new leader lacking Droukdel's status, AQIM could lose influence over its subsidiary and local dynamics could gain the upper hand.

Within this local context, the peaceful coexistence of JNIM and the smaller ISGS was shattered earlier this year by violent confrontations in a battle for dominance. These confrontations, as well as the acknowledged willingness of al Qa'ida's Sahel branch to negotiate with the Malian authorities, have been discussed in media publications by ISIS's core. There, the group links these events to the intensified military counterterrorism operations being carried out against it in the Sahel. In these commentaries reference is made to the Takuba Task Force, a multinational military initiative to which the Netherlands has aligned itself in political and organisational terms, but no mention is made of the Netherlands directly. The situation in the Sahel and West Africa now appears to be an integral part of ISIS's central narrative.

Al Shabaab as active as ever

Al Shabaab remains as active as ever in Somalia and northeastern Kenya. Among other things, the group is opposed to US and Kenyan military counterterrorism operations in Somalia. In this connection, there is fierce fighting against ISIS's Somali branch in Puntland too. As far as we know, the group does not have an agenda with regard to Europe. A small number of Dutch nationals are – or have been – actively involved with al Shabaab, however. The group's activities – and the fact that it is increasing its knowledge of means of attacks – suggest a desire to portray itself as al Qa'ida's East Africa branch. The new leader of al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a group that is close to al Qa'ida's central leadership, has praised al Shabaab for its 'daring attacks'.

5. Extremism, radicalisation and polarisation

Right-wing and left-wing extremism during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken by the authorities in this regard have not led to an increased threat from right-wing and left-wing extremism in the Netherlands. A logical consequence of the measures is that they have led to a temporary halt in in-person activities on the part of both law-abiding activists and extremist groups. Left-wing and right-wing extremist groups have also played a marginal role in demonstrations against such measures. This confirms the long-standing fragmentation, personal animosity, weak organisation and lack of leadership that have been observed within such groups. Online, groups and individuals from both sides have hitched developments relating to COVID-19 to their own pet causes, for the purposes of ideological propaganda and to make the point that the pandemic is exposing the failings of the current political system. Within these narratives, the pandemic may be linked to immigration, globalisation, global inequality or the valuing of economic interests above human lives. Despite the expectation that the restrictive measures taken would actually enable radicalisation, since people would be spending more time online than before, there was little online activity in the Netherlands involving established ideologies. However, the long-term impacts of COVID-19 could potentially provide more scope for radical viewpoints to arise (see chapter 2).

Just like before the pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of individuals who – fuelled in part by far-right ideas – make violent threats online. Although the seriousness and, most importantly, the likelihood of such threats being carried out is not always very great, the authorities continue to take such behaviour seriously. The risk of right-wing lone actors or small-scale groups resorting to violence is thought to be greater than in the past, however. In addition, in order to push their own agendas, far-right groups and individuals have attempted to latch onto conspiracy theories circulating online or anti-lockdown sentiment. The fact that members of such groups have only been present at anti-lockdown

demonstrations in limited numbers and did not have a leadership role, while other groups *have* stepped in, is emblematic of the current situation (see the section on ‘Polarisation’).

Arson attacks on telecom towers

Various conspiracy theories are circulating, some of which suggest a link between 5G networks and COVID-19, leading to extremist incidents both at home and abroad. In the Netherlands, 30 telecom towers have been set alight since April 2020, with seven arrests being made. No link seems to exist between the various incidents of arson; nor are there indications of any common organisation, coordination, leadership or even an overarching ideological motivation. The incidents seem to have been fuelled by conspiracy theories, but some may also have been carried out by copycats, inspired by previous incidents of arson and the media coverage they were given. As a response to the far-reaching changes to daily life as a result of COVID-19, people may be engaging in transgressive behaviour as a way of letting off steam or relieving boredom. The sudden drop in arson attacks since the start of May appears to confirm this: the arrests and media attention in programmes such as *Opsporing Verzocht* may have scared off potential offenders, while the easing of COVID-19 measures may also have played a part.

Arson attack by animal rights activists

The Dutch Animal Liberation Front (DBF) has claimed responsibility for an arson attack on a duck slaughterhouse in Ermelo on the night of 28 May. A well-known animal rights extremist turned himself in to the police and, according to his lawyer, has made a full confession. The arson is noteworthy because it is the first time animal rights extremists have used such tactics in 13 years. This does not seem to point to a wider new trend, however. For some time now, the Dutch animal rights movement has primarily expressed its grievances through peaceful demonstrations. That said, there are a handful of people who sometimes take more far-reaching action. The arson suspect should be considered a radical

exception to the general trend: he is known to be a full-time activist who disrupts events involving animals at home and abroad and is sporadically involved in efforts to free animals. This individual action is therefore not expected to inspire a new wave of animal rights extremism in the Netherlands.

Polarisation

The DTN addresses negative forms of polarisation because these can contribute to social unrest and/or set the stage for radicalisation processes. The issues set out below inspire protests or polarised debate which can lead to a hardening of attitudes, both in the digital domain as well as offline.

Various individuals behind anti-lockdown demonstrations

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, expressions of social dissatisfaction have increased, both online and offline, with social media playing a facilitating and mobilising role in this regard. Some of the groups and individuals involved have found common ground rejecting the authorities or government policy. This sentiment is rooted less in ideological motives, than in feelings of injustice, strong discontent or a different perception of reality. In addition, people who have a long-standing distrust of government, science and traditional media can now see their ideologies confirmed in conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation. Since the start of the pandemic, conspiracy theories have been spreading more quickly from the margins of the internet to mainstream channels.

A context has arisen (online) in which the threshold for extremist conduct has been lowered. This context is heightening polarisation and, in some cases, is leading to a hardening of attitudes, intimidation or violence, or calls to commit violent acts (see the section 'Arson attacks on telecom towers'). In early June, a man active in online anti-government and conspiracy theorist circles was arrested. He is a leading figure in an online group with 12,500 followers on Facebook and is also active in various Telegram groups. His statements should be seen in the light of the measures to combat COVID-

19, given that he made mention of making ‘citizens arrests’ of MPs and staff working at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM). There is, however, a significant discrepancy between online expressions of discontent and the scale of the protests taking place offline.

Various groups have been coming together to stage anti-lockdown demonstrations, and while these are in no way comparable to the size and disorderliness of protests seen in – for instance – Germany, they could lead to potentially violent disturbances of public order. The demonstrations bring together participants concerned about a broad array of issues, such as the bill on temporary measures to combat COVID-19; what they feel to be the disruptive effect of the measures on families, the self-employed and the elderly; and conspiracy theories. Sometimes, these demonstrations have been exploited primarily by a coalition comprising normally rival groups of football hooligans. Together, they have sought out violent confrontation with police. The same coalition has also demonstrated near statues in response to anti-racism protests in the Netherlands. Alongside the diverse, law-abiding upper layer of activists, there is also a radical undercurrent in which staunch distrust of the authorities can lead to extremist conduct, such as harassing politicians and journalists, intimidating police officers or publishing lists containing personal details of police officers and politicians (a practice known as ‘doxing’) as part of online anti-government activities.

Various groups of discontented individuals are also looking to link up with the ongoing protests by Dutch farmers. In contrast to the large-scale farmers’ protests seen last year, however, the protests are now smaller in size and more aggressive in tone. Attitudes among some farmers have hardened, leading them to make threats against politicians, journalists and farmers who hold different views to their own. The forging of connections between different groups holding various grievances and united by a shared anti-government ideology can also lead to a hardening of attitudes. For example, the ultraconservative publishing house De Blauwe Tijger – which

serves as a conduit for anti-government propaganda, fake news and conspiracy theories – has donated to a farmers' action group.

Sharp-edged anti-racism demonstrations

Since the death of George Floyd as the result of excessive force used during his arrest in Minneapolis on 25 May, the US has seen widespread, large-scale demonstrations. In the Netherlands too, a coalition of long-standing anti-racism and anti-discrimination action groups has organised demonstrations under the new moniker 'Black Lives Matter NL'. Demonstrations have sought to highlight issues such as institutional racism, police violence, colonialism, slavery, Black Pete and discrimination in a wider sense. In contrast to other countries, anti-racism demonstrations in the Netherlands have been peaceful. They have not been accompanied by looting, arson or the toppling of statues.

In addition, there has been intense debate in society, the media and politics surrounding the issues concerned. The debate on both sides can be rather sharp-edged, with emotional and polarising tendencies from the US being projected onto the Netherlands. Among some individuals and small identitarian groups, there are signs that attitudes are hardening. This tendency manifests itself in, for example, the exclusion of those with different opinions from discussions, the daubing of graffiti on statues they believe must be removed as perceived symbols of racism and colonialism, and the intimidation and threatening of opponents and members of the police, both overtly and covertly. Activists share video clips online showing the arrests of black people and discriminatory statements made by police officers in the Netherlands. Sometimes, this leads to threats against the police. The counter-response to this primarily comes from football hooligans and some known far-right groups who then 'defend' various statues by daubing them with their own graffiti, seeking out confrontation and by using abusive language and making threats, both online and offline. As was seen during local protests against centres for asylum seekers in 2015 and

during the anti-lockdown protests, far-right groups are trying to exploit current social issues in order to gain more supporters, albeit with little success. On the other hand, known far-left groups are joining in with or helping to organise the anti-racism demonstrations, but their presence is also limited.

When certain groups become frustrated because they feel they are being ignored or discriminated against on the basis of their identity (e.g. race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, etc.), this can pave the way for identity-based extremism. The AIVD has been conducting research into this area since 2019 and has observed a trend whereby anti-racism groups take action on the basis of their own identity against what they see as colonial and racist elements in Dutch society. This can create the conditions for radicalisation. Identity extremism can be triggered by a deepening of existing polarisation, as well as by events at home and abroad.

Developments such as the anti-racism and anti-lockdown demonstrations, identity-based debates and the socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19, as well as the Dutch parliamentary elections of March 2021, could accelerate processes of polarisation and potential radicalisation.

Turkey's Grey Wolves in the Netherlands

The Grey Wolves (also known under other names, such as Bozkurtlar or Ülkücü) is an ultranationalist, far-right Turkish movement that can be recognised by its members' use of specific gestures and symbols. The movement also has a presence in the Netherlands. Various municipalities have now stopped grants to the organisation Turkse Federatie Nederland (Hollanda Türk Federasyon, TFN), which has links to the Grey Wolves. The movement has recently been a cause for tension elsewhere in Europe. In the Netherlands, while the number of violent incidents has declined in recent years, the Grey Wolves symbol is now being seen more regularly. In recent years, there have been occasional confrontations between activists who present themselves as Grey Wolves, on the one hand, and Kurds or critics of the Turkish government on the other,

including counter-demonstrations and threats (both online and offline). This could lead to tensions between members of the Turkish-Dutch community, as well as to polarisation within wider society.

Salafism

With regard to Salafism, existing trends have persisted, with political Salafist agitators continuing to spread intolerant, anti-integration and anti-democratic ideology. They are not only engaging in missionary and media activities but also organising fundraising campaigns for the building or renovation of mosques in the Netherlands or in solidarity with Muslims abroad. Furthermore, a number of political Salafist agitators are expanding their organisational web, for instance by establishing the organisation Stichting Muslim Rights Watch Nederland (MRWN), which acts as a 'watchdog for the Islamic community' against policy-related injustices. The group wants to take legal action in response to alleged discrimination and hate speech in the media and in politics.

Agitators are attempting to strengthen their political standing by way of energising and mobilising their followers. This applies to both individual cases, such as showing solidarity with the imam of the as-Soennah mosque in The Hague or the dismissed former principal of the Cornelius Haga Lyceum (CHL) secondary school in Amsterdam, and to political issues such as the report by the Parliamentary Committee on Undesirable Influence Exerted from Unfree Countries (POCOB). Some political Salafist agitators have decried what they perceive as double standards when it comes to foreign donations: funds from the Vatican or Israel are generally not seen as a problem, whereas money from Gulf States intended for Islamic institutions can be controversial. They believe that the findings of the POCOB have resulted in unduly harsh restrictions on the religious freedom of Muslims. Other political Salafist agitators are responding to international developments relating to the Muslim community. Among other things, this takes the form of denouncing the new 'moderate' course now being charted by Saudi Arabia in religious matters and the normalisation of

relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel, and condemning those in power in the Arab world.

Impact or potential impact of 'moderate Islam' from Saudi Arabia in the Netherlands

In Saudi Arabia, religious changes are afoot which, in due course, could have implications for the Muslim community in the Netherlands, in terms of undesirable ideology, political influence and financing. These changes relate to the religious discourse, religious institutions and international networks of Saudi Islam. The Saudi government has recently begun promoting 'moderate Islam' within the country, with an emphasis on social changes and on religion as an individual experience rather than a collective one. In the sermons that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Guidance issues to imams, the stress is on personal ethics, virtues and lifestyle. They focus less on traditional Salafist theological themes, and although Salafism is not being directly or openly called into question, its place in society is changing. In doing this, it is thought that Saudi Arabia is seeking to prevent Salafism from being politicised and associated with extremism. The Salafist narrative regarding solidarity between Muslims and the creation of a global Muslim community is now making way for a new nationalist, patriotic narrative.

The changes in religious institutions and networks can, for instance, be seen in the World Muslim League (WML), which is dominated by Saudis. The WML promotes a large number of initiatives outside the country that seek to encourage interfaith dialogue with parties such as the Vatican, Jewish communities and others. The vision of the WML secretary-general on the Holocaust is noteworthy: he believes it is the responsibility of Muslims around the world to learn about the Holocaust. The WML also seems to have radically altered its stance on issues such as the position of Muslims in Western countries, tolerance, ethics, the position of Muslim women and the need to reconcile Islam with modernity. The WML is said to want to view Muslims in the West as Western citizens who are participating in furthering the countries and societies they live in.

Internally and externally, the change of emphasis in the variety of Islam espoused by the Saudi state and the increasing Western orientation of Saudi leaders has already caused political Salafists in the Netherlands to fiercely criticise the Saudi Royal House. They have also presented themselves as supporters of the religious course charted by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for instance in relation to the conversion of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul from a museum into a mosque. As a result, Saudi Arabia is reconsidering the links it has with Salafists and the funding it provides to Salafists in countries like the Netherlands. Leaders in Saudi Arabia, as well as in Gulf States such as Qatar, which also fund political Islam, have authority over organisations involved in missionary and charity work, which play a vital role in their foreign policy and religious diplomacy. With the changes taking place, Saudi Arabia could be seen to be taking a pragmatic approach, at least towards the West. This does not alter the fact that Saudi missionary activities in other parts of the world will continue, and that it is unlikely there will be any change of direction there.

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 analysis 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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