



Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 54

April 2021

Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

Radicalisation - Extremism - Terrorism

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3

4

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Current threat level:
Significant

1. Threat level

On the basis of the 54th edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN), the threat level has been set at 3. A terrorist attack in the Netherlands is conceivable. At present, there are individuals in the Netherlands who are becoming radicalised and those who are already highly radicalised and could pose a threat. While there are currently no indications that anyone in the Netherlands is preparing an attack, it is conceivable that a lone actor could carry out an act of violence. Over the past few years terrorist attacks in Europe were largely the work of lone Islamists or jihadists, whose extremist ideology was often accompanied by psychosocial or psychiatric problems. The attacks in France and Austria in the autumn of 2020 illustrate the threat posed by such individuals. The threat level is based on the elements discussed below.

The Dutch jihadist movement

The jihadist movement in the Netherlands is both socially and ideologically fragmented and lacks both charismatic leadership and a strong, hierarchical structure. The movement is feeling the pressure of repressive government measures, with the result that they are less motivated to organise activities. The threat of violence remains because attacking the Netherlands is still seen by the movement as a legitimate tactic. The threat could also be heightened by other factors: the release of prisoners from a terrorist wing in a Dutch prison, the return of jihadists from foreign conflicts, or certain external developments, both at home and abroad. The next few years will be decisive for the jihadist movement: further disintegration could cause the movement to shrink and create a less receptive environment for potentially dangerous jihadists re-entering society after serving time in prison.

Attacks

The attacks committed in France and Austria by lone actors and various arrests across Europe show that the jihadist threat is still present. However, the situation is not comparable to what we witnessed in the period between 2014 and 2017, when a larger number of attacks took place, some of which

were large-scale and complex. In 2020 there were more attacks in Europe than in 2019, but the number of fatalities was lower. The current types of attacks generally seem to be improvisational in nature. It is plausible that such small-scale attacks (with low numbers of victims) will continue to occur in Europe and the Netherlands.

International jihadism

Although ISIS's striking power is nothing like it was in the heyday of the 'caliphate', the organisation did regularly carry out attacks in Syria and Iraq during the period under review. Jihadist groups affiliated with al Qa'ida and ISIS pose regional threats in various parts of sub-Saharan Africa and, by extension, to Dutch and other Western interests in that part of the world.

Right-wing terrorism

Troubled young people in the Netherlands are particularly attracted to the growing international online right-wing extremist scene which includes a small-scale collection of Dutch-language private online groups. It is conceivable that a lone right-wing extremist could carry out an attack in the Netherlands. In addition there are people in right-wing extremist (and anti-government) circles who have issued online threats of serious violence. As yet, none of these threats has taken concrete form.

Social unrest amid COVID-19 pandemic

During this past pandemic year, the Netherlands has witnessed an interplay between an upper layer of activists who demonstrate in public spaces and a radical undercurrent that is agitating against the government's coronavirus measures. This has given rise to a situation in which the threshold for engaging in extremist behaviour has been lowered. The continuing coronavirus measures could trigger unlawful behaviour on the part of potentially violent individuals. At present such behaviour mainly takes the form of public order disturbances.

2. The terrorist threat to the Netherlands

The main threat to this country continues to be posed by the Dutch jihadist movement. In 2020 this threat appeared to decrease slightly in comparison to previous years. For example, during the period under review no Dutch jihadists were arrested on suspicion of preparing a terrorist attack. That said, the Dutch jihadist movement still poses a violent threat. Nevertheless, it can also be concluded that the jihadist movement in the Netherlands has become even more fragmented in recent months, thus reducing its capacity for action.

It remains difficult to predict who will eventually take the step of committing a violent act, particularly in cases where an attack is prepared and carried out in isolation, as happened last autumn in several European cities. These attacks, a number of which were related to instances of perceived blasphemy, have thus far not caused Dutch jihadists to become more willing to take action or engage in copycat crimes. It is also conceivable that the threat posed by the jihadist movement will increase over time as a consequence of the return of jihadist travellers and the release of jihadists currently held in terrorist wings. These 'veterans' have a proven willingness to engage in violence, and some possess combat experience. As a result, they enjoy a certain status within the Dutch jihadist movement, possibly serving as a source of inspiration for other people in the movement and fostering greater unity. The next few years will be crucial in this regard. If the Dutch jihadist movement becomes even smaller and more fragmented, potentially dangerous jihadists will find a less receptive environment awaiting them upon their release from prison.

The jihadist movement in the Netherlands

The jihadist movement in the Netherlands consists of around 500 people who subscribe to jihadist ideology. The size of the movement has remained more or less constant since 2018, with a small number of individuals either joining or leaving it.

The non-hierarchical 'mainstream' is formed by various social networks and like-minded individuals who have been in contact

for many years. Although this mainstream has become further fragmented in recent years due to the arrest of key figures, personal and ideological conflicts, and various other factors, it still occupies a central position within the Dutch jihadist movement. In addition there are also small, loose-knit networks and individual supporters of jihadist Salafism which mainly exist outside this mainstream but which do feel a strong kinship with other jihadists in the Netherlands and abroad.

The Dutch jihadist movement is concentrating on scriptural study, missionary work (*dawah*), fundraising (mainly for the benefit of jihadist travellers), organising social activities and creating and disseminating propaganda. One of the most significant activities that has emerged is fundraising for women in reception camps and jihadist travellers in other countries, because it is one of the few ways Dutch jihadists can make a tangible contribution to the jihad (apart from actually going to a conflict zone or carrying out an attack). Despite the ideological differences between them, jihadists and some Salafists have demonstrated their solidarity with these women and children and called upon the wider Muslim community to follow suit.

For the time being, the Dutch jihadist community continues to experience ongoing negative effects from repressive government measures and the absence of agitators (whether due to imprisonment, departure for foreign conflict zones or a lack of motivation). This has led to increased security awareness and decreased motivation when it comes to organising activities or pursuing initiatives.

In addition jihadist groups and individuals in the Netherlands are constantly judging each other (and other Muslims). In some cases this may even prompt them to turn their backs on one another. It is likely that a large segment of the Dutch movement identifies more with jihadist ideology as such than with a specific organisation like ISIS. Although ISIS is probably still, in relative terms, the most popular jihadist group, sympathy for the organisation is no longer as unconditional and

exclusive as it was. There is also an enduring lack of new focus since ISIS suffered major territorial losses in 2018, and since then there have not been any new issues around which to mobilise supporters. There have also been no new leaders or agitators to emerge within the movement who have both the intention and the leadership qualities needed to galvanise the fragmented movement. A contributing factor in this regard may be the fact that jihadists who have been released from prison are subjected to certain restrictions that inhibit their freedom. It is also noteworthy that while Dutch jihadists express concerns about the plight of the Rohingya, Uighurs or women in Syrian-Kurdish reception camps, these issues have not yet stirred up Dutch jihadists to the extent that they have been willing to engage in violence.

Minimal terrorist propaganda seen in public online groups

As previously described in DTNs 52 and 53, there has been a sharp decline in explicitly jihadist messages on Dutch-language social media channels in open groups. The attacks in France and Austria have not altered this trend. In open groups frequented by Dutch jihadists, it is rare to find direct responses to the attacks or the perpetrators. The situation of women in reception camps in the conflict zones, the French crackdown on radical Islam and theological debates are some of the main topics Dutch jihadists and Salafists write about online. Despite the near absence of any terrorist content in relation to the attacks in France and Austria, the jihadist struggle is still glorified in general terms. This sort of propaganda can cause young Muslims and other receptive readers to adopt a stance towards non-Muslims (including non-believers) or Dutch institutions that is detached, militant and (in the most extreme cases) violent.

Thanks to the actions of social media companies and repressive measures on the part of the authorities, disseminating jihadist propaganda has become more difficult. As a result jihadists have had to make use of private groups and less common chat applications. This limits the reach of their message, which remains largely confined to their own jihadist network. Online

propaganda for maintaining the jihadist movement will also continue to be spread via Facebook, as there is no other platform with the same reach.

Online jihadist initiatives attempt to get around the possible (permanent) takedown of their social media pages by starting alternative pages. Setting up back-up channels is a proven method not only for jihadists; it is also used by right-wing extremists. (See the section 'Extremism, radicalisation and polarisation') Using these back-up channels they seek to minimise their online presence while continuing to spread propaganda. As long as in-person contact remains more difficult due to the pandemic, it is possible that jihadists will increasingly turn to the internet to network and share propaganda. This could bring Dutch jihadists into contact with foreign individuals and networks seeking to carry out an attack. This kind of interaction could heighten the threat level.

Arrests

On 16 March 2021, following the release of an official report by the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), a 30-year-old man was arrested in Zutphen, on suspicion of threatening to commit a terrorist offence. He is also suspected of incitement to terrorism via social media. In addition, in late 2020 a Syrian with refugee status was arrested in Rijssen on suspicion of membership of a terrorist group in Syria. In mid-January 2021, at the request of the Dutch Public Prosecution Service, a Syrian refugee with a Dutch residence permit was arrested in Greece, also on suspicion of participation in a terrorist organisation in Syria. Both individuals are suspected of involvement in terrorist offences committed in Syria and Iraq. There are no indications that they had any plans to carry out attacks against the Netherlands.

Criminal cases and imprisonment

Last October two Moroccan men were sentenced to eight years in prison for preparing a major terrorist attack in the Netherlands. Both men, who were residing illegally in the Netherlands, were apprehended in Rotterdam-Zuid in response

to an official report by the AIVD. From information on their phones the authorities learned that they had already scoped out potential targets, searched for instructions for explosives and recorded a farewell video.

There are currently dozens of suspected and convicted jihadists being held in the terrorist wings of prisons in Vught, Rotterdam and Zwolle. Within these terrorist wings new networks are being formed and prisoners are influencing one another. On account of the high occupancy rate, it can be difficult for prison staff to monitor these processes and pursue policies that meaningfully differentiate between prisoners. The fact that these prisoners influence one another may magnify the threat these individuals pose, both inside the terrorist wings and after their release. The fact that jihadists can pose a real threat after their release was demonstrated in late 2020 by the attacks in Dresden and Vienna, which were carried out by jihadists who had previously served time in prison (see chapter 3). In 2021 various jihadists currently imprisoned in the Netherlands will be released, including a number of men who took part in the fighting in Syria and Iraq.

In mid-February 2021, Gökmen T., the perpetrator of the attack in Utrecht in March 2019, stabbed a staff member of the terrorist wing at De Schie prison multiple times in the cheek with an improvised weapon. T. was probably seeking to injure or kill random prison staff. T., who has been deemed to have diminished responsibility for his actions by the Pieter Baan Centre (a forensic psychiatric clinic), was sentenced to life in prison in 2020 for the Utrecht attack. The Public Prosecution Service is investigating whether this stabbing, as well as the earlier attack in Utrecht, was motivated by a complex of personal factors and extremist ideas.

Dutch jihadist travellers and returnees

The total number of Dutch people who have travelled to Syria and Iraq for jihadist purposes is around 305 (according to figures kept by the AIVD). Around 100 of them have been killed, and 65 have returned to the Netherlands (most of them

in the early stages of the conflict). In total there are around 110 jihadist travellers from the Netherlands still in Syria or Iraq. Approximately 40 of these individuals (all adults) are currently in camps or in detention in northeastern Syria. About 20 jihadist travellers are now in Turkey. Around 30 individuals are still part of jihadist groups in northwestern Syria. There are also at least 215 children with at least one Dutch parent in the area, 70 of whom are in reception camps in northeastern Syria. The potential threat posed by future returnees is comparable to that posed by returnees who are currently in prison. Many of the travellers who are still in the conflict zone have been there for more than six years. Male jihadist travellers will generally have some combat experience. The amount of training an individual has received and their specific experiences differ from person to person. Female travellers have also often been exposed to long-term indoctrination and violence. At present, around one-third of previous returnees have not gone back to the network they were part of before leaving the Netherlands. It is, however, conceivable that future returnees, who stayed in the conflict zone until the fall of the 'caliphate', could seek out their old network on their release from prison. Because those who returned after the fall of the 'caliphate' will spend the next few years in prison, it will take several years before it is clear what effect they have on the Dutch jihadist network.

Dutch women transferred to al Roj camp from increasingly unsafe al Hawl camp

Over the past few months the Syrian-Kurdish authorities have been transferring foreign ISIS women from the al Hawl reception camp to the much smaller camp al Roj. The security situation for women at al Roj is considerably better than at al Hawl. A number of these women are Dutch nationals. Al Hawl is becoming increasingly violent. Since the end of 2019 it has become more and more difficult for the local (Kurdish) authorities to maintain order and security at the camp. According to the United Nations there were a dozen murders committed by camp residents in the first half of January alone. According to human rights investigators and UN staff there had already been 18 murders in the beginning of February, and by

mid-March this number had risen to 40, according to camp guards. A local staff member of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was also murdered in late February. By way of comparison, a total of 35 people were said to have been killed over the whole of last year. According to the same guards there are sleeper cells active in the camps. The head of the public relations department of the camp has said that an underground sharia court is active in the camp and that nocturnal death squads carry out killings at the behest of that court. It is likely that ISIS supporters in al Hawl are playing a key role in these developments.

Possible Dutch link to right-wing extremist group The Base

In late October 2020 two young people were arrested in two separate cases on suspicion of 'right-wing extremist incitement to commit criminal offences, and offences with terrorist intent'. A search of the homes of the two individuals' parents resulted in the confiscation of large quantities of Nazi material, including a swastika flag, uniforms, posters, data-storage devices and prohibited knives. They are suspected of being part of the American right-wing extremist (online) group The Base. This is not a traditional organisation, but rather a collective of individuals who seek each other out on the internet, via fluid networks united by certain shared ideas. In late 2019 and early 2020 eight supporters of The Base were arrested. Several of them are accused of plotting attacks for the purpose of provoking unrest and racial violence. Members of groups like The Base, which the NCTV has reported on in multiple editions of the DTN over the past two years, talk about overthrowing the government and the democratic order, starting a race war and establishing a white ethnostate. Since the right-wing terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand (in March 2019), these sorts of groups have been closely monitored by Western security services.

The previous DTN highlighted the emergence of an entirely new generation of right-wing extremists who have grown up with the internet and communication apps. While they are not quick

to join established movements, online groups and encrypted chats bring them into contact with right-wing extremist ideology. Young people in the Netherlands are also active in national and international chat groups in which participants discuss accelerationism, racial hatred, anti-Semitism, fascism and national socialism.¹ Instruction manuals for weapons are also shared, as is highly provocative and violent propaganda. Participants in these chats glorify the perpetrators of right-wing terrorist attacks and Adolf Hitler. More than anything, such groups serve as echo chambers, in which lone young people from the Netherlands can say whatever they like unchallenged by opposing views and converse solely with people of a similar mindset. The danger remains that lone individuals will form groups, and that this type of online radicalisation will lower the threshold for carrying out an act of (terrorist) violence. The active Dutch participants in such groups, most of whom are young people, often are dealing with problems at home or at school, such as neglect, physical abuse, excessive alcohol consumption by a parent, or bullying. In addition most of these individuals exhibit signs of psychological problems (e.g. depression) or developmental disorders (e.g. autism). The combination of this vulnerability with repeated immersion in online echo chambers can lead to radicalisation and even to the use of violence.

¹ As used here, 'accelerationism' is a right-wing extremist ideology centred on creating or accelerating chaos in order to precipitate a race war and hasten the replacement of the democratic system by a white ethnostate. See also DTN52, NCTV, May 2020.

3. Threat to the West

2020 attacks reaffirm jihadist threat

In the autumn of 2020 terrorist attacks with a radical Islamist or jihadist motive took place in various Western European countries. After the fall of the ISIS 'caliphate' the public perception was that the terrorist threat was in decline. In 2020 however more small-scale attacks took place in Europe than in 2018 and 2019. It is difficult to offer an explanation for this. The attacks in France and Austria in the fourth quarter of last year illustrate the jihadist threat facing Europe. There appears to be no indication that foreign-based terrorist groups (like ISIS or al Qa'ida) were involved in facilitating or coordinating the attacks in the autumn of 2020. That said, a variety of attacks were inspired by the violent anti-Western ideology associated with ISIS.

In 2020 a number of attacks were carried out in France. The beheading of Samuel Paty, a teacher who had shown the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons to his class, led to mass protests in mid-October 2020. From then on, France stepped up its efforts to tackle Islamism. Two weeks later, on 29 October, a Tunisian, who had entered France illegally not long before, fatally stabbed three people with a knife in a church in Nice. He was shot by the police and arrested. These attacks also had a considerable public impact outside France. A few days after the attack in Nice, on 2 November, an Austrian of North Macedonian-Albanian origin shot at people at various places in the centre of Vienna. The man, who was inspired by the ideology of ISIS, killed four people before being shot dead himself.

In terms of the people involved and their *modi operandi* these attacks are consistent with what has been observed in recent years in various Western European countries, including the Netherlands. It has been the case for some time now that attacks carried out by small cells and lone jihadists are more likely than complex, large-scale attacks carried out by terrorist organisations as seen in the 2014-2017 period.

On the internet ISIS continues to urge its followers to use violence against the West. Partly as a result of this, the organisation remains relevant in terms of the threat against the West, two years after the fall of the 'caliphate'. In February 2021, for example, a total of 14 arrests were made in Germany and Denmark in connection with an investigation into suspected plans for an attack being made by three Syrian brothers who are thought to have been inspired by the violent ideology of ISIS.

Alleged blasphemy once again sparks violence

Both the attack in Paris on 25 September near the former offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and the attack on Mr Paty on 16 October had clear links to (perceived) blasphemy. The attacks in France took place shortly after several caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed were republished by *Charlie Hebdo*. The publication was prompted by the trial of the men charged with carrying out the attack on the magazine's offices on 7 January 2015. The republication of these cartoons led to a renewed international outcry among Islamists and jihadists. Some called for France to be attacked. There were also protests by the Pakistani TLP party, which has made blasphemy a major political issue in the country, as well as calls for retaliation by terrorist organisations like ISIS and al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula.

These protests and calls for violence may have resonated with the lone actors who then proceeded to carry out attacks, such as those in Paris. The threat to avenge insults to the Prophet can also arise from other radical Islamic currents besides jihadism. As a result, this threat can be harder to detect for security services and is thus more unpredictable. It would also seem that we are witnessing a shift in the type of individuals targeted. Whereas previously it was the perceived blasphemers themselves who were in danger, now it is the case that teachers or even random members of the public can be targets.

Concerns in Europe about returnees and terrorists released from prison

Although the perpetrators of the attacks in Europe in the autumn of 2020 were not returnees from jihadist conflict zones, the European authorities nevertheless remain concerned about this group's potential for violence. In total around 5,000 jihadists travelled to Syria and Iraq from European countries, and around 25% of them have now returned to Europe. With their combat experience and network of contacts and the status they have gained, jihadist returnees could – now and in the future – play a mobilising role within jihadist networks in Europe, thus heightening the threat of violence.

In most cases European returnees continue to subscribe to jihadist ideology and rejoin jihadist networks. It is likely that only a small number of returnees play a central or leadership role within these jihadist networks. The background of the perpetrators of the attacks in Vienna and Dresden (where a 20-year-old failed asylum seeker from Syria attacked two German tourists with a knife on 4 October 2020, one of whom died) illustrate the security risks that can arise from the release of imprisoned terrorists. Various European countries have been highlighting this risk for some time. The perpetrator of the Vienna attack had previously been convicted following a failed attempt to leave the country to join ISIS. The perpetrator of the Dresden attack had also spent time in prison for recruiting ISIS fighters, planning an attack and other offences. The release within Europe of individuals with a proven willingness to engage in violence could generate significant security risks in the years ahead.

ISIS supporters continue building international networks

ISIS still has ambitions to carry out attacks in Europe. To this end it seeks to cultivate its relations with ISIS supporters in Europe. Conversely, ISIS supporters in Europe are attempting to strengthen (online) ties among themselves, as well as with jihadists in other parts of the world, and with ISIS in Syria and Iraq. However, during the period under review this has not led

to attacks in Europe that were coordinated or directed by ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Al Qa'ida also wants to carry out attacks but practical obstacles remain

Like ISIS, al Qa'ida continues to build its international networks, though the two groups tend to go about it differently. Whereas ISIS mainly chooses to do this through its supporters (bottom-up approach), al Qa'ida tends to do it through its central organisation. Although al Qa'ida still harbours the intention of carrying out attacks in a Western country or against a Western target somewhere else, it has a number of practical issues to contend with. As already noted in the previous DTN, al Qa'ida's external attack capabilities in Syria have probably been eroded by the deaths of various leaders. The organisation is also under fire in Afghanistan and Iran, and various experienced leaders have been killed there too. There and in other conflict zones the organisation is not only under pressure from military units but also from intelligence and security services and competing groups. Finally, another factor is that some African organisations affiliated with al Qa'ida are more likely to focus on local conflicts than on striking at the West or Western targets abroad. However, this does not apply to all allied organisations, as is clear from the threat that the Somali group al Shabaab may pose to the West (see chapter 4).

Right-wing terrorist violence during US elections

The spectre of right-wing terrorist violence hung over the polarised elections in the United States, culminating in the storming of the Capitol building. Prior to this incident, there was a thwarted plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan. The 13 men who planned the kidnapping are part of the Boogaloo movement, which has certain similarities to the accelerationist ideology of the online group Feuerkrieg Division, which is on the UK's list of terrorist organisations. It is the avowed aim of these groups to spark a civil war. Thus far the threat posed by these groups to Europe remains limited, but the events in the

US could serve to inspire others. These groups are on the radar of the security services. The trial of two Dutch nationals who have been linked to the online American right-wing extremist group The Base (see chapter 2) shows that clandestine right-wing terrorist groups from the US are seeking to establish a foothold in Europe.

4. International developments

ISIS and al Qa'ida under pressure in Syria and Iraq

The military situation in Syria is at a stalemate. In the coming months this situation will largely be shaped by Turkey, Russia and (most likely) the US. The US is probably eager to maintain its military presence in northeastern Syria, not only to fight ISIS, but also with a view to geopolitical considerations. Over the past few years a pattern has emerged in northwestern Syria, in which limited offensives by the regime – backed by Russia – are followed by ceasefires with Turkish-backed militias. In this way Damascus has been able to slowly expand the area under its control. However, the limits of these gradual expansions are coming into view. It is likely that Turkey will oppose further advances on the part of the regime more forcefully. It has invested a great deal in the area, and will wish to prevent a large influx of refugees.

In the past few years various (high-ranking) al Qa'ida fighters have been killed in northwestern Syria. Some perished while fighting the regime, whereas others were killed by other jihadist militias such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). HTS is the predominant power in northwestern Syria and the only group to succeed in maintaining a kind of proto-state. The situation is particularly difficult for ISIS in that region, but al Qa'ida networks also have limited freedom of movement on account of HTS. During the period under review there were multiple clashes between HTS and other jihadist units, such as Tanzim Hurras al Din (THD), which is allied to al Qa'ida. Various higher-ranking THD fighters were killed in targeted US air strikes. This pressure has had a negative effect on al Qa'ida's ability to carry out attacks elsewhere in the world.

The position of ISIS in Syria and in Iraq differs from that of groups allied to al Qa'ida. Groups allied to al Qa'ida in northwestern Syria have come under increased pressure and are less able to carry out local attacks, but this is not the case with ISIS. While it is true that ISIS faces military pressure from the United States, Iraqi security troops and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), it has also

managed to continue carrying out regular attacks in Syria and Iraq.

The previous DTN stated that when it comes to carrying out attacks outside the region from their positions in Syria and Iraq, the operational capabilities of al Qa'ida and ISIS have diminished considerably. This situation has not changed. And as far as HTS is concerned, it has been the case for years that the organisation does not have an international agenda.

Situation in Afghanistan remains favourable for jihadists

Since 2019 the Taliban, the Afghanistan-based Islamist movement with a primarily domestic agenda, has been at the negotiating table with the Afghan government and the United States, in order to put an end to the war that has been raging in the country for nearly two decades. In February 2020 the Taliban concluded an agreement with the Trump administration which provided for, among other things, the withdrawal of US units from the country as of 1 May 2021. Following an impasse, the Taliban is again talking to the Afghan government about the agenda that is meant to foster a dialogue about peace and the future of Afghanistan.

From a counterterrorism perspective it is relevant that the Taliban has promised that terrorist groups, like al Qa'ida, will no longer be allowed to plan international attacks on Afghan soil. That said, such a promise is difficult to verify and, in the light of the impending withdrawal of US troops, difficult to enforce. In addition, according to the United Nations there are indications that even before the agreement in 2020 the Taliban had already promised al Qa'ida that it would remain an ally – a relationship that goes back two decades. In mid-November 2020 NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned that an overhasty US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan could cause the country to once again become a base of operations for terrorists seeking to carry out attacks in the West. The course charted by the new US president will have a significant influence on developments in Afghanistan. He has previously

spoken in favour of stationing a small US counterterrorism unit in Afghanistan. Two years of negotiations with the Afghan government and the US has in any event led to dissatisfaction among a growing number of Taliban fighters. This is probably beneficial for the growth of ISIS in Afghanistan: unlike al Qa'ida, this group is in no sense an ally of the Taliban. The Afghan branch of ISIS had previously been responsible for attacks in Iran and Pakistan. Over the long term, the group could also pose a threat elsewhere in the world.

Sub-Saharan Africa: jihadist activity also threatens Western interests

Jihadist groups affiliated with al Qa'ida and ISIS pose a regional threat in various parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Western and Dutch interests could also be at risk. In Somalia, al Shabaab, which is affiliated with al Qa'ida, has been a regional threat for many years. Western interests in the region are also a target for the group. An attack by al Shabaab in the Somali capital of Mogadishu in January 2021 killed a Dutch national of Somali origin. Late last year it emerged that this group may have also sought to carry out an attack in the US. According to an indictment disclosed in December 2020 by US criminal justice authorities, a Kenyan member of al Shabaab, who had previously been arrested in the Philippines, was planning a 9/11-style attack on a building in a US city. Under the direction of a high-ranking al Shabaab commander in the Philippines, he had completed a course that qualified him for a pilot's licence in preparation for this attack. This shows that even though the threat posed by al Shabaab is largely regional in nature and the group has yet to carry out any attacks in the West since its founding in 2006, it may harbour the intention to do so and be seeking to develop the necessary capabilities.

In Mozambique the meteoric rise of a local, ISIS-affiliated jihadist group has led to the emergence of a threat in this part of the world as well, with ramifications for surrounding countries. The group, known as al Shabaab (though it is not linked to al Shabaab in Somalia), is active in a part of northern Mozambique with large gas reserves, for which gas projects are

being developed. The French oil and gas concern Total is one of the Western firms involved in these projects. The violence is taking place in the vicinity of the gas projects, in some cases within a radius of a few kilometres. For Total the deteriorating security situation was one of the reasons it decided to evacuate some of its staff in early January 2021. As a result of the threat facing the gas projects, Dutch companies that are involved in these projects run a risk of being affected.

5. Extremism, radicalisation and polarisation

Online right-wing extremism goes further underground

In late October 2020 two young men were arrested in two separate cases on suspicion of 'right-wing extremist incitement to commit criminal offences, and offences with terrorist intent'. The men are suspected of belonging to the American online right-wing extremist group The Base (see also chapter 1). In the Netherlands dozens of people who have drawn inspiration from far-right ideas have made violent threats online. Although these threats do not always appear to be serious or likely to materialise, this remains an area of concern. In December 2020, for example, a Dutch right-wing extremist was sentenced to four months in prison (of which two months suspended) for threatening a politician from the BIJ1 party in a Dutch chat group. The Public Prosecution Service is also investigating potential prosecution of a man for threatening an anti-racism activist in a chat group.

Increasingly, the online activities of Dutch right-wing extremists and the small far-right and right-wing extremist protest groups are migrating to the periphery of the internet. In recent months they have become less and less active on major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This is due in part to arrests around the world and these platforms' more restrictive policy on hate speech, discrimination and right-wing extremist propaganda, as a result of which accounts are being blocked or suspended more frequently. Because of this, various protest groups have moved to alternative platforms with few if any restrictions, such as Telegram, Parler, Gab and Bitchute. However, on these platforms, these groups have less reach. Communication between members runs mainly through encrypted chats.

But these alternative platforms are also increasingly coming under fire from the authorities and major tech companies, on account of the lack of moderation of posted content. This could force right-wing extremist individuals and groups to return to their own websites or platforms. Because of the costs involved and the limited reach, this is not seen as an attractive option.

Here we see the risk of the 'waterbed effect', where right-wing extremists keep moving to other corners of the internet or isolate themselves in closed online environments. This can contribute to the emergence of separate online worlds, filter bubbles and echo chambers where there is never any pushback to radical discourse, where members simply reaffirm each other's ideas and where radicalisation is allowed to proceed unabated. It should be noted that the above-mentioned migration does not mean that platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram are free of far-right content, but it is mainly peripheral figures who remain active there. It is simply not feasible for the major platforms to moderate all content and tackle the rising number of radical accounts.

The far right and far left continue to lock horns, online and in the real world

There is an ongoing interplay between far-right and far-left activists. Not only do right-wing demonstrations sometimes provoke left-wing counter demonstrations; on the internet, too, members of each camp keep a close eye on their ideological opponents. It would seem that a number of far-left individuals have infiltrated several private Dutch right-wing extremist online groups, where subjects like weapons and violence are discussed (see chapter 2). By gathering details of the activities of this secret, right-wing extremist online landscape, individuals on the far left can gain information for future counter-activities. In addition, they are putting out information to inform and warn the public about the possible dangers of these online groups.

This interplay of far right and far left also takes the form of 'doxing': the online publication of opponents' personal information, often for the purpose of unmasking, intimidating or causing harm to them. This can be perceived as an act of intimidation by the people concerned. Doxing occurs not only between known ideological groups; it is also practised by groups that are opposed to the government in general or to specific policies. For years politicians, senior officials, companies and organisations involved in implementing asylum

and expulsion policy have been subjected to doxing and 'naming and shaming' campaigns by far-left groups. Information concerning right-wing protesters, or individuals and businesses that facilitate right-wing demonstrations, are also published. Far-right accounts target not only far-left protesters, but also other people perceived as being on the left: lecturers, judges, members of the civil service, journalists and other public figures. By publishing personal information they are seeking to break through the supposed left-wing hegemony in Dutch society. Attempts by left-wing groups to unmask right-wing doxing accounts have yet to halt or rein in the practice. It is not inconceivable that this online back-and-forth could lead to real-world activity, for example, to put a stop to doxing. National elections can spark both online and real-world confrontations between the left and the right.

Polarisation

The DTN addresses negative forms of polarisation because these can contribute to social unrest and/or fuel radicalisation processes. The issues described below have sparked protests or polarised debate which is leading (or can lead) to a hardening of attitudes, both in the digital domain and the physical world. For years now the NCTV has observed that in times of intense polarisation in society at large, potentially violent extremists can feel empowered to commit an act of violence.

Angry tone in ongoing COVID protests

Amid the ongoing pandemic, protests against the restrictive measures continue to occur. Although the measures to counter the spread of COVID-19 are widely accepted and observed by the majority of the population, a diverse group of people have spoken out against these measures. The trends identified in DTN53 have continued into the present period: the bulk of the protests take place on social media, and they can sometimes take on aggressive and threatening forms. Real-world protests are regularly antagonistic in tone and lead to public order disturbances, but for now, any movement in the direction of extremism is rare. And whereas individuals on the far right

have been gravitating towards pandemic protests, the far left have actually turned their backs on them.

There is a certain cross-pollination between protest groups opposed to government policy and conspiracy theorists. People who are part of both online communities share conspiratorial plots, disinformation and misinformation about the virus and the official response to it. The adoption of a conspiratorial mindset contributes to a hardening of attitudes on social media, but also in real-world protests. The online expression of often legitimate grievances alternate with threats to politicians, journalists and academics and the dissemination of doxing lists. Some of these online threats are serious in nature, and have led to multiple arrests. In December, for example, a 40-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of threatening to commit a terrorist offence. He is known to the authorities for certain statements he has made regarding the Dutch government, coronavirus measures and the police, and he has criticised the government online in inflammatory terms. On YouTube the man allegedly threatened to use a firearm. At the time of his arrest he was carrying a firearm, but there are no indications that he had any specific plans to carry out the threats he had made online.

Sometimes protesters will also directly address the police, journalists, politicians, academics or doctors, both during demonstrations and in other ways. This can take the form of, for example, delivering threatening letters to the homes of people involved in COVID-19 policy, but it may also involve engaging in lawful protest actions that can be perceived as intimidating. An example of the latter involved sending letters to thousands of GPs with unfounded warnings about criminal prosecution with regard to COVID-19 vaccines. This willingness to approach people directly, the occasionally heavy-handed forms of protests and the many online and real-world threats are worrisome, but for now the number of violent incidents related to the pandemic is limited. In addition to the acts of arson carried out on mobile phone masts, mostly in April and May of last year, there have also been a number of acts of

vandalism at municipal health service (GGD) testing centres, for example in Bovenkarspel (North Holland) on 3 March 2021.

International polarisation caused by 'cartoon attacks' resonates here as well

The international polarisation around the issue of freedom of expression in the aftermath of the 'cartoon attacks' has resonated in the Netherlands as well. Shortly after the terrorist attacks in France and Austria (see chapter 3) and the international blasphemy debate, a political Salafist imam started a petition against insulting the prophet Mohammed. This petition eventually garnered over 120,000 signatures, although with no additional personal data (such as an address) to go on, there was no way of ascertaining the number of unique signatories or their origins or ideological persuasion. Partly as a result of its unfortunate timing and the fact that teachers in Rotterdam and Den Bosch were being threatened online in relation to satirical cartoons, this petition led to a polarised debate.

One unlawful protest action that took place during the period of the 'cartoon attacks' and the blasphemy debate involved a threat against PVV leader Geert Wilders by a Dutch person of Turkish descent. The man, who was probably in Turkey at the time, shared a video in which he fired a gun at a portrait of the politician. At the time, Wilders was embroiled in an online polemical debate with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan about the relative importance of freedom of expression versus the condemnation of blasphemy. This sparked thousands of hostile online reactions from members of the Turkish-Dutch community against French president Emmanuel Macron, Wilders and the Dutch government. The online messages in support of Erdoğan did not come only from Islamic organisations; they were also posted by Turkish nationalists. Some non-Turkish Muslims in the Netherlands also posted online about this issue. However, no major protests or demonstrations from the Turkish community ever materialised in the Netherlands in response to Wilders' publication of a satirical cartoon about Erdoğan. Apart from what was observed

during this quarrel between Erdoğan and Wilders, the number of threats aimed at the PVV leader tends to increase when there are international events and incidents related to Islam, which he then responds to. This was the case, for example, when the criminal trial of the perpetrators of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack began, and also at the time of Samuel Paty's beheading.

A number of informal Salafist educational institutions are spreading a harmful message

Salafist centres in the Netherlands regularly offer informal classes. The classes offered by a small group of these informal Salafist institutions preach intolerance, exclusion, hate and rejection of those with dissenting ideas and of members of other faiths. This is particularly alarming when this message is being delivered to children and other vulnerable groups. Sometimes, the public image projected by these informal Salafist educational institutions is more moderate than what goes on behind the scenes. Legally speaking, this kind of intolerance generally does not rise to the level of criminal hate speech, though it can have a similar effect and lead to polarisation. Specifically, it can pit different segments of the population against one another, and over the long run, it can contribute to the radicalisation of young people. This undermines the 'horizontal' dimension of the democratic legal order (i.e. the relationship between individual citizens). In time, this intolerant, isolationist style of teaching could also undermine the 'vertical' dimension of the democratic legal order (the relationship between citizens and the government).

Although Salafists are only a small minority within the Muslim community, other forms of Islam lag behind in terms of the instructional opportunities they provide. This means that Salafism ends up exerting a disproportionate influence on the Muslim community.

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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