



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

# Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 57

November 2022

## Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

*Radicalisation - Extremism - Terrorism*

1

2

**3**

4

5

Current threat level:  
**Significant**

# 1. Threat level

On the basis of the 57th edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN), the threat level has been set at 3. This means that a terrorist attack in the Netherlands is conceivable. There are individuals and groups in the Netherlands that are radicalised or in the process of becoming so. They can pose a threat to national security. There are, however, no specific indications that radicalised individuals are preparing a terrorist attack.

The threat level has remained unchanged since 2019. Yet the *nature* of the terrorist threat has changed: the threat in and against the Netherlands has become more multifaceted and more diffuse. Jihadism remains the principal terrorist threat, but the threat posed by the jihadist movement in the Netherlands and neighbouring countries has decreased since since the end of the last decade. With the rise of right-wing extremist accelerationism, terrorist attacks prompted by this inherently violent ideology have also become conceivable. In addition, a belief in conspiracy theories within the radical anti-government protest movement can also lead to extremist and even terrorist acts.

### **The jihadist movement in the Netherlands**

Given its relatively large size and level of organisation, the Dutch jihadist movement remains the principal terrorist threat to the country. Yet repressive measures taken by government authorities and a lack of 'mobilising issues' have rendered the movement stagnant and relatively inactive. Nevertheless, some Dutch jihadists still harbour the intention to carry out an attack, although there are no indications that there are currently any plans to do so. The development of the movement remains unpredictable. The threat could increase again, influenced by, for instance, certain mobilising events or the release of persons from prison who have been convicted of terrorist offences.

### **International jihadism**

The number of jihadist attacks in Europe has fallen since the end of the last decade. That said, individual jihadists and small groups can still carry out attacks. ISIS and al Qa'ida are capable of strengthening and expanding their organisations and networks in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. In Africa they are also expanding their influence via local, affiliated groups. These developments come mainly at the expense of regional security, while also posing a potential threat to Western interests in the region. If these trends continue, a new threat to Europe could nevertheless arise.

### **Right-wing extremism**

Accelerationism remains the principal right-wing extremist violent threat. This movement advocates terrorist violence as a legitimate means of achieving its ideal of a white ethnostate. One of the pillars of accelerationism is a conspiracy theory called 'the great replacement theory', which is increasingly a part of the public debate in the Netherlands. Accelerationists believe that this perceived 'replacement' can be stopped by violent means and by precipitating a race war. Although accelerationist attacks have seldom occurred in Europe so far and accelerationists mainly confine themselves to expressing their discontent online, the inherently violent nature of the ideology means that a terrorist attack from these circles is conceivable.

### **Anti-government extremism**

There is a group of anti-government extremists in the Netherlands which, prompted by deep-seated distrust, anger and feelings of injustice, is agitating against the government and other institutions. This group, which emerged as a radical undercurrent of the COVID-19 protest movement, is shifting its focus to other matters, such as the controversy surrounding nitrogen emissions and the farmers' protest movement. A subset of this group endorses conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories undermine public trust in the country's democratic institutions and the rule of law. The spread and normalisation of such theories could lead to extremist and even terrorist acts.

## 2. Jihadism and the threat posed by radical Islam

Jihadism is a significant source of the terrorist threat to the Netherlands. Adherents of this ideology pursue the establishment of an Islamic state or 'caliphate'. They want to achieve this goal by force of arms, including terrorist attacks.

### **The Dutch jihadist movement**

For some time now the Dutch jihadist movement has consisted of around 500 people. It encompasses a variety of groups spread out over the country. The groups, which vary in size, are in contact with each other via an informal supra-regional network of active members. Although the members of these networks can play different roles, such as producing propaganda or organising meetings, in most cases no clear hierarchy exists. There are few leaders or agitators. There are also no specific, commonly agreed goals.

In addition there are a small number of Dutch jihadists who do not belong to any offline networks. They may have been radicalised by online propaganda, with little or no offline interaction with Dutch jihadists. This can make it difficult to recognise them as a potential threat. These kinds of lone actors are generally in contact with other jihadists in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

The size of the Dutch jihadist movement has not changed significantly. Often, new recruits are relatives and friends of existing members. Because of these close personal ties, it is not always easy to abandon the movement. Usually, when people exit the movement, they do not make a clean break. Rather, it is a process of gradual disengagement, as these individuals make new friends and cultivate new interests.

Not only is the movement stagnating in terms of growth, it is also less active. Thanks to repressive government measures, jihadists in the Netherlands have felt little scope to turn their convictions into action. Potentially mobilising issues, such as the plight of Dutch ISIS women in camps in northeastern Syria, seem to have little influence on the size and activity of the jihadist movement. Dutch jihadists seem to be focused mainly

on non-violent social activities. Some of these activities are aimed at strengthening the movement. This is done by disseminating jihadist ideology and engaging in mostly small-scale activities such as supporting prisoners.

There is still sufficient knowledge and experience among Dutch jihadists for them to carry out a successful terrorist attack. A limited number of jihadists in the Netherlands harbour the intention to carry out attacks on this country, for example in response to urging from groups like ISIS and al Qa'ida. As far as is known, this intention has not resulted in any actual preparations to carry out a terrorist attack.

It is possible that future developments could serve as a driving force for further action by the movement in the Netherlands. This is not the first time that the Dutch jihadist movement has been relatively quiet. This was also the case between 2008 and 2012, for example. The jihadist conflict in Syria and Iraq then led to a resurgence in the movement. In addition to these kinds of mobilising events, the release of convicted terrorists from prison can also cause an uptick in jihadist activities within local networks. However, the development of the movement remains unpredictable; without any mobilising incidents, a further decline in the jihadist threat is also possible.

### **Dutch jihadist travellers and returnees**

#### **Thirty per cent of Dutch jihadist travellers have returned to the Netherlands or another homeland**

As of 1 July 2022 around 70 (out of a total of 300) adult Dutch jihadist travellers had returned to the Netherlands. Just under 40 per cent of these returnees are women. In addition around 40 minors have also entered the Netherlands. Some of these minors were born in Syria and Iraq; others were taken to the region by their parents. Another 20 adults and 45 children with ties to the Netherlands returned to another country, often the country of their second nationality.

According to the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), around 105 adults and 185 children with ties to the Netherlands were still in the region as of 1 July 2022. Of that number, around 35 adults and 60 children were living in Syrian Kurdish reception camps or were in detention; the rest were with jihadist groups in northwestern Syria or elsewhere in Syria or Turkey. It is assumed that another 105 adults and 25 minors with ties to the Netherlands have died.

### Return and prosecution of jihadist travellers to Syria

It remains unlikely that large numbers of jihadist travellers will return to the Netherlands of their own accord. In most cases these individuals no longer have valid travel documents, which makes it difficult to return to Europe. Whenever possible, the nationality of Dutch jihadist travellers has been revoked. In addition, the freedom of movement of many travellers in Syria is limited. For those in reception camps or in detention in northeastern Syria, it is not possible to return on their own initiative. Similarly, it is not always possible for Dutch nationals who have joined jihadist groups to leave of their own free will. Moreover, it should be noted that some travellers have no desire to return and have opted to build a life for themselves in the region.

On 1 November 2022, 12 female travellers who are suspected of terrorist offences were repatriated to the Netherlands from Syria with their children. In May 2022 Rotterdam District Court ruled that these women had to be brought back to the country so they could stand trial in person. If the women had not been repatriated, the criminal cases against them could have been dropped, thus allowing them to evade criminal prosecution in the Netherlands. In February the Dutch government picked up five Dutch women and their 11 children from Al-Roj camp in Syria for the same reason. In addition, in mid-June a Dutch female traveller returned to the Netherlands from Turkey. She is suspected of participation in a terrorist organisation during her stay in Syria.



The first woman who was brought back from Syria by the Dutch authorities was sentenced in June to three-and-half years in prison. In addition, for the first time the Public Prosecution Service is prosecuting a female jihadist traveller who had gone to Syria for pillaging, which is a war crime. War crimes generally carry relatively high penalties.

### Threat posed by returnees

In principle all returnees pose a heightened terrorist threat following their release from prison, in part because of the ideological knowledge and international jihadist contacts they acquired during their time in the conflict zone. The potential threat posed by men is particularly acute, given their combat training and experience. Because women have generally not taken part in arms training and hostilities, female returnees typically pose less of a violent threat than do men. That said, women (like men) can still pose an indirect threat to national security if they return to jihadist networks following their release. In this scenario they could recruit or inspire others or even incite them into committing an act of terrorism. The extent to which female returnees pose a genuine danger varies by individual. Some female returnees who have been released from prison in the past few years appear to have distanced themselves from jihadist networks for the time being, while others are thought to have remained active in jihadist circles.

### Imprisonment

As a rule, men who are suspected of or who have been convicted of a terrorist offence are held at special terrorist wings at the custodial institutions De Schie and Vught. Initially, convicted female terrorists were held there as well. However, for the past two years they have instead been imprisoned at a special terrorist wing for women in Zwolle. Up until the summer of 2022 a total of 15 women were held there, all of whom were returnees from jihadist conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

A key advantage of holding both male and female offenders in dedicated wings is that they cannot transmit their ideology to regular prisoners. A calculated risk of this practice is that

terrorist prisoners will come into contact with like-minded fellow prisoners they did not know before. In the case of male prisoners this has previously led to the formation of new jihadist networks. The formation of new networks by women being held at terrorist wings is less common because in most cases these prisoners already knew each other from Syria. Because these are long-standing friendships that can grow stronger in prison, it is likely that these women will stay in contact after their release.

### Terrorist prisoners conceal their extremist views

Both male and female terrorist prisoners often make an effort to conceal their extremist views while serving their sentences. By concealing their extremist views and by acting in a socially desirable way, these individuals seek to avoid a prison sentence, reduce the length of their sentence, or stay off the authorities' radar when engaging in new illegal activities following their release. Women are particularly motivated to conceal their jihadist views because they want to be granted or retain access to their children. The group of female returnees who are currently imprisoned in the Netherlands is a mix of women who continue to actively embrace and promote jihadist ideology and a smaller number who appear to have genuinely renounced it.

In Europe various jihadists who were assumed to be de-radicalised have planned or carried out terrorist attacks in recent years. A number of them were able to deceive staff at de-radicalisation programmes and convince them that they had abandoned their extremist thinking. While in prison these individuals can learn techniques from one another that can be employed to conceal their true intentions. Because of the concentrated occupancy of terrorist wings, the transfer of such knowledge is relatively simple for terrorist prisoners in the Netherlands.

### **Revoking the Dutch nationality of individuals convicted of terrorism**

Approximately 20 jihadists with dual nationality residing in the Netherlands have had their Dutch nationality revoked on the basis of a final and unappealable conviction for a terrorist offence. In general an entry ban is also imposed on such individuals. Some members of this group are still in detention and will be released in the coming years. Objections and appeals have been filed against most revocations of nationality, so these are not yet final. A handful of jihadists whose Dutch nationality has been revoked have since left the Netherlands.

If revoking Dutch nationality prompts the jihadists in question leave the Netherlands, this measure will reduce the terrorist threat to our country, given that their departure will create a physical and social distance to the Dutch jihadist movement. However, a significant number of the jihadists residing in the Netherlands who have had their Dutch nationality revoked cannot leave the country, for example because the country of their second nationality refuses to cooperate in their expulsion or to provide them with a travel document. If these individuals do not leave the Netherlands following revocation of their Dutch nationality, they are considered to be residing here illegally. This means that they will have little if any access to social services. This can lead to increased dependence on associates within their jihadist network. This dependence can perpetuate the threat they pose. Although taking measures under immigration law remains a possibility, the revocation of these individuals' Dutch nationality limits the authorities' scope for action and their ability to monitor these convicted terrorists, as noted in DTN55.

### **Terrorist financing**

In the Netherlands people are convicted of terrorist financing with some regularity. Although the amounts in question can rise to the thousands of euros, in most cases terrorist financing involves small donations that are generally transferred by friends or relatives of Dutch jihadist travellers in Syria and Iraq. The fact that terrorist financing can assume more

significant forms and have major consequences was demonstrated by the case of a former member of the Hofstad Group who was sentenced to 30 months in prison in August. The court found that the man in question had raised \$107,000, which he transferred to 25 female Dutch and Belgian ISIS supporters in Syria with the help of a hawala banker.<sup>1</sup> A number of these women are on the national terrorism sanctions list. Several women were able to escape from Kurdish camps in Syria with the man's help. Seven of them then returned to the Netherlands. A number of Finnish women were able to return to their home country with the help of the same man.

In May a Dutch woman who was extradited to the United States was convicted of transferring several hundred euros to the Somali organisation al Shabaab. For this she was given a three-year prison sentence by a US court.

### **Online jihadist propaganda remains important for jihadists**

It is clear from various criminal cases against Dutch jihadists over the past few years that jihadist social media is still being used to share ideas and do 'missionary work'. Their aim is to attract new recruits and reinforce solidarity among jihadists. A secondary goal is to incite followers to commit violence, in part by glorifying terrorist attacks.

Ongoing efforts by the authorities and social media platforms to prohibit pro-ISIS channels, groups, users and bots have compelled ISIS supporters in recent years to adopt a more decentralised online presence, making use of a wide range of online platforms. In this way ISIS supporters are also attempting to build in fall-back options for their channels. The production of pro-ISIS material is a key element of the propaganda dissemination strategy of ISIS supporters.

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<sup>1</sup> Hawala banking is a form of informal banking in which financial transactions take place via payments to intermediaries in such a way that no cash is actually transferred or physically moved.

The threat posed by online jihadism has remained more or less the same during the past few years. More active measures by the government have ensured that the amount and gravity of online jihadist propaganda has declined sharply in recent years. The accessibility of the internet coupled with the potential reach and undiminished importance of online propaganda for sustaining the jihadist movement means that jihadists will probably continue to maintain an online presence.

### Salafism

Salafism is a fundamentalist reform movement within Islam that sees the first three generations of Muslims as ideal models for human behaviour and advocates a literal interpretation of scripture. Salafists see it as their duty to purge the Islamic community of things they consider un-Islamic. Salafist agitators are limited in number in the Netherlands, but they have a disproportionately large influence on the Muslim community, due in part to their dominant presence on the internet. Problematic behaviour by anti-democratic, intolerant and anti-integrationist elements within the Salafist movement could eventually lead to social polarisation and subversion of the democratic legal order.<sup>2</sup>

### New generation of Salafist preachers takes a more pragmatic approach

A segment of the Salafist community appears to be adopting a less dogmatic approach to societal issues like participation in elections and the question of how to treat members of other faiths. In some cases they are opting to reinterpret certain problematic concepts within Salafism or to simply ignore them completely. The new generation of preachers tend to focus on issues that relate to preserving Muslim identity within Dutch society. This allows them to appeal to a wider public, thus broadening their reach. This pursuit of a more pragmatic course does not, however, mean a change in ideology. There are a number of reasons behind this change in direction, one of

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<sup>2</sup> The 'democratic legal order' refers to social relations along two axes: between citizens and the government (vertical axis) and among citizens themselves (horizontal axis).

which is that ongoing pressure on the part of the Dutch government and critical media coverage has forced Salafist agitators to take a more moderate tone. At the same time there is a wide-ranging debate among Salafist clergy about what the position of Muslims should be in regard to Western society. It is currently unclear what the impact of this change in course will be on the risk that Salafist ideology could subvert the democratic legal order.

### Informal Salafist educational centres offer more classes

One of the ways that Salafists spread their message is through informal schooling. During extracurricular religion lessons at Salafist educational centres, young children can come into contact with teachings that advocate a rejection of Western values and the exclusion of those with dissenting views. That message can also contribute to the growth of extremist thinking. There is little in the way of legislation that would provide a legal basis for monitoring informal schooling.

The number of classes offered by informal Salafist educational centres has risen since 2018. In addition to traditional Salafist educational centres, a number of alternative centres have opened since 2018 outside the country's large cities. It is estimated that educational institutions that offer teachings that are at odds with the democratic legal order are reaching several thousand pupils. This represents a very small minority of Muslims in the Netherlands who receive informal schooling. It is difficult to determine the exact impact of informal Salafist schooling on children and young adults. Salafist doctrine is not taught in the same way everywhere, and the reach of their educational centres differs from place to place. In addition to informal Salafist schooling, there is also increasing interest in home schooling on the part of Salafist agitators and their followers. This is in keeping with a wider, national trend in which home schooling is growing in popularity. For the time being, the group of children that is currently receiving a Salafist education would appear to be small. The influence of the Salafist movement on regular education is thus far limited

due to the stricter nationality law and oversight by the Inspectorate of Education.

### **International developments related to the jihadist threat**

The evolution of the jihadist threat abroad can influence the threat to the Netherlands and other Western countries. In addition, Dutch and Western interests abroad, such as embassies and international companies, can be the target of terrorism. Beyond the terrorist threat in Europe, the evolution of the threat posed by worldwide organisations such as ISIS and al Qa'ida in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Africa is the most relevant factor with respect to the threat situation in this country.

### **Jihadist terrorism continues to pose a threat to Europe**

The number of jihadist attacks in Europe has fallen sharply in the past few years, from 22 in 2017 to five in 2021. The threat of jihadist attacks in Europe may have diminished, but it has certainly not disappeared. The attacks that have taken place since 2017 are, however, smaller in scale and have claimed fewer victims than previously. In general these attacks are the work of lone actors, involve little preparation and are carried out with the help of easily obtainable means. The fact that such acts of violence are prepared and carried out by lone actors makes it difficult for security services to detect potential attackers of this kind at an early stage. Many of these lone actor terrorists are on the radar of the authorities due to mental health issues. This can make it difficult to ascertain a perpetrator's exact motives.

In the first half of 2022 two attacks took place in Europe that could potentially be classified as jihadist or radical Islamic terrorism, though further police investigation is necessary to determine if the motive was in fact terrorist in nature. These attacks claimed the lives of three people. Thanks to arrests in various European countries in the spring of 2022, the authorities were able to prevent a number of attacks by jihadist lone actors, small groups and a possible larger cell.

One of the two attacks occurred in Oslo in late June: using a firearm, the perpetrator killed two and injured 21 near a popular gay bar. The suspect had been known to the Norwegian security services since 2015 on account of radicalisation and jihadist sympathies, and according to the intelligence division of the Norwegian police he had previously suffered from psychological problems. Although the suspect acted alone, it is possible he received outside help in preparing the attack. This attack was also notable in that it involved the use of a firearm. There had been no jihadist or radical Islamist attacks involving a firearm in Europe since the Vienna attack in November 2020.

In the other attack during the period covered by the present DTN a known Corsican separatist was killed in prison by a fellow prisoner who was serving a nine-year sentence for terrorist-related offences. This suspect is also believed to suffer from mental health problems. He allegedly said that the killing was in response to blasphemy by the victim, who 'spoke ill of the prophet'. As in previous years, supposed blasphemy can serve as a justification for extremist and terrorist violence. This was previously the case with regard to the attack on the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, the attack on two American tourists at Amsterdam central station in 2018 and the murder of the French teacher Samuel Paty in 2020. A more recent example is the attack on writer Salman Rushdie on 12 August. Since Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, he has been under threat from extremist Muslims who believe that he should be punished for what they perceive as the book's blasphemous content.

### Professionalisation of ISIS in Syria and Iraq can lead to a renewed threat to the West

In its heartland in Syria and in Iraq, ISIS is facing ongoing security operations by both the local authorities and the anti-ISIS coalition. Thanks to these operations there has been a gradual decline in the number of active ISIS fighters. According to the United Nations (UN) that number has been cut in half in the past two years; in mid-2022 it was estimated to be



between 6,000 and 10,000. In February a number of ISIS leaders were killed or taken prisoner, including 'caliph' Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. The strategy of eliminating the group's leadership seems to be having some effect on the organisation's operational capabilities. For example, the number of attacks in Syria and Iraq decreased in the first half of 2022 following a brief resurgence after a longer period of stagnation.

Despite these setbacks, ISIS in Syria and Iraq has shown resilience, and it remains a centrally led organisation that is capable of profiting from these countries' instability. After the fall of the so-called caliphate in March 2019, a large part of the organisation withdrew to several inhospitable parts of Iraq and the central Syrian desert (Badiya). There is also a decentralised network of ISIS cells that carry out attacks and intimidate the local population. From its strategic base in Badiya, ISIS is once again seeking to conquer parts of Syria and Iraq. In order to achieve that goal ISIS remains focused on increasing its manpower and on rebuilding, in both organisational and material terms. Given the ongoing political and social instability and other factors, ISIS has retained its appeal for Sunnis in both countries. In addition to the group of active ISIS fighters, the organisation probably has many thousands of supporters and sympathisers in both countries who sometimes perform odd jobs for the group and who, if so desired, could be called upon to take up arms. Now and in the future these supporters and their families form a pool of potential ISIS recruits.

At present ISIS is probably not capable of carrying out terrorist attacks in the West from its heartland in Syria and in Iraq, though it has not renounced the intention to do so. As in previous years the main threat to Europe is posed by ISIS supporters in the West who are inspired by the group's ideology but are not acting on the orders of or receiving assistance from people in Syria and Iraq. If ISIS succeeds in its aforementioned efforts to rebuild, the organisation can over

time once again pose a threat to Europe. ISIS's long-term goal remains the establishment of a global caliphate.

In addition to consolidating and expanding the organisation, ISIS's central leadership in Syria and Iraq is seeking to professionalise the international network of external ISIS provinces and affiliated combat groups. It takes a particular interest in Africa and Afghanistan in this regard.

### ISKP and al Qa'ida can pose a threat to the West from Afghanistan

The regional branch of ISIS in Afghanistan, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), has strengthened its position in the country since the Taliban returned to power. According to the UN, the number of ISKP fighters has increased during the past year from 2,200 to 4,000 individuals. This is due in part to the fact that after seizing power, the Taliban released hundreds of prisoners, including members of ISKP. Another explanation for the growth of ISKP is financial support from the mother organisation in Syria and Iraq. The Afghan Taliban regime has proven to be largely unable to offer a counterweight to the growing domestic and regional threat posed by ISKP. In recent months the local branch of ISIS carried out multiple large-scale attacks in the country, and it was also responsible for a number of missile attacks, launched from Afghanistan on two neighbouring countries.

Thanks to its historical alliance with the Taliban, al Qa'ida core has acquired more freedom of movement in Afghanistan since the regime change. This has allowed it to attract new recruits. That said, the Taliban has reportedly barred al Qa'ida core from planning and/or carrying out attacks on targets abroad from its position in Afghanistan, as this would harm the Taliban internationally in its pursuit of some form of international recognition or the acquisition of financial support. These efforts came under serious pressure after al Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in Kabul in late July in a US drone strike. The fact that al-Zawahiri was apparently able to live relatively openly in the Afghan capital is in conflict with the Taliban's

promise to the US in the Doha Agreement of 2020 that Afghanistan would no longer be a safe haven for terrorists. Although the elimination of the al Qa'ida leader has substantial symbolic value, the group will probably have little trouble replacing al-Zawahiri. Not only did he lack the stature of his predecessor Osama bin Laden, he also played no role in the day-to-day coordination or oversight of the operations of regional al Qa'ida franchises. Even so, his death has had an impact on the organisation, as he was its public face.

Given the developments over the past few months, the priorities of ISKP and the al Qa'ida core in Afghanistan are currently national and regional in nature. Even so, certain longer-term terrorist risks for the West can nevertheless be identified. Both ISIS, of which ISKP is a part, and al Qa'ida are global jihadist organisations that traditionally also seek to carry out attacks in the West and against Western interests abroad. Given al Qa'ida's current ability to build up its capabilities in Afghanistan and the rise of ISKP, it is conceivable that the subject of planning attacks in the West will once again be a greater priority in the near future. Despite these groups' greater freedom of movement and stronger position, the UN has stated that regardless of their intentions they will not be able to carry out terrorist attacks in Western countries until 2023 at the earliest. After the Taliban took power it was feared that, after Syria, Afghanistan would become a refuge for Westerners with jihadist sympathies. This scenario does not seem to have materialised.

### Jihadism continues to spread through Africa, up to the outskirts of capital cities

ISIS has further expanded its influences on the African continent. In doing so, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, the group has also been focusing on professionalising its networks there. The increased importance of Africa to ISIS has been apparent for several years, as witnessed by the attention ISIS media has been giving to the continent. The rising share of attacks by African ISIS 'provinces' in the total number of attacks claimed by ISIS worldwide underscores the organisation's focus on this

part of the world. Last June ISIS even called on Muslims to immigrate (using the word *hijra*) to Africa to wage armed jihad there. This was a first. By drawing a parallel in this communication between the former 'caliphate' in Syria and Iraq (2014-2019) and present-day Africa, ISIS is suggesting that a new Islamic state is coming into being in Africa. ISIS fighters in the group's heartland in Syria and Iraq are reinforcing this call to arms with video messages in which they praise and seek to inspire their brothers in Africa. It is by no means certain that this appeal will find a receptive audience. It is unlikely that jihadists in Europe will pay it much heed.

One of ISIS's most vital regional structures outside its heartland in Iraq and in Syria has its centre in the Lake Chad basin, where ISIS's West Africa Province (ISWAP) operates. It is also one of the few fronts where ISIS can claim to have installed a form of government that bears a resemblance to an ISIS-like state. Over the past year ISWAP (3,000 to 5,000 fighters) has been able to expand and consolidate its grip on rural areas in remote northeastern Nigeria. If ISWAP manages to acquire a firmer grip on territory in its area of operation, this can give rise to a jihadist safe haven – a breeding ground for regional and supra-regional attack planning. In time this could also pose a threat to Europe. During the period covered by the last DTN, ISWAP carried out a series of attacks far outside its area of operation for the first time since its inception (March 2015). In July it even succeeded in mounting a large-scale and complex attack on a prison on the outskirts of the Nigerian capital of Abuja. Among the hundreds of prisoners that managed to escape, there were also dozens of jihadists, including some from the upper echelons of the group from its earliest days. This shows that groups loyal to ISIS that operate in peripheral areas can also strike in economic and administrative centres. The Western interests that are located in these large urban centres are thus within their reach.

In the Sahel region of West Africa (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) the jihadist conglomerate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), which is loyal to al Qa'ida, is expanding its

control and activities. The group selects mainly peripheral areas of the region where there is little to no government control as its base of operations. For several years now a southwestern expansion has also been visible. A new development is that JNIM is now threatening the Malian capital of Bamako, in the south of the country. With a large-scale attack on the country's main military base near Bamako in July, the group managed to strike at the very heart of the military regime. In a video message JNIM claimed it had taken up positions around Bamako for further operations. Although JNIM's activities in Mali are currently focused mainly on bases of the Malian armed forces, attacks beyond the group's traditional area of operations, such as the one in Bamako, can also strike Western interests. In addition, JNIM's ongoing expansion, via Burkina Faso, to countries along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin) contributes to the threat to Western interests in the wider Sahel.

### 3. The right- and left-wing extremist threat

## Right-wing extremism

### Accelerationism remains the principal source of the right-wing extremist violent threat

As before, the principal violent threat from right-wing extremist circles comes from adherents of accelerationism. Like many other right-wing extremist movements, accelerationism is based on the conspiracy theory 'the great replacement' (See 'Normalisation of the great replacement theory in the Netherlands'), whereby adherents seek to hasten a race war. Their aim in precipitating such a war is to create chaos and replace the current political system with a white national socialist ethnostate. As described in previous DTNs, they regard the use of terrorist violence as a legitimate means for unleashing this conflict. New accelerationist publications once again promote the belief that attacks by lone actors and large-scale attacks on critical infrastructure, such as the electricity network, telecommunications and oil transport, are effective methods of bringing about the intended race war.

There are probably a few hundred Dutch-speaking supporters of this right-wing terrorist ideology. The number of Dutch-speaking supporters does not seem to have increased since 2021. Despite this stagnation, there has been turnover in the movement: some people leave accelerationist networks while new ones join. In addition, the Dutch-speaking right-wing terrorist landscape has a limited degree of organisation. A handful of individuals pose a violent threat. The profile of these extremists remains unchanged. The ideology holds a particular appeal for vulnerable boys and men between the ages of 13 and 30, who often grew up in unstable homes and sometimes struggle with psychosocial problems or psychopathological conditions, making it difficult for them to establish social connections. They come into contact with the ideology through the internet and the world of online gaming. The online nature of the movement makes it difficult to estimate who will engage in violence: the people with the loudest voices online are not necessarily the same ones who will cross the line to physical action.

Online, Dutch-speaking accelerationists use both open and secure social media platforms for communication, recruitment and the dissemination of propaganda. They exploit the large reach of social media platforms to find interested users and then refer them to secure channels, where accelerationists have more freedom to air their ideas in their most extreme form. The trend of users migrating to alternative end-to-end encrypted social media, such as Wire and Element (previously Riot) continues apace. This is in keeping with right-wing extremist movements' growing awareness of privacy and security issues, and this limits intelligence and security agencies' ability to monitor what they are saying. Accelerationists do not stay on the same social media platforms, but move around from one to the other. Sometimes they do so voluntarily, for example as more advanced platforms appear. On other occasions, content moderators force them to move to other social media platforms. New groups regularly crop up while others disappear.

Right-wing terrorism is less common in the real world (as opposed to the internet) than initially assumed. Attacks with a right-wing extremist or accelerationist motive are uncommon in Europe. However, this does not mean that this ideology poses no threat: the possibility of violence remains. For example, an attack with accelerationist motives was carried out in Slovakia in early October 2022, causing the death of two people (see the section 'Right-wing terrorist attacks inspired by accelerationism and the great replacement theory'). In addition, six people were arrested in Europe last year for planning or preparing a terrorist attack with accelerationist motives, and this year too various accelerationists were arrested, for example in the UK, Germany and Slovakia.

In the Netherlands in October a man was convicted of incitement of the commission of criminal offences against public authorities and the dissemination of right-wing terrorist material online. Sharing this sort of material online can incite terrorist offences. The dissemination of apparently less



inflammatory content, e.g. in the form of 'humorous' memes, contributes to the circulation and normalisation of radical ideas.

### Normalisation of the great replacement theory in the Netherlands

One point of commonality between accelerationists and most other right-wing extremist movements is a belief in the theory of the great replacement. This theory, which originated from the alt-right, is used by terrorists to legitimate their actions. It is a fact that the demographic composition of Western countries has changed over the past few decades, but adherents of replacement theory believe that this is the result of malicious intent. According to the theory certain groups, often 'the Jews' or 'the left-wing elite' are systematically changing the ethnic composition of Western countries by replacing white people with people from a different cultural or ethnic background. Due to the notion that the survival of the white race is being thwarted by a Jewish elite, replacement theory has led to a resurgence in antisemitism. Right-wing extremists believe that the birth rate of white people must increase; they oppose the mixing of races, feminism, the LGBTI community and immigrants. Accelerationists see violence and race war as the only way of halting this planned replacement.

A troubling development is that replacement theory has been migrating from the fringes of the internet to the mainstream public debate, including in the Netherlands. Openly and uncritically discussing this xenophobic and often racist ideology, and other conspiracy theories, contributes to the social acceptance of such ideas. Research has shown that the repetition of these ideas in the media and on social media contributes to their further normalisation. This is certainly not to say that anyone who promotes this ideology also endorses terrorist violence, but the ongoing normalisation of such thinking can give right-wing extremists the idea that their beliefs are legitimate.

### Right-wing terrorist attacks inspired by accelerationism and replacement theory

This year there were multiple cases of violence emerging from right-wing extremist circles. Both the 18-year-old perpetrator of an attack in May on non-white shoppers at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York (10 dead), and the 19-year-old perpetrator of an attack on a gay bar in the Slovakian capital of Bratislava in October (two dead) shared right-wing extremist manifestos which sought to justify their actions. In his manifesto the Slovak, who by his own admission became radicalised on right-wing extremist internet forums, refers to accelerationism, previous right-wing terrorists, possible targets and antisemitism. The perpetrator of the attack in Buffalo was also inspired by previous right-wing terrorists. The American livestreamed his attack and also published a lengthy manifesto in which he described himself as a racist, fascist and anti-Semite. Ideologically the Buffalo attacker was inspired by replacement theory. Although he did not refer explicitly to accelerationism, the idea that this supposed replacement must be stopped by violent means is a central element of his manifesto.

The manifesto of the Slovak perpetrator has been shared and praised on accelerationist and neo-Nazi channels. According to partner agencies, there has been a mixed response to the attack in Buffalo on secure channels used by Dutch right-wing extremists. Traditional neo-Nazis see little point in such attacks because they regard them as counterproductive for their own political projects, which are also informed by the great replacement theory. Accelerationists, by contrast, respond more positively: they share jokes and memes and refer to the perpetrator – as with previous right-wing terrorists – as a saint.

### Right-wing extremist groups are again holding rallies

Increasingly, traditional right-wing extremist groups are assembling for real-world rallies. Since the relaxation of the restrictive COVID-19 measures in early 2022, small groups of neo-Nazis and anti-Islam demonstrators have come together

for demonstrations, protest actions, sticker campaigns, physical training or group activities like hikes or drinks events. Several dozen Dutch nationals have attended extreme right-wing events in Belgium, Germany and Hungary and maintain contact with like-minded individuals in Scandinavia. In addition, both established and new right-wing extremist groups have been airing their views both online and in the public sphere. There is limited enthusiasm for known right-wing extremist groups in the Netherlands, and they pose no direct threat of violence. They are known, however, to intimidate their opponents.

The threat posed by traditional right-wing extremist ideology manifests itself mainly in the subversion of the democratic legal order and in the erosion of the rule of law and social cohesion. The normalisation of replacement theory is one example of this tendency. Right-wing extremists actively promote these ideas, and they find a receptive audience both online and in the physical world. Notions about the establishment of a white ethnostate are incompatible with the fundamental rights of groups in our society. Right-wing extremist ideas can also spread when those who harbour them join other types of protests. For example, the involvement of right-wing extremists with the radical segment of the pandemic protest movement and conspiracy theorists led to a mingling of discourses. At this point it can be difficult to distinguish right-wing extremists from anti-government extremists: this is an amorphous group in which unclear, ever-changing and intermingled ideas often go together with personal grievances and psychological problems.

### Ongoing right-wing extremist interest in working in the defence sector

In 2020 the Ministry of Defence observed an increased interest on the part of young right-wing extremists in a career in the Dutch armed forces, as noted in the previous DTN. They see the armed forces as a good fit for their view of manhood, struggle and self-reliance. A segment of these right-wing extremists are eager to use the military training that they

anticipate receiving in the armed forces to transform society into a white ethnostate. A follow-up study by the Defence Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) revealed that the interest in a job with the armed forces among right-wing extremists has not diminished. At present, the group in question is a relatively small cohort of young men, and there are no indications that they currently have any terrorist intentions. Despite that, the presence of right-wing extremists can adversely affect the deployability of the armed forces, on account of the erosion of social cohesion and a reduction of support for protecting democracy and the multicultural society. These individuals thus pose a threat to national security and the democratic legal order.

### Little apparent interest among right-wing extremists to travel to Ukraine

As yet, Dutch right-wing extremists have shown little interest in travelling to Ukraine to fight alongside one or the other of the belligerent parties. Shortly after Russia attacked Ukraine in late February 2022, a debate arose between right-wing extremists over the question of whether they should side with Russia or Ukraine. On the one hand Russia is seen as the aggressor; on the other hand they have issues with the Jewish background of the Ukrainian president. In more general terms right-wing extremists tend to regard the war as a fratricidal conflict which is killing off white people, and they are therefore refusing to get involved. Thus far hardly any Dutch right-wing extremists have gone to Ukraine. There are also no indications of a large influx of right-wing extremists from other European countries to the war zone.

### Left-wing extremism and activism

#### The far left: mostly small-scale, lawful activism

Far-left groups have more of a public presence than when the restrictive pandemic measures were in place, but the size of these groups and the scope of their protest actions remains limited. By and large their protests have been non-extremist in nature, taking the form of, for example, international

campaigns against European migration policy or demonstrations and graffiti against perceived racism, this country's colonial past or the far right. Their protests have also linked up to broader issues, such as the housing shortage or the climate crisis. Some anarchists have been opposed to peaceful activism for some time and speak openly about a militant struggle against the state and capitalism. Although these kinds of pronouncements are generally nothing more than talk, more militant actions cannot be ruled out in the future. Climate activists have been staging protests that attract a great deal of attention from the public and media. These can be qualified as non-extremist.

## 4. Anti-government

### **Subversive conspiracy theories among anti-government extremists**

In the past few years a law-abiding mainstream and a radical undercurrent have been expressing their discontent, both online and in the real world, with the measures taken by the government in response to the pandemic. The phasing out of these measures earlier this year has removed the primary source of that discontent. This means that the size of the group of moderate, law-abiding demonstrators has decreased.

However, the radical undercurrent remains active. As noted in DTN 56 this radical undercurrent is not a homogeneous group. Rather, it consists of three subcategories: just under 20 (predominantly online) agitators, between 10,000 and 50,000 people who follow them (again, predominantly online) and share content, and approximately 100,000 ad hoc supporters. Their anti-government sentiment is motivated by a fundamental sense of distrust, anger and injustice. But their targets are broader than that, extending to other institutions as well; they are also opposed to politicians, the justice system, the media and the academic establishment. The radical undercurrent is not alone in its distrust: polls have shown that over half of the Dutch population does not trust the government. However, the way in which this undercurrent expresses its dissatisfaction is distinguished by the sometimes extremist form that their protests take and the factually inaccurate messages they systematically spread.

The grievances and distrust harboured by the radical undercurrent manifest themselves through conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories can be a source of meaning and guidance in a complex world, but they can also lead to fierce opposition to the established order. Examples of this include the misleading stories about the World Economic Forum and the QAnon conspiracy theory, which is less widespread in the Netherlands. We are observing the contours of a movement that is characterised by deep hostility, fanaticism and fantasies of vigilante violence. Its adherents spread an 'elite narrative', the notion that the Netherlands is ruled by an oppressive elite,

which is at war with ordinary people and which must be met with resistance. This elite will eventually have to be brought before tribunals.

Conspiracy theories can find a wider audience because they are easy to link to current events. The repetition of these theories in the public and political domain only serves to normalise them. The aforementioned elite narrative started to be heard more frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic, but now other developments are also being slotted into this discourse, such as the war in Ukraine, the protests against the government's plans to reduce nitrogen emissions, and climate policy. This means that it is unlikely that the elite narrative will disappear in the near future, even though it is unclear how its proponents will evolve over the long term. A great deal depends on public trust in democratic institutions.

The threat posed by such conspiracy theories is twofold. In some cases they can lead to clear extremist acts such as incitement of the commission of criminal offences against the public authorities, threats and even violence (see the section 'Conspiracy theorists on trial'). The pandemic protests show that this threat manifests itself mainly on social media, though it can also materialise in the real world, albeit to a much lesser extent. In addition the dissemination of conspiracy theories by anti-government extremists can also undermine public trust in the institutions comprising the democratic legal order. This is not always immediately noticeable; rather, it manifests itself insidiously, as a gradual process of rot at the very foundations of democracy. The way in which government institutions communicate has a direct influence on whether this distrust will increase or decrease in the future.

### Conspiracy theorists on trial

In May 2022 three individuals were ordered by a court to pay damages totalling €215,000 to the municipality of Bodegraven-Reeuwijk for spreading conspiracy theories about a Satanic network of paedophiles and a series of child murders they claimed had taken place there. The same three individuals



were brought before the court again in mid-June, this time for the incitement of the commission of criminal offences against the public authorities and for making death threats to the director of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) Jaap van Dissel, Prime Minister Mark Rutte and a GP in Bodegraven. The men were sentenced to prison and community service. One of the defendants had previously been convicted of threatening a lawyer for the municipality of Bodegraven-Reeuwijk and the incitement of criminal offences against Jaap van Dissel. In July two individuals were sentenced to five years' imprisonment and were issued with a hospital order for throwing a Molotov cocktail at the home of a journalist. The perpetrators are part of a group of conspiracy theorists which arose from the pandemic protest movement.

### **The presence of anti-government extremists can lead to increased militancy on the part of the protest movement against the government's nitrogen measures**

There was a resurgence in the nitrogen-emissions protest movement after the government announced its nitrogen measures in late June. Most of the protests were peaceful and within the bounds of the law. Nevertheless some farmers committed serious criminal offences, such as blockading of highways, dumping asbestos, arson, vandalism and violence against law enforcement officials. Some of these protest actions can be characterised as radical. That said, the farmers cannot be considered extremists: their protests are not rooted in a particular ideology, nor do they seek to bring about far-reaching changes to society that pose a danger to the democratic legal order. That said, the protest actions can still undermine the democratic legal order. An example of this is the subversive effect of intimidating and threatening government officials and MPs.

Within the nitrogen protest movement, different parties have seized upon various aspects of the government's plans as an excuse to rise up in opposition. The movement is made up of a variety of groups, which operate independently of one another, without coordination or strategy. In the first place there are

farmers who will be affected by the government's plans and who are taking action on economic and identity-related grounds. There is another group made up of farmers who are not directly affected by the government's plans and sympathisers who feel a kinship with the protesters. This group is also driven by identitarian motives or anti-government sentiments. The last group is composed of anti-government activists and extremists, conspiracy theorists and, to a lesser degree, right-wing extremists who have sought to join the movement. They perceive nitrogen policy as an element of a larger, malevolent, oppressive agenda which is being pursued by the government, as described in both the elite narrative and replacement theory. The distinction between the groups that comprise the nitrogen protest movement is not absolute; the boundaries between them are fluid. In addition it is not always clear who is behind a given protest action: protesting farmers or anti-government demonstrators.

The involvement of anti-government extremists and conspiracy theorists in the nitrogen protest can lead to a rise in militancy. The overwhelming majority of farmers do not seem to be receptive to the interference of anti-government extremists and right-wing extremists. Thus far there does not seem to be any significant and/or long-term cooperation between protesting farmers and extremist groups. However, it would appear that certain segments of the farmers' protest movement are adopting the tactics of the anti-government movement. A future rapprochement is possible, given the points of commonality between the two groups (at least according to the anti-government extremists), the terminology used by the protesting farmers and the opportunities that collaboration could present for increasing public support.

The lack of any real partnership with protesting farmers has not prevented anti-government extremists from joining in with demonstrations or seizing on the nitrogen issue to threaten local politicians and civil servants. As happened before with the pandemic protests, the language used by various individuals in the public sphere can cause anti-government extremists to feel

that they are being listened to and that their radical behaviour is legitimate. Statements about conspiracy theories and disputes about the government's monopoly of force undermine the democratic legal order and contribute to a climate that lowers the threshold for committing violence.

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## 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 Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV) publishes the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN) two to three times a year. The DTN presents a broad analysis of the threat to the Netherlands posed by domestic and international terrorism. It looks at trends that serve as a forerunner to terrorism (such as extremism or radicalisation) or factors that can form a breeding ground for terrorism, such as negative forms of polarisation. 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. The NCTV does not monitor social media accounts for the purpose of the DTN.

**Published by**

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Counterterrorism and Security

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November 2022