



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

# Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands

May 2023

## Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

*Radicalisation - Extremism - Terrorism*



Current threat level:  
**Significant**

# 1. Threat level

On the basis of the 58th edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN), the threat level has been set at 3. This means that it is conceivable that a terrorist attack could occur in the Netherlands. Although the threat *level* has remained the same since 2019, the actual terrorist threat has increased over the past six months. There are more and more indications that jihadist organisations are preparing to carry out terrorist attacks in Europe. These groups have explicitly referred to the Netherlands as a target. A terrorist attack by right-wing extremists remains conceivable as well. Finally, there is also the possibility that lone actors or small groups that have embraced anti-government conspiracy theories could commit an act of violence.

### **Jihadism**

There are currently ISIS supporters living in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe who are part of transnational networks. It is their intention to carry out attacks in Europe. Moreover, ISIS is thought to be capable of sending individuals to Europe and providing support to its followers who are preparing attacks. Terrorist groups have mentioned the Netherlands by name as a target for retaliation for recent incidents involving the desecration of the Koran. Dutch interests abroad are particularly vulnerable to attack.

The local ISIS branch in Afghanistan, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), poses a growing terrorist threat to the West and its interests. This threat is underscored by the discovery of attack plans from February 2023 for targets including the Dutch consulate in Istanbul, possibly in retaliation for the desecration of the Koran in the Netherlands and Sweden. In its heartland in Syria and Iraq, ISIS has acquired more scope for action on account of the reduced Russian military presence there, due to the war in Ukraine. The conflict in Ukraine has also led to a shift in focus on the part of armed forces and intelligence/security services around the world.

At the same time, the size of the Dutch jihadist movement is no longer increasing. After the fall of the caliphate, adherents of jihadist ideology grew disillusioned with ISIS's capacity for

action. However, it is still conceivable that Dutch jihadists could engage in violence on an individual basis or in a smaller groups, possibly in response to perceived acts of blasphemy.

### **Right-wing extremism**

The terrorist threat posed by right-wing terrorist movements, such as accelerationism, has not changed. The movement has not grown in size, however, and for the time being, deeply disturbing online posts have not led to actual attacks in the Netherlands. However, it is alarming that several hundred young Dutch people are actively spreading right-wing terrorist ideas and glorifying perpetrators of terrorist attacks. In addition, there are concerns about a further normalisation of right-wing extremist ideas in politics and society.

### **Anti-institutional extremism**

The threat posed by anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands is twofold. In the short term, there is a limited threat of violence; over the longer term, anti-institutional extremism can undermine the democratic legal order. Some conspiracy theorists fuel distrust in the government by propagating the narrative of a malevolent elite. Their sometimes highly intimidating stance towards politicians can seriously hamper the latter in performing their democratic duties. If large numbers of people were to start declaring themselves 'sovereign citizens', independent of the government, and reject the legitimacy of the government and democratic institutions, this could undermine the democratic legal order.

## 2. Jihadist and radical Islamic threat

Jihadism remains the most important source of the terrorist threat to the Netherlands and surrounding countries. Supporters of this belief system seek to overthrow governments in the Muslim world by force of arms and to replace them with an Islamic state or caliphate. This armed struggle entails the use of violence against religious minorities and a willingness to carrying out terrorist attacks in the West. Jihadists also actively seek to convert others to their belief system.

## **Jihadist threat to Europe and the Netherlands**

### **Increased threat of attack by ISIS in Europe**

Last year saw an increase in the threat to Europe posed by ISIS. Starting around the second half of 2022, more and more indications have emerged that ISIS is planning on carrying out attacks in Europe. The threat can be traced mainly to networks that are under the direction of ISIS structures in Syria and Afghanistan. There are networks connected to these ISIS structures in Türkiye and other countries.

The Afghan branch of ISIS, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), has gained strength since the Taliban took power in August 2021. There are great concerns that Afghanistan will again become a safe haven for terrorist activities against the West. In March 2023 the US military leadership stated that ISKP would be able to carry out attacks in the West within six months.

In Syria, too, jihadist organisations are experiencing greater freedom of movement as a result of reduced Russian activities in the area, due to the war in Ukraine. The conflict in Ukraine has also led to a shift in focus on the part of armed forces and intelligence/security services around the world. In addition, amid the fighting there, a number of supporters of jihadism residing in Ukraine have fled the country and made their way to Western Europe. Finally, there is a belief among jihadists that it is now easier to acquire arms in Ukraine, including automatic weapons, which can be used in terrorist attacks. ISIS will probably seek to exploit these developments.

There are currently ISIS supporters living in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe who are part of transnational jihadist networks. It is their intention to carry out terrorist attacks in Europe. ISIS is thought to be capable of sending individuals to Europe and of providing support to its followers that are preparing attacks. This represents a change in the trend. From 2017 onward, attacks were mainly carried out by lone individuals or small groups that were possibly inspired by ISIS, but were not in direct contact with the group.

The pressure being put on ISIS by the anti-ISIS coalition, local security troops and international intelligence/security services is probably still sufficiently high to adequately intercept and disrupt the majority of planned attacks in Europe directed by ISIS. The coverage and cooperation on the part of the international intelligence community with regard to these kinds of plots is effective, or at any rate, better than at the time of the attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016). That said, it is increasingly possible that the intelligence/security services will not be able to identify an incipient attack in time. For example, a small-scale, directed attack involving a lone individual with a gun could potentially slip through the cracks.

### Incidents involving the desecration of the Koran raise the Netherlands' profile among jihadist organisations

For some time now, global jihadist organisations have regarded the Netherlands as a legitimate target for an attack. As a result of recent incidents in this country involving the desecration of the Koran (see the inset 'The desecration of the Koran in the Netherlands and Sweden'), the Netherlands now has a higher profile among such organisations. Various pro-ISIS channels have taken to social media to call for retaliation against Western countries, including Sweden (which is mentioned by name) and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands. In late January, following these Koran protests, a media organisation connected to ISKP, the Afghan branch of ISIS, issued threats to 'infidels'. The Netherlands was specifically mentioned as a target. A video released in late February 2023 shows the leader of the anti-Islam movement Pegida. In

addition, ISKP's English-language magazine contained a poster that incorporated the Dutch and Swedish flags and called on people to carry out attack on shops, police officers and concerts.

### ***The desecration of the Koran in the Netherlands and Sweden***

*On 22 January the head of the anti-Islam movement Pegida tore up a Koran during a demonstration in front of the temporary premises of the House of Representatives in The Hague. He repeated this action on 12 February during a demonstration in Utrecht, on 22 March in Leiden and on 15 April in front of Amsterdam city hall. In Sweden a Danish anti-Islam activist burned a Koran in front of the Turkish embassy on 21 January 2023. In April 2022 the same activist had burned several Korans during a controversial tour through Sweden, which led to serious public order disturbances in a number of cities.*

*In various Muslim countries these Koran protests led to outrage and demonstrations against Sweden, the Netherlands and other parties. In the Netherlands, anger about perceived sacrilege or blasphemy has mostly been expressed through legal, democratic means, such as demonstrations or petitions. The leader of the DENK group in the Amsterdam municipal council asked the mayor to prohibit people from tearing up the Koran in the future. The national branch of the party has advocated a country-wide ban on the desecration of sacred books.*

*In the past, extremist Muslims in Western countries have carried out attacks in response to blasphemy, such as the one on the offices of the satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo in 2015. The most well-known example of this in the Netherlands was the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004 by a member of the jihadist network dubbed the Hofstad Group.*

As it turned out, these were not empty threats. In early February, 20 people connected to ISKP were arrested in Istanbul on suspicion of planning attacks on churches and



synagogues and on diplomatic missions of Western countries, including the Dutch and Swedish consulates in Istanbul. According to reports in the Turkish media, the Turkish intelligence service feared that ISKP had ordered its followers in Türkiye to carry out the attacks in retaliation for the desecration of the Koran in Sweden and the Netherlands. One week previously, nine Western countries (including the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States) closed their consulates in Istanbul for some time, amid the tensions and heightened threat.

On 11 April, Sweden also closed its embassy in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad for security reasons. In Sweden five men were arrested on 4 April on suspicion of preparing a terrorist attack. According to the Swedish security service, the potential attackers have ties to international ISIS networks via Facebook groups. These groups, whose members included ISIS fighters, were used to raise money for the terrorist organisation. Since the burning of the Koran in January, there have been a number of specific threats of an attack. Prompted by fears of new terrorist attacks, the Swedish police took various actions, including stepping up security measures at various locations of symbolic importance. For now, the threat level in Sweden has remained unchanged at 3 (on a scale of 5).

It is not uncommon for jihadist organisations to mention specific countries in their terrorist propaganda. Academic research has shown that this does not always lead to an increase in the number of attacks in a country. Like the attacks on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, the threatened attacks in Istanbul and in Sweden do however show that the selection of potential targets by jihadist organisations can be guided by perceived acts of blasphemy in the West.

Terrorist groups seize on these instances of perceived blasphemy as a means of strengthening their terrorist message and justifying the use of violence. In this way they seek to inspire radicalised individuals in Europe to carry out

attacks without being actively involved in the preparations themselves. Perpetrators of attacks in response to perceived blasphemy are generally not connected to terrorist groups; in most cases they claim to be acting out of their own personal convictions. Attacks in the past show that Muslims of various stripes (Sunni, Shiite, Salafist, Sufi) can be receptive to calls for retaliation, even if the offensive act in question occurred years before. In August 2022, for example, a man stabbed the Indian-British author Salman Rushdie multiple times while the latter was giving a lecture. The attacker may have been inspired by the death sentence pronounced against Rushdie in 1989 by the spiritual leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, after the publication of the novelist's *The Satanic Verses*. In mid-April 2023 a Muslim cleric in Pakistan posted a message on social media, repeating his previous call for the assassination of Geert Wilders. The motivation for this was the Mohammed cartoon competition that Wilders tried to organise in 2018.

Within a short span of time, jihadist propaganda that specifically mentions the Netherlands as a country that condones blasphemy has contributed to a heightened terrorist threat to this country and its interests abroad. The threat to Dutch targets in countries where cells allied to ISIS are already active is greater than the threat in the Netherlands itself.

### Assessment of Dutch jihadist movement unchanged

The assessment of the Dutch jihadist movement has remained the same in recent years. In several larger cities in the Netherlands there are a number of networks of various sizes that support jihadist ideology. The networks are in contact with one another and they exchange ideas. The movement is both ideologically and socially fragmented, which has prevented it from operating effectively and increasing its influence. With ISIS defeated in Syria and Iraq, the movement has also lost an important narrative, and as a result, it is struggling to attract new members or secure the ongoing commitment of existing members. It is estimated that around 500 men and women in the Netherlands embrace jihadist ideology. Although there has been some turnover within the

movement in the past few years, it is not expected to grow in either size or strength in the short term.

With the fall of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, many members of the Dutch jihadist movement have grown disillusioned in ISIS's capacity for action. Although there are still those who hold fast to the ideal of establishing an Islamic state and are prepared to use violence to achieve that end, Dutch jihadists seem to realise that carrying out attacks without a new caliphate is of limited use. For the time being, it would seem that the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan and the rise of the local branch of ISIS in that country have not served as fresh motivation for people to carry out attacks or to travel to conflict zones. Nevertheless it is still possible that an individual or small group might commit an act of violence, possibly in response to incidents that are perceived as blasphemous, such as the Koran protests in January 2023 (see inset 'The desecration of the Koran in the Netherlands and Sweden'). The movement in the Netherlands is mainly focused on spreading jihadist ideology among like-minded individuals. Over the past few months there has been increased online chatter between jihadists, and they have undertaken a number of new initiatives. This includes an interest in prisoners in special terrorist wings.

For example, they have been highlighting the plight of a group of Dutch women and children who were repatriated in November 2022. There is also a magazine called *De vrije zielen* (Free Souls) which is sent to prisoners being held in terrorist wings. While the magazine does not preach hatred or violence, it does say that prisoners can count on support from the outside. These online and real-world initiatives offer prisoners the opportunity to establish new contacts outside prison and maintain existing ones.

***Eindhoven terrorism defendants acquitted***

*On 14 March 2023 Rotterdam District Court acquitted nine men of preparing terrorist offences. The Public Prosecution Service had requested the acquittal of seven of the defendants and non-suspended prison sentences for the two main defendants. The court held that the evidence in the case file did not prove that the men were planning to commit terrorist offences.*

The fact that the jihadist movement has stagnated does not mean, however, that the potential for new radicalisation has disappeared. There is still a breeding ground for jihadism in the Netherlands. Although external motivating factors do not currently play a major role, this can change rapidly. If new political developments should arise or a new conflict breaks out that involves Muslims, this can give a fresh impetus to the movement. Furthermore, the release of prisoners convicted of terrorist offences or the arrival of migrants with a jihadist past (see inset 'Refugees suspected of involvement in terrorist organisations') can prompt an increase of jihadist activities within local networks.

### **Refugees suspected of involvement in terrorist organisations**

*On 17 January 2023 a Syrian man was arrested in the village of Arkel in the province of South Holland. The Public Prosecution Service suspects him of having held a leading position in the terrorist organisations ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. His exact role is still a subject of investigation. The man applied for asylum in the Netherlands in 2019 and had been living in Arkel since 2020. On 9 March 2023 the police arrested a man from Gorinchem on suspicion on involvement in ISIS and/or Jabhat al-Nusra.*

*In the Netherlands multiple Syrian refugees have been convicted of membership of terrorist organisations and war crimes in their country of origin. At present there are few indications that asylum seekers or refugees who are suspected of participation in terrorist organisations abroad also pose a threat to the Netherlands. Their activities in support of jihadist groups generally seem connected to conflicts in their countries of origin. They are trying to build a new life for themselves in the Netherlands and to conceal their past from the authorities as best as possible.*

Finally, there is also the risk associated with radicalisation outside of known real-world jihadist networks. It is possible for individuals to develop jihadist convictions under the influence of online propaganda or informal online contact with jihadists in the Netherlands or abroad. It is more difficult for intelligence services to uncover terrorist plots if the individuals in questions are not in close contact with fellow jihadists.

On 21 December 2022 a Syrian man was arrested in the town of Stein in the province of Limburg on suspicion of preparing a terrorist offence. The man was brought to the attention of the Public Prosecution Service through a person-specific report from the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD). According to the prosecution, the man was seeking to purchase weapons and make an explosive belt. He also had several ingredients for making cyanide in his bedroom. A court

ordered him to be sent to the Pieter Baan Centre, a forensic psychiatric clinic, for observation.

## Attacks in Europe by lone actors remain a possibility

### **Arrests in Belgium in connection with preparations for a terrorist attack**

*On 27 March 2023 a total of eight people from jihadist circles were arrested in Antwerp and Brussels on suspicion of preparing a terrorist attack. The individuals came from two separate groups (five people in Antwerp, three in Brussels), which were in contact with one another to some degree. The arrestees were allegedly trying to obtain firearms, but they had not yet chosen a target. One of the suspects was previously suspected – in late 2020 – of planning an attack on a police station in Liège. He was on conditional release. These young people are thought to have become radicalised in a very short time, possibly in response to the Koran protests in Sweden and the Netherlands.*

*On 4 May 2023, following the search of several homes, another seven people were arrested in Belgium on suspicion of terrorism. The majority of the suspects are of Chechen origin. They are individuals in their twenties who are thought to have rapidly radicalised into fervent ISIS supporters. They had not yet chosen a target, but according to the Belgian National Office of the Public Prosecution Service, a variety of scenarios had been discussed. The suspects were allegedly trying to obtain weapons. The main suspect was on a list of known extremists and terrorists in Belgium.*

*The threat level in Belgium remains at 2 (on a scale of 1 to 4).*

In recent years almost no attacks have been carried out in Europe by groups. As noted above, this is partly due to the fact that intelligence and security services have become more adept at intercepting the necessary communications between the attackers and thereby discovering and thwarting their plans. A recent example of this is the arrest of eight people in

Antwerp and Brussels on suspicion of preparing a terrorist attack. (See inset 'Arrests in Belgium in connection with preparations for a terrorist attack') These arrests show that the threat posed by semi-organised jihadist networks (whether online or in the real world) has not disappeared, but that in most cases security services are better able to disrupt them in time.

Most attacks in the West are therefore still carried out by jihadists acting independently, possibly inspired and incited by calls for action on the part of ISIS and others. Such attacks are often small in scale and result in fewer victims than complex and centrally directed attacks. The perpetrators often act alone, with limited preparations and means of attack that can easily be obtained, such as a knife or a motor vehicle. That said, in a number of instances, attacks that initially appeared to be carried out by individual perpetrators acting on their own have subsequently proven to have been prepared or carried out with the help of others (see inset 'Four people convicted of aiding and abetting in attack in Vienna'). Police officers or members of the armed forces are popular targets because they are seen as representatives of a hostile government. Many lone actors struggle with psychological problems, which makes it difficult to establish a motive for the attack. That said, the fact that an individual is mentally disturbed does not rule out the possibility that they may also hold extremist views. The jihadist attacks that have occurred in the West since September 2022 largely fit into this pattern (see inset 'Recent jihadist attack in the West').

***Four people convicted of aiding and abetting in attack in Vienna***

*An Austrian court convicted four people of involvement in the attack in Vienna that took place in 2020. They were found to have provided weapons or helped to select a location. The defendants claimed that they were unaware that an attack was being planned. The court found that the parties concerned had worked together and provided support, even though they were not operating from within a tightly organised cell.*

In the past few years a number of terrorist attacks have been committed in Europe by failed asylum seekers or other individuals with no right of residence in the country where they carried out an attack. For example, in early 2023 a Moroccan national who had been ordered by the Spanish authorities to leave the country stabbed five people in the south of Spain (see the inset 'Recent jihadist attacks in the West'). A failure to obtain legal residence in a country or the revocation of an existing residence permit can contribute to a person's decision to use violence. In this way ideological motives can be compounded by personal grievances. Due in part to these events a debate has recently flared up once again about the difficulty of sending failed asylum seekers back to their country of origin in some cases.

Although the number and scope of attacks in Europe has declined since 2017, this is not to say that the threat posed by jihadism has disappeared. There is still a breeding ground for jihadist ideology within Europe. Geopolitical developments, the outbreak of regional conflicts, a large-scale attack carried out by ISIS or repeated instances of perceived blasphemy can lead to a resurgence in jihadism and thus to a new wave of attacks.



### **Recent jihadist attacks in the West**

*In November 2022 a 32-year-old man attacked two police officers with a knife in the Schaerbeek district of Brussels. He had previously attracted the attention of the Belgian authorities on account of both psychosocial problems and jihadist beliefs. He is believed to have become radicalised while in prison, and his name was on a list maintained by the Belgian authorities of people who potentially had jihadist intentions.*

*In the Spanish city of Algeciras a 25-year-old man stabbed various people at two churches, killing a sexton and wounding four others. The perpetrator was a Moroccan man who was living illegally in Spain, and had been issued an expulsion order in June 2022. He was not on the radar of the police, and had apparently become radicalised within the span of a few months. Spanish media reported that he had struggled with mental health issues in the past. The events in Algeciras were similar in many ways to the attack at a church in Nice in 2020, in which two worshippers and a priest were killed. The perpetrator, a Tunisian man, had entered Italy a short time before, but was ordered by the authorities to leave the country.*

*In New York a 19-year-old man attacked three police officers with a machete on New Year's Eve 2022. He had become radicalised over the span of a few months and had previously indicated a wish to travel to Afghanistan and join the Taliban. He had jihadist material with him at the time of the attack. Members of the man's family indicated that he suffers from psychological problems.*

### **Increase in online jihadist activities**

Over the past few months there has been an increase in the online activities of jihadist individuals and groups around the world. A number of influential and – in jihadist circles – respected agitators who had been quiet for some time are now once again highly active online. Increasingly, jihadists seem to be pushing the boundaries of what is permitted in terms of the law and the policies of social media platforms.

### **Radicalisation occurring at increasingly young age due to online propaganda**

*There are certain obstacles for potential new members to joining real-world jihadist networks. For example, a significant age difference can impede social interaction, thus excluding children or young people from networks composed of adults. However, because radicalisation is increasing occurring online, young people can come into contact with terrorist propaganda at an ever younger age and become part of online jihadist networks.*

*This has also been apparent from various arrests of suspected terrorists over the past several months. For example, in northeastern France a 14-year-old boy was picked up on suspicion of preparing an act of violence in the name of ISIS. He already had several components for making explosives at his home. Among those arrested in Sweden on 4 April (see the section 'Incidents involving the desecration of the Koran raise the Netherlands' profile among jihadist organisations') was apparently a 15-year-old boy who had been on the radar of the security services for some time. One of the suspects behind a planned attack in Belgium (see the inset 'Arrests in Belgium in connection with preparations for a terrorist attack') was 19, and two years previously, that same individual had already been suspected of plotting an attack on a police station.*

*Early radicalisation is not confined to jihadist circles. People who consume and disseminate online accelerationist content are often very young (see section 2.1 'Right-wing terrorism').*

Jihadists not only use the internet to spread terrorist propaganda or call for violence; they also engage in targeted recruiting. This means that there is demand for people who can produce propaganda material in English (either by translating it or writing it themselves), such as bomb-making instructions, videos of beheadings, jihadist magazines and ideological documents.

It is difficult to determine whether a given jihadist who is active online poses a terrorist threat. Young people regularly express a desire to join the jihadist movement or claim to be a member already, when in reality they are just sensation seekers.

Online, the Dutch jihadist movement is mainly to be found in English-language groups and channels, and for the most part, it consumes English-language propaganda. Parallel to these English-language online jihadist groups, there are also Arabic channels. Alongside the 'regular' internet, extremists increasingly use the less accessible deep web and dark web to communicate anonymously, prepare attacks and purchase weapons. On 28 January 2023 in the city of Girona in northeastern Spain, the Spanish police arrested a 28-year-old man on suspicion of preparing a terrorist attack. The man had allegedly been planning on carrying out an attack on beachgoers in the resort of Benidorm. According to the Spanish authorities he was searching the dark web for instructions and materials relating to explosives.

### More women and children repatriated from northeastern Syria

The number of women and children with a connection to the Netherlands who are still living in reception camps in northeastern Syria continues to decline. In order to ensure that justice is served, on 1 November 2022 the state of the Netherlands repatriated the largest group up to that point: 12 women and 28 children. This means that there are now fewer than a dozen women with a connection to the Netherlands still living in these camps. It is likely that the majority of these remaining women would like to leave the camps. It is conceivable that some of them would like to return to the Netherlands.

Over the past few years concerns have been expressed not only about the conditions in which ISIS fighters are being held in northern Syria, but also about the ongoing feasibility of their detention. There are fears of potentially large-scale prison breaks, or an assault by ISIS aimed at freeing prisoners, such as the one that occurred in Hasakah in January 2022. Outside

attacks and internal uprisings are not the only ways imprisoned ISIS fighters might escape their captivity; a natural disaster or some other unexpected event might also provide the necessary opportunity.

### ***Prison sentences for women for membership of ISIS***

*On 13 April 2023 Rotterdam District Court sentenced four women to prison terms varying from 30 to 36 months (partially suspended) for membership of ISIS. In the case of a fifth woman, the court held that it had not been proven that she was in ISIS, but she was nevertheless given a 16-month sentence for taking her child to a war zone. The women had previously been repatriated to the Netherlands by the Dutch authorities so as to ensure that justice was served.*

*The sentences were less than what prosecutors had requested. The court found that it had not been proven that the women had engaged in combat or played any other active role in ISIS. According to the court the women also explicitly renounced the ideology of ISIS. The court's judgment was also influenced by the consideration that the women had been held in a detention camp in Syria for over four years and that the women with dual nationality ran the risk of losing their Dutch nationality.*

*The Public Prosecution Service has announced its intention to file an appeal in every case. According to the prosecution, by caring for fighters and by bringing children up with the ISIS ideology, the women provided an 'indispensable' contribution to the continued existence of the caliphate. Furthermore, the Public Prosecution Service feels that the fact that a person has been living in a camp or faces the prospect of losing their Dutch nationality should not have any bearing on the severity of the sentence imposed.*

Returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq can theoretically pose a violent threat in the Netherlands on account of the time they have spent with jihadist organisations in that region and the training or combat experience they have had. Once they are released from detention they could also

give an impetus to networks within the Dutch jihadist movement. Thus far, however, there is nothing to suggest that returnees who have been released from prison have contributed in any significant way to the threat posed by the Dutch jihadist movement.

### Transfer of individuals formerly imprisoned in terrorist wings to migration detention facilities could lead to radicalisation

Previous DTNs have dealt on several occasions with the consequences of revoking someone's Dutch nationality on the basis of a final and unappealable conviction for a terrorist offence. The aim of this measure is to ensure that once individuals convicted of terrorist offences have been released from prison and barred from entering the Netherlands, they will leave the country voluntarily or be expelled.

It has thus far proved impossible to expel a certain number of jihadists who have had their Dutch nationality revoked, and as a result they have been residing in the country illegally. This has made it more difficult for the authorities to monitor this group of terrorist offenders once they are released from prison. Moreover, they are no longer eligible for programmes to prevent recidivism, and they have limited access to social services. This may mean that they are more dependent on their old jihadist networks.

In November 2022 the Council of State ruled that Moroccan nationals with no right of residence in the Netherlands could be held in an immigration detention facility because there is once more a prospect of expulsion within a reasonable amount of time.

Up to now, a small number of released terrorist offenders have been placed in immigration detention facilities, and some are still there. There is a chance that this number will increase in the future. It is conceivable that these ex-prisoners will seek to convey their jihadist convictions to others in these facilities.

## International developments with regard to jihadism

### ISIS under pressure in Syria and Iraq

During the past year ISIS has again been under fire in Syria and Iraq from national and local security troops, such as the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) and units of the anti-ISIS coalition. The movement lost a substantial number of fighters, many lower-ranking leaders and, on two occasions, its top leader. ISIS has suffered material losses as well as human losses: large quantities of arms and ammunition and several safe havens. All this has led to a drop in the number of attacks in Iraq and a levelling off of the number of attacks in Syria. In 2023 security forces in the various regions of Iraq and Syria will probably maintain this pressure on ISIS and keep it on the defensive. For this reason, ISIS is expected to be mainly capable of carrying out simple, small-scale attacks in these countries themselves. In Syria, jihadist organisations are experiencing greater freedom of movement as a result of the reduced Russian presence in the area.

### Taliban has been unable to rein in ISKP

Since the Taliban took power in August 2021, there has been great concern among the international community that Afghanistan could again become a safe haven for terrorist activities, partly in light of what happened in the 1990s. Although al Qa'ida is still apparently closely connected to the Taliban, the Afghan branch of ISIS (ISKP), an enemy of the Taliban, currently poses the greatest threat.

ISKP regularly carries out deadly attacks in Afghanistan. In late 2022 the organisation carried out three attacks on Western targets. It is clear from this that the Taliban has not yet been able to get the group under control. In addition, ISKP is increasingly carrying out attacks in neighbouring countries. ISKP's threat to the West, including to Dutch targets, is also growing. The threat of an attack in Istanbul (see the section 'Incidents involving the desecration of the Koran raise the Netherlands' profile among jihadist organisations') reaffirms the fact that ISKP has an international terrorist agenda and refuses to be limited to Afghanistan and neighbouring

countries. Terrorist activities undertaken by ISKP against Western targets could increase that organisation's following in the West and thus heighten the threat over the long term.

### For now, ISIS and al Qa'ida in Africa have had little impact on national security

Africa is a strategic interest for ISIS, as it could serve as a base of operations and thus inject new life into the movement. Over the past few years ISIS's media publications have focused strongly on the continent, calling on its followers to join regional jihadist organisations allied to ISIS. Thus far, there seems to be little interest within Europe in the latter. Similarly, very few European jihadist travellers are leaving Syria and Iraq for conflict zones in Africa.

The local branches of ISIS in Africa are carrying out more and more attacks, in more parts of the continent. ISIS seeks to exploit regional and local grievances and is trying to enlarge its regional influence through such attacks. The threat posed by African terrorist organisations allied to ISIS to the Netherlands' national security remains small, because these organisations mainly have a local agenda. That said, it is possible that Dutch interests in the region could become the target of attacks. There is also a risk of Westerners being taken hostage by terrorists. The threat to Europe posed by local branches of al Qai'da seems limited as well. Groups like Al-Shabaab in Somalia and JNIM in the Sahel mainly focus on regional conflicts.

### Radical Islamic threat

#### Threat posed by Salafism to democratic legal order has decreased

Salafism is a fundamentalist reform moment 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. The movement has a stable following of around three to five per cent of the Muslim community in the Netherlands. 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. If large groups were to put anti-democratic, intolerant and anti-integrationist elements of Salafism into practice, their actions could undermine the democratic legal order.

In recent years a segment of the Salafist community has shown itself to be less rigid about such issues as participation in elections or interacting with people of other faiths and non-believers. A new generation of preachers tends 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 pragmatic approach seems to be attracting support within the Salafist community. This also reduces the threat to the democratic order posed by Salafism in general. However, a subsection of the Salafist community continues to cling to the intolerant and anti-democratic interpretation of the religious doctrine. It should be said that this group has fewer followers and is less institutionalised.



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

Over the past few years the right-wing extremist threat, including right-wing terrorism, has become more diffuse and unpredictable. This applies to both the Netherlands and other Western countries. A minority of right-wing extremists pose a violent threat. Another segment of this group is actively working to normalise their intolerant ideas.

## Right-wing terrorism

### Threat of violence from right-wing terrorism remains conceivable

Within the Netherlands the main threat of right-wing extremist violence comes from online supporters of accelerationism and similar right-wing terrorist ideas. Accelerationism is based on replacement theory.<sup>1</sup> Supporters of this belief system seek to precipitate a race war through terrorist violence, thereby leading to the replacement of the current political system with a white ethnostate. There are probably a few hundred Dutch-speaking supporters of these ideas. This number seems to have remained the same over the past year, though there has been turnover within the movement. In addition, more experienced participants in online networks are retreating to private chat groups with a select group of acquaintances.

The Dutch right-wing terrorist milieu has a limited degree of organisation. It is principally composed of susceptible boys and men from the ages of 13 to 30, who often come from unstable homes and sometimes struggle with psychosocial or psychopathological issues. These problems can make it difficult for them to maintain social relationships in the real world, thus causing them to look for company online. Online, they have their own way of speaking and their own iconography, for example in the form of memes (see the inset 'Memes as a form of communication for right-wing extremists').

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<sup>1</sup> According to replacement theory, certain groups – often 'the Jews' or 'the left-wing elite' – are systematically changing the ethnic composition of Western countries by deliberately replacing white people with people from a different cultural or ethnic background. This far-right conspiracy theory is imbued with antisemitism and has been glorified by perpetrators of right-wing extremist attacks, such as Brenton Harrison Tarrant and Anders Behring Breivik.

### ***Memes as a form of communication for right-wing extremists***

*Memes are popular with right-wing extremist groups on the internet, as they can be used to rapidly disseminate far-right ideas, often disguised as jokes, in a simple and subtle manner to a wider public. With the widespread sharing of these types of memes, it is possible that the content in question will no longer be seen as problematic and will become normalised in the public discourse. Within their own online communities right-wing extremists and terrorists share more overtly extremist memes, which glorify violence, guns or far-right terrorists.*

New members who join online groups draw inspiration from defunct organisations like Atomwaffen Division or The Base, excerpts from extremist or terrorist writings, and the actions of previous attackers. Dutch adherents of accelerationism often pick and choose bits and pieces from various ideological currents to arrive at their own personal right-wing terrorism belief system (see inset 'Extremism unpredictable due to "cut-and-paste ideologies"'). Some are seeking an ideology that is consistent with their desire to commit violence. Their changeable ideological foundations can make it easier to switch from one online group to another, or to be part of multiple groups at the same time. Because systematised extremist ideologies are relatively rare in these online groups and because conversation tends to consist of superficial violent ideation and praise for far-right terrorists, these groups may be more accessible to potential new members.

In the Netherlands no one from this right-wing terrorist online milieu has ever carried out a terrorist attack. Elsewhere in the world, too, the number of attacks inspired by accelerationism have been relatively limited, particularly in the past few years.

That said, more and more young, radicalised right-wing extremists are being arrested in the Netherlands and other European countries, mostly for incitement (online or in the real

world) or for disseminating terrorist content. In those instances where the authorities do intercept plans for an attack, preparations tend to be at an early stage. The fact that more arrests are being made does not mean that right-wing terrorist activities are becoming more common; rather, security services now have better insight into a threat that has existed for some time.

***Major differences in right-wing extremist violence across Europe***

*Despite the increased focus on right-wing extremism, there has been a decline in right-wing violence in Europe since 1990, with 2021 as one of the least violent years on record – possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are major differences in right-wing extremist violence from one European country to another. In absolute terms the most violence takes place in Germany, followed by the United Kingdom, Italy, Greece and Spain. In per capita terms the most violence takes place in Greece and Germany, with the Scandinavian countries also scoring high. Historically, right-wing extremist violence is very rare in the Netherlands, with only a few known incidents between 2015 and 2022. Differences also exist in terms of the choice of target: whereas the violence in Northern Europe is mainly directed against ethnic and religious minorities, in Southern Europe it is chiefly political opponents (such as anti-fascists) who are attacked.*

Historically, right-wing extremist violence is rare in the Netherlands (see inset ‘Major differences in right-wing extremist violence across Europe’), but given their activity in international online forums, it would seem that Dutch extremists no longer have roots in this nonviolent tradition. This means that there is a greater risk that they will engage in violence. At the same time, the absence of organised right-wing extremist networks that could facilitate an act of violence could reduce the threat of violence. Finally, the youthfulness of these groups gives rise to the question of whether they would be actually able to plan an attack of any complexity (see inset

'Right-wing extremist violence in Europe rarely committed by young people').

***Right-wing extremist violence in Europe rarely committed by young people***

*Most right-wing extremist violence in Europe is of a different nature from the sort of attacks that accelerationists fantasise about online. Large-scale or highly prepared attacks like the one that occurred in Bratislava in 2022 remain the exception. According to the Norwegian research centre C-REX, of the 26 deadly far-right terrorist attacks that occurred in Western Europe between 2015 and 2022, only five perpetrators were younger than 25, and only one of them was a minor. No fewer than 12 perpetrators were over 40. Whereas it is primarily young people who disseminate terrorist content, the actual perpetrators behind terrorist attacks in Europe are often quite a bit older.*

*On Friday 23 December 2022 a 69-year-old Frenchman shot dead three Kurds and seriously injured three other people in Paris. He stated that he harboured a 'pathological hatred' of foreigners in general and bore a grudge against the Kurdish community in particular. In 2021 this same man wounded several people at a refugee camp with a sabre. He is awaiting trial in a psychiatric institution. The French authorities are treating the case as a hate crime and not as terrorism.*

*The incident bears certain similarities to an attack on a migrant centre in the English town of Dover on 30 October 2022. Two men were slightly injured after a 66-year-old British man threw two petrol bombs into the centre. The man committed suicide a short time later. It is likely that psychological issues or psychosocial problems played a role in this attack as well. Although the authorities initially did not consider the attack to be an act of terrorism, that changed after they discovered the perpetrator's right-wing extremist posts on social media. The two attacks seem to be the outgrowth of a deep-seated hatred of foreigners or Muslims combined with personal hardship, feelings of resentment, negative experiences with the government and sometimes certain ideological elements.*

Nevertheless, it remains troubling that the right-wing terrorist online milieu also has a following in the Netherlands. Adherents of this belief system, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere, can consume hate-filled content for years until a single incident impels them to commit violence in the real world. Because of the online nature of the movement and transnational interlinkages between ideologies, an attack in one country can potentially inspire perpetrators on the other side of the world to commit a similar act. The person who attacked a LGBTI bar in Bratislava in early October 2022 was initially inspired by the 2019 Christchurch attack, and was spurred to action by a right-wing terrorist attack in Buffalo, New York in May 2022. Copycat behaviour is actively encouraged within the right-wing terrorist online community. This need not take place over the short term: research shows that right-wing copycat terrorists can take some time to plan their attacks. The actual ideological, practical and psychosocial preparations for an attack can take some time.

## **Right-wing extremism**

### **The right-wing extremist landscape in the Netherlands**

Together with the accelerationists, the alt-right movement forms the 'new generation' of right-wing extremists. In contrast to traditional right-wing extremists, such as neo-Nazis, the members of this new generation do not wear visible right-wing extremist symbols, clothing or hair styles. This makes them less recognisable as such in public. Previously, the alt-right movement in the Netherlands consisted mostly of relatively young, highly educated men. As these ideas become normalised and as groups like Erkenbrand recede into the background, the composition of the alt-right is becoming more diverse in terms of age and level of education.

As stated in the previous section, the new generation of right-wing extremists aims to establish a white ethnostate and fears the 'replacement' of the population of the Netherlands (and other Western countries). They often blame the government and its institutions for demographic changes, claiming that the

authorities are deliberately promoting migration for nefarious reasons. In addition they also hold feminists and the LGBTI community responsible for obstructing the reproduction of the white race. The alt-right currently considers the use of violence to spark a race war in the near future as counterproductive for the growth of the movement. The alt-right movement mainly seeks to influence public opinion and prevailing views in a country, in some cases by participation in the democratic system. By constantly trying to shock society and push the boundaries of what is acceptable, they are creating an environment in which extremist ideas are becoming further normalised. The dividing line between accelerationists and the alt-right is quite blurry, particularly online. Within the alt-right movement it is commonplace to believe that violence in service of self-defence may be inevitable.

The right-wing extremist landscape in the Netherlands remains fragmented, due not only to cultural and ideological differences but also to internal social conflicts. Despite this, groups are increasingly joining forces, with replacement theory as a binding element.

### Normalisation of right-wing extremist ideas

Over the past six months right-wing extremist ideas are being voiced more and more often. The open and virtually uncritical discussion of xenophobic and occasionally racist views is common not only on social media but also in the political discourse, the public broadcasting system and indeed in daily life.

The slogans projected on the Erasmus Bridge in Rotterdam on New Year's Eve illustrate the desire to normalise the right-wing extremist movement (see inset 'Extremist laser projections in the Netherlands'). By intermingling activist and extremist utterances, right-wing extremists are succeeding in making their views more accessible to the general public. For tactical reasons right-wing extremists do not merely assert their own 'ethnic superiority'; indeed, they mainly stress that it is the Netherlands' 'cultural identity' that is under threat from the

arrival of migrants. In this spirit they point to the disappearance of 'traditions', like the use of blackface in the portrayal Black Pete around the St Nicholas Day holiday. By playing into concerns shared by a larger segment of the population about the loss of traditions, culture and identity, right-wing extremists seek to make larger groups of people sensitive to replacement theory.



### ***Extremist laser projections in the Netherlands***

*Since December 2022 there have been a number of incidents in the Netherlands involving racist and antisemitic slogans being shown in public spaces with a laser projector. These right-wing extremist provocations serve to spread propaganda, attract new members and further normalise their ideas.*

*For example, in late December in the town of Venlo texts were projected on the offices of the Employment Insurance Agency and a shop. On New Year's Eve slogans appeared on the Erasmus Bridge during the countdown to 2023, which was broadcast live on television. The right-wing extremist group that claimed responsibility for this seems to have kicked off a new modus operandi in the Netherlands, which has been dubbed 'projection bombing'. With relatively simple and inexpensive means, the people behind these incidents are able to reach a large audience, particularly when projections attract media attention. Both right-wing and left-wing protesters outside the Netherlands, mainly in the US and the UK, have used these type of projections for some time. A group of neo-Nazis in the US seems to be the main source of inspiration for the projections in the Netherlands. Since the new year there have been laser projections of this type on the city hall in Alkmaar (18 January), the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam (6 February), the Hemweg power plant and a hotel in Amsterdam (around 14 February) and the municipal offices in Eindhoven (during Carnival on 20 February).*

*Responsibility for some of these projections was claimed by a small but radical network of Nazi sympathisers that has close ties to other far-right and right-wing extremist groups. This group does not pose a violent threat, but some of its members do take part in Telegram chat groups in which there are discussions about carrying out right-wing extremist attacks. Multiple suspects have been arrested on suspicion on being involved in the projections.*

The success of acts by right-wing extremist groups is largely determined by the amount of attention they generate. These

groups embrace the principle that any publicity is good publicity. But this kind of extreme provocation can also undermine the groups' goals. This is the case when the right-wing extremist texts have an explicitly antisemitic or racist character, or when they are shown on highly sensitive locations, such as the Anne Frank House.

### Preparations for a violent confrontation

The alt-right movement is questioning the fundamental rights of groups in society and thus undermining the democratic legal order. While members of these groups generally try to conceal their more extreme and violent ideas from the general public, they speak more plainly in online groups, which are growing ever larger. In those groups they characterise violence as justified, describing it as 'self-defence' or a 'necessary evil'.

Adherents of the alt-right movement are preparing themselves in various ways for what they regard as an inevitable violent confrontation with their opponents. Sometimes this can take seemingly innocent forms. In these circles, for example, it is not uncommon to engage in physical training, sometimes in a group setting, in order to purify the body and keep it fit, but also to gain fighting skills. This becomes more problematic when the people in question attempt to acquire weapons. As noted in DTN56, there is interest among right-wing extremists in acquiring 3D-printed weapons. In the course of arrests carried out in February 2023 a crossbow and 3D-printed crossbow parts were seized. Right-wing extremists are also interested in joining shooting clubs. It is alarming as well that some of them aspire to join the armed forces.

The Defence Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) has noted that since 2020 there seems to be an increased interest among right-wing extremists in working for the military. Right-wing extremism could pose a threat to the deployability of the armed forces and to the democratic legal order.

## Left-wing extremism

### Left-wing extremism remains limited, most protests stay within the bounds of the law

The left-wing extremist milieu in the Netherlands is very limited in size, but in the past few years there has been growing interest in anarchist and Marxist ideas. Left-wing extremist groups generally express their views in lawful ways, speaking out against racism, demonstrations involving the far right (or individuals and groups perceived as being on the far right), climate change, the housing shortage or inflation. Sometimes left-wing extremists join international campaigns against migration policy. This can be accompanied by acts of incitement or the defacement of property with graffiti. It cannot be ruled out that in the future some anarchists will engage in more radical actions against politicians, the state or the capitalist system, possibly in the margins of peaceful demonstrations.

## 4. Anti-institutional extremism

Fuelled by conspiracy theories, anti-institutional extremists continue to express their distrust of various institutions, including the government. 'Sovereign citizens' are part of the larger anti-institutional milieu. On the basis of conspiracy theories they deny the legal and democratic legitimacy of the government. Anti-institutional extremism is principally a threat to the democratic legal order. There is also the possible threat of violence.

## Conspiracy theories

### Conspiracy theories about a 'malevolent elite' are gaining in popularity

Over the past few years the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for conspiracy theories in the Netherlands, and it gave a boost to negative and even hostile sentiments towards the government, the legal system, the media, academia and other institutions. The conspiracy theories that were in circulation at that time were broad in scope, and the virus and pandemic could easily be incorporated into them. The measures taken to curb the spread of COVID-19 have since been phased out, and the virus no longer plays a significant role in day-to-day life. Nevertheless, anti-institutional extremists continue to cling to these conspiracy theories, mixed with a variety of other themes, both old and new. Now that the engine of conspiratorial thinking has been started, the pandemic is no longer needed for it to keep running.

When it comes to anti-institutional extremists, a distinction can be made between, on the one hand, agitators and other fanatics, and on the other, a large group of followers for whom conspiracy theories serve as an outlet or coping mechanism for discontent and uncertainty. Anti-institutional extremists can also have legitimate grievances, and a belief in conspiracy theories need not, in itself, be problematic. It can offer people who feel a lack of control a sense of stability in a complex world. It should be noted that the vast majority of people who believe in conspiracies should not be labelled extremists. However, the conspiracy theories that are currently most in vogue among anti-institutional extremists centre on a

malevolent elite, with which they regard themselves as being in a state of 'war' and which they believe is deliberately seeking to oppress or even exterminate the population. They believe that various crises are being staged to legitimate oppressive policies and measures. This is referred to as the 'malevolent elite narrative'. Well-known examples of this include the conspiracy theory surrounding the 'Great Reset' of the World Economic Forum (WEF), which conspiracy theorists believe will be used to impose a totalitarian world order, and the QAnon conspiracy theory, which posits that a malevolent international elite, the 'deep state', is working against people's interests and engaging in such crimes as child trafficking and child sexual abuse.

These conspiracy theories posit the existence of an enemy that is so vaguely defined ('the elite') that the label can be applied to anyone who is mistrusted, not only government officials, but also judges, scientists and journalists. In addition, these conspiracy theories often have an antisemitic dimension, although in many cases their adherents are not aware of this. The war in Ukraine is often incorporated into conspiracy theories as well. Anti-institutional extremists are generally pro-Russian, regarding Putin as a 'saviour' in the fight against the malevolent elite. Finally, the conspiracy theories are so general and all-encompassing that new issues and events easily can be slotted into them. This makes these theories very durable, and they are not expected to go away anytime soon.

Their universality also means that their adherents are a highly diverse group. People across the ideological spectrum can pick and choose the conspiratorial themes and ideas that are relevant to them and then pin their own grievances on to them. There is no single uniform group but rather a whole range of partially overlapping groups and movements, within which there are differences between individuals, each of whom expresses their aversion to the government and other institutions from their own perspective. (See inset 'Extremism unpredictable due to "cut-and-paste ideologies"'). Various groups are seeking to establish connections with each other. At

the time of the coronavirus demonstrations, for instance, right-wing extremists sought to join up with protests by groups of a different ideological stripe.

***Extremism unpredictable due to 'cut-and-paste ideologies'***

*In the case of both anti-institutional extremists and right-wing extremists, the embrace of clearly defined ideologies is becoming less common, making way for what could be termed 'cut-and-paste ideologies'. This is when individuals pick and choose among miscellaneous elements from various extremists ideologies in order to assemble their own personal belief system. These bits and pieces can complement one another, but they can also be contradictory. Individuals who embrace conspiracy theories about a malevolent elites can also incorporate elements of right-wing extremism, incel culture, spiritualism or Christian and cultural traditionalism into their thinking.*

*The global interconnectedness brought about by social media and other online platforms contribute is one of the main contributing factors to the formation of these cut-and-paste ideologies: amid a virtually unlimited supply of extremist content, susceptible individuals can always find something that suits them. They craft their own extremist profile by selecting those ideological elements that justify their own discontent. Regardless of their personal cut-and-paste ideologies, anti-institutional extremists do share certain common features, such as a belief in conspiracy theories and an aversion to the established order.*

*Unclear, shifting and mixed ideas are often accompanied by personal grievances, extremely negative experiences with the government and psychological problems. These factors can make some people more susceptible to extremist thinking. The intermingling of ideological fragments with feelings of resentment or personal problems makes it more difficult to recognise extremism as such, thereby making the threat more unpredictable.*

There are indications that the engine of conspiratorial thinking has kicked into high gear in recent years. Despite the fact that the government lifted its pandemic-related restrictions in the first quarter of 2022, that year saw a sharp rise in the number of adherents of the malevolent elite narrative. It is estimated that at least 100,000 people in the Netherlands believe in the malevolent elite narrative to some extent. This makes anti-institutional extremists the largest group in the Netherlands to hold extremist views. The narrative's appeal has also shown growth potential, due in part to the large reach of certain influencers, both online and off. The narrative is also spread by various public figures and politicians, including members of parliament, who contribute to its further normalisation by way of their prominent public position. A recent representative study of the Dutch population reveals that over 20% of the country agrees with the statement that a small, secret group of people makes all the major decisions in world politics. This is not to say that one in five people is an anti-institutional extremist. Yet these results do show that there is a potential breeding ground for the malevolent elite narrative.

There is also declining trust in the government due to dissatisfaction with policy. Issues such as the failings in the childcare benefits system, the treatment of people in the province of Groningen who have suffered earthquake-related damage due to natural gas extraction, the housing shortage, and the reception and integration of asylum seekers can fuel anti-institutional sentiments and broaden the audience for the malevolent elite narrative.

### The undermining of the democratic legal order and possible threat of violence

The threat posed by anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands is twofold. Firstly, anti-institutional extremists can pose a somewhat veiled, dormant threat to the democratic legal order. On the basis of factually inaccurate information, conspiracy theories centred on a malevolent elite narrative erode trust in and the legitimacy of the government and other institutions that are essential to the functioning of the democratic legal order. In addition, they can serve to



demonise opponents and amplify polarisation between various segments of the population.

The many threats and acts of intimidation by anti-institutional extremists can undermine the democratic legal order. Parallel to the large increase in the number of adherents of the malevolent elite narrative, a record number of threats directed at politicians were reported in 2022. More than a thousand reports were registered, almost double the number as in previous years. The seriousness of the threats has increased as well. Not all reported threats can be attributed to anti-institutional extremists, though they have contributed to the enormous increase. As a result of this, some threatened politicians have said that they sometimes keep their opinions or positions to themselves for fear of threats. When politicians can no longer openly and freely engage in political debate amid an atmosphere of threats and intimidation, this represents a direct violation of the democratic legal order. It is not only politicians whose work can be hampered by threats and intimidation, but also scientists, judges, journalists and healthcare workers.

Secondly, there is a possible threat of violence. Adherents of the malevolent elite narrative collectively contribute to a climate in which individuals can become inspired and motivated to use violence. The past few years anti-institutional extremists have been guilty of incitement, threatening behaviour and violence. The number of individuals who actually engage in physically intimidating acts has been limited to around a hundred people, but these individuals have done so on a large number of occasions. In late 2022 and early 2023, a number of individuals were convicted of crimes related to anti-institutional extremism, including making threats and inciting the commission of a terrorist offence. Although there have not been any instances of violence for some time, extremist and even terrorist acts carried out by radicalised individuals or small, ad hoc groups remain conceivable.

## The sovereign citizen movement

### 'Sovereign citizens' deny the legitimacy of the government

The sovereign citizen movement is part of the larger anti-institutional scene. The phenomenon arose decades ago in the United States and found its way to various European countries, where it has been adapted to fit the national context.

Germany, for example, has its own Reichsbürger movement, which attracted extensive media coverage at the end of 2022 due to preparations for a coup (see inset 'The sovereign citizen movement in the West').

There was already a similar movement in the Netherlands before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. But the movement has grown considerably in the past three years, due in part to discontent over the government's coronavirus measures. The movement is thought to consist of a few thousand individuals. On the basis of conspiracy theories, its adherents deny the legal and democratic legitimacy of the government and declare themselves independent of the state of the Netherlands, or in other words 'sovereign citizens'. The movement is not a homogeneous one. People with a variety of standpoints and ideological backgrounds feel attracted to sovereigntist ideas.

Like anti-institutional extremism in general, the sovereign citizen movement can pose a threat to the democratic legal order. However, this is only an issue when large numbers of people no longer recognise the legitimacy of the government and refuse to obey the law.

The vast majority of the movement poses little to no violent threat. This nonviolent segment of the movement turns its back on the government, goes its own way and tries to live as self-sufficiently as possible. Some of them continue to obey the law, have no objection to the continued existence of democratic institutions and therefore cannot be labelled as 'extremist'. Another segment of the movement no longer feels bound to the law and will, for example, cancel mandatory insurance, pull their children out of school and refuse to pay

taxes, rent or fines. As a consequence of this, they end up in a negative spiral in which they become more and more estranged from society, the state and the rule of law. This can also lead to conflicts with the government. When the authorities they do not recognise take repressive action, for example in response to a violation of the law or unpaid bills, it is conceivable that such an individual could respond with violence.

We know from other countries that some sovereign citizens are actively preparing for an expected conflict with the government, for example by engaging in combat training and other relevant forms of training and by stockpiling guns and other weapons. Most are not actively seeking out conflict, however.

That said, there is a limited group of sovereign citizens who *are* actively looking to provoke confrontation. An example of this is the 'common law movement', an ideological variant within the sovereign citizen movement. In their eyes the people have the right to arm and defend themselves. They call for the 'enemies of the free Dutch people' to be arrested and tried before tribunals. If necessary, it is permissible in their view to use deadly force in making these arrests. So far, little response has been given to these calls for such offensive actions.

***The sovereign citizen movement in the West***

*The sovereign citizen movement arose in the US in the 1970s, after which it spread to other countries, like Germany, Canada, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. In each country where it has taken hold, the movement has adapted to the local history and context. In the US, for example, there is overlap with the militia movement, while in Germany there is a focus on the return of the German Empire. In Germany the movement is known as the Reichsbürger movement and has tens of thousands of followers. They have been in the news on a number of occasions in recent years due to arrests. In April 2022 five individuals were arrested on suspicion of planning to kidnap a government minister and carry out an attack that would knock out the electricity network. And in December 2022, 25 Reichsbürger were arrested for plotting a coup. Sometimes sovereign citizens are involved in actual violence. For example, in Belgium last autumn a 36-year-old man was shot dead by the police when he violently resisted an attempt to search his home. In the US a number of police officers have been shot during traffic stops. Such incidents demonstrate that this ideology can serve as a source of inspiration for both offensive and (perceived) defensive violence. In the Netherlands there have been no violent incidents of this type thus far.*

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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.*

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National Coordinator for  
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Postbus 20301, 2500 EH The Hague  
Turfmarkt 147, 2511 DP The Hague  
+31 (0)70 751 5050

[www.nctv.nl](http://www.nctv.nl)  
[info@nctv.minjenv.nl](mailto:info@nctv.minjenv.nl)  
[@nctv\\_nl](https://www.instagram.com/nctv_nl)

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