



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

# Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands

December 2023



***Photo caption cover:***

Officers of the Special Interventions Division during a security exercise around Utrecht Central Station. An attack against the Netherlands has become more conceivable. By conducting exercises like these, the Netherlands is prepared to respond.

# Threat level raised to ‘substantial’

The previous Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN) described a heightened terrorist threat due to the fact that jihadist organisations were preparing to carry out terrorist attacks in Europe. Over the past few months the terrorist threat has increased to such an extent that the threat level has been raised to 4 (‘substantial’). This means that there is a realistic possibility that an attack will take place in the Netherlands.

## Attacks and arrests underscore jihadist threat

The jihadist-inspired terrorist threat to the Netherlands is on the rise. Organisations like ISIS and al Qa’ida are using the war in Gaza to urge sympathisers to carry out attacks in the West. These organisations are also calling for attacks in retaliation for acts of desecration to the Koran in various European countries. Given this context, individuals or small groups within the jihadist movement may feel inspired to commit acts of violence. These events have had a mobilising effect not only on Dutch jihadists, but also on radical Islamists outside the jihadist movement. Lone attackers are often more difficult to recognise than groups. The war in Gaza has also had a polarising effect on parts of society. It is conceivable that the resultant tensions will lead to violence against Jewish or Muslim institutions.

### Threat level raised to 4.

This means that there is a realistic possibility that an attack will take place in the Netherlands.

Threat level

4

In various European countries, including the Netherlands, suspects were arrested in 2023 on suspicion of intending to carry out an attack with jihadist motives. They were led or inspired by jihadist groups. These arrests show that jihadists are seeking to carry out attacks and making preparations to that end, but they also show that the European intelligence and security services are able to identify terrorism and thwart attacks. Although the threat posed by transnational networks linked to foreign jihadist organisations has declined over the short term due to these arrests, there is nevertheless a heightened terrorist threat. In addition, online propaganda campaigns run by ISIS and its Afghan branch Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) could inspire people to commit violence, as could online contact with these organisations. Attacks and arrests in France, Germany, Belgium and the United Kingdom since early October illustrate the risks posed by radicalised individuals who are inspired by current events and terrorist organisations.

ISIS (Syria, Iraq) and ISKP (Afghanistan) are under military pressure in their respective regions, but they nevertheless intend to carry out attacks in the West. Moreover, the centre of gravity of jihadist violence is shifting from the Middle East to parts of Africa, such as the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. For now, the violence is primarily regional in its orientation. If local jihadist groups in these regions succeed in occupying territory and creating a safe haven for themselves, it is possible that more internationally oriented groups from that part of the world will encourage, prepare or oversee attacks in the West.

### Radicalisation of young jihadists and right-wing extremists mainly occurring online

In recent years the online world has played a relatively big role with respect to the dissemination of propaganda, the formation of networks and the establishment of new contacts, especially within jihadist and right-wing extremist circles. Online radicalisation is nothing new, though it is evolving. The online dimension is occupying an increasingly prominent place in people's daily lives, and extremists are capitalising on this by seeking out like-minded people from around the world and then communicating with them via secret and encrypted chats. It is conceivable that, once

radicalised, a minor or young adult within the right-wing extremist online milieu will decide to engage in violence. In this connection it is worth noting that by no means all these young people will be radicalised to engage in violence on the basis of an ideology like Nazism; some of them are in search of an ideology that is consistent with their *existing* fantasies of violence. Additionally, there are a number of examples of young jihadists who have become radicalised outside of known real-world networks, under the influence of online propaganda and agitators, or via intermittent contact with fellow jihadists in the Netherlands and abroad. Arrests show that they could start planning attacks, possibly in collaboration with like-minded individuals throughout Europe. That said, at this stage the numbers of people involved are relatively small.

### Concerns about a small segment of the anti-institutional movement and 'sovereign citizens'

Finally, there are concerns about small segments of both the anti-institutional movement and the 'sovereign citizens' community. Anti-institutional extremists continue to spread the 'malevolent elite' narrative, which centres on the notion that the population is in a state of war with an internationally operating elite. The effect of this is mainly to undermine the democratic legal order, although violence is also conceivable. In addition, 'sovereign citizens' reject the legitimacy of the government in general and unilaterally declare themselves independent of the state of the Netherlands. Most sovereign citizens pursue a life of autonomy or self-sufficiency, without posing any violent threat. However, a small minority are pondering the question of when violence is justified or are even making preparations for a violent confrontation with the government.

**Threat level raised to 4 (substantial) on a scale of 1 to 5.** The chance of an attack is real.

4

The likelihood of an attack against the Netherlands has risen to such a degree that the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV) has raised the threat level from 3 to 4. The renewed conflict in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, acts of desecration to the Koran in various European countries and calls for attacks by terrorist organisations have led to an increase in the threat posed by jihadism.

**Attacks more likely.** The terrorist threat is greater than in previous years.



An increased terrorist threat was first identified in the previous Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN). This heightened threat is demonstrated by attacks in other European countries and a number of arrests of suspects who intended to carry out an attack with jihadist motives. It is conceivable that Dutch jihadists or other radical Islamists will engage in violence. In addition, the threat posed by right-wing extremism and anti-institutional extremism remains undiminished.

**Jihadist threat to Europe.**

ISIS networks continue to pose a threat.



Earlier this year jihadist organisations were preparing to carry out terrorist attacks in Europe. Arrests in various countries, including the Netherlands, are likely to have prevented attacks in 2023. These arrests decreased the short-term threat posed by transnational terrorist networks, but this threat remains greater than in previous years.

**Right-wing terrorism.** The terrorist threat posed by accelerationists remains undiminished.



It remains possible that a minor or young adult who has become radicalised within the right-wing extremist online milieu will use violence. Not all of these young people will become radicalised to the point of engaging in violence solely on the basis of an ideology like Nazism, but some of them are in search of an ideology that is consistent with their existing fantasies of violence.

**Online radicalisation.** An evolving threat due to online radicalisation.



Extremists are focusing more on the online dimension, which occupies an increasingly prominent place in people's daily lives, and as a result, the radicalisation of young jihadists and right-wing extremists is now largely occurring online. Extremists use the internet to spread propaganda, form networks and find new contacts. Online hate against Jews and LGBTIQ+ people is also on the rise in the Netherlands.

**Anti-institutional extremism.**  
A small minority is prepared to use violence.



The anti-institutional movement in general and self-proclaimed sovereign citizens do not pose a violent threat. However, small minorities are pondering the question of when violence is justified or are even making preparations for a violent confrontation with the government.

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# Introduction

## Goal and structure

The Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (*Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland*, DTN) provides insight into the threat to the Netherlands posed by terrorism and violent extremism, the interests that could be affected by this, and our degree of resilience. It also examines typically non-violent extremist movements if there are indications that they could potentially commit terrorist acts or other forms of serious violence. International developments are also taken into account if they affect the threat to the Netherlands or Dutch interests abroad. The DTN is used by the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV) to set the threat level, which is an assessment of the general terrorist threat over a longer period of time.

The DTN is based on research into all forms of terrorism and violent extremism, regardless of their ideological origins. If certain subjects are not mentioned in the DTN, such as Salafism, left-wing extremism and animal rights extremism in the case of this edition, this is because they did not pose a demonstrable, serious threat of violence at the time of writing. If current events warrant further discussion, the NCTV may issue a separate report on one of these subjects. The same applies to terrorist financing, which is dealt with in the DTN if there is a correlation to a violent threat to the Netherlands or its interests abroad.

The main purpose of the DTN is to aid in the formulation of strategy and policy at national level. The DTN is used to inform the government, members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, civil servants, administrators and policymakers at national and municipal level, academics and researchers, and other interested parties about the current threat to the Netherlands posed by terrorism and violent extremism.

## *Motives behind attack on leader of Forum for Democracy as yet unclear*

On the evening of Monday 20 November, the leader of the political party Forum for Democracy (FVD) was struck on the head with a beer bottle at an election event at a pub in Groningen. Multiple suspects were arrested. The investigation into the attack is still ongoing; as yet nothing can be said about the motives involved. This incident has therefore not been included in this DTN.

## Guide to this document

The DTN consists of the previous section, which sets the threat level and summarises the most important findings, and four sections that discuss the situation in greater depth. The fourth section,

which is devoted to a specific theme in each edition, explores a particular facet of the threat to the Netherlands posed by terrorism or violent extremism. The titles of the sections are as follows:

- Jihadism and radical Islam
- Right-wing terrorism and extremism
- Anti-institutional extremism
- Special theme section: An evolving threat caused by online radicalisation

Annexe 1 presents an overview of the most significant terrorist attacks and arrests in connection with planning an attack in Europe, between May and December 2023.

## *Key concepts*

- **Accelerationism:** A right-wing extremist ideology centred on using terrorist violence to create chaos in order to precipitate a race war and hasten the replacement of the democratic system by a national socialist and white ethnostate.
- **Activism:** The efforts of individuals or groups to influence political decision-making through extra-parliamentary action which is within the bounds of the democratic legal order.
- **Democratic legal order:** A society in which the interaction between citizens and the government and among citizens themselves takes place in accordance with principles, procedures and institutions that are rooted in freedoms and rights enshrined in the constitution, specifically the rights of equality, freedom and participation. This is the open society that ensures, among other things, that everyone within the system can live freely and enjoys certain protections.
- **Extremism:** A willingness, grounded in a particular ideology, to engage in activities, whether violent or non-violent, that undermine the democratic legal order. Extremism can take both violent and non-violent forms. Some examples of non-violent undemocratic activities are systematically inciting hatred; fostering a climate of fear; deliberately spreading disinformation; demonising and intimidating opponents; denouncing laws; and attempting to create a parallel society that rejects the authority of the Dutch government and legal system.
- **Ideological motive:** Taking action on the basis of a particular worldview in order to achieve a goal, whether general or specific. This goal might be something as vague as: 'things should be different from how they are now'. An ideological motive is distinct from a purely personal, criminal or financial motive.
- **Jihadism:** A political movement within Islam, founded on a specific interpretation of Salafist doctrine and the ideas of Sayyid Qutb that seeks global Islamic hegemony and the re-establishment or maintenance of the Islamic state (the caliphate) through force of arms (jihad).
- **Terrorism:** The planning or perpetration of ideologically inspired acts of violence against people or of acts intended to cause property damage and calculated to result in social disruption, in order to create a climate of fear among the general public, achieve social change, and/or influence political decision-making.



*There have been jihadist attacks in a number of European countries in recent months.*

## Chapter 1

# Jihadism and radical islam

Jihadism remains the greatest terrorist threat to the Netherlands and most other European 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, which will ultimately come to dominate the whole world. In their eyes it is also necessary to carry out terrorist attacks in the West as part of this struggle.

This threat has increased in the Netherlands in recent months. This is firstly due to current events, such as the war in Gaza and the desecration of the Koran in various European countries. This could have a mobilising effect on Dutch jihadists and on radical Islamists, both inside and outside the jihadist movement. People can also become radicalised under the influence of online propaganda outside the known networks. Although the general state of the jihadist movement in the Netherlands has not changed for a number of years, the threat it poses could increase under from the influence of such events. There is also a threat posed by individuals and transnational networks inspired by or directed by Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) and its Afghan branch, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Individuals who were radicalised in Europe are seeking contact with ISIS networks outside Europe with a view to carrying out an attack.

## Planned attacks by networks thwarted; ISIS-inspired attacks in Europe

Since the end of 2022 police and the intelligence and security services in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe have disrupted a number of attacks by networks inspired or directed by ISKP (see Annex 1 for an overview). Attacks by ISKP-connected individuals and networks responsible for planning attacks in Europe were also foiled in Türkiye, Syria and Afghanistan. These interventions helped prevent multiple attacks in Europe. On the one hand, the increased number of thwarted plots suggests a heightened threat of attacks by ISKP in Europe. On the other hand, it also shows the effectiveness of the intelligence and security services, both in the Netherlands and abroad. Given that the networks have been weakened, at least temporarily, the ability of ISIS and its Afghan branch, ISKP, to mount attacks in the short term or to order attacks to be carried out in Europe has probably decreased. However, the threat is higher than it was last year.

Thanks in part to the arrest of individuals and members of networks allied to ISIS there were few attacks in Europe in 2023. These relatively small-scale attacks were carried out by lone actors, some of whom were inspired by ISIS. For example, on 13 October a secondary school teacher was killed by a 20-year-old man in the French town of Arras. Shortly before the attack the killer had made a video pledging allegiance to ISIS. The attack on three Swedish football supporters in Brussels on 16 October was perpetrated by a 45-year-old Tunisian who was living illegally in Belgium. In a video, the man said that he was acting on behalf of ISIS and taking revenge, in the name of all Muslims, for acts of desecration to the Koran committed in Sweden. The next day, ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack without referring to these acts of desecration, stating that citizens of Sweden had been attacked because the country is part of a global coalition against jihadists. Such attacks could serve as an example for Dutch jihadists or other extremists who are willing to commit violence.

## Arrests in the Netherlands and Germany of individuals linked with ISKP

On 6 July, a 29-year-old man and a 31-year-old woman were arrested in Eindhoven and Breda, respectively, on suspicion of preparing a terrorist offence. The man is also suspected of being a member of ISIS. According to the Public Prosecution Service the man is from Tajikistan and the woman is from Kyrgyzstan. The man pretended to be a refugee, but according to the Public Prosecution Service he was actually the leader of a network linked to ISKP whose other members were located in Germany and Belgium. In Germany seven individuals between the ages of 20 and 45 from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan were arrested. They, too, were members of the network. They are believed to have entered Germany from Ukraine in early 2022. They discussed possible targets in Germany and tried to obtain weapons.

Due to the war in Ukraine, various jihadists who had been based in that country have relocated to Western Europe. The ideology espoused by ISKP is thought to appeal to radicalised individuals with a Central Asian background. The Afghan ISKP has had structures in neighbouring Central Asian countries like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan for some time. In addition, since 2021 ISKP has increasingly been targeting its propaganda at these countries, which are part of the historical region of Khorasan.

## Increased threat linked to various mobilising events

Although the threat posed by transnational networks linked to foreign jihadist organisations has declined since the beginning of the year, there nevertheless remains a heightened terrorist threat. On account of developments related to the war in Gaza and acts of desecration to the Koran in various European countries, individuals or small groups within the jihadist movement may be inclined to commit violence. These events have also had a mobilising effect on Dutch jihadists and on radical Islamists outside the jihadist movement. This heightened threat is not expected to subside any time soon.

### Gaza war has a mobilising effect on jihadists

Hamas's large-scale attack on Israeli civilians on 7 October 2023 and Israel's ensuing military response reignited the intractable conflict in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. In addition to possible regional repercussions, the war is also influencing the jihadist threat in and against the West. Hamas has called on sympathisers all over the world to take action, without explicitly urging violence or attacks in Europe. For now the organisation is focusing its terrorist activities exclusively on Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Jihadist groups are, however, trying to use the war in Gaza to encourage sympathisers to carry out attacks against and in the West. Organisations with a global reach, such as ISIS and al Qa'ida, have called for attacks in the West. In its newsletter *al-Naba*, ISIS is drawing attention to the suffering of

Palestinian Muslims. Although ISIS considers Hamas to be an ideological opponent, as a nationalist organisation that works with Shi'ite organisations like Hezbollah and countries like Iran, it has nevertheless seized the opportunity presented by the war to call for attacks on Jews and Jewish targets around the world. In addition, a popular American jihadist preacher, who also has a following among Dutch ISIS supporters, has called for violence against Jews, using veiled language.

In a statement posted on its official online channel, As-Sahab, on 13 October, the central leadership of al Qai'da called on jihadists to carry out attacks in countries that have normalised relations with Israel in recent years, as well as on US military bases, airports and embassies in the Islamic world. Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al Shabaab have called for violence as well. It is uncertain, however, whether al Qa'ida's central leadership is capable of carrying out attacks in the Middle East, let alone the West. This call for violence can probably best be seen as an expression of solidarity with the Palestinians, and it is mainly intended to spur sympathisers to action.

Both Dutch and international media have reported extensively on the suffering of Palestinian civilians as a result of the war in Gaza. If this coverage and the accompanying images continues, or if it becomes more extensive, serious and graphic, feelings are likely to run even higher among those sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. In most cases, this will not lead to violence. However, as a result of the war and the calls to action by terrorist groups and preachers, there is an increased likelihood of violence by some jihadists or other extremist Muslims, particularly against Israeli or Jewish people, locations or organisations. The risk of violence may be higher among radicalised individuals who also struggle with serious psychological or psychosocial problems.

In the worst-case scenario, this could lead to terrorist violence. In Paris on 2 December, a 26-year-old man attacked three people with a knife and a hammer, killing one of them. The man was inspired by ISIS, and his actions are thought to have been prompted by the war in Gaza. In October a man was arrested in Germany on suspicion of planning to drive a truck into a pro-Israel demonstration. If the war in Gaza persists and escalates further, jihadist organisations will continue to call for violence in the West, and it will become more conceivable that people will actually resort to violence.

## *War in Gaza leads to a sense of insecurity in the Netherlands*

In addition to the increased threat of violence, the war in Gaza has a wider impact on national security in the Netherlands. Deep-seated feelings of insecurity among Jewish and Islamic communities are putting pressure on social stability. As in surrounding countries, the number of antisemitic incidents in the Netherlands has risen sharply since the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October. These incidents consist mainly of threats, either online or in the physical world, graffiti and intimidation. Anti-Muslim incidents have also been reported. This tense climate is expected to persist for the time being. This could generate lasting polarisation between different sections of the population, amplify 'us-versus-them' thinking and cause people to avoid those who do not share their views.

## **Desecration of the Koran in various European countries**

The jihadist threat to Europe has also been magnified by the acts of desecration to the Koran performed by far-right and anti-Islam activists since the beginning of the year in Sweden, Denmark and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands. These incidents have received extensive media coverage in the Middle East and Asia, putting Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands on the radar of jihadist organisations. The governments of these countries have condemned the desecrations, and the Dutch government has emphasised that the Public Assemblies Act is the framework for determining whether a demonstration should be restricted or banned in the Netherlands. For their part, terrorist organisations like ISIS and al Qa'ida have called on their followers to carry out revenge attacks in these countries. In August the Swedish government raised its threat level, noting at the time that various planned attacks had been thwarted. The aforementioned attack in Brussels on 16 October demonstrated once again that potential attackers can be motivated by such incidents.

At the time of writing, the Netherlands has a lower profile among jihadist organisations than Sweden and Denmark. That said, the Netherlands was mentioned by name in ISKP propaganda as a possible target (see next section). In addition, the increased threat of an attack against Europe may impact Dutch interests abroad. For example, the Dutch consulate in Türkiye was targeted early this year in a planned attack by a terrorist cell linked to ISKP, presumably in retaliation for the aforementioned acts of desecration. The attack could be prevented thanks to arrests made by the Turkish authorities.

Both the war in Gaza and the Koran protests could also lead to violence by radical Islamists outside the jihadist movement. These are individuals who do not embrace jihadist ideology and are not inspired by terrorist organisations but who do feel that the use of violence is legitimate. The attacks carried out by such individuals are generally less complex and smaller in scale than those mounted by terrorist organisations. The desecration incidents have raised the long-term threat as well. Some jihadists and radical Muslims have a long memory and retroactively legitimise acts of violence in retaliation for blasphemy, for example.



## *Disinformation spread by state actors may increase the terrorist threat*

In Norway and Sweden there are indications that state actors are using cyberattacks to incite Muslims to take revenge for acts of desecration of the Koran. A recent example of this was a hacking incident at various telecom providers where text messages urging revenge were sent to several Norwegian telephone numbers. The messages appeared to originate from the leader of Hezbollah, but Norwegian security service PST has determined that they were sent by a foreign hacker group. This group used the same platform as previous Russian hacker groups. According to the Swedish government, Sweden has for some time been the target of Russian-backed actors seeking to tarnish the image of the country, which is a candidate for NATO membership. According to the Swedish prime minister, these actors are attempting to further aggravate polarisation by means of an online disinformation campaign, in response to the Koran burnings. According to this campaign, the Swedish government is directly responsible for these acts of desecration, thereby making the country a legitimate target for violent attacks. Since current international tensions are likely to persist for the foreseeable future, such disinformation campaigns may become more common in the coming months. As far as is known, there have been no such cyber campaigns against the Netherlands to date.

## ISKP aims to raise its profile by carrying out attacks in the West

Over the past year the Afghan branch of ISIS, ISKP, has evolved from a terrorist organisation mainly focused on Afghanistan into one that also operates outside the country's borders. The main threat to the West comes from relatively autonomous transnational networks linked to ISKP. ISKP is posting messages online, calling on Muslims in the West to carry out attacks. The arrest of members of a network linked to ISKP in various European countries in July confirmed the existence of this international focus. In addition, according to leaked reports the Pentagon apparently concluded that ISKP leaders were directing various plots from Afghanistan, including one targeting the World Cup in Qatar. For now it would appear that the organisation is incapable of assembling terrorist attack cells and sending them to the West.

ISKP receives instructions from the central leadership of ISIS, to which it is accountable. The current leader of ISKP was previously appointed by the central leadership to breathe new life into the branch, which was in a weakened state in 2019. The organisation considers itself the most important ISIS province (*wilaya*) after those of Iraq and Syria. An attack in the West involving ISKP, whether directly or indirectly, could increase the international status of this ISIS branch among jihadists.

The international threat posed by ISKP over the past year can be gauged from the content of online propaganda, which is posted primarily on its main media channel, Al-Aza'im. Such propaganda is

increasingly being spread by sympathisers in Europe. Whereas ISKP material initially appeared only in Pashtu and Dari (the most widely spoken languages in Afghanistan) and Arabic, over the past two years it has also been released in Urdu, Russian, Uzbek and Turkish. Since 2022 ISKP's online magazine *Voice of Khorasan* has focused on English-speaking sympathisers and supporters in South Asia and the West. The production of this magazine is likely to be largely dependent on contributions from supporters outside Afghanistan. The publication is similar to *Dabiq*, the English-language magazine previously published by ISIS. Political and religious issues are discussed from a jihadist perspective; the Taliban are dismissed as apostates, and supporters are called upon to carry out attacks in the West. The Netherlands was mentioned in this context in January 2023. In March the Netherlands was also referred to in the online jihadist media campaign 'War on Religion', which may have been inspired by this magazine. In both cases the Netherlands was mentioned as a target because of a desecration incident.

### *Fewer attacks by ISKP in Afghanistan itself*

In the first half of 2023 ISKP carried out fewer terrorist attacks in Afghanistan than in the previous two years. The reason for the decline in the number of attacks is uncertain. It is probably due in part to the Taliban's intensified military approach, which has killed many ISKP fighters, including several leaders, and forced others to flee to neighbouring countries. In Pakistan ISKP actually carried out *more* attacks in the same period. There are no indications that ISKP is in a position to conquer and administer territory in Afghanistan. This will make Afghanistan less attractive to Western jihadist travellers, and far less so than during the heyday of the so-called ISIS caliphate in Syria and Iraq. The fact that ISKP is under increasing pressure in Afghanistan does not necessarily mean that the threat to the West posed by ISKP networks is on the decline: there are ISKP-linked networks outside Afghanistan that operate relatively autonomously.

## War in Gaza could also mobilise the Dutch jihadist movement

In general terms the assessment of the Dutch jihadist movement has been unchanged in recent years. The movement is composed of around 500 individuals. In various cities in the Netherlands there are a number of networks of various sizes that support jihadist ideology. These networks are in contact with one another and they exchange ideas and meet in person. But the movement is both ideologically and socially fragmented, which has prevented it from operating effectively and increasing its influence.

Although the Dutch jihadist movement as a whole appears to be less active than it was a few years ago, its underlying ideology has not gone away. It is unlikely that a new caliphate will arise in the short term, but the establishment of an Islamic state remains an ideal for jihadists, and in principle they are willing to use violence to this end. In addition it remains conceivable that someone, either acting alone or as part of a small group, may decide to commit an act of violence, perhaps inspired by the war in Gaza or by incidents that are perceived as blasphemous. As noted above, the war in Gaza could serve to re-mobilise the jihadist movement. Even if it does not lead to a resurgence of the movement as a whole, individuals could be encouraged to engage in violence or take action in some other way.

### *Police arrest British preacher influential in Dutch jihadist circles*

On 17 July 2023 the British authorities arrested a British preacher on suspicion of leading a terrorist organisation held responsible for the 2005 London bombings. He had previously been in prison for supporting ISIS. This preacher had a great deal of influence within the jihadist movement in the UK and beyond. He also plays a major role in the Dutch jihadist movement which, in the online sphere, mainly inhabits English-speaking groups and channels and consumes English-language propaganda. As a result of his arrest, the influence of this preacher and his network on Dutch jihadists will probably wane.

### **Online radicalisation outside known jihadist networks**

In May and June 2023 police arrested two teenagers on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack. A 19-year-old youth from Deventer and a minor are suspected of planning attacks on targets in Belgium. The arrests are related to arrests in Belgium of individuals who may have been preparing a terrorist attack. According to the Public Prosecution Service the suspect from Deventer had volunteered to carry out an attack, although the suspect denies he was actually planning on doing so. There are indications that he may suffer from mental health problems to some extent. The suspects did not have a specific target in mind, but in their online chats, nightclubs and a police station in Belgium were suggested as possibilities. Their contact occurred entirely online; the Dutch nationals and the other individuals had not met before in person. The Dutch nationals did not possess the materials needed to carry out an attack. The provisional detention of the two Dutch suspects was suspended, though the court banned them from using social media.

This case underscores the fact that people can also become radicalised outside of known jihadist networks, through the influence of online propaganda or through occasional contact with jihadists in the Netherlands or abroad. There have been similar examples in other European countries and the US. These show that young, sometimes minor, and vulnerable individuals in particular can be

susceptible to such manipulation and maintain online contact with like-minded parties in other countries. It should be noted that although multiple cases of radicalised minors have been identified in the Netherlands, the numbers involved are relatively small, compared to the known jihadist movement as a whole. This issue's themed section 'An evolving threat due to online radicalisation' discusses the subject of online radicalisation in greater depth.

### **Imprisoned jihadists continue to pose a risk**

In the Netherlands, prisoners suspected or convicted of a terrorist offence, including returnees from the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq, are held in special terrorist wings. By putting individuals suspected and convicted of terrorist offences together in the same wing of a prison, the authorities deprive them of the opportunity to communicate their ideas to the general prison population, and this helps combat the spread of extremist ideas. In the Netherlands it is less common for 'regular' prisoners to become radicalised than in other European countries.

It is, however, the case that jihadists in a prison's terrorist wing can make contact (or maintain existing contacts) with fellow jihadists. This means they can remain part of jihadist networks which pose a direct or indirect threat to national security following the release of their members. It is also possible that frustrations about their time in prison could increase the risk of an act of violence. In Europe the release of a large number of individuals convicted of terrorist offences is a cause for concern for many governments. The authorities generally do not have the capacity to monitor this ever-growing group of ex-prisoners.

Following a final and unappealable conviction of a terrorist offence, an individual with dual citizenship can be stripped of their Dutch nationality. The aim of this measure is to ensure that once individuals convicted of terrorist offences have their nationality revoked and are barred from entering the Netherlands, they will either leave the country voluntarily or be expelled. A number of jihadists who have lost their Dutch nationality have remained in the country, however. 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. For example, this group will receive little or no assistance with reintegration; it will be difficult to enforce the conditions of their release; and they have little or no access to social services. This could lead to increased dependence on their existing jihadist social circle and thus prolong the threat they pose.

## Jihadist groups outside Europe

Organisations like ISIS (in Syria and Iraq) and ISKP (in Afghanistan) are under military pressure in their respective regions. Moreover, the centre of gravity of jihadist violence is shifting from the Middle East to parts of Africa, such as West Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. If local jihadist groups in these regions succeed in occupying territory and creating a safe haven for themselves, it is possible that more internationally oriented groups from that part of the world will encourage, prepare or oversee attacks in the West.

### The death of its leader puts the ISIS core under greater pressure in Syria and Iraq

On 3 August 2023 the new ISIS spokesperson announced on its official media channel Al-Furqan that the organisation had appointed a new supreme leader or caliph. He also stated that the previous caliph had been killed in fighting with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib in late April. Furthermore, he reported that ISIS's previous spokesperson had been captured by HTS. The fighting and this online rhetoric shows that there is still hostility between ISIS and HTS.

The identity of the new leader remains a mystery, and it is unclear what his appointment will mean for the organisation. In any case it is plausible that the operational capabilities of the ISIS core in Syria and Iraq are under further pressure due to the fact that its leaders are regularly being eliminated. This new caliph is the fifth since the creation of ISIS in 2014 and the third since the killing of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qureishi in February 2022. It is expected that ISIS will remain capable of impacting the security situation in Iraq and Syria through underground networks.

### Men with links to the Netherlands are being held in Syrian-Kurdish detention

Many of the Western men being held in Syrian-Kurdish detention, including Dutch nationals, believe they will never be released. The chance that they will be given a swift trial by the Syrian Kurdish-led administration in northeastern Syria seems remote, although in early June the administration announced that it would begin prosecuting the approximately 2,000 ISIS fighters who are not from Syria or Iraq. Since then, little has been heard about this initiative. The chance that they will be sent back to their country of departure in the near future and tried there seems equally remote. As long as there are Dutch nationals being held there, they will probably continue to pose a very limited threat to the Netherlands and Dutch interests in the region. If they were to return to Europe, however, these men could pose a violent threat. As is the case with female returnees, male returnees can also pose a non-violent threat, by spreading propaganda or cultivating jihadist networks, for example.

### Threat to the Netherlands posed by al Qa'ida remains limited

Over the past few years, the threat posed by the al Qa'ida core to Europe or Western targets elsewhere in the world has been limited. The al Qa'ida core has not been capable of mounting, planning or directing attacks in Europe from abroad. At most, al Qa'ida's ideology may have inspired a few people to carry out attacks. In the vast majority of cases such lone actors were inspired by ISIS and not by al Qa'ida, as was recently the case with the attacks in Arras and Brussels. Likewise, organisations in Asia and Africa that are allied to al Qa'ida, such as AQAP or al Qa'ida in de Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), have posed only a limited threat to the West in recent years. In their case the

threat pertained almost exclusively to Western interests in the vicinity of their areas of operation – in Yemen and the Sahel, respectively.

### **Centre of gravity of jihadist violence is shifting further to parts of Africa**

For some years now, the majority of jihadist violence has been taking place not in the Middle East but rather in certain parts of Africa. More and more attacks are being carried out, especially in countries of the Sahel, such as Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. Jihadists are also turning up regularly in northern Togo, Benin and Nigeria. This does not mean that the Netherlands will face a terrorist threat from these regions in the short term. In contrast to the ISIS core organisation, jihadist groups in the Sahel have not expressed any ambitions to establish a global caliphate. Nor have there been any attacks in the West that have been masterminded from the Sahel. What is more, the region does not have the same religious appeal as Syria and Iraq. The regional jihadist organisations have no shortage of fighters, and it is unlikely that many Western jihadists will travel to this area. There is, however, a growing threat to Dutch nationals living in the region, including military personnel, and to Dutch companies and organisations operating in the Sahel.

Over the longer term, a different threat situation may arise if local jihadist groups manage to capture territory, as has happened in Afghanistan and in Syria and Iraq, and create a safe haven in the Sahel or the Horn of Africa. More internationally oriented groups could then use this territory as a base from which to prepare, direct or order attacks in the West. On 31 October the police arrested a 22-year-old man from Helmond for attempting to take part in a terrorist organisation. The man was about to leave for the Horn of Africa to join ISIS.



*Police have launched an investigation into the defacement of graves, walls and the chapel of the British war cemetery in Mierlo by an unknown individual or individuals. A large swastika was daubed on the inner wall of the chapel.*

## Chapter 2

# Right-wing terrorism and extremism

Individuals active within an online right-wing extremist milieu, some of whom are very young, continue to pose a violent threat. They share messages containing Nazi content, glorify violence or issue calls for a race war. By no means all of these young people are being radicalised to the point of violence by the force of their ideological convictions alone; some are simply in search of an ideology that is compatible with an *existing* desire for violence. In addition, the Dutch right-wing extremist scene consists of traditional neo-Nazis, national socialists, the alt-right, identitarian groups and ethnonationalists. Their main aim is to normalise their right-wing extremist ideas, and they generally regard violence as counterproductive, at least in terms of their public messaging. However, for purposes of ‘self-defence’, they do engage in survival and combat training and have an interest in weapons.

## Right-wing terrorism remains conceivable due to online radicalisation

The violent threat posed by right-wing extremism in the Netherlands is largely unchanged. The threat lies in the possibility that an individual who has been radicalised within the online right-wing extremist milieu will decide to commit an act of violence. Within this setting, for example, there are adherents of accelerationism, which seeks to use terrorist violence to trigger a race war in order to replace the current political system with a white ethnostate. Two attacks earlier this year



demonstrate once again that people within this online milieu can turn violent: one in Texas (in May, eight dead) and one in Florida (in August, three dead). In Germany and the UK, in May and July respectively, young men were convicted of planning right-wing terrorist attacks. The specific threat of an actual attack remains an exception, however; most arrests of right-wing extremists in Europe are for online incitement and the dissemination of terrorist content. In the Netherlands, too, individuals from this online milieu were arrested this year, on suspicion of a terrorist offence, threatening to carry out an attack, recruitment, hate speech, discrimination and group defamation.

In the Netherlands there are probably a few hundred people active in this online right-wing extremist milieu, many of whom are minors or young adults. Many of them have an unstable home life, problems at school and psychosocial issues. Some are also struggling with addiction. The cumulative effect of these problems can make these individuals more suggestible, as a result of which they can be more easily induced, within the online milieu, to engage in extremist activities. In addition, an existing interest in the Second World War and the glorification of Nazism can help induce such individuals to become radicalised to the point of committing violence. As right-wing extremist language becomes increasingly normalised for these young people, it could be easier to take the step to the expression of even more extreme and violent ideas.

### An online breeding ground for hate

The Terrorgram Collective is a key resource used by right-wing extremists and accelerationists around the world. It is an online network of various channels on the Telegram communication app. It differs from the broader far-right milieu by way of its explicit emphasis on terrorism and violence. The network has no hierarchy, and membership is voluntary and carries no obligations. On Terrorgram, followers are encouraged to read specific Nazi books, such as *Mein Kampf*, *Siege* and *The Turner Diaries*, and are given access to the collective's own publications, such as *Militant Accelerationism* and *The Hard Reset*. Such publications encourage and ideologically justify violence, as well as disseminating instructions for making bombs and sabotaging critical infrastructure. They also glorify right-wing extremist terrorists. Packaging all this in an aesthetically appealing format or in the form of memes serves to normalise terrorist violence among right-wing extremists. Much of the content does not contain extremist symbols or slogans, making it easy to spread on mainstream online platforms, and thus reach a larger public.

A substantial amount of the content on Terrorgram puts more emphasis on style and imagery than on ideological motives. This makes the network attractive to young people who are not seeking ideological instruction so much as an outlet for existing violent fantasies. Some young Dutch right-wing extremists within this online environment are immersing themselves in accelerationist literature, but this is becoming less common. There are many people online who fantasise about murdering people with a different ethnic or cultural background, or sexual orientation. These right-wing extremists make incendiary statements online about groups they seem to encounter in the real world, such as Muslims or LGBTIQ+ people. This type of language is mainly found on Telegram, though it can also be seen on TikTok, in Instagram group chats and, to a lesser extent, on Discord.

The fascination with acts of violence goes beyond an interest in images of previous right-wing terrorist attacks. It also extends to gruesome footage of jihadist beheadings, massacres, school

shootings, satanic rituals, executions, mutilations and sexual violence. There is particular interest in school shootings, and some have threatened to commit a similar act. This violent footage has a numbing effect on minors and young people, and as a result, the images that are shared need to be ever more extreme, thereby further alienating these individuals from society. This may lower the threshold for engaging in violence, especially considering that this online environment actively encourages attacks and copycat behaviour.

### *Rotterdam shooting not inspired by extremist motives*

On 28 September a 32-year-old man killed three people in Rotterdam, at a residential building and at Erasmus Medical Center. The suspect was a trainee doctor at the hospital. In the course of a previous arrest for animal abuse, the police found violent videos and Nazi symbols on his phone. Even so, the shooting is not believed to be an act of terrorism, and it does not seem to have been inspired by right-wing or other extremist motives. Further investigation is necessary to establish the perpetrator's motives.

## Right-wing extremists actively taking part in resilience training

The Dutch right-wing extremist scene also includes traditional neo-Nazis, national socialists, the alt-right, identitarian groups and ethnonationalists. Their current focus is mainly on their right-wing extremist ideas, including the replacement theory.<sup>1</sup> These extremists see the use of violence as counterproductive, at least in terms of their public messaging.

For a number of years, small right-wing extremist groups in the Netherlands have been organising combat and survival training courses. They do this to improve physical and mental health, boost the resilience of the 'white race' and protect themselves from their perceived enemies. In late 2020 right-wing extremist 'Active Clubs' started appearing in the US, Canada and Europe. For years there have been ordinary training schools and gyms operating under that name in the Netherlands, without any ties to right-wing extremism. The right-wing extremist clubs are different. In other countries some clubs form militias that can be activated for violent action if deemed necessary. Online, they form a transnational network, within which the groups can communicate with and encourage one another, and organise joint events. Up till now, such right-wing extremist Active Clubs have been a marginal and poorly organised phenomenon in the Netherlands, with only a

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<sup>1</sup> According to replacement theory, certain groups – often 'the Jews' or 'the left-wing elite' – aim to systematically change the ethnic composition of Western countries by deliberately replacing white people with people from a different cultural or ethnic background.

Progressive values concerning issues connected to birth rates and population size (e.g. abortion, euthanasia, family formation, feminism and LGBTIQ+ rights) are also viewed through the lens of replacement theory.

single group operating under that name, and a handful of active members within the online network. Right-wing extremist Active Clubs in Europe sometimes organise international combat events.

There are also similar Dutch right-wing extremist groups that have the same goal as the Active Clubs, but they fall outside the transnational network. These groups are working with the Dutch Active Club to build a national network, and sometimes they organise joint training exercises. The number of participants is often limited, numbering between a handful and a few dozen. This Dutch Active Club has over a thousand followers on social media. Such groups recruit and indoctrinate young, white men by organising what appear to be innocuous athletic activities. Participants are often not recognisable to outsiders as right-wing extremists. Openly, they stress the importance of martial arts, masculinity, healthy living, physical meet-ups and brotherhood. However, beneath the surface these groups offer a platform for right-wing extremist ideas. They promote a worldview that revolves around the replacement theory, the survival of the white race and preparations for a supposedly imminent race war. Unlike right-wing extremist groups in the past, they actively pursue partnerships with other groups.

In the Netherlands the resilience training exercises are defensive in nature and are generally described as 'self-defence'; the use of violence against others is not actively pursued. From this same self-defence perspective, some right-wing extremists continue to exhibit an interest in purchasing weapons, including firearms.

## *Normalising (right-wing) extremist ideas can foster violence*

The normalisation of extremist ideas can lead to a growing intolerance towards certain institutions and social groups, as a result of which violence against these groups is more readily accepted. Academic research has shown that there is a correlation between exposure to online hate speech about minority groups, negative stereotyping, intolerance towards these groups and ultimately, possible violence.

Over the past few years antisemitism and online hate directed at LGBTIQ+ people has been on the rise in the Netherlands. This increase can be attributed in large part to the far right and the anti-institutional movement, but it can also be traced to ultra-conservative and strictly religious people. What they have in common is a desire to protect traditional values by opposing progressive ideas, which are often dismissed as a 'woke agenda' that is being imposed on them. Such groups express concerns about the influence of 'wokeness' on society, government policy and the preservation of Dutch traditions, culture and identity. This trend, which originated in the US, is accompanied by warnings about paedophilia and the supposed sexualisation of children, which are mainly directed against LGBTIQ+ people. Right-wing extremists cite the replacement theory in this context too, because LGBTIQ+ people and 'the woke' are allegedly impeding the 'white race' from reproducing.

On 6 September a 41-year-old man was arrested at the Media Park in Hilversum. He was armed with a gun and a knife, and by his own account he was there to kill a television presenter. The man had converted to Islam, and on the internet he vented his thoughts about conspiracy theories related to 'wokeness', 'the far left' and 'LGBTIQ indoctrination'. In addition, LGBTIQ+ people and symbols are openly attacked on a regular basis. Specifically, the number of reports of discrimination, harassment and assaults of transgender people doubled in 2022, compared with the year before. The motives for such violence were not recorded. In part this increase can be attributed to a greater willingness to report such incidents, but it is a reasonable assumption that online hate and eroding tolerance play a role as well.



*A particular danger of the anti-institutional movement is its potential to undermine the democratic legal order.*

## Chapter 3

# Anti-institutional extremism

Anti-institutional extremists continue to spread their ‘malevolent elite’ narrative about an international elite that is supposedly trying to oppress, enslave or even murder the population. Self-declared ‘sovereign citizens’ form a prominent group within the anti-institutional movement. They deny the legitimacy of the government, and claim to be independent of the Dutch state. In both cases the threat lies mainly in the way this behaviour undermines the democratic legal order. There are, however, concerns about small sections of both the anti-institutional movement in general and the sovereign citizen movement in particular, in which discussions are taking place about when violence is justified or in which preparations are being made for a violent confrontation with the government.

## ‘Malevolent elite’ narrative could lead to violence

According to the ‘malevolent elite’ narrative, the population is in a state of war with a supposed elite. This narrative is fuelled by conspiracy theories about current events, in which adherents of this kind of thinking see their ideas confirmed over and over again. Within this narrative there are various sub-narratives that contribute to intolerance and possible acts of violence against certain sections of the population. Each of these narratives envisions an elite with evil intentions, but they vary in terms of who exactly is part of that elite and what exactly that elite is doing. For example, there is a sub-narrative that posits that the elite is engaging in child trafficking and satanic child abuse. There are various sub-narratives centred on protecting traditional values. This supposed elite is purportedly seeking to secure its position of power by imposing ‘woke’ ideas on the

population on issues like abortion, climate change, immigration and LGBTIQ+ rights. A number of spiritual sub-narratives revolve around an existential struggle between good and evil, or the opposition to modern medicine. According to one of these narratives, the elite is ‘possessed by Satan’, while in another they are associated with control over public health and the food supply. Finally, there is a right-wing extremist sub-narrative centred on replacement theory, in which the elite is Jewish or leftist.

The threat posed by this movement lies mainly in its potential to undermine the democratic legal order. Broadly speaking, the violent threat posed by anti-institutional extremism is limited. However, this narrative contributes to an atmosphere of threats, intimidation and intolerance. As with a section of the right-wing extremist movement, the potential for violence lies in the kind of us-versus-them thinking that this narrative promotes. By spreading an unreal and frightening scenario of a malevolent elite, they collectively give rise to a climate in which individuals or small groups could be inspired to use violence. Although these people generally do not openly call for violence, the hostile language used could lead some of them to conclude that violent resistance is the only option. The demonisation and dehumanisation of opponents, and the use of terms like ‘oppression’, ‘genocide’, ‘tribunals’, ‘holy war’ and ‘existential struggle’ could encourage people to draw this conclusion.

## Small minority of ‘sovereign citizens’ are prepared to use violence

Self-declared ‘sovereign citizens’ form a prominent group within the anti-institutional movement. They deny the legitimacy of the government, and declare themselves independent of the Dutch state. The sovereign citizen movement is estimated to comprise around ten thousand individuals. The interest in and level of support for the movement appears to be growing. The vast majority of sovereign citizens pose no violent threat; they are simply pursuing a life of autonomy or self-sufficiency.

However, a small but radical minority of the movement is seeking to replace the current legal system with its own laws, law enforcement, judiciary and ‘people’s tribunals’. They challenge the government and sometimes attempt to provoke confrontation. Thus far, this has not been accompanied by violence, but there are discussions about when violence is warranted. For example, some argue that their own independent law enforcement officers (‘sheriffs’) should be allowed to carry guns to defend themselves and perform arrests. In February a self-appointed sheriff in the Netherlands was found to be in possession of a firearm and ammunition. There is also talk about large-scale citizen arrests of politicians and police officials. It is difficult to estimate the size of this minority; it is thought to number around a few hundred individuals. A smaller subset of the group advocates the use of violence and gun ownership. There is a risk that supporters of this movement will turn their attention to the formation of militias and vigilantism. If they become more organised, the violent threat they pose is likely to increase.

Finally, some of these 'sovereign citizens' in the Netherlands are preparing for a violent confrontation with the government. These preparations are defensive in nature: they are not seeking out confrontation themselves; they expect the government to initiate it. They are attempting to obtain weapons, including firearms, and are taking part in combat training and shooting lessons. In September a sovereign citizen and former member of the armed forces was sentenced to 18 months in prison for attempting to buy firearms and ammunition. There is no evidence he intended to use those weapons to carry out any specific plan.





*Online propaganda, networks and contacts are playing a greater role in transmitting extremist ideas. A recent trend within jihadism is the use of Snapchat to lure possibly susceptible young people to encrypted communication channels like Telegram.*

## Thema section

# An evolving threat due to online radicalisation

In recent years, online propaganda, networks and contacts have begun to play a relatively larger role in radicalisation, especially among jihadists and right-wing extremists. This DTN mentions various Dutch examples of young jihadists and right-wing extremists who were arrested this year after being radicalised online. Elsewhere in Europe, multiple individuals who became radicalised online have been arrested on suspicion of preparing an attack and for offences such as online incitement and the dissemination of terrorist content (see Annexe 1: Overview of terrorist attacks and arrests for planning attacks).

Online radicalisation is nothing new, though it is evolving. Building on earlier trends such as radicalisation via social media platforms, for a number of years now extremists have been communicating with like-minded individuals from around the world in secret and encrypted chats. As a result, recruiting members of terrorist organisations is becoming less important than the online dissemination of extremist ideas. That said, such organisations and other extremist agitators can inspire people to commit violence, just as state actors do by spreading disinformation. This process involves an eclectic mix of extremist ideas and violent fantasies, which are often informed by conspiracy theories and accompanied by psychological or psychosocial problems. In addition, it is becoming more common for people to not only consume propaganda but also to produce it themselves and thus help to radicalise others.

Individuals who become radicalised mostly online are often very young – and may even be minors – and they may be part of a network whose members live relatively far away from each other, or

even in other countries. In some cases they embrace terrorist ideas, an extremist ideology, conspiracy theories – or a combination of all three – within a very short span of time.

## Extremists focus on online radicalisation

Currently, most radicalisation is occurring online. Chat apps, gaming platforms and social media play a facilitating and galvanising role, especially in environments with inadequate content moderation. Both jihadist and right-wing extremist groups actively use the internet to recruit minors. The aforementioned young accelerationists and similar right-wing extremists are active almost exclusively online, while ISIS exploits the lack of supervision in the online gaming sector to spread its disinformation and propaganda. For example, on the gaming platform Roblox, Nazi users were able to attack LGBTIQ+ symbols, and a game made specifically for the Netherlands was discovered where players could attack police officers in the guise of an ISIS terrorist.

The online world cannot be separated from the offline reality. An unstable home environment, problems at school, psychological or psychosocial problems or crime can be reflected in the way a person behaves online. Such experiences can make individuals more susceptible to extremist messages and behaviour. Not everyone is therefore equally receptive to extremist ideas, and by no means everyone who is susceptible will ultimately resort to violence. This receptiveness is reflected in online recommendation algorithms. Recent studies show that all social media platforms boost the visibility of extremist content to users who exhibit interest in such posts. These individuals may, for example, subscribe to extremist channels or deliberately click on external links to them. This is in contrast to the assumption that people are becoming radicalised purely by way of algorithms and recommendations: individuals who are less receptive to such content will see fewer recommendations for extremist channels, and when they do encounter them, they will rarely click on them.

### Age gaps are no obstacle online

The internet poses few obstacles to radicalisation. Whereas in the physical world a large age gap can impede social interaction, age barriers are much less significant online. On social media young people can come into contact much earlier with terrorist propaganda and even become drawn into online extremist and terrorist networks. Accordingly, the intelligence and security services and the police have noted that the percentage of young people among terrorist suspects is growing all the time. In 2020 the Dutch police announced that in recent years a number of very young people, including minors, had been arrested on suspicion of disseminating terrorist propaganda and managing extremist social media channels. In 2022 Europol noted that recruiters and their target group were becoming younger and younger. In France the number of terrorist suspects under the age of 18 has been on the rise for several years, and in the UK a full 20% of all people arrested for extremism and terrorism are now minors, a fivefold increase over 2019. A significant part of this consists of online incitement and the dissemination of violent propaganda by right-wing extremists and jihadists.

Since 2020, dozens of teenagers have been arrested in Europe on suspicion of preparing a terrorist attack. Since May 2023 various young jihadists and right-wing extremists have been arrested or

convicted of planning potential attacks in the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Poland and the UK. Only on two occasions were teenagers in Europe actually successful in carrying out their plan. The most well known incident was the beheading of Samuel Paty, a French teacher who was killed on the street in 2020 by an 18-year-old youth, following an online smear campaign about blasphemy. In October 2022 a 19-year-old youth attacked an LGBTIQ+ bar in Slovakia's capital Bratislava, after becoming radicalised within the right-wing extremist online milieu.

The majority of attack plans conceived by radicalised young people are discovered or fail. This is partly because their use of the internet to share terrorist plans or content means that there is a greater chance of detection and eventual arrest. It may also be a consequence of their young age. Minors are often less capable of preparing an attack of any degree of complexity, and they generally do not have the financial means to purchase professional equipment and material for an attack. It also seems less simple for jihadists and right-wing extremists who have no physical contact to carry out an actual attack, whether individually or as a group. Whereas it is primarily young people who disseminate terrorist content, the actual perpetrators of terrorist attacks in Europe are, on average, quite a bit older. At the same time, it remains difficult to predict who will eventually resort to violence.

### Physical distance is no obstacle

Moreover, online, distance is no obstacle. Real-world extremist networks are generally found in certain cities or neighbourhoods, which function as hotbeds of radicalisation. Someone who lives a considerable distance from these networks is less likely to come into contact with extremist ideas or to become part of a real-world extremist network. Moreover, from a distance it is more difficult to maintain close contact with a network. Online, physical distance does not matter, and it is easy to find like-minded individuals. Ideologically aligned people can thus form a network and encourage one another to carry out an attack, even if they live on opposite sides of the world. For example, the school pupil arrested in France in May on suspicion of preparing a jihadist attack was in contact online with other radicalised young people throughout Europe. Prior to and immediately after his attack, the perpetrator in Bratislava used Twitter and 4Chan to communicate with like-minded people around the world, something that has become common within the right-wing extremist online milieu.

It is also worth noting that the Dutch nationals arrested in places like Deventer were interested in carrying out an attack in Belgium. Online relationships can also blur national borders when it comes to selecting targets. Nevertheless a traditional attack still has to be physically prepared and carried out. In that sense, if there is too great a distance between the perpetrator and target, an attack remains impractical. There are also other online barriers, such as language. For example, it is difficult for Dutch jihadists to join Arabic-speaking networks, and they are therefore mainly active on English-speaking online channels. The 'online generation' of right-wing extremists also spend a great deal of their time on English-language channels.

### Radicalisation can occur in a matter of weeks

Finally a radicalisation process can occur quickly online, making it difficult for the authorities to identify what is happening and take preventive action. This is nothing new: around 10 years ago,

individuals sometimes became radicalised in a matter of weeks before travelling to Syria to join ISIS. On the internet, people who are especially receptive to such ideas – due in part to psychological or psychosocial problems, an unstable home environment, problems at school or work, problematic alcohol or drug use, or criminal behaviour – can easily find their way to extremist content. Given their anonymity, online group chats are often more extreme than in the physical world, with newcomers quickly conforming to the prevailing group ethic, without realising that some of what is being said is merely exaggeration or bravado. On the other hand, this does not necessarily mean that radical ideas will be translated into violent behaviour.

With the help of social media and online chat channels on gaming sites, recruiters and agitators can come into contact with young people relatively easily. On social media with limited content moderation, such as TikTok, children can be confronted with extremist videos. A recent trend within jihadist circles is the use of Snapchat. From there, potentially susceptible young people can be referred to encrypted communication channels like Telegram. If they take this step, they may find themselves in an extremist echo chamber in which they only see messages that confirm and fuel their extremist convictions. Online, these young people are then exposed to a steady stream of extremist and terrorist content, and are inducted into networks whose members continuously feed each other terrorist ideas. This means that they can become radicalised in a short span of time.

## Annexe

# Overview of terrorist attacks and arrests for planning attacks

Below is an overview of the most significant terrorist attacks and arrests (for planning an attack) in Europe between early May and 5 December 2023. Convictions for such offences are not noted in the list because they relate to past arrests and are therefore not necessarily relevant to the current threat situation.

### May 2023

- **4 May: The Netherlands, Belgium.** A young ISIS supporter (a minor) was arrested in the Netherlands on suspicion of being involved in planning a possible attack. Seven individuals were arrested in Flanders in connection with the same investigation.
- **30 May: Italy.** A young ISIS supporter (a minor) was arrested on suspicion of preparing an attack.

### June 2023

- **6 June: The Netherlands.** A man from the town of Deventer was arrested for having ties to the group based in Belgium and the Netherlands that was arrested on 4 May.
- **14 June: Hungary.** A Norwegian man was arrested in Budapest for making online threats to carry out a large-scale attack. Motivated by right-wing extremist ideology, he had threatened to attack airports and train stations.
- **16 June: France.** A 21-year-old ISIS supporter was arrested because he was thought to be planning a knife attack on churchgoers or on ‘enemies of Islam’, together with a minor, who had already been arrested on 5 March.
- **16 June: Poland.** An 18-year-old ISIS supporter was arrested on suspicion of preparing a suicide attack on government buildings.
- **17 June: Austria.** Three ISIS supporters, two of whom are minors, were arrested in connection with plans to attack the Vienna Pride Parade. The group was in contact with a Belgian sympathiser.

### July 2023

- **6 July: The Netherlands and Germany.** In Breda and Eindhoven a 29-year-old man and a 31-year-old woman were arrested on suspicion of preparing a terrorist offence. Seven individuals were arrested in Germany as part of the same investigation. The network is linked to ISKP.

- **20 July: Finland.** The Finnish police arrested four men on suspicion of plotting right-wing terrorist attacks on migrants, political opponents and critical infrastructure. The men were training to use homemade, 3D-printed guns.

### August 2023

- **7 August: Bosnia.** A 43-year-old ISIS supporter was arrested on suspicion of preparing an attack on Islamic scholars who had made negative remarks about the militant activities of other Muslims.

### September 2023

- **6 September: The Netherlands.** A 41-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of preparing to commit murder, possession of a firearm and making threats. He intended to murder a TV presenter, possibly inspired by conspiracy theories and extremist ideas.
- **17 September: Austria.** A 16-year-old boy was arrested on suspicion of preparing a jihadist attack. Inspired by online ISIS material, he wanted to attack passers-by at the main railway station in Vienna until he was shot to death by the police. He decided at the last minute to abandon the plan.

### October 2023

- **13 October: France.** A 20-year-old man stabbed a teacher to death at a school in Arras. Shortly before committing this crime the killer had made a video in which he swore allegiance to ISIS.
- **15 October: United Kingdom.** A 44-year-old man from Morocco stabbed two people in Hartlepool, one of whom died of his injuries. The British security service considers the incident to be an Islamic extremist attack.
- **16 October: Belgium.** A 45-year-old Tunisian used an automatic weapon to kill two Swedish football supporters in Brussels. Another person was seriously injured. In a video the man said that he was acting on behalf of ISIS and taking revenge, in the name of all Muslims, for the acts of desecration to the Koran committed in Sweden.
- **24 October: Germany.** A 29-year-old man from Duisburg was arrested on suspicion of planning to drive a truck into a pro-Israel demonstration. The man had previously been convicted of joining ISIS in Syria.

### November 2023

- **9 November: Belgium.** As part of a coordinated police operation in six European countries, a 23-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of preparing to carry out terrorist attacks. It is thought that the man played a leading role in an international online accelerationist network.
- **16 November: Germany.** An 18-year-old right-wing extremist was arrested for preparing a terrorist attack, after repeatedly making threats online to kill people. A search of his house turned up weapons and ammunition.
- **28 November: Germany.** Two teenagers were arrested on suspicion of plotting an attack on a synagogue or a Christmas market. It is not yet clear to what extent they took any concrete steps to plan the attack.

### December 2023

- **1 December: Germany.** A 20-year-old ISIS supporter was arrested after announcing online that he intended to carry out a knife attack on visitors to a Christmas market.
- **2 December: France.** In Paris a 26-year-old man attacked three people with a knife and a hammer, killing one of them. The man was inspired by ISIS, and the war in Gaza probably served as a trigger.





**Publication**

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

**More information**

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

*December 2023*