



National Coordinator for Security and
Counterterrorism
Ministry of Justice and Security

Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 52

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Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

Radicalisation - Extremism - Terrorism



Current threat level:
Significant

1. Threat level

The threat level for the Netherlands is currently set at 3 (significant). In other words there is a conceivable chance of an attack in the Netherlands, most likely carried out by a lone actor or a small group motivated by jihadist aims or by some other extremist ideology.

A terrorist attack is conceivable; the threat is significant

The Dutch jihadist movement remains a key element of the terrorist threat to the Netherlands. Some individuals within these circles still intend to carry out an attack, but only in exceptional cases does this intention progress to the planning stage. The jihadist movement in the Netherlands, estimated at over 500 people, consists of multiple networks built on social ties rather than hierarchical structures. For years now, they have maintained little, if any, public presence, though they are still engaged in creating and disseminating propaganda, inter-network social activities and fundraising. Terrorist incidents occur sporadically. However, a jihadist-inspired terrorist attack remains conceivable. Thanks to ongoing vigilance and pressure on the part of the authorities, terrorist plans are generally uncovered in time. The Netherlands could also be the target of an attack by ISIS or al Qa'ida planned abroad. However, there are no specific indications of any preparations being made for such an attack. Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic makes a large-scale attack in the Netherlands less likely, in part because of the difficulty of finding large numbers of soft targets.

Attacks

Since the summer of 2017 the number of jihadist attacks in Europe has fallen sharply. The threat to Europe – and the Netherlands, in particular – posed by international jihadist organisations like ISIS and al Qa'ida, has diminished, but not disappeared. Both ISIS and al Qa'ida and their sympathisers still seek to carry out attacks in or against Europe. Incidents and arrests over the past year show that the jihadist threat in

Europe emanates mainly from ISIS sympathisers, mostly acting alone and in some cases in groups.

Returnees

Geopolitical developments in Syria have resulted in a new yet fragile situation. The ground offensive by the Syrian army in the province of Idlib, supported by foreign allies, could lead to a major flow of refugees to Turkey. Their numbers could include jihadist travellers from the Netherlands who are currently in the province of Idlib. In total there are still around 145 jihadist travellers from the Netherlands in Syria and surrounding countries, such as Turkey. Around 50 adults and 90 children are in reception camps or in detention in northeastern Syria. Around 30 individuals are still part of groups allied to al Qa'ida in northwestern Syria. Upon returning to the Netherlands, individuals who have received training in the conflict zone and gained combat experience with terrorist groups potentially pose a violent threat. Returnees, including women, may also serve as a source of inspiration within the Dutch jihadist movement.

Right-wing extremism

An attack in Europe, including the Netherlands, by a lone right-wing terrorist is also conceivable. Although the real-world (as opposed to online) Dutch right-wing extremist scene is characterised by fragmentation, weak leadership, personal animosity and the absence of a consistent organisational structure, individuals (particularly those radicalised online) continue to pose a threat. There are also indications that the terrorist attack in Christchurch resonated with certain individuals in the Netherlands. They are motivated less by well-defined right-wing extremist ideas than by a mix of psychological problems and personal grievances about developments in society and in the political realm in particular.

2. The terrorist threat to the Netherlands

Jihadism still constitutes the principal terrorist threat to the Netherlands. Within the jihadist movement there are individuals who harbour the ambition to commit acts of violence and who, in exceptional cases, are willing to act on this ambition. Thanks to the efforts of intelligence and security services, this can be prevented in most cases. Two categories of jihadists are a source of particular concern: firstly, jihadists in prison, who can have a negative influence on one another and form new networks; secondly, jihadist travellers and returnees, who joined terrorist groups and gained combat experience in conflict zones abroad. Female returnees can also pose a violent threat. Finally, the right-wing terrorist attack in Christchurch inspired multiple perpetrators around the world, and a right-wing terrorist attack by a lone actor in the Netherlands remains conceivable.

The jihadist movement in the Netherlands

The nature of the jihadist movement in the Netherlands has not changed during the period under review. The movement consists of over 500 individuals who adhere to a jihadist Salafist ideology. Membership numbers have stagnated. The movement is made up of multiple networks and individuals which are connected with one another, albeit in a non-hierarchical way. A number of networks which have existed, in shifting forms, for over a decade are linked through friendships, social activities and marriage. These networks are predominantly, though not exclusively, found in the western part of the country. Collectively, they are regarded as the jihadist 'mainstream'. This core group instigates a large proportion of jihadist initiatives in the Netherlands, in terms of the creation and dissemination of propaganda, inter-network activities, jihadist travel to conflict zones (in the past), fundraising, etc.

For years now, the jihadist movement has had little if any public presence. There are few leaders or agitators. There are relatively few inter-network gatherings or other activities. As noted in DTN51, one reason for this is repressive measures on the part of the Dutch authorities, which undercut the jihadist

movement's ability to organise and take action. This does not mean, however, that the threat posed by the movement has disappeared (see next section).

Incidents and arrests

An attack by the jihadist movement in the Netherlands is conceivable. On 25 November 2019 two men from Zoetermeer were arrested on suspicion of preparing a terrorist attack. They were allegedly seeking to carry out an attack using explosive vests and one or more car bombs. In a concealed space in one of the men's homes, the police found a throwing axe, a dagger and a mobile telephone with multiple SIM cards. Thus far, their intended target remains unclear.

The Zoetermeer case was the last arrest of jihadists in the Netherlands in 2019. Like 2018, the year 2019 was notable for the high number of terrorist incidents compared with previous years. On 18 March 2019 an attack in a tram in Utrecht killed four people. On 20 March 2020 the perpetrator, Gökmen T., was sentenced to life in prison for murder, attempted murder and making threats with terrorist intent. A month earlier, on 15 February 2019, a 48-year-old man was arrested in De Lutte in the province of Overijssel on suspicion of preparing to commit a terrorist offence. He was found in possession of a firearm and ammunition.

A number of other jihadists were arrested during the period under review. For example, on 10 October 2019 a Dutch woman from Uithoorn was arrested. The Public Prosecution Service believes her to be the administrator of the pro-ISIS Telegram group 'GreenB1rds'. She is suspected of disseminating inflammatory jihadist literature and participating in a terrorist organisation. She was already the defendant in a criminal case in which she is accused of having travelled to Syria in 2015 and joining ISIS. A British Muslim convert who was also involved in GreenB1rds was arrested in the UK in autumn 2019 on suspicion of preparing an attack. She has since admitted to disseminating propaganda and to seeking to

carry out an attack on a hotel or St Paul's Cathedral in London and performing preparatory acts to that end.

As the various arrests show, the jihadist movement in the Netherlands is still active. In exceptional cases, attacks are being planned. Most jihadists in the Netherlands are not involved in preparing attacks. The arrests also show that the intelligence services, the Public Prosecution Service and the police are often able to detect jihadist activities in time and take action. Investigation and prosecution are part of the repressive approach that is seriously disrupting the jihadist movement at present.

Developments in detention

The purpose of the Netherlands' policy of 'concentrated detention' for terrorists is to ensure that jihadists cannot radicalise other prisoners. A downside of group detention is that the jihadists can negatively influence one another and form new networks. The high influx of new prisoners (a population of 30-40 individuals in the past few years) is putting strain on the system. It is becoming increasingly difficult for staff to monitor every prisoner individually and detect the formation of networks.

Thus far, no prison staff in the Netherlands have been attacked by terrorist prisoners. There have been such attacks elsewhere, however. In France, on 5 March 2019, a prisoner and his wife, who was visiting at the time, attacked several guards with knives. A similar attack occurred in the UK on 9 January 2020 at Whitemoor Prison. It is noteworthy that in both cases the perpetrators were wearing fake bomb vests, just like the attackers in London on 29 November 2019 and 2 February 2020. Wearing a fake bomb vest drastically reduces a perpetrator's chance of survival, making it an attractive option for terrorists who seek to achieve 'martyrdom'. There have also been instances of imprisoned terrorists planning attacks, which then have to be carried out by someone on the outside. The attack in Liège on 29 May 2018 by Benjamin Herman was an example of this.

The debate about the feasibility of deradicalising terrorist prisoners has been particularly fierce in the UK. The perpetrator of the London Bridge attack on 29 November 2019, Usman Khan, was on parole at the time of the attack, following a conviction in 2012 for preparing a terrorist attack in London. He had gone through two rehabilitation programmes for terrorist offenders or other extremists. Following another attack (on 2 February 2020) in London by a convicted terrorist on early release, the British Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Justice announced an emergency law that would block automatic early release. Although recent cases may suggest otherwise, the recidivism rate in Western countries for individuals convicted of terrorist offences is low, according to various studies. A Dutch study from 2018, for example, calculated a rate of 2.5% for terrorism-related recidivism (based on an evaluation of 159 individuals convicted of terrorist offences). The study followed people who were under the supervision of the specialised Terrorism, Extremism and Radicalisation (TER) Team of the Dutch Probation Service. This seemingly reassuring news requires some qualification however. Experience in the Netherlands has shown that convicted jihadists often return to their former jihadist networks following their release. Even if they do not commit any new offences, they can play a key role in such networks, for example as teachers, role models, or sources of inspiration or unity. In other words, recidivism rates are not always the clearest indicator of success in combating terrorism.

Travellers and returnees

The number of Dutch jihadist travellers remains virtually unchanged. The total number of individuals who have travelled to Syria and Iraq remains at around 300. Around 100 of these travellers have been killed, and 60 have returned to the Netherlands (most of them in the early stages of the conflict). In total there are around 145 jihadist travellers from the Netherlands still in Syria and surrounding countries. Approximately 50 of these individuals (all adults) are currently in camps or in detention in northeastern Syria. Around 15

travellers are now in Turkey. Around 30 individuals are still part of jihadist groups in northwestern Syria. In late December a female Dutch jihadist traveller was arrested by the Turkish authorities, along with her Belgian husband and their three children. There are still at least 205 minors with links to the Netherlands in the region. Ninety of them are being held in camps in northeastern Syria. The majority of the minors are very young: nearly 90% are under the age of nine.

Returnees pose a potential threat due to their experiences in conflict zones

Various studies of terrorist offenders in recent years have shown that most jihadist attacks in Europe were committed by people who had never left the country to fight abroad or indeed even planned to. However, some of those attacks were carried out by aspiring jihadist travellers whose attempts to travel to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq had been frustrated. There were also a small number of incidents in Europe (the Netherlands is an exception in this regard) involving people who were radicalised in prison. Nevertheless, potential returnees from conflict zones have acquired a great deal of combat experience in the lengthy period they have spent with terrorist groups abroad. Often the men will have been exposed to extreme violence and been instructed in the jihadist ideology of violence. They may well have gained experience in the use of weapons and explosives.

Female returnees from this region also pose a potential violent threat. There are several known cases of women involved in threatened attacks in Europe. What is more, women in jihadist networks also pose a threat. They can perform auxiliary tasks, indoctrinate their children with jihadist ideology, raise money for the jihadist cause and produce and disseminate propaganda. With the formation of friendships and families in the conflict zones, they are now also connected to transnational networks inside and outside Europe.

In a recent judgment, Rotterdam District Court held that if the state of the Netherlands did not work rapidly to bring back a particular female Dutch jihadist traveller, the criminal case against her would be dropped. This judgment could have

repercussions for a larger group of Dutch women who may eventually be able to return to the Netherlands without facing prosecution for joining a terrorist organisation or committing crimes during their time in the 'caliphate'. The court held that there was no evidence that any concrete steps had been taken in the past two years to repatriate the woman in question to the Netherlands. The court has given the public prosecutor three months to clarify the status of the case. The proceedings will resume on 2 June.

It is worth noting that the impact of attacks varies widely. This is due in part to the attackers' training, exposure to violence and combat experience, and the network they belong to. Individuals who have never left the Netherlands to fight abroad but plan a lone attack, having been inspired by jihadist ideology – for example through propaganda – or who are spurred on or assisted by jihadist connections abroad do not have the same operational experience and network that jihadist travellers often have. Attacks carried out by operatives (i.e. trained jihadist travellers who have been given plans by the organisation's senior leadership, such as the perpetrators of the 2015 Paris attack) have had a greater impact in terms of fatalities and social disruption than attacks carried out by individuals who have never left the country for jihadist purposes.

Situation in camps in northeastern Syria

Developments with respect to the military and political situation in northeastern Syria have hampered the ability of humanitarian organisations to gain access to the camps and worsened the general humanitarian situation there. As a result of these changes, the situation in the region has become more fragile. The fear that the Kurdish camps would disintegrate or be taken over by the Syrian regime or Turkey, has not come to pass. The security situation in the annexed section of camp Al Hawl, where foreign women – including Dutch nationals – are located, is still dominated by a small group of fiercely radical ISIS supporters who impose their rules on the other women

through coercion. At camp al-Roj, where Dutch women are among the inhabitants, this is less of an issue.

There are still online fundraising campaigns for the women and children in reception camps in northeastern Syria. The Dutch Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) is still flagging up financial transactions from the Netherlands to Turkey. This money can be transferred through *hawala* banks. Facilities have been created at the camps for the women to receive money for basic necessities. However, this money can also be used for people smuggling, helping people to flee the camps and head to Turkey. Transferring money to people on the national sanctions list is a criminal offence. A number of women have since escaped from Al Hawl and returned to the Netherlands by reporting to Dutch diplomatic representations in Turkey.

Authorities take down online jihadist channels

The presence of explicitly jihadist messages on Dutch-language social media channels has diminished considerably. In a takedown operation by Europol, European police services and Telegram in late November 2019, a large number of international Telegram channels, groups and profiles with jihadist content were taken offline. The impact of the dissemination of jihadist propaganda by ISIS and al Qa'ida has been temporarily weakened by a shift to platforms with a more limited reach. However, this could render the online segment of the jihadist movement (temporarily) less visible. Because the online jihadist landscape is spread out over a variety of platforms, it has become temporarily fragmented and has been driven underground.

Online, Dutch jihadists and their initiatives are still primarily focused on propaganda, fundraising and strengthening solidarity among jihadists. For example, they seek to raise awareness about the plight of fellow jihadists, especially those in prison, political issues such as the 'burka ban' and the situation of (Dutch) women at camp Al Hawl. On social media jihadists are disseminating content that is intended for a general audience, such as conventional religious messages and

activist statements that can serve to motivate other jihadists. In online conversations among themselves, the main subjects relate to daily religious practice and theological matters. But ideological discussions that divide jihadists both inside and outside ISIS also continue to play a prominent role in the Dutch-language jihadist discourse.

The Netherlands' profile in Pakistan remains unchanged

The Netherlands' international profile is shaped in part by its participation in international counterterrorism missions and by the debate on Islam within the Netherlands. Ever since Dutch MP Geert Wilders' 'Mohammed cartoon' contest, the Netherlands has regularly been mentioned on Pakistani social media in relation to blasphemy cases. This could have consequences for the security of Dutch interests in the region and the terrorist threat to the Netherlands.

Right-wing terrorism

The right-wing terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, has served as a source of inspiration for further attacks all over the world, such as in El Paso, Oslo, Halle and Hanau. An attack by a lone right-wing terrorist is also conceivable in the Netherlands. This assessment is mainly based on the possibility that a lone Dutch actor could become radicalised online and then carry out an act of violence with right-wing extremist motives. Dutch far-right and right-wing extremist organisations are fragmented. Groups are marginal and non-violent, and lack appealing leaders who are capable of mobilising large numbers of people. This in itself could be a danger when it comes to the threat posed by lone actors, as such individuals can become radicalised, whether online or in the real world, without the intervention of a group. In this way, lone right-wing extremists can stay under the radar of the security services for longer because they have never joined any organisation. Recently there were two separate criminal cases in the Netherlands in which two male defendants were apparently inspired in part by the Christchurch attack and the ideology that motivated it. These cases shed more light on how the Christchurch terrorist attack can exert an appeal on individuals in the Netherlands,

although in neither case did the Public Prosecution Service suspect the men in question of actually committing or preparing acts of violence or terrorism.

3. Threat to the West

The threat posed by jihadist terrorism to Europe and the West has fallen dramatically since the summer of 2017, though it has not disappeared. Both ISIS and al Qa'ida still seek to carry out attacks. Both organisations have bases in Syria and elsewhere, facilitation networks in Turkey and networks of supporters in most Western countries. The threat posed by right-wing extremists is on the rise: right-wing terrorist attacks are glorified online and form a source of inspiration for like-minded parties.

The number of attacks continues to drop, but arrests continue: jihadist threat persists

Since the summer of 2017 the number of jihadist attacks in Europe has fallen sharply. This trend continued in 2019, with the number of attacks declining by a third compared with the previous year. In Europe the United Kingdom is, after France, the country where the most jihadist attacks have taken place. The fact that the threat posed by jihadist terrorism has declined though not disappeared is demonstrated by a number of small-scale attacks carried out in Western countries over the past few months, including one in France on 4 April 2020. In Romans-sur-Isère a man started stabbing random members of the public, killing two. The ongoing threat is also demonstrated by various arrests that have taken place over the past few months in Europe, both of individuals (as in Belgium in December 2019) and of groups (as in France in January 2020) who were probably preparing terrorist attacks. At the same time, such arrests show that, in many cases, the authorities are capable of intervening in time. The primary jihadist threat in Europe is posed by ISIS sympathisers, who act mainly alone but occasionally in groups.

Al Qa'ida continues to pose a threat

Like ISIS, al Qa'ida has not given up on trying to carry out an attack in or against the West. Al Qa'ida has bases in Syria and elsewhere, facilitation networks in Turkey and networks of supporters in most Western countries. Al Qa'ida propaganda also continues to play a role in attacks or attempted attacks that are not connected to the network. This is evidenced by the

attacks that occurred in early December 2019 at a US military base. This illustrates that the West must contend with more than just the jihadist threat posed by ISIS: the attacker in question was most likely acting in the name of al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Global right-wing extremist internet community

The last few years have seen an increase in right-wing extremist violence in various European countries, including the UK and Germany. In Germany three attacks were carried out in the past nine months (the murder of Walter Lübcke and the attacks in Halle and Hanau). These days, perpetrators of right-wing extremist attacks are usually not members of neo-Nazi groups; rather, they seem to feel an affiliation to a global online community. Glorification of such attacks posted on right-wing extremist forums can serve to inspire like-minded individuals. Right-wing extremists around the world are increasingly active on alternative platforms and chat forums like 4chan and Gab, messenger apps like Telegram and gaming apps like Discord. Broadly speaking, right-wing extremist online communities and channels can be divided into the categories 'anti-Muslim and anti-migrant', 'national socialist' and 'identitarian and ethno-nationalistic'. The recently hacked database of the members-only fascist and neo-Nazi web forum Iron March illustrates the violent narrative that is articulated on such forums. This forum went offline in 2017, but hacktivists put the database from the period 2011 to 2017 online late last year.

Contributors to the forum encouraged and glorified violence against the state, Jews, ethnic minorities, women and LGBT people. The narrative embraced on international online forums is inspired in part by the anti-Semitic and racist newsletter *Siege*, which was circulated in the United States in the 1980s. With the American neo-Nazi James Mason as its primary author, *Siege* propagated an anti-political stance, marked by violent opposition to the modern political system. The *Siege* narrative is premised on both systematically and randomly causing as much social unrest as possible, so as to spark a

'race war' which will lead to social collapse and wipe out democracy in favour of a state in which the superior white race is in charge. Creating or escalating chaos, with a view to precipitating the outbreak of the 'white revolution', is called 'accelerationism'.

Offline, many different right-wing extremist organisations, such as the Feuerkrieg Division (which arose in Estonia) and the American Atomwaffen Division, were inspired by the *Siege* narrative and advocate accelerationism. Starting in 2016 'Read *Siege*' became a meme and popular trope in these circles, and the term 'accelerationism' began to crop up in various international online right-wing extremist channels that encourage (terrorist) violence against civilians and the government. Because there have been multiple right-wing terrorist attacks by individuals inspired by the perpetrator of the Christchurch massacre, his pamphlet or similar modes of thought, it remains conceivable that there could be copycat attacks in Europe in the future. This narrative has also been embraced by a number of Dutch right-wing extremists, making a copycat attack in the Netherlands conceivable.

Confrontations between right-wing and left-wing extremists

In the past few years disagreements and confrontations between right-wing and left-wing extremist groups in countries like the US and Germany have been more pronounced. The polarised political climate in the US has a resonance on international extremist online channels, which are also used by Dutch people. The increase in racist language and right-wing extremist violence since the presidency of Barack Obama has elicited a response from anti-fascist groups, which stage counterdemonstrations and offer their services as heavily armed 'protection squads' at demonstrations involving minorities. With the US presidential elections later this year, it would be prudent to take account of the possibility of a further intensification of polarisation, confrontations between right-wing and left-wing extremists and possibly violence.

4. International developments

ISIS has a new leader and spokesperson. In a recent audio recording the new spokesperson stresses the importance of fighting Israel and Jews around the world. The recent ground offensive by the Syrian army has led to a precarious humanitarian situation in Idlib and may result in a large flow of refugees towards Turkey. Jihadist fighters could use this chaos to enter Turkey unhindered, and possibly travel onwards to other destinations. This could reduce the number of fighters in Syria, thereby weakening the Syrian opposition.

Under its new leader ISIS issues strong threats against Israel and Jews

After the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019, ISIS reported that its new leader would be Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. This is thought to be an alias of Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi. Unlike al-Baghdadi, Salbi is not an ethnic Arab but an Iraqi Turkmen. If this is indeed the case, it is possible that ISIS has mistakenly bestowed the name 'al-Qurashi' on its new leader. This name is relevant because it indicates that the person in question belongs to the tribe of the prophet and is thus eligible to serve as the caliph of all Sunni Muslims. Al-Baghdadi was also known to use the name 'al-Qurashi'. Salbi's Turkmen ethnicity may undermine his religious legitimacy. Yet so far it would seem that the use of the name 'al-Qurashi' has led to little debate within ISIS circles. On the contrary: at least for now, many jihadist groups have sworn allegiance to the new ISIS leader.

On 27 January ISIS issued an audio message from its new spokesperson, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi. Its main message is that, despite the efforts of its enemies, ISIS will continue to exist, even after Baghdadi's death. Abu Hamza also announced a new phase, in which ISIS would shift the focus of its hostilities to Israel and Jews around the world, in response to the latest US peace plan for Palestine and Israel. He also called for attacks using chemical weapons, primarily targeting Israel. In the past, ISIS has shown interest in the use of chemical weapons on a number of occasions, but it probably lacks the

necessary capabilities. That said, simply threatening to use chemical weapons can generate attention and instil fear.

It is striking that Abu Hamza has called upon jihadists around the world to emigrate to the closest ISIS province (Wilayat), attend training and fight their enemies. This is in contrast to messages in the past, which urged followers to emigrate to the 'caliphate' and later, to remain in their own countries and carry out attacks there. It is unlikely that the recent message will unleash the kind of exodus of jihadist travellers as that observed previously (when jihadists were summoned to the 'caliphate'), but it is possible that his words may, to a certain extent, serve as an incentive. The (renewed) call to attack Jews around the world and the State of Israel could have the same effect. Thus far, ISIS supporters in the Netherlands have not attacked any Jewish targets.

COVID-19 crisis also affecting jihadists

In an Arabic-language infographic of 16 March 2020, entitled 'Sharia recommendations on dealing with pandemics', ISIS offers its followers practical advice and tips, telling healthy people not to travel to affected countries and infected people in those countries not to go abroad. This travel advice is not expected to have much of a practical effect on travel to and from Europe, given that the EU has suspended almost all inbound and outbound traffic. In light of this, an exogenous attack on a Dutch target would seem to be less likely at this time.

Jihadists see COVID-19 as a form of divine intervention. Invoking the pandemic, both ISIS and al Qa'ida rebuke the West and call on non-Muslims to change their ways. Thus, on the one hand, ISIS propaganda calls on followers to carry out attacks, but on the other, it advises them not to travel to countries where coronavirus is present.

This group, in particular, has made the point that the West is now more vulnerable than ever. A terrorist attack on a hospital, for example, or a target associated with a critical

sector would help sow chaos and instability. Al Qa'ida, by contrast, is calling on Westerners to convert to Islam, because Allah is the only source of salvation. As a rule, jihadist groups tend to benefit from periods of chaos and uncertainty.

Because Western troops have been recalled in order to assist with domestic efforts to tackle the pandemic and because COVID-19 has also led to uncertainty in Syria and Iraq, jihadists now have freer rein in areas which they controlled up till a year ago. At the same time, jihadists' freedom of movement is also being impeded by the measures taken by governments around the world to contain coronavirus.

Developments in Idlib

The Syrian regime, supported by Russian air strikes, is gradually capturing more and more parts of the province of Idlib. This government-mounted offensive has unleashed a major flow of refugees in the direction of the Turkish border. Because this border remains closed for the time being, internally displaced people are being accommodated in overcrowded camps on the Syrian side of the border. It is uncertain if Turkey would be able to keep its border closed (or almost closed) if the humanitarian situation were to deteriorate further. Jihadist opposition fighters could infiltrate these refugee flows in order to enter Turkey. There are currently around 30 adult Dutch jihadist travellers with jihadist groups in northwestern Syria. In the short term, the military pressure on the province of Idlib will probably limit the ability of groups allied to al Qa'ida to plan or carry out international attacks.

Islamist movements in Turkey have more room to manoeuvre

In Turkey, Islamist movements and organisations are steadily gaining more room to manoeuvre. Islamists, who were once oppressed by secularists, are now more visible in Turkish politics and society. These include groups that are ideologically allied to radical political Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result of this development, it is more likely that the Turkish community in the Netherlands could encounter radical

ideology. Turkish Muslim organisations like Diyanet and Millî Görüş, which are active in the Netherlands, are also subject to such influences.

Growing tensions between the US and Iran create an opening for ISIS

The US assassination of the Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and the Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on 3 January in Iraq and Iran's subsequent retaliatory ballistic missile attack on 8 January brought tensions between the US and Iran to a new high. These heightened bilateral tensions distracted attention from the fight against ISIS and complicated the international approach to the ISIS threat in Iraq and Syria. In response to the assassination, the Iraqi parliament adopted a non-binding motion on the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country.

Various countries, including the Netherlands and the US, temporarily suspended their training and support activities for the Iraqi army. In mid-January the Netherlands resumed its training activities. The US army also resumed its operations in Iraq. The Dutch training mission was again suspended in late March 2020, on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the tensions between the US, on the one hand, and Iran and Iraqi militias allied to Iran on the other, the international coalition in Iraq is compelled to focus more on protecting its people and resources. As a result, there is less capacity available for fighting ISIS. In parts of Syria and Iraq ISIS may benefit from this state of affairs. This could strengthen and accelerate the resurgence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq; a process that is already under way. The US military contingent in eastern Syria is partly dependent on its units in Iraq for logistical support.

Iran's strategy in Iraq and the wider region is focused on removing US and other Western units from the Middle East and minimising the influence of the West. Iran is also keen to position itself as a regional power. Partly in view of the difference in military strength between Iran and the US, Iran may use allied militias in Iraq to target the US or Western

(including Dutch) interests. However, it does not seem likely that Iran is seeking a major escalation of the conflict with the United States.

Afghanistan: ISIS suffers setbacks, but the threat remains

After Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan remains the conflict zone that causes the UN the most concern. Officials are not only allowing for the possibility of an ISIS resurgence in Afghanistan (after a period full of setbacks), but also still see the Taliban and al Qa'ida as a threat. Al Qa'ida still provides support for the Taliban in Afghanistan, for example in the form of training. The bond between the two remains strong, as demonstrated by a recent video by al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This video is an illustration of the statement regarding the attack that took place in the US in December, using images of another large-scale attack carried out by the Taliban last year against an American army base.

Resurgence of jihadism in West Africa: al Qa'ida and ISIS

In West Africa there has been a resurgence in jihadist violence in the Sahel states of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Burkina Faso, which had previously been relatively stable, has been particularly hard hit by a growing number of deadly attacks on civilians and security troops as a result of a spillover from Mali. Terrorist groups affiliated with al Qa'ida and ISIS are the primary drivers of this intensification and spread of jihadism in the Western Sahel.

Al Qa'ida

The jihadist organisation Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), a coalition of various Malian jihadist groups which was established in 2017 and which is affiliated with al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), poses the biggest threat in the region. This threat stretches from Mali, with central Mali as its epicentre, to Burkina Faso and Niger, and has now also reached the borders of the West African coastal nations south of the Sahel. In Burkina Faso, JNIM maintains contacts with the

Burkinese group Ansaroul Islam, one of the parties responsible for the flare-up in violence. As it expands southwards, the group is profiting from a lack of state control in rural and peripheral areas, exploiting local conflicts and grievances and recruiting new members from the local communities whose interests they claim to defend.

ISIS

The enemies that JNIM claims to be fighting are also the enemies of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), an ISIS affiliate. ISGS emerged in 2015 following a split from a jihadist group allied to al Qa'ida (from which JNIM would later be formed). The group mainly operates in the area where the borders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger converge, carrying out attacks in each of these countries; its area of operations overlaps in part with that of JNIM. According to US civilian and military authorities these two groups are even working together. In recent months ISGS carried out a number of large-scale, complex attacks on military bases in Mali and Niger which bear witness to the group's growing capabilities. In terms of the threat it poses, ISGS currently rivals JNIM.

Propaganda

When it comes to claiming responsibility for attacks carried out by ISGS, both ISGS and ISIS assert that they were the work of the 'West African province' of ISIS (ISWAP). This name is also used by the ISIS affiliate operating in northeastern Nigeria which attracted attention in recent months by releasing videos that were remarkably similar to official ISIS propaganda. These videos showed the group executing Christians. Indications suggesting operational collaboration between ISGS and the ISIS affiliate in Nigeria are currently limited to the exchange of contacts between the two groups. ISGS's increasingly violent actions are meant to be seen in the light of the continuing 'success story' narrative of ISIS as a 'global' organisation, which the group has been propagating since the collapse of its 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria.

Western targets and further southward expansion

Western interests and individuals in the Sahel are being targeted by abductions and by attacks on diplomatic missions, Western business interests and hotels that cater to international guests. There is a real risk of a spillover of violent jihadism from Burkina Faso, which forms a link between the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea, to countries on the West African coast, such as Benin, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. There is also a real possibility that such a spillover could lead to Western interests and individuals being targeted in those coastal states, where the Netherlands also has economic interests.

Thus far, the combined efforts of French military operations (Serval and Barkhane), an international UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and a regional military force (G5 Sahel Joint Force) have not been able to rein in jihadist violence. Regional instability has only increased. This situation could attract North African fighters returning from Syria, to the detriment of the overall security situation in West Africa. For the time being, it is unlikely that Dutch jihadists will feel inclined to travel to the jihadist conflict zone in West Africa.

5. Extremism, radicalisation and polarisation

Manifestations of right-wing extremism are rare in the Netherlands, whether in terms of public visibility, the scope of violent incidents, the level of organisation, financial wherewithal or a willingness to engage in violence. The group of Dutch right-wing extremists active in international online circles is also limited. In the Netherlands the right-wing extremist threat emanates mainly from lone individuals and not groups. Online right-wing extremist agitators can inspire and radicalise vulnerable people on international web forums. In addition there have been sporadic cases involving *Wutbürger*s: angry individuals with a grudge against 'the Establishment'.

Right-wing extremism in the Netherlands

In contrast to countries like Germany, France, Belgium, the UK and Italy, there are few extremist organisations and activists in the Netherlands. Here, the number of incidents of right-wing extremist violence has been low for years. The public visibility of right-wing extremists is marginal. In terms of its size, organisational structure, financial wherewithal and willingness to engage in violence, the Dutch right-wing extremist scene is not comparable to those of neighbouring countries. That said, two criminal cases that recently opened shed more light on the appeal that the terrorist attack in Christchurch and its underlying motives could hold for individuals in Dutch society.

Resonance of the Christchurch attack

On 25 September 2019 a man with right-wing extremist sympathies and a fascination with guns was arrested in Moordrecht following the interception of a package containing live ammunition and cartridges. The man (59) is suspected of unlawful possession of firearms. He is believed to harbour animosity towards Muslims, and he was found to have texts in his possession about 'the Great Replacement', a theory popular in right-wing extremist circles. The central thesis of this theory is that 'indigenous European peoples' in the Western world are in the midst of a major demographic transformation due to increasing numbers of non-Western immigrants. This has allegedly been caused by a deliberate migration policy on the part of the political elite. This theory occupied a central place in

the online manifesto written by the perpetrator of the Christchurch massacre to justify his right-wing terrorist attack.

Another case which seems to have echoes of the Christchurch attack and involves a fascination with guns coupled with right-wing extremist sympathies is that of a tram security guard (55) who was arrested in The Hague on 1 October 2019. During an altercation with a colleague in late September the man is alleged to have made 'extremist verbal threats' which glorified the right-wing terrorist attack in Christchurch of 15 March 2019. He also boasted about possibly taking two hand grenades to a mosque. Shortly after these alleged remarks were made, he was arrested. A semi-automatic weapon with ammunition cartridges was found at his home. On 13 May the man was sentenced to 24 months in prison (eight of which were suspended) for unlawful weapons possession and threatening to commit a terrorist offence.

The only case in which the right-wing terrorist attack in Christchurch may have been a motive for terrorist violence in the Netherlands, was the terrorist attack in Utrecht on 18 March 2019, three days afterwards. According to the Public Prosecution Service, there is every indication that the perpetrator, Gökmen T., sought to kill 'as many non-Muslims as possible'. After this attack he left behind a note saying that 'you people kill Muslims and want to take away our religion' and that he had done what he did 'for my religion'. It is also noteworthy that he had inscribed texts on his gun, just as the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack had done.

The Wutbürger

The profiles of the men in the cases from Moordrecht and The Hague differ from those of the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack and his imitators. They are not young men who have been radicalised through the internet, but older men whose ideological background reflects the German concept of the *Wutbürger*: an angry individual with anti-Establishment views who is motivated less by well-defined right-wing extremist ideas than by a mix of psychological problems and personal

grievances about developments in society in general and the political realm in particular. Their anger is often directed towards refugees and Muslims, who they feel are threatening the identity of Dutch society.

Lone actors are not a new phenomenon. There is no one-size-fits-all profile for lone actors, which makes detecting them in advance a complex task for the authorities. It is, however, known that 53% of lone attackers in Europe in the period between 2000 and 2014 had mental health issues. Psychological problems may make lone actors more susceptible to propaganda and to the urge to carry out an attack. In this connection, investigators have pointed out that although violent individuals may act autonomously, they operate in a wider social context. In times of extreme social polarisation or far-reaching world events, they may feel emboldened to commit an act of (terrorist) violence.

Online right-wing extremism

The recent hack of the database of the members-only fascist and neo-Nazi web forum Iron March revealed that a small group of Dutch right-wing extremists were active on international websites, searching for right-wing extremist content. This forum went offline in 2017, but hacktivists put the database from the period 2011 to 2017 online late last year. This forum has been linked to online international neo-Nazi groups like Atomwaffen Division and Feuerkrieg Division, and over a seven-year period it had between 10 and 15 users who appear to be from the Netherlands. It is not so much the number of Dutch people involved that is a cause for concern, but rather the violent and apocalyptic 'Siege narrative' that young people from the Netherlands are absorbing.

The hacked IronMarch database showed that there were very few Dutch people on the forum, and among those who were active, there was little interest in starting a real-world neo-Nazi movement in the Netherlands. This is in keeping with three key insights about the Netherlands in this regard: (1) the number of neo-Nazis in this country is small; (2) the real-world neo-

Nazi movement does not amount to much; and (3) the Dutch-language right-wing extremist online landscape is small. Nevertheless, international right-wing extremists are seeking each other out online, and agitators are using social media to inspire and radicalise vulnerable people in favour of the right-wing extremist cause. Because the right-wing threat to the Netherlands is posed mainly by lone individuals and not by groups, it is important to follow this international online development closely.

Divisions among the left over climate issues

The climate change debate has caused divisions within the far-left landscape in the Netherlands. Far-left and left-wing extremist groups that originally focused on other issues, such as fighting fascism or denouncing asylum/immigration policy, are now incorporating the issue of climate change into their discourse so as to attract new recruits and create new partnerships. A number of these groups embrace the narrative of climate protest groups and their strategy of 'non-violent civil disobedience'. Various climate protest groups and coalitions with overlapping goals make use of this strategy – for example, by staging 'die-ins' – especially during international protest weeks. Such demonstrations may be accompanied by public order disturbances and a willingness to be arrested, but it cannot be said that the climate movement is becoming more radical in its forms of protest. However, other far-left and left-wing extremist groups are engaging in the climate debate without joining the broader climate movement. They tend to conceptualise the climate debate more as a systemic conflict and preach direct action. Extremist action cannot be ruled out; some have already called for sabotage or even arson attacks on government bodies or businesses that cause pollution.

In this connection it should be emphasised that the far-left movement in the Netherlands is limited in its size and level of activity, particularly when compared to its counterparts in Germany or France. For the most part protest activities are more about talk than action. Occasionally, modest demonstrations are held, for example in response to anarchist

developments in Greece, or posters bearing inflammatory slogans are displayed to demonstrate solidarity with refugees.

Animal rights activism and extremism

Internationally coordinated occupation-style protests took place last year in Boxtel (in May), in France (in September) and in Belgium (in November). In addition to Danes, Germans and Belgians, there were also a number of Dutch people involved in these protests. Although the image of animal rights activism (in both its lawful and extremist variants) in the media and political sphere is strongly influenced by the events in Boxtel, this image does not reflect actual developments in this area. The Dutch animal rights movement has been small for some time, and it mainly expresses its views via peaceful demonstrations. However, some individuals will occasionally make secret video recordings, for example at rabbit farms, to expose the conditions in which animals are held. Although this can be intimidating to farmers living in the vicinity, it is not a new development, nor are there any indications that such forms of protest are on the rise.

Excesses at farmers' protest fuel polarisation

Since the autumn of 2019 farmers have been staging protests, aimed primarily at the Dutch government's policy on nitrogen pollution. These demonstrations were generally peaceful. An exception to this are the tactics employed by the Farmers Defence Force (FDF), which arose in a different context from that of other agrarian interest groups. The FDF was founded on the day of the occupation of a pig farm in Boxtel, as a form of self-protection against animal rights activists and extremists. This defensive stance can be seen in statements which explicitly compare the farmers' position to that of Jews during the Holocaust. This led to concerns and condemnation, especially after the organisation's governing body refused to retract the statements, unlike more moderate interest groups. The FDF has also attracted attention with its blunt and threatening remarks directed at politicians and farmers who do not share their views. For example, on 13 April the FDF lashed out at farmers who had agreed to government buyouts, saying

that there were scores to be settled with 'the weak links and Judases within our own ranks'. In addition there have been incidents at a number of demonstrations. For example, a tractor rammed a door of the provincial offices in Groningen, and police officers on motorcycles were pelted with heavy-duty fireworks from a moving bus. These sorts of excesses are fuelling social polarisation around the issue of climate action.

Arson attacks on telecom towers

Since early April telecom towers across the Netherlands have been the targets of acts of vandalism, varying from sabotage to arson. Such incidents, which have also occurred in the UK, can have a major impact. Service failures could have far-reaching repercussions for telephone coverage in the area and the accessibility of emergency services. Protesting against telecom towers is nothing new, and last year it gained fresh impetus with the announced rollout of 5G networks in the Netherlands. Opponents of 5G direct their ire at the government, which they believe is harming public health or the environment or violating privacy by introducing this new technology. Their claims are disputed by scientific experts. Although such opposition generally takes the form of peaceful demonstrations, the recent extremist protest actions have been notably different. It is conceivable that the sudden property destruction was instigated by various unfounded conspiracy theories that posit a link between 5G networks and the spread of COVID-19. Although the Netherlands does not yet have 5G, such disinformation-based theories are also circulating within anti-5G and anti-government movements. While a considerable number of their followers on social media (in some cases tens of thousands of people) are opposed to the government and the rollout of 5G, they do not support the conspiracy theory and reject violence. The context of COVID-19 may have prompted conspiracy theorists to act quickly and render telecom towers unusable, so as to 'protect' the Dutch public from what they regard as a dangerous government.

Salafism

Salafism as a political ideology and Salafist agitators can pose a threat to national security. They are responsible for spreading an anti-democratic and intolerant ideology and seek to impose their views in a coercive and sometimes intimidating way on Muslims who follow a less strict interpretation of Islam. In doing so they limit other Muslims' ability to exercise their democratic freedoms. In addition, certain aspects of Salafism can contribute to some followers' being radicalised and embracing violent jihad. According to the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), there is now an active second generation of agitators that communicates in Dutch, is conversant with Dutch law and is media savvy. Their influence is on the rise. They dominate almost the entire online and social media landscape, crowding out competitors.

Responses to government action

In recent months there has been a great deal of discussion in the media and political circles about the phenomenon of Salafism. This was prompted by a number of factors, particularly the possible influence of Salafist agitators at the Cornelius Haga Lyceum (CHL) secondary school in Amsterdam and the hearings of the Parliamentary Committee on Undesirable Influence Exerted from Unfree Countries (POCOB) in February 2020. These discussions prompted various responses from Salafist agitators. On the one hand, in their statements to the media and in posts on social networks, they re-affirmed their narrative of a biased, untrustworthy government that seeks to violate Muslims' democratic rights. By systematically disseminating this negative narrative, agitators can also influence the image of the Dutch government among Muslims more broadly. A court's judgment that aspects of the government's actions in the CHL case were unlawful or lacked adequate justification reinforces this framing.

On the other hand, a number of Salafist agitators have cleaned up their own websites and Facebook pages, removing many comments, sermons and videos. Moreover, a number of Salafist centres avoid mentioning Salafist agitators who give

lessons and lectures by name. Video clips of certain lessons are no longer publicly available and can now only be viewed by a select group of people. The consequence of this is that their reach has become smaller for the time being, and their activities, sermons and lessons less visible. This development may also suggest that Salafist agitators aim to continue their *dawah* activities away from the prying eyes of the outside world. This is consistent with the public façade they maintain, presenting themselves as moderate and reasonable while expressing anti-democratic and intolerant ideas in private.

POCOB questions key players on undesirable influence

The above-mentioned parliamentary committee, which was established to gain a better sense of the undesirable influencing of religious and civil society organisations in the Netherlands, such as mosques, held public hearings in February 2020. The report of its findings is expected before the 2020 summer recess. Many Salafist agitators expressed outrage at and grievances with these hearings, including Imam Suhayb Salam of the Salafist alFitrah Foundation in his appearance before the committee on 19 February.

Curbing the growing influence of Salafism remains a difficult task

The discourse on and media coverage of Salafism in recent months reveals how difficult it is to bring the Salafist agitators' long-term strategy into the open. That strategy is focused on gradually building Salafist infrastructure and asserting more influence on Dutch Muslim communities. Counteracting the growing influence of these anti-democratic and intolerant Salafist agitators is a demanding task. Over the past year Salafism in the Netherlands has attracted considerable attention from the media and politicians, especially as a result of the CHL case, the introduction of the 'burka ban', a report by the Verwey-Jonker Institute about the quality of education at alFitrah (an informal educational institution in Utrecht) and the POCOB hearings. Salafist agitators regularly appeared in a negative light in these contexts. However, there were also many contrary voices to be heard, both within the Muslim

community and outside it, expressing solidarity with these Salafist agitators and accusing the government of pursuing an anti-Muslim policy.

About the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands

The Netherlands uses a system of threat levels that indicate the likelihood of a terrorist attack. The National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) publishes the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN) three times a year. The DTN presents a broad analysis of the threat to the Netherlands posed by domestic and international terrorism. The DTN is based on information from the intelligence and security services, the police, public sources and foreign partners, and on analyses by embassy staff.

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