



Islamist Terrorism in the West

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We have seen brutal attacks in Brussels, Paris, Berlin, London, Stockholm, Manchester, and again two weeks ago in London. The United States has faced attacks in New York City, Boston, San Bernardino, and Florida in recent years.

What we see is that the modus operandi of the attacks differ, the number of casualties differ, the targets differ, and the terrorists differ. Some of the attacks are directed and organized from outside of our countries, others are committed by homegrown actors, youngsters from our own neighborhoods, inspired by the social media and Internet.

Yet, the attacks have one crucial factor in common: fear. The attackers want to create fear. They want to intimidate ordinary people in order to prevent people in Florida from going to a nightclub, to prevent people in Manchester from going to a concert, to prevent people in New York and Amsterdam from taking a subway or bus to work -- in short, to prevent people from living their lives.

A Dutch researcher used the word "theatre" as a metaphor to describe terrorism. "A theatre of fear," she called it. Terrorists want the public's, the audience's, attention. Regardless of time and place, creating fear is the main driver of the play. And I think she is right. The plot and the drivers remain the same. But the players differ.

To effectively intervene means having to know the communities they grew up in. It means we have to know the local organizations, and it means we have to know the websites and social media that are being used to influence youngsters. It also means understanding the underpinning ideology that is a perversion and sectarian version of Islam. In short, we have to work together; at the local level, at the national level, and of course, across the border.

NCTV

These days, a question that is often posed to me as the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism is: Why has the Netherlands still not been hit by an attack? Are your intelligence and your police services so effective? Are your local community programs so successful?

The answer is: the terrorist threat facing the Netherlands resembles the threat facing the rest of Western Europe. The chance of an attack in the Netherlands is real, as real as in any other country in Western Europe. That is why we have set our threat level at "substantial." To say we have the most effective instruments, the smartest people, or the best intelligence would be to close a pact with the devil. I would like to emphasize, a jihadist attack in the Netherlands, such as happened in the countries that surround us, is very much conceivable.

Stopping terrorists and countering violent extremism is a key priority for the Netherlands. We take a comprehensive approach, which includes prevention as well as repression. This means reaching out to local partners and connecting with local communities. It also includes legal instruments, such as revoking a potential terrorist's passport or even his nationality. But before going into more detail about our approach, let me share some facts and figures about the current threat in the Netherlands and Europe.

CURRENT THREAT LEVEL

We are faced with a complex threat picture in Europe. It is more complex and diffuse than a few years ago. More than ever before we have to deal with different kinds of terrorists using several methods of attack and communication. Some are well prepared, some use a simple modus operandi. And they are aiming at a large variety of targets.

We assess that the threat posed by ISIS is a key part of the threat to the West, be it through planned attacks or inspired violence. Also, al-Qaeda retains both capability and intent to commit terrorist attacks in the West and against Western targets abroad.

Domestically, partly in reaction to the jihadist terrorist threat we see an increase in right-wing extremism, and partly in response to that again, in left-wing extremism. As I mentioned before, the threat level for the Netherlands remains "substantial," meaning that we consider the chance of an attack to be real, but that there are no specific indications that an attack is being prepared.

The attacks in Brussels, Paris, Berlin, Manchester, and most recently London once again show us that the work of terrorists does not stop at national borders. Terrorists ignore borders. They travel from one country to the other, often by plane, bus or train, or by car. Or they are influenced by jihadi networks and individual fighters residing in other countries or regions.

To give you a number: in Europe we're talking about an estimate of four thousand foreign terrorist fighters in a population of 750 million people. But we also see "homegrown" terrorists, those who did not travel to ISIS territory but stayed and plan or carry out terrorist attacks. Another development is one of the biggest paradoxes facing us: while ISIS is losing territory and important leaders, this does not diminish the threat of attacks against the West, also in the longer term. Because of the setbacks on the battlefield, its level of fanaticism is increasing. Now that ISIS is losing ground, there is a significant chance that more jihadists will return home or move to other conflict areas. The numbers will differ for each member state. But for the Netherlands, a few dozen seems like a realistic scenario.

They won't return all at once, but gradually over an extended period.

The threat is also constantly evolving, getting ever more complex, because ISIS is renewing itself and modernizing continuously. Its fighters are now using drones with explosives in Syria and Iraq. And we also see ISIS getting more professional online. Initially, jihadis were using social media like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to recruit for their jihadist goals. With the help of these same social media platforms, we are now able to greatly reduce the spread of jihadist propaganda on the Internet. In response, terrorist recruiters move to the darker spaces on the Web, for example, communicating with potential recruits -- young and old -- by means of encrypted Telegram and WhatsApp. This makes it harder for us to detect and easier for vulnerable adults and children to fall prey.

THE DUTCH APPROACH

In the face of such challenges, how do we, in the Netherlands, counter terrorism and extremism? Based on our experience and our threat assessments over the years, we decided on a number of strategic principles, which together form the main pillars of our National Counter Terrorism Strategy.

- Our approach is threat-based and comprehensive;
- Our approach recognizes the interwovenness between the international and the domestic sphere;
- And it is aimed at both networks *and* individuals.

Let me elaborate on the principle of comprehensiveness. By comprehensive we mean we focus on **pre-ventive** and **repressive** measures.

Let me start with **prevention**, or countering violent extremism. A key point of departure is that no one is born a terrorist. People, youngsters, become terrorists under the influence of others, be it through the Internet or in their own neighborhoods.

Early identification and intervention are key to preventing and combating radicalization. In order to do so, local and national authorities and all other organizations involved need to work closely together. Civil society organizations and communities are important partners. I read in a [recent Policy Note](#) by The Washington Institute that the researchers agreed with us -- that in order to defeat ideologically inspired violent extremism, involving local communities is key.

In the case of the Netherlands, when one of the organizations or local youth workers picks up signs of potential radicalization, the person in question is discussed in a so-called "multidisciplinary case management team." In these teams the police, members of local government, and the Public Prosecution Service (OM) share information on persons of concern, both those in the Netherlands and those who joined terrorist organizations such as ISIS abroad. Depending on the characteristics of the case, members of the Child Care and Protection Board, the Dutch Association of Mental Health, or the Rehabilitation Services may join in this case management team.

In this setting, tailor-made interventions are weighed and imposed on an individual level. They can for example decide to give the family extra support, and in the case of minors they can initiate child protec-

tion measures. Depending on the case, this can result in a minor being taken away from his/her family and placed into the care of the local authority. The team can also initiate the process of having someone's passport revoked, or of taking preventive measures such as a contact ban or an area ban.

Regarding **repression**, I just mentioned that no one is born as a terrorist, but when someone becomes one, we will act. Over the past few years we have successfully implemented a set of measures to effectively combat terrorism. Recently, three laws entered into force that expand the Dutch government's powers to combat terrorism.

For example, when in the interest of national security it is possible to revoke someone's Dutch citizenship in case of dual nationality. Another measure is to impose a periodic duty to report or an exclusion/restraining order for certain high-risk locations, e.g. international airports. This can be enforced by electronic monitoring (an ankle brace).

And regarding returning foreign fighters, we have a set of measures we can take. Those who return are immediately arrested on arrival. They are then questioned and, where possible, prosecuted on the basis of a criminal investigation.

At the same time, we must make an assessment of the threat that is posed by each returnee:

- What is the reason why someone returned?
- Will he or she continue fighting the West from within?
- Is he or she likely to plan an attack?

Based on these questions and others it is decided which interventions are best suited to minimize the potential threat. For example, some measures that can function as an alternative to pretrial detention or incarceration are a reporting duty, or a restraining/exclusion order. When we cannot prosecute someone but we think they could still pose a threat, the authorities will keep an eye on the person in question.

COMMUNICATION

Let me make one more point: the importance of communication. We believe that open and effective communication to the public about the current threat and new developments is extremely important. We believe that by sharing our threat analysis four times a year, we make the public more aware and more able to create the right mindset about the threat. We think that they become more capable of dealing with the news and the sometimes horrifying pictures we see on the Internet.

We are aware, of course, that this open way of communication might raise some questions. I recently gave a lecture at the Free University in Amsterdam and one of the students, a twenty-year-old girl, asked me why my organization had warned about a "sign" relating to terrorism regarding a popular dance festival in Amsterdam. She told me that until she heard about this "sign," she had been relaxed and was ready to have a great day with her friends, but when she heard about our warning, she felt concerned. Would she still be able to enjoy the festival or should she stay at home for security reasons?

My answer to her question about why we gave the warning was: as the National Coordinator on Security and Counterterrorism, I give an honest assessment and want to be as open as possible about this. Not to create fear, but to be realistic and create a mindset that will help people when something does happen.

Our main message is:

- We cannot guarantee that an attack will not happen, but we will say that we do everything we can to prevent it.
- We do not want people to be paranoid, but we do not want people to be naive either.
- We do not want to create fear, but we do want people to be alert.

CONCLUSION

I started by talking about the attacks both of our continents have had to endure. We share a number of the same problems. Youngsters from Washington DC and children from Dutch neighborhoods might come into contact with radical beliefs; they might be inspired through the Internet or influenced.

As the recent [Washington Institute Policy Note](#) indicates, we need to "get ahead of the curve" in countering terrorism and extremism. And let me add: let's work together, let's exchange best practices from our own experiences, and let us be alert, not alarmed.