

Summary

Jihadist terrorism in the Netherlands – A description based on closed police investigations

What is the nature of jihadist terrorism in the Netherlands at the outset of the 21st century when we base our analysis on information the police gathered about this phenomenon? That is the core question of this research. In order to increase the understanding of jihadist terrorism, the knowledge collected by the police during criminal investigations into jihadist activities has been analysed systematically. When we refer to jihadist activities, we mean activities which are aimed at making a contribution to the armed fight against the West and against other perceived enemies of Islam. For the purpose of this research, we analysed a total of twelve (large-scale) criminal investigations that were conducted in the Netherlands in the period between July 2001 and July 2005. In doing so, we have sketched the portrait of an era. The most recent criminal investigation we analysed was conducted in the spring of 2005. We cannot make any projection about the manner in which the phenomenon of jihadism has changed since then under the influence of national or international developments.

We have based this research on police files. This entails considerable restrictions. Firstly, not all jihadist activities come to the knowledge of the police and the police do not initiate criminal investigations into all jihadist activities which come to their knowledge. Secondly, we only selected a part of the cases which have been investigated during the research period. This selection may have influenced our perception. Thirdly, we have based this research on the information gathered by investigation teams which had the aim of reconstructing terrorist crimes and submitting these to the court substantiated by evidence. This focus of the investigation teams, their investigation hypotheses and the related selection and interpretation of information has also influenced our perception. The findings presented below must be seen in this light.

For the purpose of obtaining an objective analysis of the available investigation material, but also because different criminal investigations into jihadist activities are often interrelated, we considered the selected investigation material *in its entirety*, and chose to rely less on the structures of the separate criminal investigations. The *raw* empirical material was subsequently restructured, so that groups of cooperating persons and joint activities could be examined together. In analysing this material, we focused on three dimensions of this phenomenon: (1) jihadist cooperations; (2) the activities performed in these cooperations and (3) the jihadist actors.

This summary provides a short overview of the most important research findings. In the final chapter of this report, the research findings – in their underlying relationships – are discussed together from a more theoretical point of view.

Jihadist cooperations

The jihadist cooperations, as they emerge from the aggregate of investigation data that we analysed, may be characterised on the basis of *largely similar features*. Persons who are the driving force behind these cooperations are inspired by a Salafist jihadist body of thought aimed at violence with world-wide pretensions. They propagate this body of thought and implement it by performing extremely diverse activities. In spite of differences in priority, they generally perform these activities both at home and abroad.

Although there are also persons involved in these cooperations who only make indirect contributions or do so with less ideological enthusiasm, in this report we refer to all persons involved as jihadist *actors*. Without the opportunist or less conscious participation of some of these actors, the cooperations would be functioning differently. The composition of these groups is mixed, partly because persons with previous criminal convictions, converts, and sympathisers become involved in jihadist cooperations, in addition to persons with very diverse jihadist or other backgrounds. Such heterogeneity also applies to the social and cultural features of these groups. Within all the jihadist networks examined, the participating actors have different national and geographical roots. They speak different languages and have different cultural backgrounds. In addition to this, we found that in all cooperations, persons from different age categories participate, and in some groups both men and women are active. The cooperations only appear to be homogeneous in respect of religion: nearly all of the actors base their religious convictions on the Sunni movement within Islam.

The common religion is just one binding factor that explains why specific people are attracted to jihadist networks. In particular, the ideology as propagated by the vanguard is an important binding factor. The majority of actors, however, seem to be attracted mainly by one or more *aspects* of this ideology, such as the theme of world-wide injustice against Muslims, rebellion against the existing social system, or rigid guidelines for a pure existence. Some actors also join the jihadist cooperations primarily because these groups include people who may provide essential daily necessities. Other binding factors are joint activities, social advantages, but also role models. After all, role models and other people who give direction to the actors can guarantee social and ideological stability and cohesion within jihadist groups. In this respect, they possess 'binding qualities' as well. The qualities that give these persons a form of power and authority often include religious and ideological expertise, life experience or experience in combat, and the fact that they have the power to both reward and punish other people.

Several structural characteristics of jihadist cooperations ensure solid connections among the actors individually and the groups or clusters

of actors as a whole. As a result of the presence of long-lasting social foundations (relations of trust), real and virtual meeting places, and key figures, these cooperations do not only show solid internal cohesion, but are also dynamically *interrelated*. As a result of this, they – as groups or clusters – are part of a broader international jihadist movement. Our analysis reveals that the presence of persons who carry an ideological or militant frame of reference based on experiences in the Islamic world is – or was – crucial to the formation or continuation of all jihadist groups we studied. These ‘heartland-oriented’ actors mobilise and/or attract people. In a Western context, they have a relatively strong ability to sell a coherent jihadist story. Due to their specific qualities, contacts and experiences – which are beneficial to their credibility and social status – they often serve as examples or role models to others. Complex interactions between these persons on the one hand and receptive persons on the other hand – in particular Muslims who grew up or were educated locally, illegal foreigners and converts – give decisive impetus to radicalisation processes. Interactions of this kind make jihadist groups function in spite of the absence of any formal hierarchical structures. Although one group may have a greater degree of organisational substance than the other, the relationships are always informal, fluid and strongly decentralised, in which people enjoy a relatively large freedom of improvisation in conducting varying tasks. The cooperations are never strictly organised in a vertical, hierarchical manner. We found social chains of informal *dependence-recipient-relationships*. Actors who are dependent on the commitment and capacities of others often give direction to persons who are receptive to them. Such relationships have a relative nature, for directive actors often appear to be receptive to the direction of other actors at home and abroad who take advantage of their commitment.

Activities

The criminal investigations we analysed show that actors in the Netherlands develop extremely varying activities. Almost without exception, these activities show how strongly the jihadist groups that formed part of our research were interwoven with international jihadist networks. In this context, it was revealed again and again that the actors – both at home and abroad – are very mobile, and appear to prefer face-to-face contacts for coordination and exchange of information, instead of communication at a distance (Internet and telephone). We can classify their activities by type.

With respect to activities aimed at converting, forming, teaching and training people, there generally is an interaction between mobilisation and self-selection: jihadist role models seek receptive persons, but they are also often sought out at the same time.

Actors who actually intend to commit attacks, and who perform preparatory acts, are often inspired by role models and *Al Qaeda* views, but they usually act relatively independently and with much improvisation. In this context, they frequently seem to act in an opportunity-based manner, and seem to make no fundamental distinction between national or international targets. If actors in the selected investigation files utter threats to persons or organisations, these threats are very seldom made in the public domain, and their main objective seems to be to incite provocation and agitation among members of the jihadist clusters.

Many of the numerous acts with which actors support jihadist core activities are criminal in nature: forgery of documents, document fraud, burglary and robbery and – to a lesser degree – drugs trafficking and production, and credit card fraud. They also facilitate activities by raising funds or by providing accommodation to extremist brothers. Money and goods (such as stolen passports) are often exchanged personally or by means of couriers. To be able to travel, actors frequently use stolen public transport passes and passports. This particularly applies to illegal actors. The facilitation of travel movements appears to be a business in itself within the jihadist movement.

Meanwhile, jihadists are aware that they may be under surveillance. Their activities in the area of protection vary. According to the police, actors are also often well informed of the manner in which the investigation services operate. This may complicate police work. As most contacts and appointments between jihadists occur face-to-face, it is difficult for investigation and security services to monitor activities of these actors at a distance.

Finally, the investigation material can teach us something about the manner in which jihadist activities are embedded in the daily lives of the actors. In particular, this material provides an insight into the places where jihadist actors usually manifest themselves and where they meet others. Among the most noticeable meeting places are call shops, Internet cafes, asylum seekers' centres, penitentiaries, and Islamic centres.

Actors

In the twelve criminal investigations we examined, a total of 113 different actors emerge who had been active on Dutch territory during the research period. In this population of actors we found *people with varying life stories and strongly different backgrounds and motives*. Although it is not possible to identify a terrorist profile, four groups of persons are conspicuous in respect of which categorical circumstances and related motivations may be applicable. Firstly, *illegal immigrants* are amply represented in all jihadist cooperations. Jihadist groups may provide

illegal immigrants with essential necessities of life or other needs, such as accommodation, forged or genuine documents, employment, social assistance, respect, social status and a purpose in life. Secondly, many of the actors participating in the population we analysed were *former or current addicts and people with criminal records*, who have given their lives a new direction with jihadism and the strong and clear Salafist doctrine which is regarded as pure. Thirdly, the jihadist groups are attractive to the category of individuals who are '*seekers*' with existential or identity questions, because these jihadist groups meet their personal desires to find meaning in life, and provide social ties, a sense of structure in daily life, and a positive self-image. And, fourthly, we distinguish the *idealists and political activists*, for whom social discontent is the most important motivation for their involvement in the international jihadist movement.

In conclusion

All in all, our findings mainly show the complexity and ambiguity in which the phenomenon of jihadist terrorism presented itself in the research period in the Netherlands. We are dealing with extremely fluid and informal cooperations, which are part of a broader movement by their mutual and transnational interrelatedness as decentralised groups. In addition, the jihadist cooperations often develop a large variety of activities that are spread over a large area, whereby the target of such activities – and thus the related threat – is sometimes only identified in retrospect. Where direct preparatory acts for attacks may set the alarm bells ringing, the broad jihadist movement may be supported and preserved by more subtle activities, such as raising funds, document fraud or other forms of facilitating crimes. Jihadist activities aimed at providing cover are often as varied as the other activities and are performed systematically.

At individual level, too, the situation appears to be complex. The jihadist cooperations we examined derive their capacities from people with extremely divergent backgrounds, origins, ages and motives. Because of their rather mixed and changing social-cultural compositions, the jihadist communities are hard to characterise. Likewise, it is not possible to provide clear risk profiles of jihadist individuals.

Jihadist terrorism is a complex phenomenon. Researchers who have the relative luxury of analysing this phenomenon in detail in retrospect have an easier job than authorities and organisations that are deemed to combat this phenomenon in real-time. This situation, however, makes the findings described in this report even more valuable. Knowledge and understanding of the nature of jihadist terrorism are, after all, necessary for developing and testing scientific theories in this field, as well as for developing practical applications to tackle this phenomenon.