

General Intelligence and Security Service  
*Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations*

**Local jihadist networks in the Netherlands**  
An evolving threat

## Foreword

Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, academics and counterterrorism experts have gained a much improved understanding of jihadist terrorism. One important fact they have come to realise is that the phenomenon does not exist in isolation. It is for this reason that the Dutch government has chosen to adopt a broad approach in its fight against terrorism – one which regards it as the culmination of a process that begins with radicalisation. From this perspective, combating terrorism is not purely a repressive activity; it must also counter radicalisation and increase society's resilience to it.

A combination of two factors can result in the origin and scale of jihadism changing over time. First, the phenomenon is influenced by its environment; to be successful, at the very least it needs a broadly sympathetic milieu around it. Effective government action can undermine that base of support and hence diminish the power and endurance of jihadist networks. Secondly, the movement has its own dynamic, which can cause both its ends and its means to evolve.

In the Netherlands, as elsewhere, the nature of jihadist networks is subject to change. This report describes and explains the developments the local networks went through in this country over the past few years, as well as detailing the general nature of the threat they currently pose. In so far as it contains new information, this document is a partial update of the 2006 AIVD publication, *Violent Jihad in the Netherlands – current trends in the Islamist terrorist threat*.

The threat to the Netherlands and to Dutch interests comes from within our borders as well as beyond them. The main conclusion of this report is that the internal danger, emanating from local networks inside the country, has diminished since 2006. As a consequence, the relative significance of the external threat from transnational networks has increased. To this can be added the observation that local jihadists in this country are currently directing most of their attention towards the struggle elsewhere in the world. That makes developments in those countries important as regards the nature of the threat to the Dutch nation and its interests. And there are numerous ways in which that could manifest itself. For example, jihadists based in this country might target Dutch interests somewhere else. Another possibility is that trained or battle-hardened jihadists could return to this country either to carry out attacks here or to facilitate jihad in other places. For these reasons, the AIVD fully expects the threat from jihadist terrorism to remain firmly at the top of the national and international security agenda for the foreseeable future.

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## Introduction

The threat to the Netherlands and to Dutch interests comes from within our borders as well as beyond them. The first of these is sometimes referred to as the “endogenous threat”, with the other known as the “exogenous threat”. In its 2006 publication, *Violent Jihad in the Netherlands*, the AIVD presented a threefold model of the jihadist networks here. As well as transnational networks made up of persons in several countries working together in pursuit of violent jihad, the source of an exogenous threat, that report described two types of network posing an endogenous threat.<sup>1</sup>

The AIVD defines a jihadist network as “a fluid, dynamic, vaguely delineated structure comprising a number of interrelated persons (radical Muslims) who are linked both individually and on an aggregate level (cells/groups). They have at least a temporary common interest, i.e. the pursuit of a jihadism-related goal (including terrorism).”  
AIVD, *Violent Jihad in the Netherlands: current trends in the Islamist terrorist threat*, 2006, p. 14.

- *Autonomous local networks.* These are structures originally established in a local context and operating almost exclusively at the local level towards the achievement of goals related to the violent jihad. For the most part, such networks consisted of persons born or brought up in the Netherlands, and radicalised here. For this reason, the description “home-grown” has been applied to them.<sup>2</sup> Autonomous networks receive no outside or international guidance.
- *Internationally oriented local networks.* These are jihadist structures originally formed around recruiters from transnational networks, who mobilised young Muslims in the Netherlands to join the violent jihad. The activities of the resulting local networks thus had transnational inspiration and concentrated upon further recruitment and upon facilitating that form of jihad.

The most important current trend described in *Violent Jihad in the Netherlands* was a shift in the dominant threat from exogenous terrorism to one rooted primarily in our own society. Rather than recruiting from above, most networks at that time were being formed from the bottom up. Radical Muslims who had grown up here had come to regard Europe, and especially the Netherlands, as a front line in the jihad. The Internet was playing an important role in inciting these feelings. Although autonomous local networks regarded themselves as participants in the international jihad, their principal focus at the time was (supposed) “enemies of Islam” close to home, in the Netherlands. They took little interest in leaving this country to take part in the jihad elsewhere in the world, or helping others to do so. In selecting targets, they were interested first and foremost in individuals – politicians and opinion formers – and in symbols of the Dutch government. And their agenda was set by the often fierce domestic debate surrounding Islam.

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<sup>1</sup> This model inevitably simplified what was a complex actual situation. For example, there existed structures bearing characteristics of both autonomous and internationally oriented local networks, hence most closely resembling a hybrid form.

<sup>2</sup> The term “home-grown” will not be used again in this report, since it is difficult to justify in practice. Whilst implying that the members of such networks were born or brought up, socialised and radicalised in Europe or another part of the Western world, in fact that has frequently proved not to be the case.

By definition, the internationally oriented local networks had a greater tendency than their autonomous counterparts to look at events abroad. In so doing, their activities were mainly supportive in nature. Through funding and the recruitment of potential fighters, they hoped to play their part in the struggle in various “active” theatres of the jihad. No direct threat of attacks against targets in the Netherlands emanating from these networks was ever identified.

The primary purpose of this publication is to provide a current overview of the endogenous jihadist threat to the Netherlands emanating from local networks. Chapter 1 outlines how the local networks have developed in recent years, as well as explaining why. Chapter 2 describes the increasing importance and changing relevance of the international jihad to those networks. And Chapter 3 draws conclusions and looks to the future.

## **1 The declining threat from within**

In 2006, the primary jihadist threat to the Netherlands came from within our own society. That is no longer the case. The internationally oriented local networks here simply no longer exist in the active form of four years ago. The autonomous local networks, too, have weakened considerably and for some time have been largely inactive. Overall, local jihadism in this country has more or less stalled. This chapter describes how the local networks have developed since 2006 and how that can be explained.

### **1.1 Emergence of local offshoots of transnational networks**

One key development of recent years is that internationally oriented local networks of the kind previously seen in the Netherlands have ceased to exist. The pattern of recruitment from transnational networks, as described by the AIVD in a number of previous publications, is no longer being observed. The principal explanation for this is that government activities, including arrests and deportations, have disrupted the recruiters in their work and they have not been replaced. Mosques, too, have become more alert to recruitment efforts within their congregations and have spoken out publicly against them.

Nevertheless, some transnational networks do still have “branches” or “offshoots” in the Netherlands. Such affiliations take the form of contacts between active jihadist networks or individuals here and long-established transnational networks elsewhere. In many cases, these are established on the Internet and ethnic background or family ties play a role in them. The initiative for first contact usually seems to come from the Dutch side; there appears to exist no planned recruitment strategy on the part of the transnational networks concerned. For this reason, to a certain extent the presence of offshoots of transnational networks *in the Netherlands* can be characterised as coincidental.

As far as is known at present, these offshoots have no intention to target the Netherlands itself. Moreover, no Dutch-based activities in support of terrorist attacks anywhere in Europe have been identified in recent years. What there has been is facilitation of the international jihad in places like Afghanistan and Pakistan, primarily in the form of financing. And some members of the network offshoots have shown a clear interest in attending training camps in Pakistan or Afghanistan, as well as participating actively in the conflicts in that region.

As a result of the developments described above, internationally oriented local networks in their own right are no longer a factor of relevance to the situation in the Netherlands. The threat now comes principally from transnational networks and autonomous local ones, and above all from the closer relationships the AIVD has observed developing between them in recent years.

### **1.2 Weakening of autonomous local networks**

A number of autonomous local networks have changed significantly since 2006, in that either their structure has “loosened” or they have ceased to pursue specific goals related to the violent jihad. In the latter cases, the networks have more or less stopped functioning in any coherent way. Some have fallen apart altogether, whilst in others the mutual contacts are now purely social.

For the most part, however, the members of these now largely inactive networks have neither abandoned their radical ideas nor forsworn the possible use of violence. Only a few individuals seem to have been genuinely deradicalised, in the sense of distancing themselves from the violent jihadist ideology. Many remaining and former network members still regard taking part in that struggle as the duty of all Muslims, even though they are not themselves doing anything specific in that direction at present. At most, then, there is what might be termed disengagement: drawing back from radical activities and rhetoric, but with no change of underlying opinions or renunciation of jihadist ideology.

### **1.3 Why autonomous local networks are weakening**

This section explains why the autonomous local networks in the Netherlands have lost so much of their strength in the past few years. It is based upon a combination of academic findings and the results of investigations by the AIVD.

#### *1.3.1 Lack of leadership*

In the past, strong leader figures played an important role within the autonomous local networks in the Netherlands. Most of them originally came from outside the country and had a background and role so different that they could not be considered actual members of the group. Older than the rest, they had a good command of Arabic, could claim a thorough knowledge of Islam and the Koran and usually had international contacts in radical or jihadist circles. And if they had actual experience fighting the jihad, that only further enhanced their standing. At some point, these individuals would take it upon themselves to assume a leading role in a group that had already formed, but hitherto had been mainly social and emotional in nature. This approach is fundamentally different from the formation of a new group around an active recruiter, as was the case in the past with internationally oriented local networks.

Those directing the autonomous local networks were spiritual leaders first and foremost. Educating the members of the group in “true Islam”, they played an important role in its initial phase of development: the lessons would create a gulf between the group and the rest of the world – “us” against “them”. The authority of these leader figures was largely based upon the perceived strength of their expertise; in other words, it was a form of power derived from their knowledge of religious doctrine and the personal conduct that it prescribed. Or at least from their followers’ attribution of that knowledge to them. Charisma and persuasiveness were an important part of the equation. And this power sometimes went so far as to include a far-reaching influence over the personal lives of the individual group members. Generally speaking, however, the leader figure had no operational role in the network’s activities. This was quite possibly a deliberate choice, prompted by the desire not to be implicated if members were arrested or prosecuted.

Several one-time leader figures have now left the Netherlands, either voluntarily or through deportation. Partly as a result of this, at the present time there are no individuals in or around the local autonomous local networks in this country who are willing or able to take on a mobilising or leadership role. Even those members who once seemed to have the potential to assume that part have so far failed to come forward, and some have even withdrawn from the networks. It is possible that they now have different ambitions, jihadist or otherwise, or simply that they are not prepared to take a lead for their own safety. Another factor is that such groups are often unwilling to accept one of their peers as leader. There have been cases in the past of members trying to take on a leadership role but failing because they lacked the

necessary expertise or charisma. In such situations, the use of group pressure, intimidation and even direct threats aimed at other members has been observed during attempts to wrest control.

### 1.3.2 *Tensions caused by group dynamics*

Group dynamics is an important factor in the formation and functioning of local jihadist networks. Concepts drawn from this field of study are therefore very useful in gaining a better understanding of those structures.<sup>3</sup> For example, they can provide an insight into how networks come about. Autonomous local jihadist networks have their roots in socio-emotional groups, which form primarily in order to satisfy members' personal needs: to belong and to establish an identity.<sup>4</sup> At this stage they are not focused upon achieving any specific goal. For a socio-emotional group to begin pursuing jihadist aims, it needs to extend its scope or even to transform completely, to take on a more task-driven orientation. The defining characteristic of a jihadist network, after all, is that its members consciously and collectively wish to contribute towards the achievement of a concrete objective, in this case the violent jihad. For such a group, the evolution from socio-emotional to task orientation is a period of instability and conflict – about its common goals, for example. If that process fails, the network can fall apart, leaving behind only the original social connection.

The specific early history of local jihadist networks has major repercussions for its group dynamics and the stability of autonomous local networks. At first there is no hierarchy or division of tasks, and also a lack of internal cohesion. The term “cohesion” here refers to the appeal a group has to its members and their mutual ties, with a distinction drawn between interpersonal cohesion – the extent to which members consider one another “important” – and task cohesion, or the amount of effort the members put into achieving the group's objective. Despite the fact that the members of autonomous local networks regard each other as “brothers” and are tied by bonds of friendship, both their interpersonal and their task cohesion are actually very limited.<sup>5</sup> This deficiency expresses itself in the form of disagreement, mutual mistrust and activities outside the group with non-members. And the lack of leadership, assigned roles and cohesion seriously affects the network's ability to function, resulting in regular periods of minimal activity. There is also no strong ideological coherence.

Task-oriented groups, on the other hand, do possess a common objective, a formal means of resolving internal conflicts, a division of tasks and at least a basic hierarchy. Consequently, the drive to fulfil a task makes demands upon the group's internal structure and dynamics which are not necessarily consistent with the prevailing socio-emotional group structure.

Every group needs a shared view of the world. In other words, conformity. That applies particularly to clandestine groups such as jihadist networks, since they are extremely inward-

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<sup>3</sup> Group dynamics is the study of how small groups are formed, function and sometimes fail, and of how the individual members influence one another. See, for example: T. A. E. Hoijsink, *Cohesieve krachten in groepen: het ontstaan en de ontwikkeling van groepen* (2007) (Cohesive Forces in Groups: the creation and development of groups); D. W. Johnson and F. P. Johnson, *Joining Together: group theory and group skills* (2006); J. Remmerswaal, *Handboek groepsdynamica: Een inleiding op theorie en praktijk* (2006) (Group Dynamics Handbook: an introduction to theory and practice).

<sup>4</sup> Groups are not by definition either socio-emotional or task oriented. It all depends upon how they form and for what purpose. Hybrid forms are also possible.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to realise that whilst cohesive groups may be more active than non-cohesive ones, that does not necessarily mean that they perform any more effectively.



looking and any break with conformity can threaten their very existence. When they are unable to reach consensus, a form of group pressure often emerges, with the majority forcefully bringing those who disagree into line. In the case of autonomous local networks, the conduct of fierce internal ideological debates has in the past clearly shown the lack of able leader figures. The discussion had not been channelled effectively, resulting in sharp internal divisions. In such situations, those who believe that the group is going too far tend to drop out. That may reduce it in size, but can also make it even more radical.

### *1.3.3 Impact of government policy*

Autonomous local networks in the Netherlands have failed to achieve their objectives in recent years. This lack of success is attributable not only to the group-related factors and absence of leadership described above, but in part also to effective action by the government. The broad approach it has adopted to counterterrorism, encompassing preventive measures, intelligence activities, the use of immigration law and the prosecution of suspects, has significantly weakened the networks in this country. Local authorities have played their part, too, by acting against Salafist centres, for example. Tellingly, Dutch jihadists have come to regard the political climate in the country – and in some cases the social climate, as well – as “hostile” to them. Due to their specific group dynamics and lack of leaders, autonomous local networks now seem particularly unresilient in the face of opposition.

Taken together, the internal and external factors described above largely explain the current position of autonomous local jihadist networks in the Netherlands. Arrests, for instance, affect the group dynamic. On the one hand they sharply increase mutual mistrust (“Is there a traitor in our midst?”) and encourage the least radical members to leave, but on the other the shared experience and the sense that the whole world is against them can strengthen the bonds between those who remain. Not that that will necessarily result in successful acts of jihad in the future. Arrest, imprisonment and then continuing attention from the police and security services do appear to have a deterrent effect, especially upon younger people who have shown an interest in jihadist activity but have yet to put those thoughts into practice. A substantial proportion of the young radicals to have been prosecuted in this context in recent years have since taken a new direction and now concentrate on their family, education or work.

## **1.4 Why the growth of local jihadism has stalled**

The above factors do not explain why the growth of local jihadist networks appears to have stalled in recent years. The reason could lie in the emergence of an alternative, non-violent ideology combined with a mobilisation of forces opposed to violent jihad within the Muslim community.

### *1.4.1 Wider prevalence of alternative ideas*

Various movements active in Europe offer young Muslims a potential alternative to the version of Islam that propagates violence. Collectively termed “Islamic neoradicalism”<sup>6</sup>, these have gained in strength since 2006 and are now also increasingly professional in their activities. All strive to present a clear strategic and tactical vision to make Islam a real force in the West, although they vary widely in how exactly this should be done. The principal expression of this current in the Netherlands comes in the form of political Salafism, which

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<sup>6</sup> AIVD, *The Radical Dawa in Transition: the rise of Islamic neoradicalism in the Netherlands* (2007).

seeks the strict application of Islamic law. Originating in the Muslim world, this strand follows a highly religious agenda, rejects the values of Western constitutional democracy in numerous areas and opposes the integration of Muslims into societies so governed.

Such movements can offer an alternative to jihadist ideology. But as they promote intolerant isolationism, antidemocratic and anti-Western sentiments and the creation of parallel societies, in themselves they also have the potential to endanger the democratic legal order. Their agenda is radical, yet also explicitly non-violent because the use of violence might deter potential supporters and force the government to take repressive countermeasures. Direct confrontation, they believe, could hinder the steady and lasting growth of radical Islam in Europe. The message emanating from this so-called political Salafism, which has become more independent and professional in the past few years, strikes a chord with many young Muslims wrestling with their identity. The movement reaches out to this group through a lecture circuit dominated by charismatic and eloquent youth preachers. This may act as an alternative outlet for young radicals who, were it not available, might instead be tempted to choose the jihadist path.

Another alternative might be provided by a second current, which in recent years has been increasing in popularity in both Europe and the Middle East, although it has yet to make major inroads in the Netherlands. Combining a conservative view of Islam with active participation in Western society, this movement has the potential to appeal strongly to many young Muslims, a small proportion of whom are currently opting for a radical interpretation of the faith. It strives to give expression to a distinctive Muslim identity. Other ultra-orthodox strands active in the West include apolitical Salafism, with its call for complete withdrawal from secular society but without taking extremist action against it. Again, the far-reaching orthodoxy of these movements could provide competition with the version of Islam that favours violence.

#### *1.4.2 Mobilisation against violent ideology*

The mainstream Dutch Muslim community is increasingly taking a stand against the radical currents in its midst. As described in the report *Resilience and Resistance: current trends and developments in Salafism in the Netherlands*, published by the AIVD in December 2009, more and more Muslims are daring to speak out on the local and national stage against the anti-integration, intolerant and isolationist message of Salafism. And Salafist centres themselves have distanced themselves from the use of violence. Persons propagating a violent jihadist ideology are no longer tolerated at those centres, and on several occasions young people expressing such views have been turned away from mosques. Salafist imams have even begun calling upon their followers to take up democratic methods. Although an isolationist and anti-integration message is still being proclaimed behind closed doors, in their public sermons the Salafist preachers have embraced moderation. A process of “self-cleansing” appears to have taken place, whereby voices in support of violence have slowly but surely been silenced at the Salafist centres.

It remains to be seen how strong the moderate forces within the Muslim community will be in the long term. Nor is it easy to tell how effective they can be in persuading young people to turn their backs on the ideology of violence. What is a fact is that local jihadist networks find it more difficult to function in an environment dominated by moderation, since it eliminates the tacit support they require. Where there is active resistance to radicalism, the jihadists’ mobilising message is more likely to fall on deaf ears. And that limits their effectiveness.

## 2. The increasing importance of the international jihad for local networks

To properly evaluate the threat posed by local networks, it is important to appreciate the international context. It is the world wide situation, after all, which feeds radical ideology to the extent that some Muslims are prepared to travel to countries where they can play an active part in the jihad. To that must be added the fact that, due to the weakening of local networks described earlier, the *relative* level of the threat posed by transnational networks has increased.

### Europe: a diffuse threat

Members of jihadist networks have recently been arrested in a number of European countries. They include Belgium in December 2007, France in May 2008 and Italy in November 2008. Europe has also experienced a number of successful, unsuccessful and foiled terrorist attacks. But the picture to emerge from these incidents is far from clear. Some of those responsible had attended training camps, where they had been instructed to commit attacks. But in most cases a local element combined with international connections.

### 2.1 The international nature of the jihad

By its nature, jihadism is an international movement. Its origins lie principally in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but it has since taken root in countries throughout the world. Both the process used to radicalise young Muslims and the underlying jihadist ideology place great emphasis upon the concept of “*umma*”, the global Muslim community. This is what gives the ideology its international dimension: because of the existing bond of faith between all followers of Islam, every conflict in which Muslims are involved matters to their brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world. By this reasoning, if Muslims are attacked in Chechnya or Afghanistan, for example, then that affects Muslims in the Netherlands and everywhere else. In principle this obliges all Muslims, those in the Netherlands included, to take part in the struggle to liberate their brothers and sisters. Conversely, in this view of the world the bond of “*umma*” means that the situation in the Netherlands may justify attacks here launched from other countries, or targeting Dutch interests anywhere.

### Terror threat in Spain

In January 2008 the Spanish authorities arrested members of an international network, most of them of Pakistani origin, which had been planning attacks in Barcelona and, it is believed, other parts of Europe – although not the Netherlands. Several of those involved had been recruited and trained in Pakistan, then sent to Europe specifically to carry out this mission. Other members of the cell had lived in Spain for many years, giving it a significant local component. The Pakistani Taliban (TTP) later claimed that it had a part in the plot. There was also one arrest in the Netherlands, of a person who may have been preparing an attack in Germany.

At the heart of international jihadism is the struggle against “the enemies of Islam”, who can be found both inside and outside the Muslim world. The World Islamic Front statement of 23 February 1998, announcing “Jihad against Jews and Crusaders”, was a call to take up arms against “enemies” in non-Muslim – by which it meant Western – countries. Autonomous local networks in the Netherlands previously focused upon the situation here and upon Dutch targets because they saw that as their contribution to the fight against these supposed enemies

of Islam. That however has now changed. The struggle's international dimension has increased in importance. What this means for the jihadists active in the Netherlands is that they now consider Afghanistan, for instance, as more than simply one of the regions in which the jihad is being fought; it has become more important to take part in the fight there than to carry out attacks in the Netherlands. At a later stage, returning to the Netherlands as trained and experienced warriors, they may strike at targets here or at Dutch interests elsewhere.

## **2.2 Fronts in the global jihad**

Two important conflict zones are currently exciting the interest of local jihadist networks in the Netherlands: the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region and Somalia. Both are regarded as key fronts in the global jihad, which may well contribute to their increasing appeal in those circles. Although no attempts, successful or otherwise, by members of these networks to join the jihad in Iraq have been detected in recent years, it seems that several persons from the Netherlands have travelled to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border with a view to taking part in the struggle there. It is also suspected that some members of Dutch networks may be interested in going to Somalia for the same reason. Several other Western countries, amongst them the United States, the United Kingdom and Denmark, have in recent years noted an increase in the number of people seeking to take part in the jihad in Somalia or training there before returning home.

### **Plots in Germany and Denmark**

In September 2007 a plot to strike multiple targets in Germany was foiled. The members of a terror cell known as the Sauerland Group had visited a training camp in Pakistan and originally intended to fight there, but were instructed by the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) to commit attacks in Germany. Their intended targets were Frankfurt Airport and the US military air base at Ramstein. Denmark, too, has had to deal with several plots in recent years. The members of a cell discovered in September 2007 had also been trained in Pakistan and were instructed to plan an attack in Denmark. That group was in contact with the militant organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).

Of the two regions mentioned above, the Pakistan-Afghanistan border is at the heart of the terrorist threat to the Netherlands and Dutch interests. It is the base for numerous jihadist groups that attract Western Muslims. Many of these organisations have embraced the ideology of international jihad and some – whether or not they have explicitly said so – would like to perpetrate attacks in Europe. The fact that such intent exists does not mean that they are actually capable of bringing their plans to fruition, though. For most, the struggle in Afghanistan remains their primary focus. Organisations like the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Al-Qaeda are known to work together, and there is also frequent collaboration with local Taliban. But that is not to say that they all share the same agenda. For the most part, their co-operation takes simple forms: joint training, the supply of goods, providing temporary shelter and so on. The network of relationships in the region is highly complex, and from a Western perspective often difficult to understand. Amidst all this, it is still Al-Qaeda which exerts the greatest appeal to radical Muslims as the “brand name” epitomising the ideology of international jihad. On the ground, however, Al-Qaeda in no way controls or co-ordinates the other groups.

## **2.3 The changing relevance of the international jihad**

The nature of the terrorist threat facing the Netherlands has changed since *Violent Jihad in the Netherlands* was published. It now comes principally from the point of interaction between local and transnational networks. The threat from within has gained a prominent international component since radical Muslims in the Netherlands came into contact with transnational networks. The media for such contacts include the Internet and family relationships. Ethnic background sometimes plays a role, whilst in other cases individuals simply head for Pakistan, say, in the hope of being able to join the international jihad there. Internationally oriented local networks are described in *Violent Jihad in the Netherlands* as arising out of recruitment efforts by veterans of the jihad with links to a transnational network. But they no longer exist in that form.

These days, the international orientation of jihadists active at the local level is usually the product of a process of autonomous radicalisation in which the Internet plays an absolute key role. It is in this way that offshoots of transnational networks have appeared in the Netherlands. These then support those networks in their activities elsewhere. And sometimes local jihadists from the Netherlands travel to a conflict zone, where they attend a training camp and then either join the struggle there or return home. As yet, the AIVD has not observed jihadists with combat training or experience coming back to the Netherlands from any of these zones.

Like other Western nations, the Netherlands is regarded as a legitimate target by transnational jihadist groups. However, the main threats currently posed by their offshoots active here are to the international legal order in general and to Dutch personnel, property and interests in conflict zones. This applies primarily to certain specific theatres of jihad, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen. As far as is known, none of these offshoots has either the intention or the capacity to commit terrorist attacks in the Netherlands. Their principal activity is providing assistance to the network elsewhere. Nonetheless, such a facilitating network could at any moment change into or become the support structure for a terror cell seeking to strike in Europe. In the long term, then, the networks currently in existence could pose a direct threat to the Netherlands.

The above observations raise the question as to **why** local networks have shifted their focus to the jihad outside the Netherlands. An initial answer can be found in their recent weakening, as described earlier in this publication. Their original domestic focus having ultimately delivered them very little, following a local agenda has lost much of its appeal. As a result, both existing and new structures – and in some cases individuals – have turned their attention to the struggle elsewhere in the world.

Another contributory factor may well be the impact of the propaganda disseminated by transnational jihadist organisations. Life without the Internet is now unthinkable for young Muslims in Western countries. Jihadist groups exploit this by conducting intensive online campaigns designed specifically to chime with this group's perception of the world. Moreover, the messages are more and more likely to be in Western languages, which substantially increases their reach amongst the target audience.

### **3 Conclusion and outlook**

#### **3.1 The current nature of the threat to the Netherlands**

The jihadist threat to the Netherlands and to Dutch interests comes from both inside and outside the country. The threat from within, emanating from local networks, has diminished since 2006. As a consequence, the relative significance of the threat from outside, which emanates from transnational networks, has increased. Moreover, in recent years Dutch-based jihadists have shifted their focus to the struggle in other parts of the world. This is reflected in contacts with groups abroad and a desire to join the jihad in conflict zones elsewhere. That interaction makes jihadists located in the Netherlands, and in many cases with their roots here, a potential danger to this country. Persons who have left for conflict zones threaten Dutch interests there, and upon their return they also pose a risk to the Netherlands.

Developments over the past few years have made the situation now quite different from that in 2006. At that time, the autonomous local networks here were setting their sights mainly on individuals and other targets they regarded as symbolising Dutch enmity towards Islam. Although this local context does still play a part, it is no longer what defines the agenda of those networks. This has reduced the level of the threat to symbolic government targets, politicians and opinion formers in the Netherlands.

The threat currently posed by autonomous local networks is low in level: they present no immediate danger to the Netherlands or its interests. And, as far as is known, they lack the intent, the knowledge and the means to carry out a successful large-scale terrorist attack within the Netherlands. At present, the most that such networks appear to be capable of is a small-scale attack. But there are no indications that they intend to commit even an act of that kind. Nonetheless, it is still quite possible that the now largely fragmented, and in part disbanded, autonomous local networks might reform, hence rekindling the threat of violence.

The local threat has gained a strong international dimension in recent years. Within autonomous local networks, for instance, there remains an intention to participate in the jihad. By this is generally meant training for or actually taking part in the armed struggle in Afghanistan, Somalia or another jihadist front. That intent needs to be taken seriously, since actual attempts to carry it through have been observed on a number of occasions in the past few years. The weakening of the autonomous local networks, due in part to internal divisions, a lack of leadership and differences of focus, has made such initiatives comparatively rare, however. And whilst young radicals often seek to outdo one another in expressing a commitment to join the jihad, in practice they are usually just bragging.

#### **3.2 Outlook**

The AIVD expects the potential danger to the Netherlands from local jihadist networks and individuals to persist in the years to come. The actual level of the threat to some extent depends upon the amount of influence that jihadists abroad are able to exert over the networks in this country, upon the success or otherwise of disengagement and deradicalisation efforts and upon how successful the existing networks are in attempts to participate in the jihad elsewhere. Another significant factor is whether the ideas described in section 1.4.1 of this report actually develop into a genuine alternative to the violent ideology propagated by jihadists in the Netherlands. If they do, that will not necessarily alleviate the threat posed by local networks but it might alter its nature. Instead of planning acts of terrorism in the

Netherlands or involvement in the jihad elsewhere, for example, the risk in future could come more from isolationism or from an undermining of the democratic legal order.

There are currently no indications that autonomous local networks in the Netherlands are likely to gain in strength in the near future. To become a factor of significance once again, what they most need are charismatic leader figures who are prepared to take on an operational rather than merely a spiritual role. Only strong leaders will be capable of compensating for the inherent limitations in the functioning of networks of this kind: lack of cohesion and task orientation. In the past, it has been mainly older men with both a thorough knowledge of Islam and combat experience who have proven most able to assume such leadership roles.

As yet, there has been no significant deradicalisation of jihadists in the Netherlands. This means that there remains a hard core of committed and potentially active radicals in this country, who could form the basis for new networks initiating jihadist action. Moreover, autonomous local networks and individuals here seem increasingly interested in taking part in the jihad in various overseas fronts.

Although successful attempts to join the jihad elsewhere so far appear to have been few and far between, such readiness entails a potential risk that trained and battle-hardened jihadists will at some point return to the Netherlands. Given the small number of people who have left the country with that aim in mind up until now, for the time being the danger they pose is limited. It is also quite conceivable, however, that such jihadists returning to neighbouring countries could threaten the Netherlands as well. It should be noted, too, that a deliberate choice, often made on doctrinal grounds, to take part in the “holy war” in another part of the world – Afghanistan or Somalia, say – can still endanger Dutch interests in the region concerned even if it does not pose a direct threat to this country.

For jihadists in the Netherlands, the current priority is the struggle against the “enemies of Islam” outside this country. As yet the AIVD sees no reason to suspect that this will change any time soon, which in turn implies that the threat to Dutch interests abroad is now greater than that to the Netherlands itself. Another factor which may shape the future threat is that active jihadists do not necessarily stay “at the front” forever. In 1980s and 1990s, for instance, veterans of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Bosnia remained active in transnational networks after the fighting there had ended. In that capacity, they were involved in facilitating jihad in other parts of the world and in preparing terrorist attacks in Europe. If the same happens with the current generation of fighters hailing from Western Europe, then new transnational networks will eventually form, made up at least in part of persons drawn from local ones. This may have the effect of increasing the level of threat, since such networks might facilitate, plan or carry out attacks. In this situation, the fact that the Netherlands and its interests are regarded as legitimate targets by the transnational networks could lead them to direct local elements to commit acts of terrorism here. The endogenous threat (from within) and the exogenous one (from outside) thus merge into one.

The Netherlands’ continuing status as a supposed “enemy of Islam” is set to remain a key factor in the level of the threat facing the country. There is no guarantee whatsoever that the reduced risk to government targets, politicians and opinion formers from local networks and individuals, as currently being observed, is a permanent state of affairs. Much will depend upon developments in Dutch society in the near future, and upon how national policy aimed at combating jihadist terrorism unfolds. Measures perceived as stigmatising by certain groups in

society may well prompt them to isolate themselves, which undermines social cohesion and will eventually endanger the democratic legal order.

It remains vital, therefore, to view the threat posed by jihadist terrorism in the proper context. On the one hand, that means neither underestimating nor trivialising it; even though the risk emanating from local networks seems to have diminished, that does not mean that it has disappeared altogether. But it also means not overestimating the threat. What danger there is comes from a small group within the Muslim community. The broad approach adopted by the government makes it possible to monitor the whole spectrum of potential risks, from anti-integrationist activities to the perpetration of terrorist attacks, so that any actual threat can be countered at an early stage. One important aspect of this strategy is enhancing Dutch society's resistance – and in particular that of the Muslim community itself – to jihadism and isolationism in its midst. Through this publication as through its other activities, the AIVD intends to make a significant and lasting contribution to that effort.

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