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

Jihadism on the Web

A breeding ground for Jihad in the modern age

Contents

Foreword

In the past decade a wide variety of counter-terrorist measures and actions have been taken to ensure that jihadist organisations are left with fewer possibilities to target the West. Nonetheless, the appeal of the jihadist ideologies adhered to by these organisations remains as great as ever. These ideologies continue to inspire and incite particularly young Muslims world-wide to violence.

The Internet has become the most important medium for the dissemination of these ideologies. The breakthrough, since 2002, of new interactive and anonymous Web applications, generally referred to as Web 2.0, has allowed jihadist ideas to spread exponentially. Virtual interaction between individuals supporting such ideas leads to radicalisation and to the emergence of new networks and attack cells. In 2012 the Internet has consequently become a breeding ground for new jihadist individuals and networks. The AIVD investigates online jihadist networks and individuals in the framework of the Intelligence and Security Services Act (Wiv 2002).

This publication aims to further the knowledge of jihadist use of the Internet and to contribute to a correct assessment of the threat generated by online Jihadism in 2012. Chapter 1 describes jihadi cyberspace, i.e. the virtual places visited by e-jihadis. Chapter 2 outlines the processes taking place in these virtual places, while chapter 3 addresses the people (actors) playing a role. Chapter 4 outlines two developments that have allowed cyber Jihadism to grow over

the past ten years. Chapter 5 summarises conclusions.

This publication is a sequel to prior AIVD publications, in particular *Violent Jihad in the Nethe lands* released in 2006, and addresses both the threat against the Netherlands and the threat against the West as a whole. It is based on operational AIVD investigations of Dutch and foreign jihadists, and of the online places they visit. Relevant open sources have also been used. As a case in point, this publication relies on (quotes from) open sources to clarify observations made by the AIVD during its investigations.

The AIVD expects online Jihadism to become a crucial, binding and organising factor in a substantial part of attack plots against the West and Western citizens and against interests abroad in the next few years. In the short and medium term online Jihadism therefore remains an important factor in national and international threat assessments.

The AIVD attempts to counter the threat generated by online Jihadism by studying virtual and physical jihadist activities. In view of the transnational nature of online Jihadism, the AIVD works together closely with foreign intelligence and security services.

There is also close co-operation with various national partners, including the National Co-ordinator for Counterterrorism and Security *(Nationaal Coö dinato Te o ismebest ijding en Veiligheid*, NCTV).

They are kept apprised of the latest developments at regular intervals, which enables them to identify policy implications. In specific cases the AIVD endeavours to mobilise partners to take action, for instance by issuing official reports for (criminal) investigation purposes against specific individuals. National partners or international partner services are also informed about specific threats so that they can make informed security decisions.

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1. How does online Jihadism work?

What characterises jihadi cyberspace and how does it work? The interactive possibilities of the Internet allow jihadists worldwide to find each other quickly. They meet in 'public' virtual places, for example on social media, on Internet forums and in chat rooms, but also in semi-public or private virtual places. This is where jihadist activities and processes unfold that constitute the greatest threat. These more private virtual places make up an important part of the *Invisible Web* (by scientists also referred to as the *Deep Web*, *Da knet* or *Unde net*). Unlike the visible part of the Internet, also called *Su face Web* or *Indexable Web*, this invisible Web refers to a part of the World Wide Web that has not (yet) been indexed and that cannot be found by readily accessible search engines such as Google. Scientists estimate that the invisible Web is 550 times larger than the visible Web.[1] In other words, the invisible Web makes up over 99.8% of the entire Web and less than 0.2% of the Web is visible.
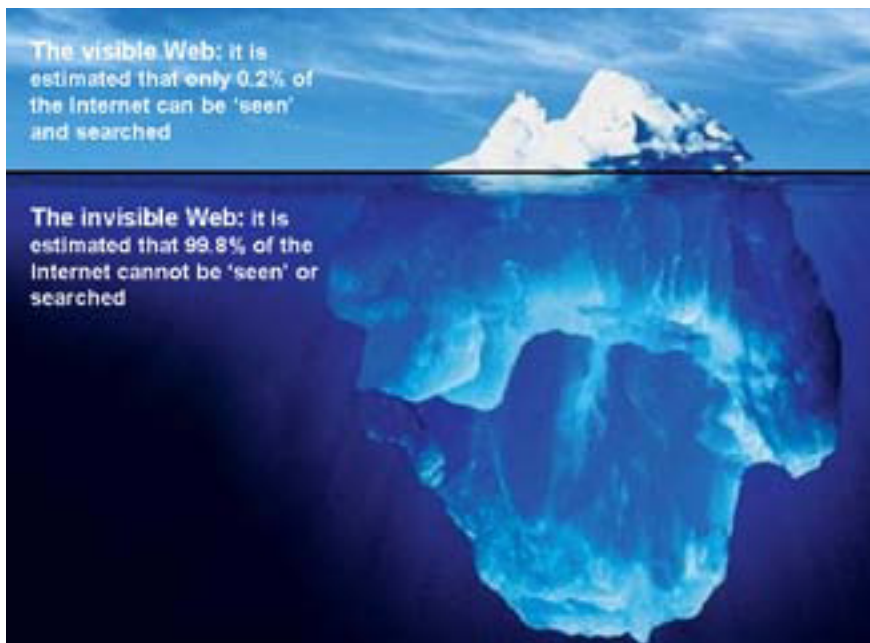
The invisible Web is often portrayed as an iceberg of which only a tiny part can be seen above water

[1] See *How much information? 2003*, www2.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info-2003, a study conducted by the University of California. As far as the AIVD can tell this is the latest scientific assessment.

1.1 Core forums: the driving force behind the global Jihad movement

Just like criminals and hackers, jihadists use the invisible Web as a hiding place and do their utmost to keep activities from being tracked. Virtual gathering places constructed, administered and secured by fanatical jihadists are hidden inside this invisible Web. In general, these jihadists do not have any formal affiliations to jihadist organisations. It is estimated that a few hundred such jihadist platforms   websites and Internet forums   exist worldwide. A number of influential jihadist Internet forums are the *de facto* core of the global virtual Jihad movement, propelling it like a turbo. The AIVD estimates that approximately 25,000 jihadists originating from over 100 countries belong to this group of core Internet forums.

The influence exerted by a core forum depends in part on whether or not jihadist media organisations approve of these forums. Currently, the most important one is Al Fajr Media Centre, the non-official distributor of Al-Qaeda propaganda, among other things. When a core Web forum receives accreditation from Al Fajr Media Centre (or from other jihadist media organisations) jihadists know that the authenticity of propaganda material is ensured. Such an accreditation does not mean, however, that a jihadist organisation 'owns' a core forum. It merely makes convenient use of existing forum infrastructure and its followers. Core forums cannot, therefore, be labelled 'Al-Qaeda websites', for example.

One of the most appealing features of core forums is the fact that all members can take part in group discussions addressing a wide variety of themes. News topics, for instance, are discussed from a jihadist perspective, newly issued jihadist propaganda material is commented on, individual forum members make suggestions for possible targets and jihadist martyrs are glorified. These interactive group discussions lay the foundation for the radical discourse[2] that paves the way for legitimised violence against the enemies of 'true' Islam.

This discourse leads to the creation and reinforcement of ideologies and to ideological indoctrination on core forums, where jihadist propaganda is generated and offered. This is also where (virtual) networks form and attacks are plotted and prepared. Moreover, these core Internet forums offer a unique possibility for Western jihadists to get in touch with likeminded individuals in jihadist conflict zones, such as Afghanistan and Yemen. They may be inspired by such contacts and supported in their efforts to participate in Jihad, or they may be deployed to carry out attacks in the West.

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[2] The word 'discourse' has several meanings. In this report the AIVD uses it in the sociological sense: statements made by a certain group at a certain level, used by that group to structure reality and thereby (implicitly) recording what it considers to be morally right and true.

1.2   Jihadists also active on secondary forums

Core forum participants have often been on a long virtual journey. Their radicalisation starts on other websites and forums that play a role in online Jihadism, usually less radical platforms in Salafi signature style, some of which are part of the invisible Web. These platforms do engender a radical discourse, but neither participants nor discussions are explicitly violent in nature. To some extent, these platforms also offer a counter-message to jihadist ideas. The dynamic, interactive processes that are typical of core forums are (virtually) absent on such platforms. Often, participants do not have direct access to jihadists in conflict zones.

Whereas core forums are the driving force behind and beating heart of jihadist cyberspace, such less radical platforms are termed secondary forums in this publication.

Secondary forums play an important role in the redistribution of new jihadist propaganda as this is where individual members of core forums post (links to) new jihadist material. Individual sympathisers then redistribute the propaganda to the visible surface Web by offering it on social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, to name a few. In other words, these secondary forums bridge the gap between core forums and the surface Web.
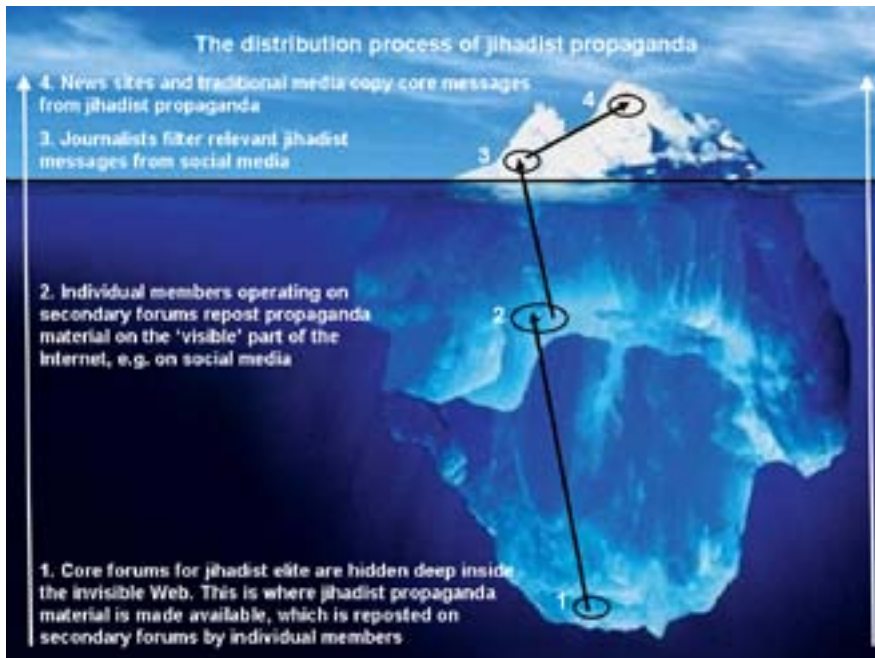
The distribution process of jihadist propaganda leaving the core forums and reaching the surface Web via secondary forums

1.3 Limited use of surface Web

Of course, jihadists are also active on the surface Web, where they use social media and various applications, such as email, Internet telephony and chat programmes, to name a few. They use these means of communication to actively spread jihadist ideas, recruit new jihadists and proactively distribute and promote propaganda material. Jihadists that are active on the surface Web are afraid of being detected, which is why there is no (or very limited) dynamic interaction, as opposed to what is observed on core forums.

Jihadists are also rather reluctant when it comes to using social media. The open, personal communication that characterises social media clashes with the clandestine and violent nature of online jihadist activities. The AIVD has found that radicalising persons erase their social media accounts sooner or later. They consider the (mostly American) social media to be *kuffa* (infidel) sites, and therefore unacceptable and unsafe.

One forum member issued a warning in a discussion about the use of 'JewTube', thereby referring to the Jewish background of one of YouTube's founders. This discussion was shared by the SITE Intelligence Group, a commercial American think tank that analyses radical statements on the Internet. This forum member stated: "Your talk on YouTube can be monitored by the Kuffar. Many a brother were arrested based on intelligence from YouTube, they will not hesitate to handover your IP details to Kuffar. Therefore, it is NOT the place you should be social networking."[3] Another factor is that moderators actively monitor and remove inappropriate statements posted on social media. As a result of these restrictions, social media are mostly used for the (temporary) republication of jihadist propaganda.

An example of a YouTube channel where jihadist propaganda is republished

[3] Quote from a forum member in a publication of the SITE Intelligence Group: *Jihadists strategize to evade YouTube censorship*, 28 April 2011.

2. Highest threat caused by two core processes

Online Jihadism is characterised by a number of (social) processes. The AIVD distinguishes two core processes that emanate the greatest threat and that lead to (the facilitation of) violence, i.e. radicalisation or 'jihadisation' and network formation.

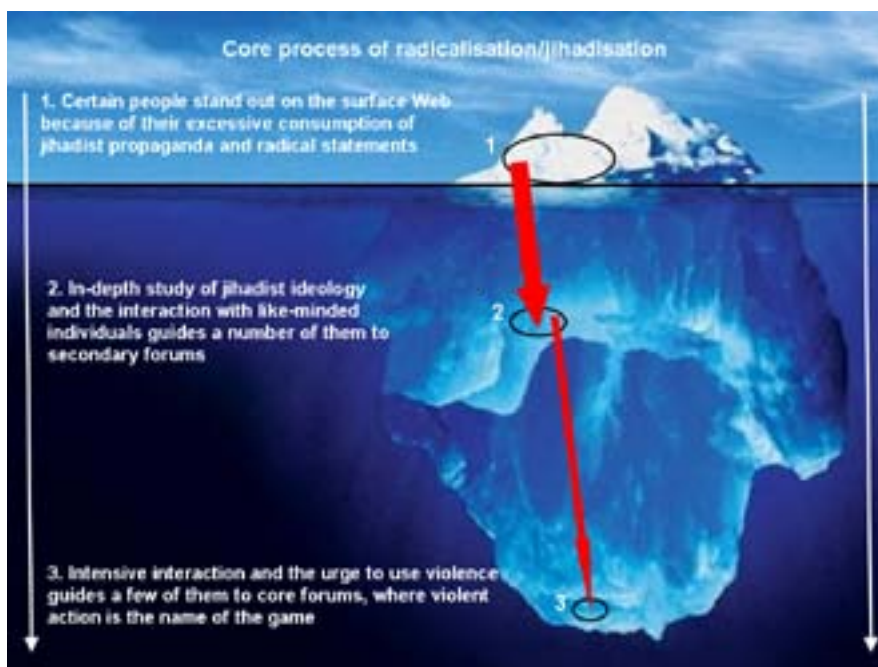## 2.1 The process of radicalisation and jihadisation

The AIVD views radicalisation as a social phenomenon that often takes place in both real and virtual life. The Internet is only a means to an end in this context, and serves as the 'place' where part of the radicalisation process transpires. The Internet allows people to get in touch with like-minded people faster, to exchange ideological ideas more swiftly and to get validation of their own ideology. As a result, radicalisation is mainly a group process that can take place partly or, in some cases, entirely online. The process of jihadisation takes place at the extreme end of the radicalisation spectrum, i.e. radicalised individuals who are ultimately prepared to engage in violent Jihad, both verbally and physically.

The AIVD has found that people who radicalise under the influence of jihadist websites often go through a number of stages. As their radicalisation progresses, their virtual activities increasingly shift to the invisible Web, their security awareness increases and their activities become more conspiratorial. At first, they often stand out on the surface Web, particularly on social media sites and mainstream (Muslim) sites in their own language area, due to their radical statements.

They also consume and distribute jihadist propaganda material found on the surface Web. On these sites they quickly find like-minded individuals with whom they can share their radical passion, who help them and validate their ideological development.

Further in-depth study of the jihadist ideology often takes them deeper into the invisible Web, where they are increasingly absorbed by an international environment. They often subscribe to a secondary forum, where they find an abundance of jihadist propaganda material and other like-minded individuals. They feed on the radical discourse delivered here, which further reinforces their ideology and also increasingly limits their thinking.

When radicalising individuals feel that the discourse on secondary forums still is not radical enough, they switch to core forums. Core forums are breeding grounds for jihadisation by creating a climate in which violent Jihad and martyrdom are glorified.

The core process of radicalisation and jihadisation, starting on the surface Web and luring people to core forums via secondary forums

2.1.1 Vi tual duck decoy

The processes of radicalisation and jihadisation that take place on jihadist websites can be compared to a virtual ideological duck decoy that lures people with the ideology of violent Jihad. A very heterogeneous group of people from all over the world feel drawn to this call. Fuelled by jihadist propaganda and the online jihadist discourse, a wide variety of jihadist content and a pool of like-minded individuals are available at every radicalisation stage. The virtual duck decoy is like a funnel causing people to go further down towards core forums: an ideological ghetto created by jihadists for the virtual jihadist elite, in which all processes are mutually reinforced and focus on violent action. Only a limited part of all radical Muslims that are active on the Internet reach this smallest tapered end of the funnel where active participation in the name of Jihad is demanded, either in words or in action.

After his suicide attack that killed seven CIA employees and one Jordanian citizen, Humam al-Balawi[4], the former moderator of the then al-Hesbah core forum, said in a statement on several core forums: "Beware, beware that you are satisfied with writing on the forums without going to the battlefield in the Cause of Allah... I see no path to this paradise] except for death in the Cause of Allah."[5] In other words, violent action is the ultimate goal envisaged by core forums.

[4] Aka Abu Dujana al-Khorasani on jihadist websites.
[5] *inSITE* of January 2010, Vol. 2, Nr. 10, page 20.

Experience teaches us that only a limited group of people actually make the leap to the use of violence. Most core forum members by far only support the Jihad verbally and regard it as a source of inspiration. (As yet) most of them lack the willingness, the knowledge, the expertise and/or the connections to walk their jihadist talk.

2.1.2 B eeding g ound

Core forums therefore enable individuals to make an individual and often significant contribution to the global Jihad movement   they spend all their spare time on core forums and their participation is like an addiction. A new forum member wrote: "If you had seen me five months ago, you would never ever imagine that today I am spending almost 12-15 hours on Islamic forums and sites   from morning till night just thinking about my role in the Jihad movement... Once I started, it was like lost purpose of my life, addiction from day one. I was like a small kid who received his favourite toy after a long wait. It did not only change my life style but changed my approach toward the ultimate goal of my life. All of sudden every previous achievement became irrelevant."[6]

The radicalisation and jihadisation process that takes place partly or sometimes entirely online ensures a continues influx of new individuals eager to fight for the jihadist cause. In 2012 the jihadist cyberspace has therefore become a breeding ground for new individual jihadists and jihadist networks.

2.2 The process of network formation

The AIVD has found that both the ideological and organisational development of jihadist networks and individuals increasingly takes place on or with the help of the Internet. Individuals who have radicalised under the influence of the Internet and who play an active role in jihadist cyberspace usually form networks. Such networks mostly develop online and can emanate a serious threat. These virtual jihadist networks are often more internationally oriented and much larger than physical jihadist networks. As network formation generally precedes violence, the AIVD considers network formation to be one of the most important processes in online Jihadism. Jihadist core forums offer the best possible conditions for this process to take place and allow it to reach full maturity.

The AIVD defines a jihadist network as "...a fluid, dynamic, vaguely delineated structure consisting of a number of radical Muslims with some form of mutual association, both individually and at a collective level in the form of cells or groups. At least temporarily, they are linked by a common purpose: the pursuit of a jihadist aim. For the AIVD, a person involved with a jihadist network is classified as a 'member' if they play an active part in it and consciously contribute towards achieving the jihadist goal."

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[6] Quote from a forum member in *inSITE* of April 2010, Vol. 2, Nr. 11, page 4.

2.2.1 Five levels of netwo k fo mation

To better grasp these largely virtual networks and their characteristics, the network model devised by two American scientists, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, offers a useful conceptual tool.[7] Their model focuses on two essential questions: what keeps a network from falling apart and how does it operate without central leadership? Based on this model, the AIVD distinguishes five critical success factors that enable decentralised, fluid network structures to generate focused collective action.

Arquilla and Ronfeldt have identified five levels of functioning that affect the strength and effectiveness of networks: internal communication (systems), organisational design, social and/or personal ties, ideological raison d'etre, and shared methods and strategies. These five levels are not hierarchically related, but do influence one another. Networks function better when all levels influence one another to a large extent. According to the Arquilla and Ronfeldt model, the most effective networks are those whose technological and organisational design is supported by strong social ties, a convincing narrative and a solid doctrine. With this in mind, the following paragraphs describe the charac-teristics of networks that are active on jihadist core forums.

2.2.2 Level 1: inte nal communication systems

A key characteristic of online jihadist networks is that they emerge on Internet forums. The communication possibilities offered by core forums and the available (technical) means used to shield and hide parts of this communication, or keep it anonymous, promote the intensive interaction among network members. New virtual networks can therefore emerge rapidly.

2.2.3 Level 2: o ganisational design

The jihadist networks that play an active role on core forums are characterised by a flat, interactive organisation made up of fanatical jihadists that are all able to communicate freely. Unlike what is frequently suggested, these networks usually lack central co-ordination (by Al-Qaeda, for instance). In other words, there are no appointed organisational leaders, there is no formal hierarchy or central leadership, and the networks do not constitute a close-knit whole. They do have an informal power structure (see Chapter 3) and are known for their ability to organise and direct themselves. Such jihadist networks are fluid in nature: new networks emerge quickly, but disappear just as fast. The same applies to the jihadists making up such networks. This organisational fluidity ensures resilient and highly adaptive networks.

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[7] As formulated, for instance, in their book *Networks and netwars: the future of terror, crime, and militancy* (2001) and in their article *Networks, netwars, and the fight for the future* published in the e-journal *First Monday*, Vol. 6, Nr. 10 – 1 October 2001.

2.2.4 Level 3: social ties
The jihadist networks operating on core forums constitute a powerful social movement, capable of inspiring jihadists from different backgrounds across the globe to forge alliances. Whereas blood ties, friendships or shared (combat) experience guarantee a strong group cohesion in real life, most core forum members have never actually met. Nonetheless, there is great mutual trust on core forums, which is crucial to the cohesive bond and interaction among members. The AIVD calls this phenomenon 'virtual trust'.

How does such virtual trust build? The (technological) means that ensure secure interactive communication within core forums, the sharp discourse and the (self) censorship (see below) guarantee that core forum members feel like they are among peers. Many of them feel hunted in their real and virtual life. They are always on their guard, wondering if their jihadist lifestyle attracts the attention of the government. In addition, they often come into conflict with their direct surroundings at the beginning of the radicalisation process, causing them to slowly retreat from their original social environment and surround themselves with new friends who validate their ideological motives. Due to the interactive nature of the Web it is easier for them to find these new friends online than in real life.

For many, finally finding the jihadist core forums feels like a warm bath after their virtual wanderings.

Here they find the like-minded friends and role models that they can trust and that they lack in real life. Those who take part in the networks forming on core forums get the feeling that they are part of a worldwide 'elite' fighting for the cause. The struggle makes them better Muslims. Their virtual activities give their life meaning and purpose, and make them feel part of something bigger. Particularly Western jihadists who experience a sense of failure in the real world, feel that they at least walk the right virtual path. Core forum interaction constantly validates and deepens this experience.[8]

The virtual trust among members of such networks can be so unconditional that they may decide to meet offline and discover each other's true identity. The AIVD has found that such a transition can generate a heightened threat.

2.2.5 Level 4: ideological aison d'et e
The jihadist ideology is by far the most important factor that binds active networks on core forums. This ideology basically contends that Islam must be protected against actors who are considered a threat to Islam, including the West. Jihadists believe that non-violent protest is ineffective and undesirable; taking the path of violence offers the only chance of success.

[8] The social relevance core forums may have to jihadists is eloquently described in the book *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, written by forensic psychiatrist Dr. Marc Sageman.

Every Muslim is obliged to take this path. Muslims who answer this call of duty are part of the chosen vanguard of pure, true Islam. The ultimate goal is to establish a global caliphate, in which the Sharia is fully adhered to. This ideology incites to violence   it is a call to violent action and personally holds Muslims responsible for their actions. This call has great appeal.

Jihadist core forums do not deny or contradict this ideological message. What's more, deviant opinions are not tolerated as only like-minded individuals can become active forum participants. Members who do voice criticism are banned. This process of (self) censorship causes participants to feel that they have the right ideological point of view. That sense of ideological 'rightness' explains the large number of virtual networks that ensure the production, dissemination and consumption of a constant flow of new jihadist propaganda material on core forums.

The English language jihadi magazine Inspire *depicts the individual choice jihadist Muslims feel they have between Jihad and paradise (Jannah) on the one hand and hell and damnation on the other At the bottom of the page the names of Taimour Abdulwahab (the man who was killed after setting off two bombs in Stockholm Sweden on 11 December 2010) and Roshonara Choudhry (the woman who stabbed British MP Stephen Timms on 14 May 2010) are glorified According to the creators of* Inspire *these lone wolves have made the right choice: to follow the path of Jihad*

2.2.6 Level 5: collabo ative methods and st ategies
Due to their flat organisational structure, jihadist networks operating on core forums do not use any institutionalised methods to attain their jihadist objectives. There is no central authority to impose discipline, and control mechanisms for making 'course corrections' do not exist. Nor is there a uniform strategy on how to reach jihadist goals. However, this lack of *command and cont ol* is partly compensated by the self-directed and self-organising processes mentioned above. The strong social cohesion within these networks, the (self) censorship, the large degree of ideological compartmentalisation and the ultimate awareness of their ideological rightness, generate a powerful sense of (self) discipline. Forum members constantly 'check' themselves and each other, and believe in divine punishment for deviant behaviour or 'betrayal'. The fanatical forum discourse also causes a proliferation of ideas and plans about the methods and strategies that can be used by jihadists. Some of them are further perfected (by others) and implemented.

Despite the fact that jihadist networks operating on core forums do not show evidence of any institutionalised, centrally directed methods and strategies, the dynamic, fanatical and flat interaction between core forum members ensures that these flaws are partly compensated. Nonetheless, the level of methods and strategies remains the least developed of all five levels mentioned above.

2.3 Unique social dynamics

The AIVD has found that the interaction between these five levels of network formation generates unique social dynamics resulting in violence-oriented networks. According to the AIVD, counter-terrorism measures intended to stop such dynamics or networks can only be successful if they tackle multiple levels simultaneously. Taking action against one level only denies the complexity that underlies the threat. 'Taking down' jihadist websites and forums alone (level 1) hardly has any lasting effects, for example. Platform administrators usually anticipate such disruptions and platforms are often back online within a few days, usually from a different location. This *modus ope andi* used by e-jihadis has been identified repeatedly by the AIVD in recent years and guarantees the survival of jihadist websites. Even 'taking down' all four top core forums in 2008 simultaneously has influenced the dynamic interaction between jihadists worldwide only briefly. What's more, the measure has led to a greater adaptability of the jihadist networks that form through such forums (see Chapter 4). Even the dissemination of an ideological counter-message (level 4) is of little use in countering terrorism if it is not (simultaneously) supported by international measures on the other four levels.
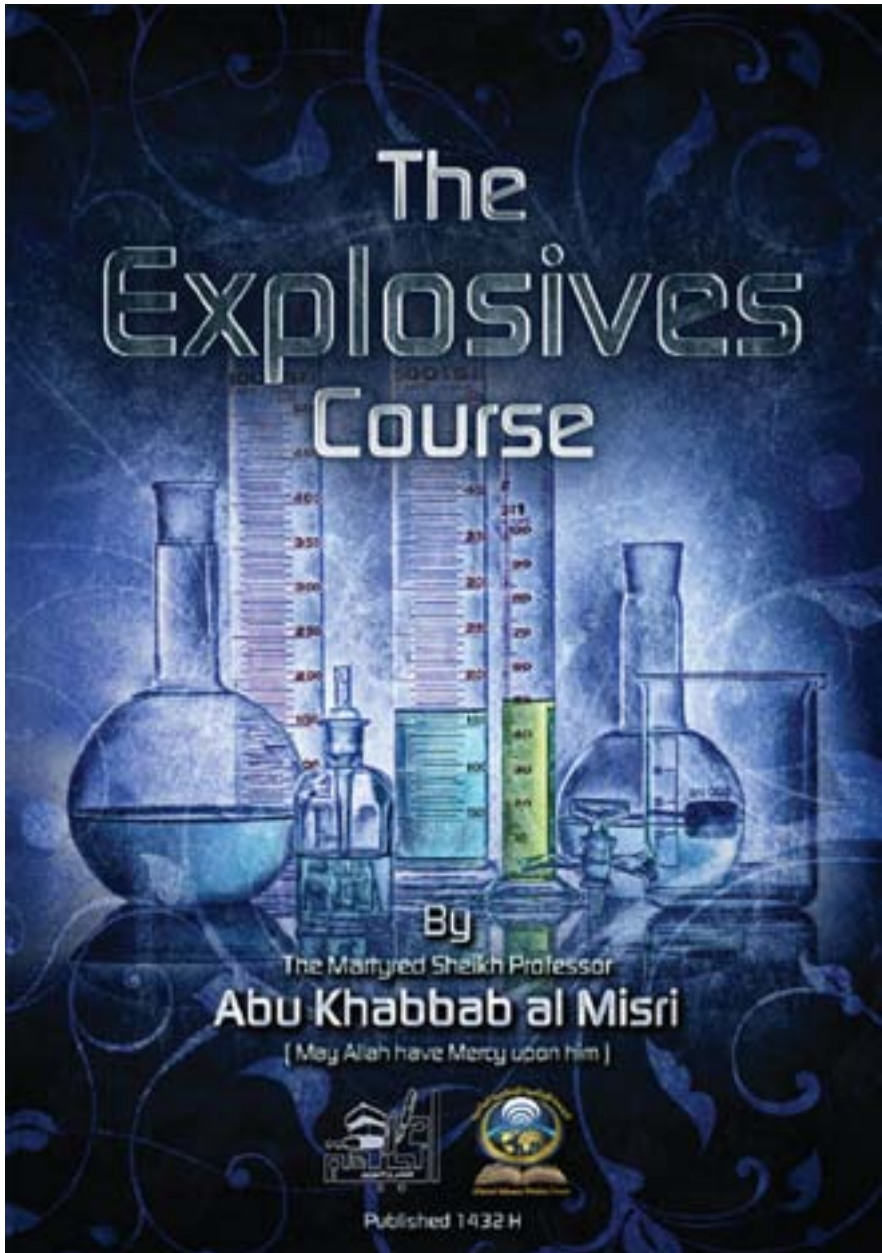
Professionally designed title page of a well-known jihadist manual on bomb-making

3. Greatest threat comes from a few types of actors

Various individuals (actors) play an important role in the aforementioned processes. Depending on their influence and the threat they generate, the AIVD distinguishes five actor groups: members of jihadist organisations, representatives of jihadist organisations, producers, consumers and lone wolves. These actor groups are mostly active on core forums. Of course there can be some overlap between these actor groups. Consumers may, for example, become lone wolves who resort to (violent) action.

3.1 'Members' of jihadist organisations

A serious threat emanates from individuals who are clandestinely active on jihadist websites and belong to jihadist organisations, such as core Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Shabaab or the Islamic Jihad Union.[9] The online presence of this extremely small group is virtually undetectable. The 'virtual' threat emanating from members of jihadist organisations particularly lies in the fact that they can use the Internet to get in touch with Western jihadists and help them to participate in Jihad or to mount an attack. The AIVD has identified a few such cases.

Members of jihadist organisations also pose an indirect threat as they fuel core forums with unique propaganda material.

3.2 'Representatives' of jihadist organisations

Jihadist organisations are also represented online by and can be contacted through middlemen. These informal 'representatives' are well versed in forum protocols and are trusted by the members of jihadist organisations. They bridge the gap between these two worlds. The presence of this small group is difficult to detect. The virtual contacts between such representatives and westerners can pose a substantial threat as well.

3.3 Jihadist 'producers'

Consequently, the organizers behind these jihadist websites are not (members of) jihadist organisations   they are the so-called 'producers' of jihadist websites. This medium-sized group of fanatical jihadists sets up, maintains and (ideologically) 'feeds' the key gathering places of online Jihadism. The most important and influential producers are the core forum *administ ato s* and *mode ato s*. Administrators fund and build the core Web forums. Moderators are often the most fanatical users. They have proven their ideological position and loyalty, and monitor the content and direction in the jihadist discourse.

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[9] Hereafter called 'members' of jihadist organisations for the sake of clarity.

The AIVD has found a series of remarkable examples of administrators and moderators who have resorted to violent jihadist action, particularly in the past five years. Several cases have also appeared in the media, such as Humam al-Balawi, a former jihadist forum moderator who killed seven CIA officers and a Jordanian citizen in a suicide attack. Another one is Malika al-Aroud, a former jihadist forum administrator who wanted to free an imprisoned Belgian jihadist, or Haitham bin Muhammad al-Khayyat, a former administrator of various jihadist forums, who was killed in an air raid in Afghanistan. The last example is Khattab al-Thaqafi, a former jihadist forum administrator who was killed during the jihadist struggle in Afghanistan.

The category of producers does not only include individuals who are part of the core forum organisation. Certain forum members who make a more substantive contribution also fall in this category, for example jihadist ideologists whose knowledge, opinion and advice are highly valued and who have a radicalising effect. The AIVD has identified various cases in which core forum members contacted jihadist ideologists without the help of intermediaries. Such contacts can inspire violence.

In addition, a number of forum members can be qualified as producers because of their expertise and experience, such as explosives experts feeding jihadist cyberspace with a continuous flow of manuals for manufacturing explosives, detonators and explosive belts, for example.

Forum members who claim to be taking part in the jihadist struggle in such countries as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen or Somalia, and who write about it or post jihadist videos are also held in great esteem. Such 'correspondents' set in motion the propaganda cycle on jihadist websites. Postings about their activities at the jihadist front are very popular. When such experienced fighters die and become martyrs, they remain icons for many forum members. One forum member reacted when a prominent member of various forums became a martyr: "I feel so ashamed of myself that I am one of those who is left behind." [10] Another forum member wrote: "My heart rips apart seeing others I know achieve the greatest success while I am still here sitting on my buttocks."

It does not always take an Arab background to become a respected and influential producer. Some recent cases prove that Western locals can also attain this status.

[10] Quote from a forum member in *inSITE*, November 2009 Vol. 2, No. 9, page 23.
[11] Quote from a forum member in *inSITE Western Jihadist Forums*, February 2010, page 5.

A well-known case is Faical Errai, a Spanish citizen who was arrested on 27 August 2010 on suspicion of working as a core forum administrator and of virtually recruiting jihadists for the struggle in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Chechnya. By virtue of their online influence, such Western producers are able to introduce other Western jihadists to experienced jihadist Internet contacts. Only an in-depth intelligence investigation into the real and virtual lives of these Western producers can lead to a correct threat assessment. It may determine that they hardly constitute a physical threat, but that their virtual activities do pose a substantial threat, for example because they incite others to violence or introduce them to jihadists that are prepared to resort to violence.

3.4 Jihadist 'consumers'

These groups of respected and influential producers contribute to the success of a core forum. They therefore hold considerable informal power on jihadist websites. Such a position is highly coveted and sought after by the large group of remaining users, the so-called 'consumers'. This group takes in all the glory activities undertaken by producers. (As yet) most consumers lack the specific jihadist knowledge, expertise and/ or connections to turn their Jihad dreams into action. They often spend many hours a day online, absorbing all the jihadist information they can possibly get their hands on. Consumers are often also (still) active on the surface Web. They play an important role in the republication of propaganda on the surface Web and can therefore be viewed as the 'carriers' of the jihadist ideology on the Internet.

Consumers regularly stand out because of their eager contributions to and threats posted on core forums. They publicly state they want to die and become martyrs for 'the cause', ask how they can participate in Jihad, propose all kinds of possible targets and incite other forum members to violence. In 2008 a consumer named Abu Omar wrote on a core forum about the urge he felt to make such calls and threats: "From the moment I wake up until the moment I go to sleep, this is what I go throughout the day.... My thoughts are limited to the following questions: How can I terrorize the enemy, at this time and with this machine his computer]? Can this thing be adjusted to be used against the enemies of Allah. Frankly I do not watch TV..... In my spare time I occupy myself by thinking about a new terrorist idea..." [12] This and other consumer postings are regularly discovered by think tanks, bloggers and scientists monitoring jihadist websites, who often pass on such consumer statements to traditional media.

Online consumer calls and threats contribute to a changing and more diffuse threat assessment in the West. As they often lack the knowledge, expertise and/or connections to actually make good on their threat, the real threat emanating from this group is much less severe than their postings may suggest.

[12] Quote from a forum member in *inSITE*, January 2010, Vol. 2, No. 10, page 21.

However, this does not mean that their calls fall on deaf ears. Sooner or later, core forum consumers may obtain the necessary support to turn their jihadist aspirations into action on their own, for instance when they 'climb the informal hierarchical ladder'. Abu Omar managed to reach Iraq a year later, where he was killed in an air raid even before he was able to carry out his planned suicide attack. [3] Particularly in the past five years the AIVD has identified many cases of jihadist consumers who eventually make the leap to the use of violent action.

As mentioned above, the respect and power held by jihadist website producers are highly coveted. There are various well-known cases of consumers who stand out because of their eagerness to take part in the Jihad movement, but who are in fact looking for some virtual attention. Such 'attention seekers' are often continuously online, post a lot and make extremely radical statements on the Internet. But they are not influential and do not pose a threat, neither in their virtual life nor in real life. Such individuals mostly crave the virtual attention and respect they can gain on core forums.

Assessing the threat emanating from activities undertaken by consumers and 'attention seekers' is usually a complex and time-consuming task. It often takes a lengthy deployment of special investigative powers before the AIVD can separate the 'doers' from the 'talkers'.

Various influential individuals in the public debate on online Jihadism, including scientists and journalists, regularly overestimate the threat posed by jihadist consumers. They generally subscribe to the concept that online Jihadism is directed by Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and that consumers are therefore guided by these organisations (see Paragraph 1.1). Such an assumption may lead to a distorted picture of the power held by the group of jihadist consumers. These influential people fall into the propaganda trap of jihadists who hint at the existence of central leadership and exaggerate the influence and threat exerted by the worldwide Jihad movement.

3.5 Jihadist 'lone wolves'
Intelligence and security services often discuss the phenomenon of 'lone wolf' terrorism. This term is mostly used to designate individuals who are not actively involved in a physical network and who single-handedly make the leap to the use of (violent) action on jihadist grounds. Most lone wolves do not appear in police or intelligence and security service records prior to their act. The term 'lone wolf' is only used *afte* an individual resorts to violence, regardless of their success or failure.

The AIVD is aware of the fact that lone wolves often plot and carry out a (violent) act on their own, but has found that they rarely radicalise in complete isolation. As described above, the AIVD argues that radicalisation is a social phenomenon. This also applies to most lone wolves.

[13] See *inSITE* of January 2010, Vol. 2, Nr. 10, page 21.

In the aftermath of such events, it is often discovered that lone wolves hardly had any contact with like-minded individuals in real life, but did maintain active contact with people on the Internet. In retrospect, it is then concluded that these contacts, as well as the consumption of jihadist propaganda and the online discourse, have contributed to their radicalisation and (may also) have inspired them to commit such a (violent) act. They do not take part in newly formed cells or call for back-up in their efforts to put a plan into action. They have (immediately) turned the collective online dream into individual reality. As a result, there is only a small probability that police or intelligence and security services will identify lone wolves at an early stage.

3.6 Interaction on virtual marketplace poses international threat

The AIVD views jihadist cyberspace as a virtual marketplace where jihadist supply and demand meet and which focuses on violent Jihad. This is where experienced jihadists get in touch with young enthusiastic wannabes who are eager to leave for jihadist conflict zones. Respected ideologists meet the persistent demand for jihadist concepts and ideas, and for their personal comments, explosives experts fulfil the demand for potential means of attack, and correspondents satisfy the great hunger for new propaganda material. All these actors forge shorter or longer-term alliances. Their background and the fact that the Internet does not stop at national borders generate an international threat.

On 2 March 2011 lone wolf Arid Uka shot dead two US airmen and wounded two others at Frankfurt Airport. Uka, who worked at the airport, accosted them in front of an army bus and asked if they were going to Afghanistan. When they said they were he opened fire. Uka said he derived his inspiration for the attack from a jihadist Internet propaganda video showing American soldiers raping Muslim women. He had watched this footage on the morning of the attack.

This illustration was distributed on a core forum, making it very clear that waging Jihad in the Netherlands is permitted by Allah

4. Online Jihadism boosted by two developments

The dynamic interaction that takes place between the actors groups described in chapter 3 specifically focuses on and/or leads to violence or the facilitation thereof, for instance participation in jihadist combat (training) in conflict zones, cell formation with a view to carrying out attacks and virtual activities aimed at facilitating violent action. Nowadays a prominent part of these activities originate from within jihadist cyberspace.

What has caused online Jihadism to become such a powerful catalyst for international violent Jihad in the past decade? Chapter 4 describes two important developments that have boosted online Jihadism: the globalisation and the professionalisation of virtual Jihad.

Countries	User Growth (2001-2011)
Afghanistan	99,900.0%
Algeria	9,300.0%
Egypt	4,374.7%
Iraq	2,500.0%
Jordan	1,268.3%
Kuwait	633.3%
Lebanon	264.5%
Libya	3,439.0%
Morocco	13,113.0%
Oman	1,527.8%
Pakistan	15,158.4%
Qatar	1,779.3%
Saudi Arabia	5,600.0%
Somalia	52,900.0%
Syria	14,796.7%
Tunisia	3,500.0%
United Arab Emirates	383.7%
Yemen	15,560.0%

Internet usage growth statistics in various Islamic countries between 2001 and 2011
(source: www.internetworldstats.com)

4.1 Globalisation of virtual Jihad

The AIVD has found that the worldwide growth of the number of Internet users has led to a globalisation of virtual Jihad. The Internet is causing a growing number of people from a growing number of countries to be touched and inspired by jihadist ideas. Jihadist organisations such as Al-Qaeda merely play an inspiring and hardly a central guiding role in this development.

The number of Internet users has grown exponentially in the past decade, particularly in the Islamic countries in the Middle East, Northern and Eastern Africa and South Asia. A whole new generation has gone online in these areas, and part of them are radicalising online. The number of jihadist core forum consumers originating from these regions has therefore increased steeply over the past few years.

Internet usage is growing fastest in jihadist hotspots, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. A growing number of more experienced jihadists from these countries are coming online, driving and enriching the dynamics of online Jihadism with their knowledge, expertise and connections, thus bridging a knowledge and experience gap. Western jihadist consumers and the aforementioned new group of jihadist consumers from Islamic countries increasingly make direct contact with these experienced jihadists. As a result, more and more consumers are enabled to travel to said hotspots in order to take part in jihadist activities. They can pose a threat to Western interests in the region or to the West itself if they return.

In 2012 all these (new) actor groups from different geographical areas have converged on this virtual marketplace. This is where they establish widespread, international, virtual networks that can pose a serious threat. The geographical distance between members in these networks is not deemed to be a limiting factor.

The globalisation of virtual Jihad has caused online Jihadism to become more booming and more fragmented than ever. An increasing number of mostly international-oriented platforms preach global Jihad and draw an international crowd. Most platforms use Arabic and English. Compared with a few years ago, the number of national jihadist platforms and their influence have dwindled. As online Jihadism globalises, the threat to the West can emanate from a large number of countries. In other words, pinpointing the origin of the threat to the West has become increasingly difficult.

4.2 Professionalisation of virtual Jihad

In the past ten years e-jihadists have managed to professionalise their activities in various areas. A wide variety of global counter-terrorist actions have led to greater security awareness, including on jihadist websites and forums. This security awareness manifests itself in an aggressive promotion of safe behaviour online and an increased use of usually free software to encrypt technical access to and communication on the Internet. As a result, more and more jihadist actor groups are capable of concealing their identity, their location and the content of their communications.

The decrease in the number of national jihadist websites and forums and the waning influence of these platforms is also visible in the Netherlands. There are three reasons why the number of active Dutch-language jihadist platforms is so small. First of all, local networks in the Netherlands have lost most of their influence after 2006. For years they have shown little activity and growth. A co-ordinated preventive and active terrorism policy countering the (virtual) activities of Dutch jihadists has contributed to this. In other words, the support for Dutch-language jihadist platforms has waned considerably: there are hardly any producers to set up such platforms and the group of Dutch-speaking consumers is small.

Second, most Dutch jihadists have come to focus on the Jihad abroad in recent years, as evidenced by their contacts with foreign jihadist groups and their desire to wage Jihad in conflict zones elsewhere. In the virtual world, Dutch jihadists find these contacts on international jihadist platforms, rather than on national websites.

A third factor is that Dutch jihadists are often sufficiently proficient in English or Arabic to take part in this international environment. In other words, they do not need Dutch-language jihadist platforms. The small group of Dutch jihadists that play an active role in online Jihadism particularly manifest themselves on international jihadist websites and forums, where they often play a mere marginal role.[14]

Jihadist activities have become less visible and more difficult to trace back to a person. This anonymization propels the jihadist discourse further: anonymous and untraceable users send an increasingly violent message.

The production of propaganda, which is crucial to online Jihadism, has also become much more professional over the past decade. The emergence of free data hosting and fast and cheap Internet connections using desktop and mobile devices, as well as the growing importance of jihadist media organisations and social media, have enabled a strong increase and proliferation of jihadist ideology on the Internet. This professionalisation also becomes evident from the emergence of advanced jihadist propaganda designed to be used on mobile telephones, smart phones and other mobile devices.

The quality of jihadist propaganda content, in particular of photographs and images, has improved significantly as well. The emergence of fast and cheap Internet connections also plays a role in this regard. Uploading and downloading professional videos is no longer a problem, not even in remote jihadist conflict zones. Other graphic material has also become more professional, such as magazines. In addition, jihadist propaganda has been focusing increasingly on specific target groups, particularly in the past five years.

[14] The first two reasons in this paragraph are elaborately addressed in de AIVD publication *Local jihadist networks in the Netherlands, an evolving threat* (2010)

This narrowcasting of propaganda targets jihadist women, a specific language area or a certain region, for example..

The narrowcasting of propaganda targeting Western Muslims is of particular relevance to threat assessments. Such propaganda increasingly incites local Muslims to commit terrorist attacks in the West and describes in simple terms how this can be achieved. This message increasingly seems to incite Western Muslims to take violent action. Particularly the English-language magazine *Inspi e* promotes these ideas by publishing such articles as *Make a bomb in the kitchen of you mom*.

The AIVD has established that such propaganda is increasingly written by Western jihadists themselves, who have made a virtual 'career' on core forums. The AVID has also observed that propaganda material increasingly features pictures of Western jihadists fighting in jihadist conflict zones.

The jihadist magazine Inspire *illustrates the narrowcasting of propaganda for Muslims living in the West. The professional design ensured by Samir Khan, who grew up in the US, is what partly gives this magazine great appeal*

5. Conclusions

The AIVD concludes that online Jihadism, as well as participating networks, groups and individuals, prove highly resilient and adaptable. Due to the globalisation of virtual Jihad, the threat generated by online Jihadism in 2012 can be traced back to many different countries and new actor groups. The professionalisation of virtual Jihad is allowing a growing number of jihadist actor groups to mask their identity, their location and the content of their communications. It also generates an abundance of high-quality jihadist propaganda that is increasingly capable of radicalising individuals around the globe.

In other words, the globalisation and professionalisation of virtual Jihad have boosted the effects of online Jihadism, allowing it to become a breeding ground for new jihadist networks and individuals. The AIVD has found that the virtual pool of new jihadists offered by online Jihadism may be a lifeline for jihadist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda, whose physical manoeuvring space has been increasingly reduced over the past decade.

In the publication *Violent Jihad in the Nethe lands*, released in 2006, the AIVD still

This illustration stresses secure communication and the use of encryption

drew some tentative conclusions on various aspects of the 'virtualisation' of violent Jihad and argued that: "…this virtualisation trend in particular will be essential in the future jihadist threat against Europe and the Netherlands." Now, six years later, the AIVD has found that an important part of the ideological and organisational development of jihadist networks and individuals indeed takes place on and with the help of the Internet. The virtualisation of Jihad is particularly essential in the current jihadist threat to the West.

The AIVD has established, for instance, that a considerable number of (foiled) attack plots against Western targets had a prominent virtual component, particularly in the past three years. The AIVD has also identified that the anonymous discourse and the professional propaganda posted on jihadist websites and forums inspire a growing number of jihadist actor groups to take (violent) action. An increasing number of jihadist producers (particularly administrators and moderators) turn their virtual Jihad dreams into violent action or active participation. More and more jihadist consumers acquire the knowledge, expertise and connections they need to act on their violent intentions after being deeply immersed in jihadist cyberspace. In addition, the number of lone wolves that, inspired by the radical discourse and propaganda posted on jihadist websites and forums, autonomously make the leap to the use of violence is on the rise. All of this produces a very diffuse and complex international threat assessment for 2012.

The AIVD expects that online Jihadism will continue to play an important role in national and international assessments in the short and medium term. It is expected that in years to come online Jihadism will be a crucial, binding and organising factor in a substantial part of attack plots against the West and Western citizens and against their interests abroad. The AIVD endeavours to counter this threat, for example by informing and mobilising (inter)national partners at an early stage.