



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

# **Jihadist women, a threat not to be underestimated**



Naive girls who follow the love of their life, women who are even more radical than their husbands, or women who ‘accidentally’ find themselves in the ‘caliphate’– the reporting on jihadist women is dominated by stereotypes. Questions such as ‘What role do women play in the jihadist movement?’ and ‘What kind of threat do jihadist women pose?’ often remain unanswered, even though they are very relevant right now. In the last two years, a number of jihadist women in Europe have attempted to carry out a terrorist attack. Media reports on women who have fled ISIS-controlled territory and want to return to the Netherlands are also on the rise.

The role that these jihadist women play within the jihadist movement should not be underestimated. In many cases, jihadist women are at least as dedicated to jihadism as men. They pose a threat to the Netherlands by recruiting others, producing and disseminating propaganda, and raising funds. Moreover, they indoctrinate their children with jihadist ideology. Women form an essential part of the jihadist movement, both in the Netherlands and in the conflict area in Syria and Iraq.

<100 women in the Netherlands

>80 women in Syria and Iraq

In this publication, the AIVD examines the role played and threat posed by jihadist women in the Netherlands and in the conflict area in Syria and Iraq. As of November 2017, there are around one hundred women in the Netherlands who adhere to jihadist ideology. In addition at least eighty Dutch women have travelled to Syria and Iraq since 2012. Never before has such a large number of women travelled to a jihadist conflict area. As the vast majority of these women have joined ISIS, the focus of this publication is on Dutch women in ISIS-controlled territory.

### Jihadist ideology

Jihadists adhere to an extremist Islamic ideology, in which the glorification of violent religious conflict plays a central role. One characteristic of jihadism is the denunciation of those with different beliefs (takfir) and the endorsement of the use of violence (the exact interpretation of these two themes is subject to much debate within jihadism). The adherents of jihadist ideology strive for a society that approximates as closely as possible what they believe is presented in the original sources of Islam.

## The threat posed by jihadist women

Within the jihadist movement there is no consensus on the use of women in conflict. There are examples of women being used to carry out suicide attacks, notably by the precursors of present-day ISIS (Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), respectively), and by Al-Shabaab. Al-Qaeda mainly assigns women a ‘supporting’ role and does not permit women to carry out attacks. Until recently, this was also the case for ISIS.

At present, however, ISIS views the role of women as one that is more active and violent. ISIS is a pragmatic and opportunistic organisation that is searching for new possibilities, especially in view of its dwindling numbers of male fighters. If this development continues, the violent threat posed by jihadist women in the conflict zone and in the Netherlands may well increase.

In Europe there are several cases of women who have been praised in ISIS propaganda and by ISIS sympathizers because they wanted to carry out attacks in ISIS' name. Take, for example, the women who left a car filled with gas canisters and petrol near Notre Dame in Paris in September 2016 after receiving direction from ISIS-controlled territory. There is a possibility that a woman in the Netherlands, inspired by jihadist propaganda or encouraged by jihadists in the conflict area or elsewhere, could choose to commit an attack.

Besides the threat of violence, jihadist women in the Netherlands and Dutch jihadist travellers also pose an indirect threat, in the form of less violent and supporting activities that are crucial for the survival and desired expansion of the jihadist movement. These include recruitment, the production and dissemination of propaganda, the raising of funds, and the indoctrination of their children with jihadist ideology. Also by travelling and helping other jihadists in their travel, caring for fighters, and encouraging others to commit violence in the name of the jihad, women support the fight and pose a threat to the Netherlands.

## Radicalisation in the Netherlands

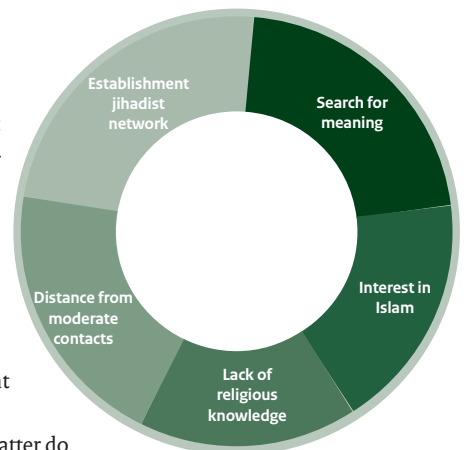
Close to a hundred women in the Netherlands are adherents of jihadist ideology. They consciously choose this ideology during their radicalisation process. Most women become part of a jihadist social network during this process of radicalisation.

Women who become radicalised often lack religious knowledge.

As they become interested in Islam, these women embark on an active search for information, during which they will come into contact with jihadists who use lectures, articles, social media and websites to present their version of Islam as the true faith. These jihadists often attempt to isolate women from their moderate contacts, by telling them that the latter do not follow the true version of Islam. Some women believe this and turn their backs on concerned friends, parents and religious leaders. Their isolation strengthens the influence their jihadist contacts have over their thinking.

Most women are in contact with one or more jihadists during their radicalisation process; a friend, a partner, a family member or online contact. The Internet and social media make it easier for women to come into contact with jihadists in the Netherlands and abroad. These women do not always immediately realise that their contacts are jihadists, although some intentionally seek out jihadists to talk to. Some women radicalise largely without any contact with jihadists, and only come into contact with like-minded people at a later time.

Jihadists present themselves to women as part of a global Muslim community that these women can be a member of. This notion of belonging is part of the appeal for these women. In this community, women can easily find (jihadist) female friends and male suitors. Thus they come into contact with and become part of a jihadist social



network in a short period of time. Once the women are in the network, their jihadist contacts exert a strong influence over them, because they have become their friends and partners, and because there is no room for contact with people with different ideas.

Adherents of jihadist ideology denounce Dutch society and the Dutch government.

Jihadists paint a vision of reality in which female Muslims will never be welcome in the Netherlands, due to their religious or ethnic background. An Islamic state, such as the so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq, is presented as a place where women can practise their faith free from discrimination. There women can contribute to the building of an Islamic state, for example by marrying fighters and having children. Even now that the so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq is collapsing, the notion of the ideal jihadist state continues to appeal to these women.

Age distribution

- 9 - 16
- 16 - 20
- 21 - 25
- 26 - 30
- 31 - 35
- 36 - 40
- 41 - 45



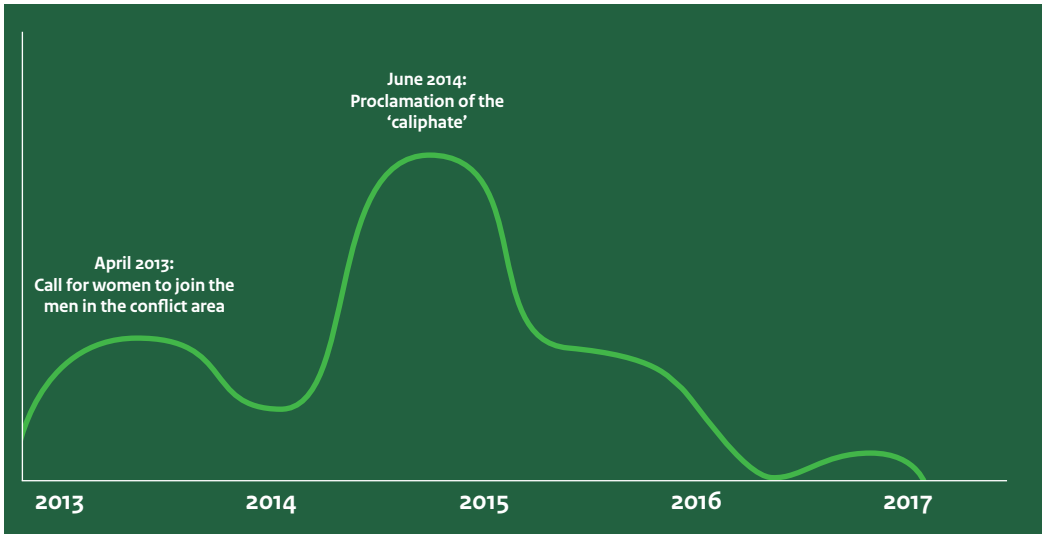
Once radicalised, jihadist women in the Netherlands try to persuade other men and women to believe in their ideas. They do so by entering into online and offline discussions and by disseminating jihadist propaganda. This propaganda often focuses on the plight of Muslims (especially children) in war zones, discrimination in the West, and the jihadists' justification of violence as a legitimate response. In addition to sharing propaganda, some jihadist women in the Netherlands help jihadist travellers or those attempting to leave by offering material support, putting them in touch with facilitators, or by hiding the fact that someone has left or is trying to leave in order to join the 'caliphate'.

## Jihadist travel to the war zone

Despite the increasing military pressure on jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, particularly ISIS, there are still women in the Netherlands who want to travel to the conflict area. Jihadist propaganda plays an important role in the desire to leave.

Since 2012, at least eighty Dutch women have made the journey to the conflict area. A considerable number of them left in 2013 and 2014, after jihadist groups called on women to join their husbands who had travelled there and the so-called caliphate was founded.

Most of the women joined ISIS, while a smaller group ended up with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a militant group allied with al-Qaeda. In most cases, Dutch women knew they were travelling to a violent conflict area and would be joining jihadist groups there. For some of them propaganda and conversations with jihadist contacts had painted an unrealistic picture of the life that awaited them and their children.



*Time of departure*

## Life with ISIS

ISIS is under increasing pressure and the so-called caliphate is rapidly collapsing. Until mid-2016, women were treated uniformly by ISIS. On arrival in the 'caliphate' women were to stay in a 'women's house' which they were not allowed to leave until they found a husband or the husband with whom they had travelled had passed his interrogation and completed his training. These houses were small, dirty and infested with vermin; food was often short. After a woman was allowed to leave the women's house, she still spent the greater part of the day indoors. According to ISIS' strict rules of conduct, women were only allowed to go outside if accompanied by a male family member. It is unclear whether these rules are still in force, now that the so-called caliphate is collapsing. Some women could be using the current situation to evade these rules.

Following their arrival in the conflict zone, most Dutch women have expanded their jihadist networks. They are in contact with jihadist women of various nationalities. Sharing a cultural background plays an essential binding role in this; Dutch-speaking women seek each other out and there is little contact with local women.

The lives of Dutch women revolve around caring for their husbands. Most women in the conflict area are married and the vast majority have children. Women run the household so that their husbands can devote themselves to other matters, for example the violent jihad. For some widows the death of a husband is seen as an honour, whereas for other women it could contribute to their desire to return to their country of origin. Widows are encouraged to remarry. Caring for offspring is another primary task for women, who are expected to bear many children and to raise them in accordance with ISIS' ideas and principles. Mothers play an important role in the ideological indoctrination of their children and in passing on ISIS' radical interpretation of Islam. There are at least 100 Dutch children in the conflict area, largely concentrated in ISIS-controlled territory. Most of these children are

very young. Many Dutch women who travelled to Syria or Iraq become pregnant there, making it difficult to verify how many children are born in the conflict area. Children born to Dutch mothers in the conflict area are not officially known to the Dutch authorities.

In the early days of the so-called caliphate, Dutch women occupied themselves with recruitment, fundraising, and the production and dissemination of propaganda. Due to mounting military pressure and reduced access to the Internet and other means of communication, such activities have largely been curtailed. A small number of women play supporting roles as teachers or nurses to the wounded. Dutch women are not known to have taken part in the Al Khansaa brigade, the female ISIS police force that monitors strict observance of the sharia and the moral code for women in ISIS territory.

A number of Dutch women with ISIS have direct experience with violence. Some have received weapons training. Women in the conflict area are permitted to carry weapons and suicide belts, and a considerable number of Dutch women do so, sometimes under pressure from their husbands. The weapons and training are mainly for the purpose of self-defence. A small number of Dutch women have expressed the desire to engage in acts of violence for ISIS, for example on the battlefield.

## Life with HTS

The lives of Dutch women with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the organisation formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, differ in some respects from life with ISIS. Most women are married to HTS fighters, generally also someone from the Netherlands, and have children. Just as with ISIS, their primary tasks are raising their children and caring for their husbands. Women with HTS, however, have more freedom of movement than women with ISIS. They are able to participate independently in activities outside the home. These activities seem to be less explicitly focused on the expansion of the jihadist movement than the activities of women with ISIS. There are no indications that Dutch women with HTS are actively taking part in the recruitment of others or participating in armed conflict.

## Returning to the Netherlands

Not all women want to stay in the jihadist conflict area; this is particularly true of Dutch women with ISIS. Disappointment, the reality of life in a war zone and increasing military pressure contribute to the desire to return. Women who want to leave are afraid that the jihadist group will take their children away from them, or that they will be separated from their children when they return to the Netherlands.

Returning to the Netherlands is not easy, partly because jihadist groups take steps to prevent men and women from going back. The complex logistical situation in and especially around the conflict area also plays a role. Nevertheless, to date more than ten women have returned to the Netherlands, mainly before 2015 when it was still fairly easy to organise such a return.

For some of the female returnees, disillusionment played a major role in their decision. The fact that they come back disappointed does not mean they have renounced their jihadist ideas. In the Netherlands, a number of them have resumed their old roles, or even taken more prominent positions in their jihadist social networks.

The subsequent attention from the authorities and the public can raise a female returnee's profile among jihadists. Other women seem to want little more to do with their jihadist contacts after they return.

## Jihadist women in the future

As military pressure on the jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq increases, more Dutch women will try to flee. There is a significant difference between these women and earlier returnees. The women who returned before 2017 stayed an average of six months in the conflict area. The women who are still in Syria or Iraq right now, have on average been there for three years. These women have been exposed to jihadist ideology and violence for a longer time, and they have built an international jihadist network. After their return to the Netherlands a considerable number of them will retain their jihadist ideas and connections, to a greater or lesser extent.

The threat posed by jihadist women in the conflict area is also influenced by military pressure. With the increasing shortage of male fighters, some jihadist groups like ISIS are likely prepared to mobilize women, and the role of those who stay behind could become violent. In that case Dutch women might also be called upon to contribute to the fight in Syria and Iraq. They could be killed in the fighting, or return to the Netherlands with experience in violence.

If jihadist groups do assign a violent role to women, this will also have an influence on jihadist women in the Netherlands. Until recently, the fact that ISIS and al-Qaeda did not explicitly allow women to commit attacks may have acted as a barrier. Now that ISIS is encouraging women to participate in the fight, women in the Netherlands could be inspired to turn to violence.

### Future returnees

- Have been in the conflict area for a longer time
- Have been exposed to jihadist ideology for a longer time
- Have a larger international jihadist network

## Conclusion

The direct and indirect threat posed by jihadist women should not be underestimated. Not only do they support the jihadist cause with crucial activities, but some women in the conflict area are also prepared to take up arms. Furthermore it very much remains to be seen if these women will abandon their jihadist ideology after they return to the Netherlands. As a result of the influence of ISIS and the collapsing 'caliphate', the threat posed by jihadist women in the Netherlands and in the conflict area is subject to rapid change.





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