



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

Focus on Returnees



Threat posed by returnees potentially great

Individuals returning from a period in a jihadist conflict zone form an important part of the broader jihadist threat to the Netherlands. The threat posed by returnees is potentially large, ranging from radicalisation and recruitment to planning and carrying out attacks. Even a relatively minor increase in the number of returnees can result in a sizable increase in the threat to Dutch national security.

The AIVD expects the number of returnees travelling back to Europe to rise in the period ahead. The same applies to the number of Dutch nationals returning after staying in the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq. While it is difficult to predict how the situation will develop, the AIVD expects that returnees will trickle back to the Netherlands, rather than arrive in large numbers at the same time.

The increase in the number of returnees is due to the militant jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq being increasingly driven into a corner. Particularly the terrorist group Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is losing ground. The living conditions in the so-called caliphate established by ISIS are steadily worsening due to air strikes and a lack of basic facilities such as good healthcare.

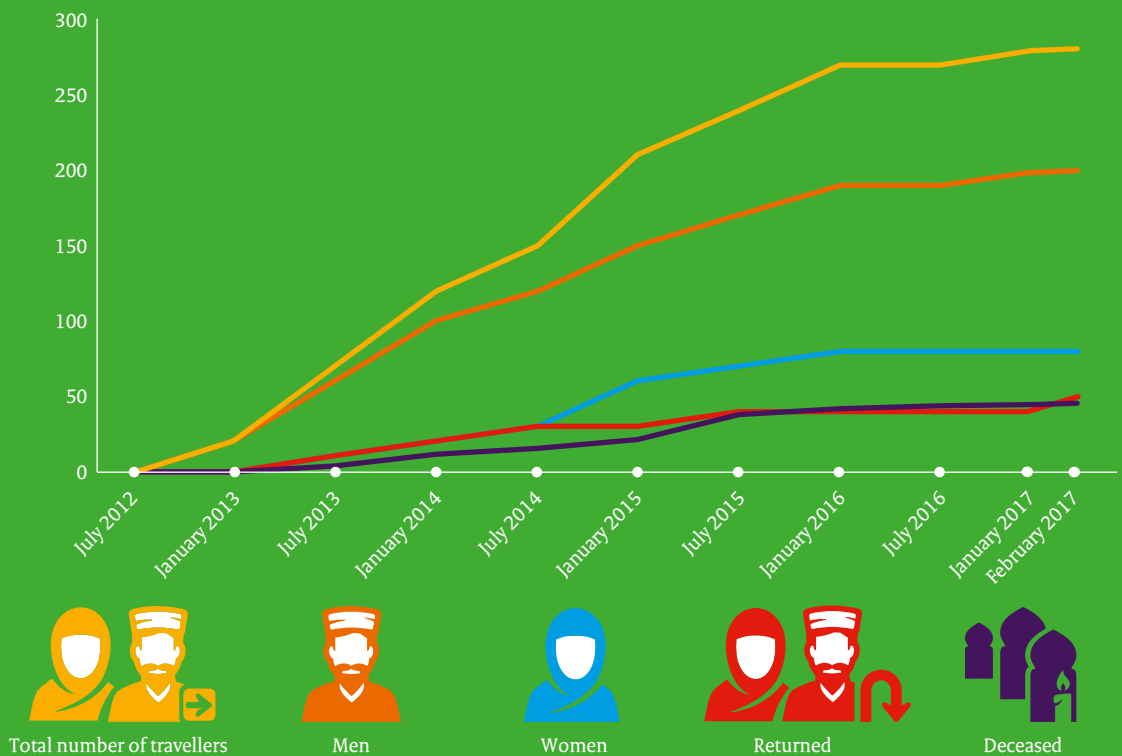
Returning after staying in a conflict zone

The AIVD defines returnees as individuals who have travelled to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq with jihadist intentions, and for whom it has been ascertained that they reached the conflict zone and are now returning to the Netherlands. This includes jihadists who departed for the conflict zone from a country other than the Netherlands, and subsequently travel to the Netherlands. This second aspect is particularly relevant in light of the fact that returnees from other countries within the European Union can stay in the Netherlands.

The year 2016 saw a strong decrease in the number of jihadist travellers leaving the Netherlands to join jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. Approximately 280 people have successfully reached Syria and Iraq since the start of the conflict (figure as of 1 February 2017). Most of the Dutch jihadist travellers have joined ISIS. A small proportion is with the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra).

Approximately a third of Dutch jihadist travelers are women. At least 80 Dutch children are currently in the conflict zone. Approximately half of these children were born there, while the rest were taken there by one or both parent(s). Less than 20 per cent of these children are nine years of age or older. Because children in ISIS-held territory sometimes receive weapons and combat training from as young as nine years old, the AIVD categorizes children from this age as jihadist travellers. Minors who have travelled to the conflict zone independently are also viewed as jihadist travellers.

About 50 jihadist travellers have now returned to the Netherlands from the conflict zone. Most of these returned before 2015. Approximately a third of these returnees are women. The returnees also include families and several women that form or formed a family with a Dutch or foreign husband still in the conflict zone. Up until now, more than 10 Dutch children have completed the trip to and back from the conflict zone together with their parents. These children were all under nine years old, and therefore not counted as returnees. Children over the age of nine who return from ISIS-held territory are counted as returnees.



Development in numbers of Dutch travellers and returnees

The threat posed by returnees

Returnees played a role in several of the attacks carried out or foiled in Western Europe since January 2015. In the Paris and Brussels attacks, in November 2015 and March 2016 respectively, a mix of trained and guided returnees, non-European jihadists and local support and facilitation networks was used. The returnees involved in these attacks travelled back to Europe under false identities. They subsequently drew on their local knowledge and old networks to plan and carry out the attacks.

The AIVD distinguishes between various types of returnees based on the threat that they pose to our national security.

For one, the AIVD has identified a small number of Dutch nationals returning from Syria and Iraq whom the service estimates could potentially move on to planning or carrying out attacks, whether or not inspired by or under the instruction of a jihadist group in the conflict zone.

There are also returnees who do not pose a direct threat of violence, but do represent a risk. They are guilty of committing non-violent activities such as recruitment and facilitating violent conflict, plan to travel back to the conflict zone, or they express their sympathy towards the jihadist cause.

Through their activities or through disseminating their ideology, they can incite others to carry out violent acts. Consequently this group also represents a risk to national security.

Lastly, there is a small group of Dutch returnees who appear to have renounced jihadism. Returnees who currently do not present a threat may do so in the future, and vice versa.

Determining the threat posed by returnees

When determining the threat posed by returnees, their behaviour before, during and after they travelled to jihadist territory is important. The individuals involved are often already known to various organisations before they leave the Netherlands, for example for their violent behaviour or social problems.

Length of stay is important



The length of time that the returnees now residing in the Netherlands spent in the conflict zone varies greatly, from a few weeks to a few years. Most of them remain in the conflict zone for just a few months. It is important to determine the length of stay in the conflict zone, as this information can shed light on the experience the returnees could have gained during this period. However, there are also known instances in Europe of returnees who stayed in the conflict zone for just a very short time, but who were nevertheless trained and instructed to commit attacks.

As also described in the AIVD publication *Life with ISIS: the Myth Unravelling (January 2016)*, it can generally be assumed that men who have stayed with a jihadist group for a period exceeding a few weeks will at least have received weapons training. This also applies to men who have joined Tahrir al-Sham. In most cases

men who stayed in the conflict zone for more than a few weeks were eventually also sent into battle. Most women in ISIS-controlled territory perform ancillary tasks, for example in relation to recruitment and facilitation. Many also receive weapons training.

Reason for return provides an indication

When determining the threat posed by returnees, the reason for their return is also of importance. The motivation behind the decision to return is not always easy to establish. In addition to the immediate cause for return (such as medical problems), there may be an underlying motive such as homesickness. Some returnees return to the Netherlands against their will and under severe pressure from, for example, their family. Particularly in cases where nothing is known about the reasons for returning or where there are indications that the returnees were allowed by ISIS to leave the conflict zone, the scenario that they have been sent back to Europe with a mission should be taken into consideration. In addition to carrying out attacks, such a mission could also involve attracting new recruits or following instructions to obtain money or goods – whether or not via criminal means.

In many cases, disillusion is an important factor behind returning. However, the fact that some returnees are disappointed does not mean that they have renounced their radical ideology or violent behaviour. Disenchanting experiences in the conflict zone do not usually result in returnees turning their back on jihadist conceptions.

Knowledge of current situation most important aspect

Although experiences while in the conflict zone are certainly taken into consideration when assessing the threat posed by returnees, up-to-date knowledge of the behaviour, convictions and intentions of these individuals often plays the greatest role when determining the threat they represent. Attention should also be paid to the possibility that returnees offer a less radical pretence than is actually the case, in order to escape the attention of the authorities involved.

Returnees and future threat

In light of the increasing pressure being exerted on ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and the associated deterioration of living conditions in the so-called caliphate, the AIVD expects the number of returnees to increase.

The threat posed by future returnees is expected to be greater than the one that those who returned to the Netherlands before 2017 posed. The threat itself is complex; in addition to a short-term increase in the threat of violence, in the long term, non-violent activities such as recruitment and facilitation can lead to the formation of new international branches of jihadist networks in the Netherlands.

In many instances, future returnees are expected to be more ideologically hardened than the group that has already returned. Children of school age are likely to have been indoctrinated with jihadist teaching material.

Particularly boys from the age of nine that have stayed in ISIS-held territory may have received weapons training and training in making explosives. Children as well as adults may have participated in the fighting or in other acts of violence such as executions. It is possible that these experiences lower the threshold for using violence and can result in traumas.

By now, nearly all of those who left the Netherlands have spent at least a year in the conflict zone.



In light of the battle experience that many of these individuals will have gained, the capabilities of future returnees are generally greater than those of the group that has returned up to now. During their time in the conflict zone, these returnees have also established contacts with regional extremists and other European ISIS members, who either remained there or returned home.

Not all of those who have departed from the Netherlands are expected to return to our country.

Some of the male travellers are likely to perish on the battlefield. Even if ISIS lose their entire territory, it is very likely that the group will continue to exist in some form in the region.

It is possible that some of the surviving Dutch nationals will want to remain member of the group even then. It is also conceivable that ISIS members and their families will join Tahrir al-Sham or another party to the conflict in Syria, attempt to settle in neighbouring countries or relocate to other conflict zones. In this regard, it is important to note that jihadist travellers who choose to seek refuge elsewhere in the region instead of



returning to the Netherlands also pose a potential threat to the Netherlands, for example, by inciting others to carry out an attack against our country.

The current territorial losses suffered by ISIS increase the risk of attacks in the West, as the group becomes keener to prove itself by means of threats and attacks against the West. ISIS' repeated calls to supporters in the West to commit attacks there is one such example. These attacks are a show of force designed to deter enemies and to impress existing members and new recruits. It is very conceivable that ISIS will once again attempt to utilise returnees for attacks.

Conclusion

The AIVD expects the number of returning jihadist travellers to increase little by little in the future.

These returnees pose a greater threat than was previously the case; they stayed in the conflict zone for longer, received weapons training, gained combat experience and built up their jihadist network.

Each individual returnee should be assessed in terms of the threat they pose and what needs to be done to deal with that threat.

Returnees are a part of the jihadist threat against the Netherlands. There also needs to be a continued focus on foreign jihadist networks and, for example, 'stay-at-home jihadists' who have been inspired or encouraged to commit or facilitate attacks.

Go to the website for the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) (nctv.nl) to see which measures are taken to curb the potential threat posed by returnees ('Plan of Action for Returnees').



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