

Home-Grown Terrorism and Radicalisation in the Netherlands
Experiences, Explanations and Approaches

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Chairman Lieberman, Senator Collins, distinguished members of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee,

I would like to thank you for inviting me to testify here today. It's a great honour for me to speak about our experiences with home-grown terrorism in my capacity as Deputy National Coordinator for Counterterrorism in the Netherlands.

I have chosen to limit myself to the subject of Islamic radicalism and jihadism, which is by far the greatest threat to my country at present. I would like to outline what we regard as the main factors contributing to this threat. I will conclude by describing the Dutch approach to counterterrorism. My organisation was established in 2004, following the Madrid bombings, for the purpose of directing Dutch counterterrorist policy. It is our job to enhance cooperation between all agencies and organisations in the Netherlands involved in the fight against terrorism.

Dutch experiences

The horrifying attacks of September 11 opened the eyes of the world to the dangers of jihadist terrorism. Even the Netherlands was not immune to this threat. This realisation was soon driven home by a smaller incident: the death of two young Dutch Muslims in Kashmir in January 2002. Suddenly, we were confronted with the question: what were these two ordinary young men doing in this dangerous part of the world, which had long been the scene of violent clashes between the Indian army and Islamic militants? And why did these young people armed only with knives feel compelled to undertake a foolhardy attack on a heavily armed Indian patrol?

These questions were answered a short time later by the AIVD, the Dutch intelligence and security service. The AIVD had hard evidence that both men had been recruited for the violent jihad by Salafist militants in their hometown of Eindhoven. They had gone to India to join an Islamic fundamentalist movement with the fervent intention of dying as martyrs.

At the time there was widespread disbelief that two young people, both raised in the Netherlands, could be capable of such a thing. They were educated and to all appearances fully integrated into Dutch society. Those close to them – their families and members of the mosque they regularly attended – were equally incredulous. They had noticed nothing unusual, apart from the fact that both had become immersed in their faith. As far as they knew, these were just two deeply religious young men who had gone off to India on vacation.

This incident came as no surprise to the AIVD, but the Dutch public clearly needed to get used to the idea that radicalisation and terrorism did not only happen in faraway places. At that time – early 2002 – many people were shocked that terrorists could be living among them, in their own city or even their own neighbourhood. At the same time there was still a tendency to downplay the extent of the problem. Even if Dutch Muslims were being recruited for the jihad, they were choosing to seek martyrdom elsewhere. They were travelling to the familiar theatres of global jihad, such as Kashmir, Chechnya and the Middle East. The risk that these young radicals could bring the jihad to Western Europe, even to the Netherlands, was conceivable but thought at the time to be minimal.

The reality that terrorists could emerge from our society and strike at domestic targets was made painfully clear on 2 November 2004 with the assassination of filmmaker and columnist Theo van Gogh (a distant relative of the famous painter Vincent van Gogh). The murderer was Mohammed B., a young man of Moroccan extraction who had grown up in Amsterdam. After committing the crime, he instigated a shootout with the police, in the hope that he would die as a martyr, thus ensuring himself a place in paradise. His plan failed – he was only shot in the leg – and he was taken into police custody.

It was later discovered that the murderer of Van Gogh was part of a network of young Dutch jihadists who had fallen under the sway of a Salafist from Syria. This preacher worked in a similar way to the recruiters who had sent the two young men to Kashmir. He urged young people to abandon the mosque in favour of home-based religious instruction, where they could be mentally prepared for the violent jihad. These meetings had come to the attention of the security service, who dubbed the participants the Hofstad group (operation name).

There was one striking difference between the Hofstad group and other networks of jihadists active in the Netherlands. The Hofstad group was not exclusively oriented towards 'Islamic' conflict zones elsewhere in the world. The members wanted to wage jihad in Europe, including the Netherlands. As they saw it, Europe shared responsibility for the suffering of the world's Muslims, and the continent's infidel population had to be punished.

After the bloody bombings of March 2004 in Madrid, the Hofstad group seemed to be making plans for a similar, large-scale attack. The AIVD kept close tabs on members of the group who were in regular contact with each other and travelled abroad. Unfortunately, the security service did not recognise in time that one individual out of this group might also be planning an attack on his own on a single individual (in retribution for allegedly insulting the prophet). Another way in which this group differed from others of its kind was its members' involvement in the political debate about Islam in the Netherlands; to a large extent, they drew their inspiration from the situation in their own country.

In both cases – Eindhoven and Amsterdam – we were dealing with young people who grew up in the Netherlands and became radicalised there. In the Netherlands we use the term 'radicalisation' to refer to a process of personal development whereby an individual adopts ever more extreme political or politico-religious ideas and goals, becoming convinced that the attainment of these goals justifies extreme methods. The term 'terrorist' is then used to refer to radicalised individuals or groups who are willing to spread fear and take human life in pursuit of their political or politico-religious goals. As can be seen from the examples I've discussed, we apply the label 'home-grown' when the radicalisation process has taken place in the Netherlands, regardless of where the terrorist acts are committed.

The terrorist acts committed by Al Qaida over the past several years have cast Islam in a bad light. Militant groups that misuse Islam to justify radicalisation and terrorism are not only found outside the Western world or imported to the Western world. It is a problem rooted in the Muslim experience in the West, especially as it pertains to the younger generation. Radicalisation and terrorism are both domestic and international phenomena, interlinked and interdependent. Globalisation has only intensified this interaction, through large-scale migration, inexpensive flights, broad access to the media, particularly satellite broadcasters, and – above all – the internet.

Explanatory factors

The appearance of home-grown terrorism in the West can be attributed to a variety of factors. Your Congress has asked for the Dutch government's view on what factors contribute to the development of radicalism and terrorism within our own borders. Without claiming to be comprehensive, I would like to mention a number of 'push' and 'pull' factors that could provide an explanation. The pull factors can be defined as the appeal exerted by the radical message and the terrorist networks. Push factors are forces that can alienate people or cause them to reject mainstream society.

When we talk about pull factors, we can't overlook Islamic missionary activities, especially those sponsored by Saudi Arabia. In this way, Salafism has been actively propagated to the world's Muslims since the early 1990s, thereby creating in some cases a breeding ground for radical sympathies. This movement, which has a growing following in the Netherlands, preaches a return to the earliest incarnation of the faith and fiercely opposes all forms of 'non-belief'. As they see it, this includes democracy, Western laws and lifestyles. This message holds an undeniable appeal on account of its simplicity and consistency, not to mention its promise of salvation. Salafism is also characterised by a strong sense of solidarity with the worldwide Muslim community. Most Salafists reject the use of violence, but a fanatical minority wants to defend the faith by the sword and spread it all over the world. Members of this minority are described as jihadist Salafists. For most of the known Dutch terrorists, the non-violent variety of Salafism was the first step towards acceptance of jihadist violence.

So-called Afghanistan veterans have played an important part in establishing and disseminating the radical jihadist philosophy throughout the world. These foreign fighters took part in the resistance to the Russians in the eighties, but after hostilities had ceased, they were often unable to return to their home countries. In many cases they were known to these countries' authorities as Islamic extremists and as such had cause to fear persecution. With their military experience, international contacts and political and ideological drive, these veterans were soon able to win the trust of small groups of other Muslims in the West and broaden their radical influence.

Another pull factor I'd like to mention as a source of home-grown terrorism is the global dissemination of violent jihadist ideology. Al Qaida is not only a terrorist network. Al Qaida is first and foremost an ideology, which appeals to Muslims from a wide variety of backgrounds who believe that their coreligionists are being discriminated against, oppressed or threatened.

With the help of ever more sophisticated and professional propaganda, this ideology is being spread all over the world, thanks in large part to the internet. It is striking how this message has come to drown out more moderate voices on the Web. On radical sites Al Qaida leaders and ideologues consistently present Western involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq as an attack on Islam. In this way they also succeed in mobilising individual Muslims in the West to participate in the jihad.

A last pull factor that bears mentioning is the influence of what we call trigger events. Modern communication technology enables us to follow news from the other side of the world as it unfolds. Even relatively small incidents can be seized on as a justification for violence. It is not even necessary to form a group. The radicalisation process can take place in the mind of a young person sitting in front of his PC in the solitude of his bedroom. An example of such a case was a young Muslim in the Netherlands who saw images of the liquidation of Sheik Yassin of Hamas on the internet. For him, that was the immediate provocation to make explosives for use in an attack. He was able to find the instructions online. Thanks to vigilant police work, the Dutch authorities were able to stop him in time.

Turning to the 'push' side of the equation for a moment, I believe that it is relevant to understand the history of Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands. The specific background of certain groups has in some cases made them more open to radical messages and influences. Large numbers of Muslims were brought to the country as cheap labour in the 1960s, especially from Turkey and Morocco. In time their families were allowed to settle in the Netherlands. A lack of education, huge cultural differences and difficulties in social integration were some of the most serious problems to beset this group. For certain immigrant groups, these problems have continued to the present day. It is especially true for the Moroccan community, from which a disproportionate number of the young radicals come.

The integration of Muslims has not been helped by the growth of Islamophobia in the Netherlands due to the many acts of jihadist violence around the world. This has led the non-Muslim population to distance itself. This, in turn, has led many Muslims to reorient themselves towards their own communities and cultural and religious backgrounds. As a result, polarisation between Muslims and non-Muslims has been on the rise for the past few years, a trend that can accelerate radicalisation processes.

Studies of radicalisation processes in the Netherlands have shown that they are often sparked by an identity crisis. These are typically young people trapped between two cultures. They don't feel welcome as Muslims in the Netherlands, and thanks to their education and social experiences, they feel disconnected from their parents' culture. In their search for identity, some of these young people fall into a life of crime. Others – by no means the least educated – turn to radical Islam. It offers simple answers to the big questions they are grappling with. It offers security and brotherhood and prospects of a heavenly reward. It's possible for perfectly intelligent people to get so caught up in their fanaticism that they see martyrdom as the ultimate goal.

In both a figurative and literal sense, national borders hardly exist anymore. And for that reason the term 'home-grown terrorism' is slightly outdated. Just as Dutch Muslims left home to fight in Kashmir, Spanish participation in the war in Iraq formed the motive for jihadists in Madrid to blow up several commuter trains.

Dutch approach

Clearly, terrorism can manifest itself at any time anywhere in the world. No country can consider itself immune. This does not mean that we intend to resign ourselves to the situation, however. The Dutch authorities have decided to analyse and tackle the dangers of radicalisation and terrorism as a coherent whole. We have developed a 'comprehensive approach' to the task at hand. It includes repressive measures against terrorists, but puts an equal emphasis on prevention. After all, no one is born a terrorist. People who set out to kill other people for political or religious reasons first go through a process of radicalisation. We are convinced that there are many opportunities to intervene in this initial phase.

Goal

Of course, the main goal of the comprehensive approach is to identify acute threats in time and take measures to prevent violent incidents. The Netherlands has done everything possible in recent years to create the conditions for an effective counterterrorism policy. Our laws have been amended to introduce harsher penalties, ban recruitment, freeze assets and so on. We have worked closely with other countries. The Dutch police and criminal justice authorities have been given new powers to be able to investigate and arrest in an earlier stage. Intelligence and security services received more staff and funds, and their information can now be used in court by the public prosecutor.

So far these measures have been successful. Several terrorist networks have been broken up, including the Hofstad group. A sizable number of jihadists have been given prison sentences. Recruiters who were trying to induce young people to take part in violent jihad in countries like Iraq and Chechnya have also been tackled. These government actions have been effective in disrupting the formation of jihadist networks in the Netherlands. As a result, radical Muslims are contending with a lack of leadership and major internal divisions. Taken together, these developments prompted us to lower the general threat level for the Netherlands. For a long time the threat level was 'substantial'; today it is 'limited'. This means that at present we view the probability of an attack as low, although of course it cannot be ruled out completely. As the Dutch government wants to inform its citizens about the real threat situation to prevent unnecessary fear, this lowering of the threat level has been made public.

As I said, the danger is always there, and it can manifest itself at the most unexpected places and times. The Dutch authorities are therefore guarding against any relaxation of vigilance. A lower threat level is no reason to be less stringent in any of the measures we have taken. The lower threat level does however encourage us to push ahead with the course we have been following. We are also carrying on a long-term media campaign calling on the public, civic bodies and the business community to stay alert and report any suspicious circumstances. Above all, we want to prevent the formation of new terrorist networks like the Hofstad group. This is why we are investing so much in prevention, the other pillar of our comprehensive approach. Its main goal is to identify processes of radicalisation as early as possible and counteract them with strategic interventions.

Three main lines

We tackle radicalisation in many different ways. We do it at national level, but our primary focus remains our cities and neighbourhoods and the role of police and local government. I don't have time today to give you a full picture of all our efforts to prevent radicalisation and, ultimately, terrorism. So I'll limit myself to the three main aspects of our policy, illustrated with a few specific examples.

One way we work to prevent radicalisation is by intensifying our efforts to integrate Muslims into Dutch society. We are trying to make Muslims feel more included, mainly by paying more attention to the identity issues confronting young Muslims in a Western environment, combating discrimination and exclusion, and encouraging Muslims to participate in society and politics.

We are also trying to counteract polarisation and Islamophobia by fostering social cohesion and encouraging inter-faith dialogue. There are many local activities targeting young people and their parents.

In this context, the Dutch government also feels strongly that Dutch Muslim communities should have their own training programmes for imams, so they will no longer be dependent on imams 'imported' from their countries of origin. An additional advantage of Dutch imam training programmes is that the clerics they produce are better informed about life in the West and therefore better able to help young people find answers to their questions about life and play a meaningful role in our society. The authorities have also hired specially trained imams to work as spiritual counsellors in prisons.

A second main way we work to prevent radicalisation is by increasing social resistance to radicalisation and terrorism, especially within the Muslim community. In the Dutch government's view, these problems cannot be solved without the help of our country's Muslims. They're the ones who generally suffer most from the radicals and terrorists. They're the ones who run the risk of losing their children to extremism. Muslims are often, wrongly, viewed as collectively responsible for the extremists' acts. They are forced to contend with both radical Islam and Islamophobia in their daily lives. For all these reasons, Muslims are the ones who are best able to recognise and resist the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism, jihadism and terrorism at an early stage. After all, these phenomena are all present in their immediate surroundings. So the Dutch authorities attach great importance to communicating with our Muslim fellow citizens.

The authorities are also supporting initiatives in Muslim circles to discuss and resist radicalisation. We are seeing positive developments across the country, activity that suggests growing resistance to terrorism. Muslim leaders are actively excluding people from their mosques who are suspected of recruiting young people. Imams are preaching against the activities of recruiters and other radical elements. A number of mosques have organised programmes and discussion evenings on radicalisation. Some have even issued their own publications on the subject. Many Muslim educational institutions are weeding out radical individuals and influences.

Another crucial aspect of these efforts is to ensure the availability of a wide range of information. At present, young Dutch Muslims who are searching the internet for answers to the big questions of life and who google general terms like 'Islam', 'Koran' or 'mosque' are very likely to end up at radical sites. Other, more moderate information is scarce.

For this reason we have set out to counteract these radical Islamic voices, at least on Dutch-language websites. Where possible, we are going to take the most radical sites offline, the ones that incite hatred and violence. This will be done by initiating a 'notice and take down' procedure with the providers, a procedure currently under construction. Similarly, it is important to counteract undesirable foreign influences that reach the Netherlands through satellite broadcasts and visiting radical preachers. At the same time we are trying to increase the diversity of the information available about Islam by supporting institutions that voice moderate views and pass on factual information about the religion: challenging ideas with ideas. Activities are being organised nationally and locally that specifically target young Muslims, teaching them additional skills that they can use to be active in society and take part in public discussions.

A third and final way we work to prevent radicalisation is by identifying, isolating and containing processes of radicalisation. With this we want to stop radicalisation before it leads to violence. This requires the authorities to be proactive in detecting signals that individuals may be isolating themselves or even turning against society. Systems have now been developed in several major Dutch cities to funnel reports of suspected radicalisation to a central information point at a local level, where they can be assessed and used to develop a customised approach. It is very important that the municipal authorities take the lead in this process, since they are familiar with their own Muslim communities and can take the most appropriate measures. The national authorities are supporting them where necessary, particularly by providing expertise and guidelines.

The customised approach I mentioned is designed to fit the phase in the radicalisation process that the person in question has reached. If he or she is already in the advanced stages, the security services and police are notified. Sometimes decisions are made to follow radicals closely and conspicuously, so that they know they are being watched. We call this a person-specific intervention.

In other cases social services, schools and other institutions can help pull radicalised individuals out of their radical isolation and offer them other social prospects. Special attention is paid to the risks of radicalisation in prison. To protect other detainees from becoming 'contaminated', the Dutch authorities have decided to concentrate convicted jihadists in two detention centres and keep them separated from other prisoners. Prison staff in these institutions are specially trained to detect signs of radicalisation.

Similarly, special attention is paid to what we call 'hotbeds of radicalisation'. A small number of locations in the Netherlands, such as a few Salafist centres and mosques, have been identified as potential gateways to radical milieus. As I said before, experience has shown that for some young people non-violent Salafism is a first step towards further radicalisation. The Dutch authorities keep a close watch on the imams and governing bodies of these institutions and remind them of their social responsibilities. Our message is clear: we will not allow them to cross the line and publicly preach intolerance. We also expect them to exclude jihadist recruiters and stop young people from opting for violence. If people in or around these centres prove to be promoting radicalisation or spreading hatred, we do not hesitate to prosecute them or deport them as a threat to national security.

Conclusion

I have given you a brief overview of the Dutch experience with radicalisation and home-grown terrorism, the factors that we believe have contributed to their emergence and the broad range of tactics we use to effectively combat these dangers. I do not claim that our experiences and conclusions can be transplanted to other European countries or the United States. I am convinced, however, that thanks to the many international dimensions and interconnections, real and virtual, in today's world all Western countries are at risk from home-grown forms of terrorism. We are doing all we can to contain the dangers. This demands an intelligent, broad strategy. One of our biggest challenges is to put a firm halt to radicals and jihadists, while on the other hand reassuring the vast majority of moderate Muslims who live in our country that they can practise their religion freely and that the Netherlands is where they belong. We need to convince them that by participating in politics and society they can help improve their own lives and the lives of their coreligionists both in the Netherlands and abroad.

Finally, I would like to stress our outstanding cooperation with the United States in this fight, including this and other exchanges of information and experiences.

Thank you. I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.