



# The Crime-Terror Nexus in the Netherlands

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- The objective of this working paper is to present an overview of links between crime and terrorism (the crime-terror nexus) in the Netherlands, highlight potential risks, and make a series of recommendations for how such risks can be mitigated.
  - It is part of a Europe-wide survey that will produce similar papers for all 28 member states of the European Union. In doing so, the aim is to generate a more holistic understanding of threats from crime and terrorism, and promote new and innovative ways of tackling them.
  - Though illicit activities are notoriously difficult to measure, the presence – or notable absence – of links between crime and terrorism can be seen in two areas:
    1. **In criminal milieus**, where jihadists with criminal pasts have leveraged criminal skills and connections for the purposes of terrorism, and actively encouraged crime for the sake of jihad;
    2. **In prisons**, where Dutch authorities seem to have been more effective than other European governments in *preventing* the radicalisation of inmates.
  - Our recommendations include action on prisons, terrorist financing, information sharing, and collaboration between security agencies as well as between government and non-government actors.
  - Given that crime and radicalisation have occurred in some of the same geographical areas and demographic pools from which “ordinary” delinquency has emerged, we believe that there needs to be an honest assessment about the extent to which state and civil society can address the conditions in which extremist narratives resonate.
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# 1 Introduction

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Like other Western European countries, the Netherlands has been threatened by homegrown radicalisation and terrorism for many years. With the assassination of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, it became clear that many of the individuals who have become radicalised into jihadism had previously been involved in petty crime. The rise of the Islamic State group seems to have confirmed – if not further strengthened – this connection.

The objective of this working paper is to present an overview of links between crime and terrorism in the Netherlands, highlight potential risks, and make a series of recommendations for how such risks can be mitigated. It is part of a Europe-wide survey that will produce similar papers for all 28 member states of the European Union. In doing so, the aim is to generate a more holistic understanding of threats from crime and terrorism, and promote new and innovative ways of tackling them.

The paper's empirical basis is a survey of open sources, including relevant government and inter-governmental reports, academic research, court documents, newspaper articles, as well as interviews with practitioners and subject matter experts. The research took place between January and March 2018, and was carried out by a team of Dutch and British researchers.<sup>1</sup>

Though illicit activities are notoriously difficult to measure and quantify, the presence – or notable absence – of links between crime and terrorism can be seen in two areas:

1. **In criminal milieus**, where jihadists with criminal pasts have leveraged criminal skills and connections for the purposes of terrorism, and actively encouraged crime for the sake of jihad;
2. **In prisons**, where Dutch authorities seem to have been more effective than other European governments in *preventing* the radicalisation of inmates.

Our recommendations include action on terrorist financing, information sharing, and collaboration between security agencies as well as between government and non-government actors.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors of this report are Peter R. Neumann and Rajan Basra. We wish to thank Mira Mehta and Rick Krujjs for their research support. We are also grateful to all interviewees, whether named or anonymous.

Furthermore, given that crime and radicalisation have occurred in some of the same geographical areas and demographic pools from which “ordinary” delinquency has emerged, we believe that there needs to be an honest assessment about the extent to which state and civil society can address the conditions in which extremist narratives and ideologies resonate.

The paper starts with overviews of organised crime and terrorism in the Netherlands, before exploring two areas in which potential links have – and have not – emerged: among Dutch jihadists; and in Dutch prisons. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

## Box 1: What is the Crime-Terror Nexus?

The concept of the crime-terror nexus emerged in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of globalisation. Amidst shifting geopolitics and the birth of the information age, analysts noticed that terrorist and insurgent groups were increasingly adapting criminal modus operandi to further their aims.

Since then, scholars have identified *three types of crime-terror nexus: institutional, organisational, and social.*

### Institutional

One of the pioneers was Tamara Makarenko.<sup>2</sup> On her “crime-terror continuum”, she identified three types of institutional linkages between criminal and terrorist groups:

- At one end, criminal and terrorist groups engaged in *co-operation*, either in limited, transaction-based alliances, or in more sophisticated coalitions.
- Nearing the middle, *convergence* indicated when groups adapted skills belonging to the other, resulting in “hybrid criminal-terrorist groups”.
- At the other end was *transformation*, in which a group had completely transformed into the other by way of a shift in motivation.

Among the most prominent examples have been the Taliban, which have at times depended on Afghanistan’s heroin production; the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces’ (FARC) involvement in their country’s narcotics industry; and the smuggling of petrol and counterfeit goods by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

### Organisational

Writing at the same time as Makarenko, Letizia Paoli focused on the structural and organisational similarities between youth gangs and terrorist groups, which she categorised as “clannish” organisations:<sup>3</sup>

- They were involved in illegal activity, including violence;
- They required members’ “absolute commitment”;

*continues...*

<sup>2</sup> Tamara Makarenko, “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism”, *Global Crime*, Vol 6, No 1, 2004, pp.129-145.

<sup>3</sup> Letizia Paoli, “The Paradoxes of Organized Crime”, *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, Vol 37, No 1, 2002, pp.51-97.

- They offered *emotional benefits*, such as status, “brotherhood”, identity, and belonging.

In Paoli’s view, drawing sharp distinctions between actors based on their stated aims – criminal versus political – could be misleading, because the distinctions might be blurred and “goals [could] change”.

As an example, she cited white supremacist gangs in the United States, which recruited their membership according to ideological principles and professed to have a political programme but were heavily involved in “ordinary” crime.

## Social

In a recent study of jihadist recruitment in Europe, Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann highlighted not the convergence of criminals and terrorists as groups or organisations but of their social networks, environments, or milieus.<sup>4</sup> Rather than formalised collaboration or even transformation, they found that criminal and terrorist groups recruited from sociologically similar pools of people, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps.

This “new” crime-terror nexus had four facets:

- It affected processes of *radicalisation*, because involvement in terrorism could offer redemption and legitimise crime.
- It highlighted the *role of prisons* as environments for radicalisation and networking among criminals and extremists.
- It emphasised the *development of skills and experiences* that could be useful for terrorists, particularly access to weapons, forged documents, and the familiarity with violence.
- It facilitated the *financing* of terrorism, especially through petty crime.

Despite differences in approach and perspective, the *three types of nexus – institutional, organisational, and social* – are not mutually exclusive. Taken together, they provide the analytical framework of the Crime Terror Nexus Project.

<sup>4</sup> Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, “Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol 10, No 6, 2016, pp.25-40.

## 2 Organised crime

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Historically, the extent and impact of organised crime in the Netherlands has been overlooked. The phenomenon was typically seen as an external problem, and only began to receive closer attention in the 1990s, especially with the establishment of the Van Traa Commission and the work of Cyrille Fijnaut's research team,<sup>5</sup> while research by the Organized Crime Monitor continues today.<sup>6</sup>

Though illicit activities are notoriously difficult to measure, it is clear that organised crime has a substantial effect on the Netherlands. The present situation is dire enough that the Dutch Police Association (NPB) issued a statement in February 2018 that the country "fulfils many characteristics of a narco-state", which has allowed a "parallel economy" to emerge.<sup>7</sup> While this may be an exaggeration – in a narco-state, all state institutions are compromised by the drug trade – it does show the level of concern in the country about organised crime. Moreover, the extent of organised crime may be greater than current estimates allow, as many victims do not report crimes due to intimidation and fear.

This section provides an overview of the organised crime scene in the Netherlands, covering the groups involved, their activities, and the locations in which they operate.

### Groups

There exist no public estimates of either the number of organised crime groups or the number of individuals involved in the country. Nevertheless, analysis of public prosecution records show that domestic crime groups commit most crimes, though international groups – such as Turks, the Italian 'Ndrangheta, and South American cartels – also have an influence on the Dutch crime scene.<sup>8</sup> As seen in Italy and the UK, Albanian crime groups are substantial newcomers, who exhibit good operational security as well as ruthless violence.<sup>9</sup>

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5 Rather than have an explicit definition of organised crime, Dutch police apply the label to certain serious crimes, such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, and large-scale fraud. For more, see <https://www.politie.nl/themas/georganiseerde-criminaliteit.html>; Interview with Dr. Frank Bovenkerk, 29 March 2018.

6 For more on their work, see the Ministry of Justice and Security's Organized Crime Monitor page, available at: <https://english.wodc.nl/Figures-and-forecasts/organized-crime-monitor/>

7 "Nederland narcostaat? 'de rode loper ligt uit voor drugscriminelen'", *NOS*, 20 February 2018; "Netherlands becoming a narco-state, warn Dutch police". *The Guardian*. 20 February 2018.

8 *Transcrime, From Illegal Markets to Legitimate Businesses: The Portfolio of Organised Crime in Europe*, Università degli Studi di Trento, 2015, p.120.

9 "Some 60 Albanians arrested for organized crime in Amsterdam area", *NL Times*, 12 September 2016; "Albanian cocaine mafia infiltrate Amsterdam", *Exit*, 2 November 2017. In a recent development, Albanian groups have also used taxi drivers to help transport drugs: "Amsterdamse taxichauffeurs helpen Albanese criminelen", *Het Pool*, 27 November 2017.

The influence of some groups is difficult to gauge. It is known, for example, that the 'Ndrangheta has been active in the Netherlands since the 1980s, but its current activities are mostly obscured.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Chinese organised crime often affects Chinese communities, yet those same communities rarely contact the police, meaning the scale of the problem is likely underreported.<sup>11</sup>

Moroccan street gangs – known in the Netherlands as *Mocro Maffia* – are currently engaged in a wave of violence, usually retaliatory in nature, that has affected Amsterdam since 2012. This included the beheading of Nabil Amzieb in March 2016, before he was due testify in court against a member of Amsterdam's underworld,<sup>12</sup> as well as an audacious jailbreak attempt – involving a helicopter – of gang leader Benaouf A.<sup>13</sup>

Crime groups have sought to evolve. The dark web is increasingly being used for the trade and trafficking of illicit goods, especially that of drugs and the illicit trafficking of firearms and explosives.<sup>14</sup> And rather than relying on a traditional "in-house" organisational model, criminals are also increasingly working with specialists for discrete tasks.<sup>15</sup> This collaboration crosses both ethnic lines and international borders,<sup>16</sup> which means that criminal activity in the Netherlands – particularly violence – can have repercussions throughout Europe.<sup>17</sup>

## Activities and Locations

Criminal groups engage in a variety of activities, including extortion, fraud, drug trafficking and production (especially of cannabis and synthetic drugs), car theft, illicit pharmaceuticals, as well as human trafficking and cybercrimes.<sup>18</sup>

The Netherlands is a strategic geographical hub for illicit trade.<sup>19</sup> The country is accessible, with easy connections to other European states. With Rotterdam being the largest port in Europe, the Netherlands is one of the most popular hubs for the entry of drugs into Europe, alongside Spain, Portugal, and Belgium.<sup>20</sup> It also serves as a transit country for drugs arriving from the nearby port of Antwerp in Belgium, considered one of the largest European entry points for South American cocaine.<sup>21</sup>

10 Edward R. Kleemans and Marcel de Boer, "Italian mafia in the Netherlands", *Sicurezza e scienze sociali*, Vol 1, No 3, 2013, pp.15-29.

11 Transcrime, *From Illegal Markets to Legitimate Businesses: The Portfolio of Organised Crime in Europe*, p.120.

12 "Severed head at criminal hangout identified as Nabil Amzieb, 23", *NL Times*, 9 March 2016.

13 "Fourth suspect arrested in attempted helicopter jailbreak", *NL Times*, 20 October 2017.

14 "Dark web niet zo anoniem als je denkt: elf verdachten in beeld", *NOS*, 13 January 2018; Frank Boerman, Martin Grapendaal, Fred Nieuwenhuis, and Ewout Stoffers, *Nationaal dreigingsbeeld 2017: Georganiseerde criminaliteit*, Dutch Police, 2017, p.38. (hereafter "Organised Crime National Threat Assessment 2017").

15 "Arrestaties om 'grootschalige' wapenhandel", *De Telegraaf*, 7 February 2018; Organised Crime National Threat Assessment 2017, p.38.

16 See, for example, the arrest of a group of 8 men (4 Brits, 2 Turks, 1 Dutch, and 1 Colombian) who were in possession of 1,800kg of cocaine: "Celstraffen geëist na cokesmokkel", *De Telegraaf*, 6 February 2018.

17 "Violent Dutch gang-war spreads across Europe", *Independent*, 14 December 2014.

18 See Transcrime, *From Illegal Markets to Legitimate Businesses: The Portfolio of Organised Crime in Europe*, pp.120-125; Alexandra Hall, Rosa Koenraadt, and Georgios A. Antonopoulos, "Illicit pharmaceutical networks in Europe: organising the illicit medicine market in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands", *Trends in Organized Crime*, Vol 20, No 3-4, 2017, pp.296-315.

19 "Misdaad in Nederland" webpage, Dutch Police, available at: <https://www.politie.nl/themas/misdaad-in-nederland.html>.

20 "Misdaad in Nederland" webpage, Dutch Police; Organised Crime National Threat Assessment 2017, pp.36-39.

21 Jordan Robertson and Michael Riley, "The Mob's IT Department: How two technology consultants helped drug traffickers hack the Port of Antwerp", *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 7 July 2015.

Unsurprisingly, *drug trafficking* is the most prolific and largest form of organised crime to take place in the Netherlands, and this includes cannabis, cocaine, and heroin.<sup>22</sup> Organised criminals have imported drugs using commercial sea containers – taking advantage of the port of Rotterdam, and of Antwerp in neighbouring Belgium – as well as small, private boats or flights.<sup>23</sup> Drug importation – across the spectrum of techniques – is abetted by corruption. Cannabis use has been decriminalised in the country, though its supply remains illegal, meaning that criminal groups compete for the market share. Turkish groups dominate the heroin trade,<sup>24</sup> while Dutch-Moroccan gangs are involved in the distribution and street-level drug dealing.<sup>25</sup> Dutch nationals, meanwhile, have a significant role in transporting and selling the heroin to other European countries.<sup>26</sup>

Novel techniques have been used to facilitate drug importation. Organised criminals have used hacking to steal the pin codes used by docks to unload sea containers, allowing criminals to access newly-arrived containers – with smuggled drugs inside – before their lawful owners do.<sup>27</sup> This method combines traditional criminal activity, such as breaking and entering into business premises, with modern cyber techniques such as using *pwnies* and keyloggers.<sup>28</sup>

Crime groups are often audacious and creative. This can be seen with *highway piracy*, whereby criminals steal items from moving trucks: the criminals closely tailgate a truck with the car, allowing a thief to climb out of the sunroof window, stand on the car's bonnet, and break open the rear doors of the truck.<sup>29</sup> In 2017, Dutch police arrested a Romanian crime group for this crime – who had emptied seventeen moving trucks using this method – with €500,000 worth of stolen iPhones.<sup>30</sup> This technique caught Dutch police by surprise, though it had existed in Germany as far back as 2008.<sup>31</sup>

The *trafficking of firearms* is also a problem in the Netherlands.<sup>32</sup> Guns are used as tools for assassinations, gang violence, as well as means of intimidation. In March 2018, for example, the Mayor of Voerendaal, Wil Houben was threatened with a hand gun while in his car close to home.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, it is clear that the availability of firearms – particularly from neighbouring Belgium – has contributed to an escalation of retaliatory violence by Dutch gangs.

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22 "Misdaad in Nederland", Dutch Police.

23 For more, see Damián Zaitch, *Trafficking cocaine: Colombian drug entrepreneurs in the Netherlands* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2002).

24 Organised Crime National Threat Assessment 2017, pp.46-47.

25 *Ibid.*, p.48.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Jordan Robertson and Michael Riley, "The Mob's IT Department: How two technology consultants helped drug traffickers hack the Port of Antwerp", *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 7 July 2015.

28 A *pwnie* is a minicomputer, disguised as an innocuous office object such as a power cable or router, which is used to intercept network data.

29 Footage of this remarkable crime has been captured by Romanian police (date unknown), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2tc95bgs3l>.

30 That valuation is based on the retail prices of the iPhones; the black-market value of the haul may be much less. "Snelwegpiraterij: zo gingen de stuntdieven te werk", *ED*, 31 July 2017.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Organised Crime National Threat Assessment 2017, pp.32,94; "Illegal arms trade still a major problem in Netherlands: Report", *NL Times*, 2 June 2017.

33 "Burgemeester Voerendaal op 3 meter afstand met wapen bedreigd", *NOS*, 14 March 2018.

*Human trafficking*, whether for sexual or labour exploitation, is also prevalent.<sup>34</sup> Gauging the scale of this issue is often difficult as victims are often afraid to press charges due to shame, fear, or even an emotional attachment to the human traffickers, as seen in the case of Amsterdam window prostitution.<sup>35</sup> Relatedly, it is understood that the legalisation of prostitution leads to increased human trafficking,<sup>36</sup> and though this is perceived as an international phenomenon, it often has a highly localised impact, concentrated in specific neighbourhoods and districts.<sup>37</sup>

A key feature of Dutch organised crime is *Ondermijning* (“undermining”), which involves the criminal underworld becoming interwoven with regular society, often by using legal means to carry out illegal activities. At its core, this involves criminals exerting influence on an area’s economy and politics due to their monetary strength.<sup>38</sup> This can have a corrosive effect on local and municipal politics, and debate on the issue often centres on the province of Noord Brabant in the south of the country.

This border area is geographically convenient, not as densely populated as other provinces, with many empty factories and flatlands, allowing drug production to thrive relatively undetected.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, therefore, the Netherlands – for reasons of geography and history – has seen sustained activities by national and international crime groups, and established robust networks in the country.

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34 For more on labour exploitation, see Monika Smit, “Trafficking in human beings for labour exploitation: The case of the Netherlands”, *Trends in Organized Crime*, Vol 14, Issue 2-3, 2011, pp.184-197.

35 Maite Verhoeven and Barbra van Gestel, “Human trafficking and criminal investigation strategies in the Amsterdam Red Light District”, *Trends in Organized Crime*, Vol 14, 2011, pp.148-164.

36 Seo-Young Cho, Axel Dreher, and Eric Neumayer, “Does Legalized Prostitution Increase Human Trafficking?”, *Economics of Security*, Working Paper No. 71, 2012.

37 Maite Verhoeven and Barbra van Gestel, “Human trafficking and criminal investigation strategies in the Amsterdam Red Light District”, pp.148-164.

38 Interview with Dr. Frank Bovenkerk, 28 March 2018.

39 “Burgermeesters: pas op voor criminele ondermijning”, *NRC*, 13 October 2017; “Misdaad in Nederland” webpage, Dutch Police.

## 3 Terrorism

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**W**hile organised crime has had a large impact on the Netherlands, the same cannot be said of terrorism.<sup>40</sup> Despite the wave of attacks that Europe has experienced over the last few years – including in neighbouring Belgium and Germany – the Netherlands has escaped this violence.

The country's historical experience with terrorism dates to the 1970s and 1980s, with attacks by South Moluccan, Kurdish, Palestinian, and left-wing organisations. The calm that followed abruptly ended with the assassination of populist politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002, and the country experienced its first and only jihadist attack in 2004, when Mohammad Bouyeri murdered the film director Theo van Gogh.

Presently, jihadism is the greatest terrorist threat, as there remains – despite the absence of attacks – a committed jihadist scene. Additionally, about 300 Dutch citizens have travelled to Syria and Iraq as “foreign fighters” since 2011 – and there are concerns about the danger posed by returning foreign fighters.<sup>41</sup> There is also a residual threat from far-right and far-left extremism.

### Jihadist

Amidst a polarising public debate on Islam, migration, and politics in the early 2000s, a group of young men known as the Hofstad Group would give a face to Dutch jihadism.<sup>42</sup> Active between 2002 and 2005, the group of about forty young men was involved in several terrorist plots.<sup>43</sup> On 2 November 2004, one of its members, Mohammad Bouyeri, murdered film director Theo van Gogh in the country's first and only jihadist attack.

After the conviction of core members as well as increased monitoring, deradicalisation programmes, and community engagement, jihadist activity decreased significantly.<sup>44</sup> In 2010, the Dutch General Intelligence

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40 We define terrorism as symbolic acts of politically motivated violence. See Peter R. Neumann and M.L.R. Smith, *The Strategy of Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2008), p.8.

41 NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 47*, March 2018.

42 See Bart Schuurman, *Becoming a European homegrown jihadist: a multilevel analysis of involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002-2005*, Leiden University doctoral thesis, 2017.

43 Bart Schuurman, Edwin Bakker, and Quirine Eijkman, “Structural Influences on Involvement in European Homegrown Jihadism: A Case Study”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol 30, No 1, 2018: p. 97-115.

44 Beatrice de Graaf, “The Nexus Between Salafism and Jihadism in the Netherlands”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 3, Issue 3, 2010, p.21.

and Security Service (AIVD) noted that, at the time, the Dutch jihadist scene existed of several small, invisible and relatively isolated networks with a high level of inactivity.<sup>45</sup>

This changed drastically in the years that followed, as jihadist groups professionalised and became increasingly activist through organisations such as *BehindBars*, *StraatDawah* and *Shariah4Holland* – which was modelled on the British jihadist group Al-Muhajiroun – and through social media and websites like *De Ware Religie*.<sup>46</sup> They staged protests and preached their ideology in public. Many members of these groups eventually travelled to Syria or Iraq as “foreign fighters” (see below). Faced with an intensified crackdown, those who remained were forced back to the shadows, and now – both online and offline – display an acute awareness of operational security.<sup>47</sup>

Presently, the AIVD estimates the jihadist movement to have a “few hundred supporters” in the Netherlands.<sup>48</sup> The Islamic State’s territorial loss, or propaganda calls for attacks in the West, have the potential to galvanise these “home-grown” jihadists. As seen throughout Europe, foreign fighters have been particularly instrumental here: by translating and spreading ISIS propaganda through social media, they can play a role in the radicalisation and recruitment of supporters at home.<sup>49</sup> The threat of attacks – whether directed or inspired by groups such as Islamic State – therefore remains substantial.

### *Attacks, Plots, and Arrests*

Despite the lack of attacks in the Netherlands, there have been several notable jihadist-related events over the past few years:

- *November 2004*: Mohammad Bouyeri, part of the Hofstad Group, assassinated film director Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, shooting and stabbing him to death, before leaving a note with a death threat to politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali on his body. Bouyeri was sentenced to a life term without parole.
- *March 2006*: Nine members of the Hofstad Group are convicted for membership of a criminal and terrorist organisation. Five other suspects are acquitted.
- *November 2014*: Sultan Berzel, a 19-year old from Maastricht, detonated a suicide bomb at a square in Baghdad, Iraq, killing 24 people.
- *February 2015*: Luul Dahir, a female Dutch-Somali national, killed at least 25 people in a suicide bombing at the Central Hotel in Mogadishu, Somalia. The attack was claimed by Al-Shabab.

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45 AIVD, *Transformatie van het jihadisme in Nederland*, June 2014, p.5.

46 *Ibid.*, p 12.

47 NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 46*, November 2017.

48 AIVD, *Jaarverslag 2017*, 2018.

49 NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 46*, November 2017.

- *August 2015*: Ayoub El Khazzani, a Belgian-Moroccan man, opened fire in the Amsterdam-Paris Thalys train before his gun jammed and he was subdued by passengers. There were no fatalities in the attack.
- *December 2015*: Eight men and one woman are convicted in the so-called “Context” case, for terrorism offences such as incitement and recruitment of foreign fighters.
- *March 2016*: Anis Bahri, a French national and member of the Belgian Zerkani-network, is arrested in Rotterdam. Police found 45kg of ammunition in his apartment.
- *December 2016*: Jaoud A. is arrested in Rotterdam after police find a stockpile of highly explosive illegal fireworks, an AK-47, ammunition, multiple mobile phones, and an Islamic State flag. In November 2017, he was sentenced to four years in prison for planning a terrorist attack.

Curiously, the Paris attacks of November 2015 had a Dutch connection. Members of the Islamic State network had travelled to the Netherlands, and had contacted Dutch gangsters to allegedly purchase weapons.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, on the day of the attacks, two individuals from the attackers’ network had travelled to Schiphol airport.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, a laptop used by the Paris-Brussels Islamic State network – and found in Belgium – held files named “Groupe Omar”, “Groupe Francais”, “Groupe Iraquiens”, “Groupe Metro”, and “Groupe Schiphol”. All of those – except for “Metro” and “Schiphol” – correspond to locations attacked by the network, suggesting a possible abandoned plot targeting Schiphol airport.<sup>52</sup>

In January 2018, the director of the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), Rob Bertholee, stated that three to four terrorist plots had been foiled in recent years.<sup>53</sup> From 2012 to 2016, there were at least 83 arrests made for jihadist-related activity, with the annual totals increasing each year.<sup>54</sup>

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50 Sebastian Rotella, “How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism”, *ProPublica*, 18 October 2016.

51 “Terrorist aanslagen Brussel wilde wapens op Schiphol verbergen”, *NU.nl*, 10 March 2017.

52 *Ibid.*; Paul Cruickshank, “Discarded laptop yields revelations on network behind Brussels, Paris attacks”, *CNN*, 25 January 2017.

53 “College Tour”, *NTR*, 21 January 2018.

54 2017 figures have not yet been released. Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TESAT) 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; and 2017*.

### *Foreign Fighters and Returnees*

More than six thousand European “foreign fighters” have joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. The Netherlands has been affected by this mobilisation, with about 300 of its citizens having travelled to join jihadist groups such as the Islamic State.<sup>55</sup> Most Dutch foreign fighters joined either IS or Jabhat al-Nusra (now known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham). Women make up one third of the Dutch travellers, according to the AIVD. In terms of ethnicity, studies have shown a strong overrepresentation of Dutch-Moroccans.<sup>56</sup>

Latest figures from Dutch authorities estimate that 60 Dutch foreign fighters have died in the region, whereas 160 Dutch citizens remain in Syria and Iraq.<sup>57</sup> With them are 145 minors with a Dutch connection, many of whom were born in the conflict zone. Since 2011, about 50 foreign fighters have returned to the Netherlands, while 30 “other” individuals are likely to be in detention centres in the region (and are thus counted as neither returnees nor still in the battlefield).<sup>58</sup>

There is collective anxiety throughout Europe regarding the threat posed by “returnee” foreign fighters, who are trained and battle-hardened.<sup>59</sup> In 2017, the AIVD has previously warned of a potential increase in returnees as jihadist groups lose terrain,<sup>60</sup> though this “returnee wave” has yet to materialise. The intelligence service has also specifically highlighted the dangers and risks of returnees – specifically of minors who have grown up with Islamic State.<sup>61</sup>

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55 NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 47*, March 2018.

56 Anton Weenink, “Family, Crime, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Police Files”, presentation delivered at NSCR symposium *The Crime-Terror Nexus: Merging Criminological and Psychological Perspectives* in Amsterdam, 12th September 2017.

57 NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 47*, March 2018.

58 Ibid.

59 For more, see Bibi Van Ginkel and Simon Minks, “Addressing the Challenge of Returnees: Threat Perceptions, Policies and Practices in the Netherlands”, in Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet (eds.), “Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back, and how should we deal with them?”, Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations, February 2018.

60 AIVD, *Focus on Returnees*, February 2017.

61 Ibid.

## Far-Right and Far-Left Extremists

There is a relatively low threat from far-left and far-right extremists, and there is currently no significant terrorist group on either end of the spectrum. From 2012 to 2016, there were at least 6 arrests made for far-right terrorism-related activity – all in 2016 – whereas in the same period there were no arrests made for far-left terrorism.<sup>62</sup>

Far-right extremism has grown in recent years, capitalising on the wave of jihadist terrorism in Europe as well as the migrant and refugee crisis.<sup>63</sup> Their activity has mostly been limited to public demonstrations, though there have been incidents of arson, vandalism, and threats targeting mosques. In 2016, five men were convicted for throwing Molotov cocktails at a mosque in the city of Enschede, while 30 to 40 worshippers were inside.<sup>64</sup> The court classified the attack – meant to spread fear among the Muslim population and prevent the opening of a refugee centre – as an act of terrorism.

Intelligence services also warn for an increase in violence from left-wing extremists, who actively seek confrontation with their right-wing counterparts and have engaged in acts of intimidation against right-wing politicians.<sup>65</sup>

Given the overall threat picture and, especially, the ongoing threat from jihadist terrorism, perhaps the most likely scenario in which far-right groups become more active is that of “reciprocal radicalisation”, whereby extremist groups from different ends of the political spectrum radicalise – and potentially even target – each other.

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62 2017 figures have not yet been released. Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TESAT) 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016 and 2017*.

63 NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45*, June 2017, p.7.

64 Court judgment ECLI: NL: RBOVE: 2016: 4134, Rechtbank Overijssel, 27 October 2016, available at: <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/inziendocument?id=ECLI:NL:RBOVE:2016:4134>.

65 NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45*, June 2017, p.7.

## 4 The Social Nexus

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There is little evidence of an institutional nexus between organised crime and terrorism in the Netherlands. Instead, there exists a social nexus, where criminal and extremist milieus, countercultures, and networks have – to a large extent – merged (see Box 1).

Police records bear this out. A study by Anton Weenink, a Dutch National Police researcher, of 319 jihadists – comprising foreign fighters, failed travellers to Syria and Iraq, and those identified as potential travellers – found that 64 per cent were the subject of police reports.<sup>66</sup> Almost half of the jihadists (147 individuals) were suspected of between 1-5 crimes, while over a fifth (68 individuals) were suspected of over 5 crimes.<sup>67</sup> Most crimes were property crimes (e.g. burglary and theft), and there was hardly any involvement in organised crime.<sup>68</sup>

This may be a relatively long-standing phenomenon. Another study – of Dutch jihadist networks between 2001 and 2005 – revealed that at least 40% of extremists had criminal pasts.<sup>69</sup> The nature of crimes varied, including theft, drug offences, and violence.

Explanations for this social nexus vary. One factor could be behavioural, as extremism can satisfy the same violent tendencies that individuals found appealing in crime. Crucially, 40 per cent of Dutch jihadists from had a history of violent behaviour.<sup>70</sup> This deserves closer attention, as it is more generally understood that prior violence is a reliable indicator of future violence.

Another factor may be one of narratives, as the jihadist ideology offers purification and redemption from errant behaviour. Simply put, it may be a chance at a clean slate. Reda Nidalha, for example, became involved in extremist circles after his former criminal associates began to extort him, and eventually travelled to Syria to join IS. He told his father that he was “on the right path”, after turning his life around.<sup>71</sup>

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66 Note: a *report* is not the same as a *conviction*, and a report may contain records of more than one crime. Anton Weenink, “Family, Crime, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Police Files”, presentation delivered at NSCR symposium *The Crime-Terror Nexus: Merging Criminological and Psychological Perspectives* in Amsterdam, 12 September 2017.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 C.J. de Poot and Anne Sonnenschein, *Jihadi terrorism in the Netherlands. A description based on closed criminal investigations* (The Hague: WODC, Ministerie van Justitie, 2011), p.130.

70 Anton Weenink, “Family, Crime, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Police Files”.

71 “Van crimineel tot jihadist”, *De Telegraaf*, 10 November 2014. Nidalha has since left IS: “Vader ex-IS'er: 'Mijn zoon heeft geluk, hij zit nu veilig in de cel'”, *RTL Nieuws*, 24 October 2017.

For others, it legitimises their pre-existing criminality, and potentially offers a license to commit crime for the sake of jihad. This could include robbery (see Box 2), as well as financial fraud: in 2017, a man from The Hague was convicted for financing terrorism through a tax scam.<sup>72</sup> Yet others may find in jihadism a feeling of belonging, camaraderie, and adventure – an amplification of the group dynamics found in street gangs.

Crime and extremism appear to thrive in a shared environment, as many Dutch jihadists come from neighbourhoods where crime rates are higher than average.<sup>73</sup> Extremist networks can seek to exploit these social conditions, by crafting a message that plays on their frustrated ambitions, perceived discrimination, and yearning for belonging. This social nexus has its limits, however, as the rate of criminality is much greater than the occurrence of radicalisation.

Dutch authorities have recognised this social nexus – including the potential for “skill transfers” – and have highlighted it as an area of concern. In 2017, the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV) noted that “through social contacts past or present, jihadists, who often have a criminal background themselves, may have at their disposal the services of criminal networks, like the acquirement of weapons and explosives”.<sup>74</sup>

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72 “Celstraf Hagenaar voor financiering jihad”, *De Telegraaf*, 10 March 2017.

73 Anton Weenink, “Family, Crime, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Police Files”.

74 NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 44 Samenvatting*, April 2017.

## Box 2: The Encouragement of Crime

Throughout Europe, jihadists have often legitimised their involvement in crime by framing it as a form of jihad. The Islamic State has intermittently pushed this message in its propaganda, justifying the use of theft and fraud not only as a means of acquiring funds, but also as an end in and of itself.<sup>75</sup> It appears that this message has resonated on the streets of Europe, as typical criminal tactics such as theft, VAT fraud, and robberies have been used to finance the activities of many foreign fighters.<sup>76</sup>

The funds raised by Marouane B., a jihadist from Arnhem, is a case in point. He had travelled to Syria in 2013, ostensibly to “help children, women, and men who are being terrorised by the tyrant Assad”, according to an open letter of his published in the Dutch press.<sup>77</sup> He eventually joined Islamic State, and – in addition to the salary received from the proto-state – received funds from his network of friends back in the Netherlands.

Facebook conversations reveal that Marouane had pleaded with them to transfer money over, and Marouane had indeed received €500 from his friends via Western Union. When his friends complained of having no cash, he encouraged them to commit robberies to raise funds – in a manner similar to Islamic State’s tactic of seizing *ghanima* (“war spoils”) on the battlefield. It is not certain if his network obliged, though they were already involved in criminal activity: in 2014, two of his associates had attempted a robbery of a jewellery store, though they were shot by the owner’s wife.<sup>78</sup> The case shows the difficulty in monitoring terrorist financing, as there was little to determine whether the failed robbery – based on the crime itself – was extremist-related or not.

Despite reports of his death in the conflict zone in December 2017, it appears that Marouane is still alive; the jihadist penned another letter stating his willingness to return to the Netherlands to face trial.<sup>79</sup> In April 2018, however, a Dutch court sentenced him – in absentia – to six years in prison for participation in a terrorist organisation. To this, Marouane responded with yet another open letter: “I will do my time laughing at the Terrorist Division in Vught”. He then called for attacks in the Netherlands, and to use crime as a form of jihad: “Conduct the jihad in the Benelux through robberies with the intent of sending part of the money to the Islamic State ... and by committing attacks on places where police officers, military officers, and members of the Royal Family find themselves”.<sup>80</sup>

75 Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, “Crime as Jihad: Developments in the Crime-Terror Nexus in Europe”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 10, Issue 9, 2017, pp.1-6.

76 Magnus Ranstorp, “Microfinancing the Caliphate: How the Islamic State is Unlocking the Assets of European Recruits”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 9, Issue 5, 2016, pp.11-15.

77 “Zes jaar cel voor ‘jihadraper’ Marouane B. die eigen dood in scène zette”, *RTL Nieuws*, 4 April 2018.

78 “Pleeg overval voor me”, *De Telegraaf*, 14 July 2017.

79 “Zette Syriëganger Marouane B. uit Arnhem zijn dood in scène?”, *Omroep Gelderland*, 15 February 2018.

80 “Jihadist Marouane B. wil wraak nemen op Nederland”, *De Telegraaf*, 4 April 2018.

## 5 The Absent Prison Nexus

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Throughout Europe, prisons are a central feature of the crime-terror nexus. They are ideal environments for radical ideas to spread, and are where the criminal and extremist milieus are – typically – in their closest proximity. Recent years have seen examples of prison radicalisation,<sup>81</sup> networking amongst criminals and jihadists,<sup>82</sup> and of attacks planned/executed within prison,<sup>83</sup> or carried out shortly after release.<sup>84</sup>

The Netherlands, however, is an exception.<sup>85</sup> There is very little evidence that prison radicalisation exists in the country, despite there being a contingent of jihadists amongst the country's 11,500 prison population. While most countries suffer from overcrowding in their prisons, the Netherlands does not, thereby addressing one of the principal underlying factors which facilitate prison radicalisation. In fact, the Netherlands has leased some of its spare prison capacity to Belgium.<sup>86</sup>

Since 2006, the Dutch approach has been to separate extremist and “regular” inmates from each other, by dedicating a “Terrorist Ward” (TA) to extremists.<sup>87</sup> There are currently two such wards: one in Vught prison, and another smaller wing in De Schie in Rotterdam. In principle, therefore, the interaction between the two groups of prisoners is non-existent in the institutionalised setting. The TA in Vught – visited by the authors in March 2017 – holds six separate wings for extremists, who are segregated according to their assessed levels of risk. A charismatic recruiter, for example, is physically separated from those deemed vulnerable to (further) radicalisation.

This can only be achieved with adequate support, be that in terms of budgeting, staffing, and training – at Vught, for example, there is a dedicated team comprising psychologists, counsellors, religious scholars, as well as prison officers, that review each individual's case and needs

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81 Most notably amongst attackers: Mohammed Merah (Toulouse and Montauban, March 2012); Mehdi Nemmouche (Brussels Jewish Museum, May 2014); and Omar el-Hussein (Copenhagen attacks, February 2015).

82 As seen with Cherif Kouachi and Amedy Coulibaly (Paris attacks, January 2015), as well as Clément Baur and Mahiedine Merabet (foiled Marseille plot, April 2017).

83 “Soon-to-go-free jail convicts snared in French attack plot probe”, *Reuters*, 10 October 2017.

84 See examples of Mehdi Nemmouche and Omar el-Hussein.

85 This section is largely based on a visit by the authors to the maximum-security Vught prison in March 2017; Bibi Van Ginkel and Simon Minks, “Addressing the Challenge of Returnees: Threat Perceptions, Policies and Practices in the Netherlands”.

86 Tinka M. Veldhuis, Ernestine H. Gordijn, Siegwart M. Lindenberg, and René Veenstra, *Terroristen in detentie: evaluatie van de Terroristenafdeling* (Den Haag: WODC, Ministerie van Justitie, 2010).

87 “The prison wing housing only terrorists”, *BBC News*, 20 May 2016; Tinka M. Veldhuis et al., *Terroristen in detentie: evaluatie van de Terroristenafdeling*; Peter R. Neumann, *Prisons and terrorism: Radicalisation and de-radicalisation in 15 countries*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), 2010.

throughout their prison stay. While there has yet to be a Europe-wide evaluation of extremist offender prison regimes, many of these could be examples of best practice.

There are still, of course, areas of concern. Upon release, a jihadist could see their standing and influence in the extremist scene increase. Likewise, there is still the potential for networking *amongst* extremists. And there is the perennial question of how to best manage extremists once they are released from prison.

Yet, there remains the potential for those *already* radicalised to become *even more* extreme inside prison. Andre Seebregts, a lawyer with many extremist clients, stated that several of his clients detained in Vught developed increasingly negative views towards the authorities. Such a prison regime can elicit mixed reactions from detainees: a study – albeit with a small sample size – of previous detainees within the TA found that half had their radical ideologies confirmed, while the other half experienced their time inside as a “wake-up” call.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, isolation from the general prison population could further reinforce extremist narratives of victimhood, exceptionalism, and persecution, making it difficult for an individual to deradicalise.

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<sup>88</sup> Daan Weggemans and Beatrice de Graaf, *Reintegrating Jihadist Extremist Detainees: Helping Extremist Offenders Back Into Society* (London: Routledge, 2017); Interview with Léa Massé, 20 March 2018.

## 6 Recommendations

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**T**his paper has examined potential links between crime and terrorism in the Netherlands. While the existence of highly networked, if not institutionalised, links between organised crime and terrorist groups is non-existent, there are areas of concern, especially when it comes to the merging of criminal and extremist social milieus (see Box 1). This has two implications. One is the potential for individuals with criminal backgrounds to use their skills – be it in forging documents, procuring firearms, or raising money through criminal means – to facilitate terrorist attacks. Another area of concern is the potential for the radicalisation of criminal inmates within prisons.

To prevent such links from re-emerging or becoming further entrenched, we recommend the following actions and/or good practices:

### 1. Effective monitoring

We recommend that authorities continue to periodically review their statistics on organised crime and terrorism, and consciously monitor them for emerging linkages between the two phenomena. Some areas – such as the link between drugs and terrorism – may require further research.

### 2. Re-thinking radicalisation

Given the partial merging of terrorist and extremist milieus, core assumptions about radicalisation need to be reconsidered. The behaviour of jihadists with criminal pasts often contradicts the notion that extremism correlates with religious behaviour. Where needed, we recommend that authorities update their checklists, indicators, and training materials in order to reflect changing patterns and profiles.

### 3. Countering all streams of terrorist financing

Efforts to countering terrorist finance have excessively focused on the international financial system – with meagre results. In light of the Netherlands' global commitment to counter the financing of terrorism, we recommend that authorities broaden their efforts at countering terrorist finance to include small-scale and petty crime, such as drug dealing, theft, robberies, and the trafficking in goods.

#### **4. Information sharing**

As the lines between terrorism and “ordinary” crime have become increasingly blurred, relevant agencies need to become more effective at sharing relevant information across departments and “disciplines”, as well as forming new “coalition” of individuals and institutions that may not be used to working with each other.

We recommend that governments continue to review existing channels and systems of information exchange (including with the Moroccan police), explore creating new partnerships (such as with local authorities, civil society, and the private sector), and make appropriate changes reflecting the new – and multi-dimensional – nature of the threat.

#### **5. Addressing social conditions**

While there is no inherent or automatic link between socio-economic conditions and involvement in terrorism, it seems clear that jihadist “delinquency” in the Netherlands has occurred in some of the same geographical areas and demographic pools from which “ordinary” delinquency has emerged. There needs to be an honest assessment about the extent to which state and civil society can address the social conditions in which extremist narratives and ideologies resonate.







# Crime Terror Nexus

## THE CRIME TERROR NEXUS

The Crime Terror Nexus is a project that investigates links between crime and terrorism, and identifies better ways to counter them.

Over the course of 18 months, we are documenting links between crime and terrorism across the European Union. Our findings are disseminated through reports, events, and workshops.

We are partnering with officials and local stakeholders to create new and innovative approaches that contribute to countering crime and making our countries safer.

The Crime Terror Nexus is a project of Panta Rhei Research Ltd. It is funded by PMI IMPACT, a global grant initiative of Philip Morris International that supports projects against illegal trade.

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