

**FROM  
CRIMINALS TO  
TERRORISTS  
AND BACK?**

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# FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

## Quarterly Report: Netherlands

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The most well-known ISIS terrorist atrocities in Europe, including the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels attacks, saw individuals who in the past had been involved in organized crime and illegal trade graduate into the ranks of the world's most successful terrorist organisation. **It is now widely assumed that Europe's terrorists are no longer radicals first and foremost but criminals who turned to political violence at some stage throughout their ordinary crime careers.** Thus a threat emanating from the "crime-terror nexus" hangs over Europe. GLOBSEC, an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation which aims to shape the global debate on foreign and security policy, responded to this threat by developing a research and advocacy project aimed at addressing the "crime-terror nexus" in Europe. **Our project titled *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back?* will:<sup>2</sup>**

1. **collect, collate and analyse data on terrorism convicts from 11 EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK)** with the highest number of arrests for terrorism offences. We will investigate whether these individuals had prior criminal connections, and if so, whether a specific connection to illegal trade is a precursor to terrorism, and to what extent this trade funds terrorism. In short, we will check whether crime-terror nexus exists and how strong it truly is.
2. **disseminate project findings at high profile GLOBSEC Strategic Forums (GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum, TATRA Summit, Chateau Bela conferences) and other internationally acclaimed gatherings** which attract decision makers, experts, private sector and law enforcement representatives, while also incorporating their expert level feedback into our work.
3. **help shape and strengthen the European counter-terrorism efforts by providing tailor made solutions on combating crime-terror nexus and terrorist financing via education and awareness, and advocacy efforts involving decision makers and security stakeholders in the 11 targeted countries.** This line of activity directly links the project to the widely acclaimed work of the GLOBSEC Intelligence Reform Initiative (GIRI), led by Sec. Michael Chertoff, which is involved in developing and promoting more effective transatlantic counter-terrorism solutions.

## 1. Introduction

According to the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) the **current official number of persons with Dutch nationality or citizenship who have travelled to (predominantly) Syria and Iraq is 285.**<sup>3</sup> Of these 285 foreign terrorist fighters (FTF), 55 are deceased and 50 have returned to the Netherlands. This means

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<sup>2</sup> The project is funded under PMI IMPACT, a global grant initiative of Philip Morris International to support projects against illegal trade. GLOBSEC is fully independent in implementing the project and has editorial responsibility for all views and opinions expressed herein.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet (eds.) "Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them." *Egmont Paper 101*, (2018): 55-70.

that, as of November 2017, about 185 persons of Dutch nationality or citizenship are still in Syria or Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, according to the Dutch Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), there are more than 80 children of Dutch nationality and citizenship in the area.<sup>5</sup>

In 2015, 20 individuals were arrested for terrorist offences. So far, we have assessed, analysed and assembled profiles of four individuals using the codebook developed for the project. **While these are preliminary findings, we have, so far, not found substantial evidence of a crime-terror nexus.** Our ongoing data collection and analysis efforts will allow us to refine this conclusion and acquire more detail on the nature of potential criminal antecedents of the 20 individuals arrested for terrorist offences in 2015. In this process, a factor of particular importance is the meagre amount of publicly available information on prior criminal activities of the individuals arrested. To compensate for this data deficiency, we are working to access first-hand sources in the form of interviews with public prosecutors and—potentially—access to police investigative files.

As GLOBSEC's *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back? Kick-off Report* mentions,<sup>6</sup> it is possible that the Netherlands has witnessed the development of the so-called “**gangster-jihadi.**” According to the report, “a ‘gangster jihadi’ is an individual who almost naturally drifts from the world of crime towards jihadism, sometimes as a form of redemption for his earlier sins. He, as the phenomenon is almost exclusively male, possesses links and skills which allow him to thrive in both, seemingly, divided worlds of crime and terrorism.”<sup>7</sup> **This development is present in Belgium, but it has yet to be seen if this development also exists in the Netherlands.**<sup>8</sup> As mentioned before, preliminary results from the profiles of the individuals arrested for a terrorist offence are inconclusive. With the collection of more data and possibly an expansion of our data sources, we will be able to reach greater clarity on this issue.

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<sup>4</sup> NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland*. No. 46.

<sup>5</sup> AIVD and NCTV, *The Children of ISIS: The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory*.

<sup>6</sup> See: Globsec, “From Criminal to terrorists and back?” *Kick-off report*, (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Globsec, “From Criminal to terrorists and back?” *Kick-off report*, (2017): 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## 2. The new crime-terror nexus

The past couple of years have seen a rise in FTF with a criminal background. These individuals have a petty criminal background and have been present throughout Europe. **This phenomenon, where the lines between crime and extremism have been blurred, is not entirely new.**<sup>9</sup> Numerous terrorist attacks, such as those that took place in the mid-1990s in France, or the Madrid train attacks in 2004, were executed by perpetrators with a criminal background. However, **while this development is not entirely new, the convergence between the two areas has become more pronounced with the rise of the Islamic State.**<sup>10</sup>

One of the most prominent scholars focusing on the crime-terror nexus is Tamara Makarenko. She developed the crime-terror continuum, in which she claims that the crime-terror nexus is a scale, on which “a single group can slide up and down the scale, between what is traditionally referred to as organised crime and terrorism.”<sup>11</sup> The crime-terror continuum consists of three areas: cooperation, convergence and transformation. Cooperation occurs when criminal and terrorist groups cooperate (in a limited form or in coalition), whereas convergence happens when a single group embraces skills that belong to the other group, with terrorist groups displaying criminal characteristics and the other way around. Lastly, transformation occurs when one criminal group has moulded into a terrorist one or vice-versa.<sup>12</sup> Bashra, Neumann and Brunner argue differently in the ICSR report on the *new* crime-terror nexus. They claim that the crime-terror nexus as posed by Makarenko is outdated and does not reflect “how terrorist structures, radicalisation and recruitment have changed.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, they propose a *new* crime-terror nexus in which the individuals “are radicals (criminals) first, and Islamist extremists or terrorists later.”<sup>14</sup>

For the Dutch case, several scholars have conducted research into the crime-terror nexus. Weenink’s research into 140 individuals who were on the so-called “List of

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<sup>9</sup> Rahul Basra, Peter R., Neumann and Claudia Brunner, “Criminal Pasts, Terrorists Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus” ICSR report (2017): 11.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Makarenko, Tamara, “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism” *Global Crime*, 6. 1 (2004): 130.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Basra, Neumann and Brunner, “Criminal Pasts” 12.

<sup>14</sup> Globsec, “From Criminal to terrorists and back?” 7.

Travelers” in February 2014, **showed that 66 “travellers” (47 percent of the sample) generated 380 police reports, thus suggesting that “male travellers are twice as often involved in crime as other young men.”**<sup>15</sup> These reports are drawn up by the police for the public prosecutor. The data also suggested that female “travellers” are five times as often involved in crime compared to the female population in the Netherlands.<sup>16</sup> However, as Weenink clearly states, the data on this topic is incomplete and it is therefore problematic to draw any firm conclusions.

That being said, Weenink’s findings correspond with similar research carried out by van Leyenhorst and Andreas, who analysed the biographical backgrounds of 26 Salafi-jihadi clients of the Dutch Probation Service (DPS). After an analysis of these 26 files from the DPS, they found that **42 percent of the suspects had prior criminal convictions, and of these, 73 percent had prior convictions relating to violent crimes.**<sup>17</sup> However, they state that the sample shows that “no significant overlaps nor difference, no profiles nor actual risk factors that statistically correlate with an outcome can be established”<sup>18</sup> and they thus conclude that “to claim that terrorism is a problem that derives from the outskirts of society, or that terrorists are social failures or criminals that lack a solid foundation in life, is not supported by our own findings and has proven to be rather short-sighted.”<sup>19</sup> They claim that in some cases, the individuals in their sample, had given up “important foundations in their (for some) prosperous lives”.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The way forward

During the course of the project, we expect to analyse 20 profiles. These are all the individuals apprehended for a terrorist offence in the Netherlands in 2015. While analysing these profiles, some challenges and opportunities will arise. First, we will discuss the challenges we might face and then the opportunities we expect.

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<sup>15</sup> Weenink, Anton W. “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9.2 (2016): 23.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Leyenhorst, Maarten and Andreas, Ada “Dutch suspects of Terrorist Activity: A study of Their Biographical Backgrounds Based on Primary Sources” *Journal for Deradicalization*, 12 (2017): 317.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 332.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

One of the challenges we are facing right now, and we expect to face in the future as well, is the difficulty of gathering the necessary data to have sufficient information for a thorough assessment. Even though the project codebooks with more than 120 variables are comprehensive and clear, much of the information required to assess the numerous variables is not publicly available. This mainly concerns information on the criminal pasts of the individuals and the manner in which these individuals radicalised. This information is absolutely necessary to shed light on the degree to which a crime-terror nexus exists. To find the answers, we are setting up interviews with public prosecutors and members of the police force. We are contacting these professionals and ascertaining which data they will be able to share.

A key opportunity we see with regard to sources concerns information on the court cases of the 20 suspects. If a court date is known, the requisite records can generally be found quite easily online. The anonymisation of these records presents a challenge when it comes to finding out on which dates the 20 subjects were convicted. Currently, we have been able to find 17 of 20 in online court records. We expect to be able to provide such information on all 20 individuals in the near future.

**What we have found after analysing four out of the 20 individuals is that all of them tried to travel to Syria but were apprehended in Turkey or Bulgaria. It will be interesting to see if any of the other 2015 arrestees made it to Syria.**

## 4. The four cases in the Netherlands

This part of the progress report will focus on the four individuals we have assessed so far.

### 4.1. Socio-demographic background

All the individuals we have analysed were **male and age 21 to 28**. They all came from large Dutch cities or their suburbs. Two of the individuals were born in the Netherlands, one in Morocco, and the birthplace of one individual remains unclear. Three of the individuals had at least a high school diploma. The occupation of the four individuals remains unclear, although some sources mentioned some of the individuals had been dismissed from previous jobs. In terms of religion, we found that all the individuals were

religious but did not show a change in their ideological orientation prior to 2015. Additionally, **none of the four individuals showed any sign of political activism.**

#### 4.2. Criminal pasts

**Two of the four individuals had no prior criminal record.** For one of the individuals it remains unclear whether he has a criminal background, but we do know he has a history of drug abuse and financial problems. It remains unclear if the fourth individual has a criminal background. Because of this lack of information, a crime-terror nexus cannot currently be substantiated.

#### 4.3. Radicalisation pathways

In all four cases, the Dutch police found evidence of a clear interest in the Islamic State and the associated jihadist worldview. Currently, however, many details of what could be termed their “radicalisation pathways,” or how they became involved in this militancy, remain unclear. Statements by the four individuals studied so far have not been very helpful in this regard. In all four cases, the individuals denied any wrongdoing; **as a matter of fact, two of the individuals clearly stated that the only reason they left for Syria was to provide humanitarian aid. In these two cases, one of the individuals was addicted to drugs and stated that he wanted to go to Syria where no drugs would be within his reach. One of the other individuals claimed to go to Syria to study the Quran and live peacefully in the newly established caliphate.** Further research will hopefully yield more detailed answers.

#### 4.4. Foreign fighters

Of the four individuals studied so far, **all were initially apprehended outside the Netherlands.** Three of the individuals were caught in Turkey and one of the individuals was caught in Bulgaria. According to the Dutch prosecutors, the men were travelling to Syria/Iraq. The fact that none of the individuals reached Syria does not mean this was not their intention. As mentioned before, (as of November 2017) about 185 FTF are currently residing in Syria or Iraq and 50 FTF have returned to the Netherlands. It has yet to be determined how many of these returnees were arrested in 2015.

#### 4.5. Convictions

**All four of the individuals studied thus far have been indicted for terrorism-related offenses. All the individuals have been arrested and charged with preparation to commit murder and/or manslaughter with a terrorist purpose and attempting to join an organisation that had an objective to commit terrorist crimes.** One of the individuals was convicted under juvenile law: his original sentence after conviction was 12 months and community service for 120 hours. Eventually, he went to jail for four months. Two of the remaining three individuals were convicted of attempts to join a terrorist organisation: both were convicted to 27 months in prison. The last individual was convicted and sentenced to 18 months, of which six were conditional, and a probation of 24 months. On appeal, he was convicted and sentenced to 26 months and a probationary period of 36 months.

## 5. Conclusion

The Kick-off Report states that it could be possible that the Netherlands has witnessed the development of so-called “gangster-jihadi”. The preliminary findings from the four profiles we have assessed and analysed seem to show opposing findings. However, since these results are preliminary and based only on four profiles, it remains difficult to draw any conclusions and we will have to await the analysis and assessment of the other individuals.