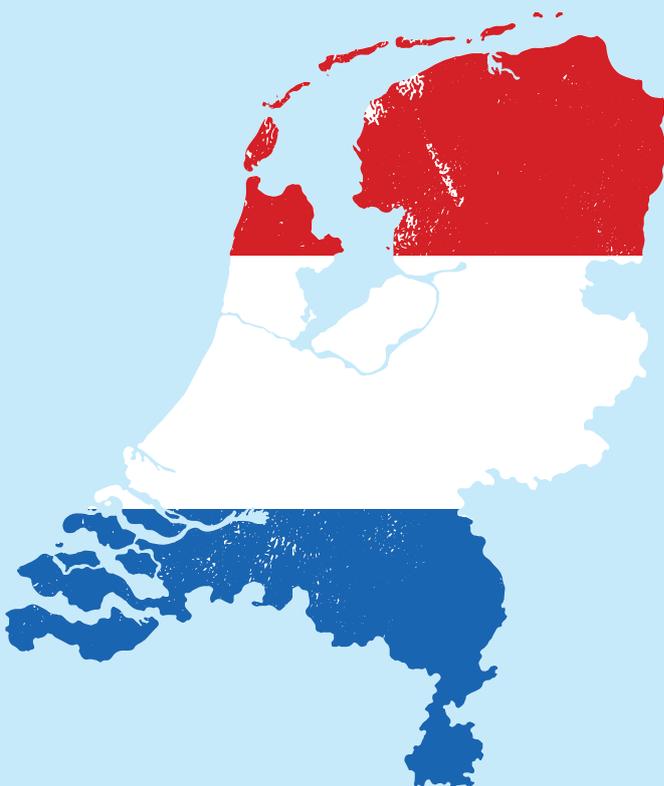


# FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK

Quarterly Report Vol. 2: The Netherlands



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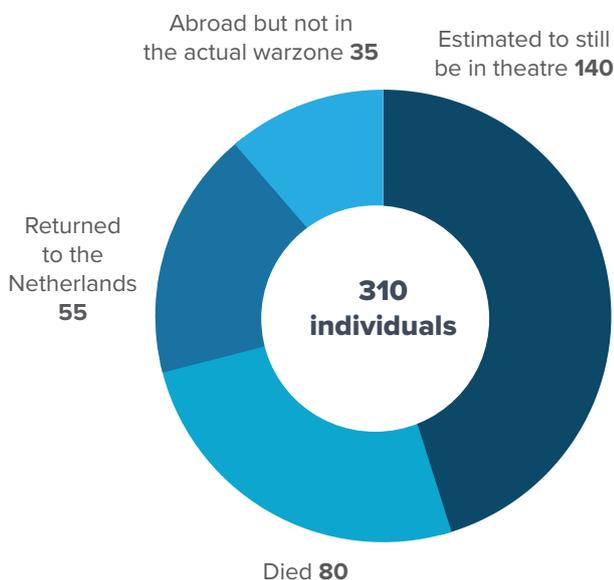
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# INTRODUCTION

Member states of the European Union continue to be challenged by the foreign fighter phenomenon and the Netherlands is no exception.<sup>1</sup> As of early 2019, the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) estimates that 310 people left the Netherlands to join jihadist groups fighting in Syria and Iraq. Of these 310 individuals, 140 were estimated to still be in theatre, 55 had returned to the Netherlands, 80 had died, and 35 were abroad but not in the actual warzone. In addition, the NCTV estimated that 175 minors, of which one or both parents held Dutch citizenship, were present in and outside of the warzones.<sup>2</sup> Although the challenge for counterterrorism policymakers and practitioners has begun to shift from understanding the motives for foreign fighting to assessing best practices for dealing with returnees, one question that remains pertinent is the degree to which crime and terrorism may overlap. To what extent does the so-called 'crime-terror nexus' provide insight into both dynamics leading to involvement in terrorism and potential avenues through which terrorist and extremists more generally may seek to reinvent themselves as their active involvement with jihadist causes ceases?<sup>3</sup>



This report forms part of a larger project on the crime-terror nexus as it applies to European jihadism in recent years. It contributes data specific to the Netherlands on the 14 individuals arrested in 2015 for suspicion of involvement in one or more terrorism-related criminal offences. It expands on the four individuals who were reported on in the 2018 preliminary report by summarizing the findings as applicable to the entire 2015 Dutch cohort.<sup>4</sup> The preliminary report worked from the assumption that 20 people had been arrested in 2015 on suspicion of terrorism-related offences, as indicated in Europol's 2016 EU Terrorism Situation & Trend Report (TE-SAT).<sup>5</sup> Searches of open-source records as well as information provided by the Dutch police and public prosecution service, however, indicated a lower number of 14 people arrested on suspicion of terrorism-related offences in 2015. The difference is likely due to the terrorism-related charges against some arrestees being dropped, as happened with at least two individuals who turned out to be prank-callers making false threats.<sup>6</sup>

Like all of the country-level reports that constitute the empirical basis of the GLOBSEC project, the collection and analysis of data on the Dutch arrestees from 2015 was structured using a pre-determined codebook. This codebook contained 122 variables intended to provide insight into, for instance, the socio-demographic background of the arrestees, their ideological convictions, radicalisation variables, and, of course, the ways in which criminal behaviour or criminal networks informed their radicalisation experiences. As noted in the preliminary report on the Netherlands, open sources were frequently not detailed enough to enable this codebook-driven analysis.<sup>7</sup> To overcome this issue, the authors applied for and acquired access to Dutch police investigative files on all 14 individuals arrested on suspicion of terrorism-related offences in 2015.

This unique source of primary data contained the detailed information required to effectively utilise the codebook-driven methodology.<sup>8</sup> It does, however, come at the cost of very limited transparency, as the

1 Tanya Mehra and Christophe Paulussen, "The Repatriation of Foreign Fighters and Their Families: Options, Obligations, Morality and Long-Term Thinking," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague (ICCT)* (2019); Harmen Van der Wilt and Christophe Paulussen, "The Role of International Criminal Law in Responding to the Crime-Terror Nexus," *European Journal of Criminology Online* first (2019).

2 Nationaal Coördinator Terrorisbestrijding en Veiligheid, "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 48," (The Hague: NCTV, 2018), 5; "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 49," (The Hague: NCTV, 2019), 2.

3 Tamara Makarenko, "The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism," *Global Crime* 6, no. 1 (2004); Colin P. Clarke, "Drugs & Thugs: Funding Terrorism through Narcotics Trafficking," *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 3 (2016).

4 Jessica Sciarone and Bart Schuurman, "From Criminals to Terrorists and Back? Quarterly Report 2018 Netherlands," (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2018).

5 EUROPOL, *TE-SAT 2016: European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016* (The Hague: Europol, 2016), 45.

6 Discussions with Dutch police and Dutch public prosecution service staff.

7 Sciarone and Schuurman, "Report 2018 Netherlands," 2.

8 Bart Schuurman, "Research on Terrorism, 2007-2016: A Review of Data, Methods and Authorship," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, no. Online first (2018).

#### **4) FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?**

police sources cannot be made public. Moreover, to protect the privacy and security of all individuals covered in those sources, the Dutch arrestees are discussed in aggregate only; no information that could be used to identify particular individuals has been recorded or provided here. The authors are grateful to the Dutch police and public prosecution service for the trust placed in them and are confident that the added detail and reliability that the police files provide will strengthen the overall GLOBSEC project on the crime-terror nexus. The presentation of the results is preceded by a brief recapitulation of some of the key characteristics of the crime-terror nexus in order to provide the necessary context.

# TOWARDS A NEW CRIME-TERROR NEXUS?

The concept of crime and terrorism as overlapping or mutually reinforcing ‘career paths’ and interlinked social milieus, has been around for some time.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, such arguments were already being made in reference to groups like Colombia’s FARC and Northern Ireland’s IRA in the early 2000s.<sup>10</sup> Yet, it is in recent years that the crime-terror nexus has gained particular interest, as analyses of European citizens joining jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq indicated that such an overlap might be particularly applicable to this iteration of the terrorist threat.<sup>11</sup>

As defined by Makarenko, the crime-terror nexus can be thought of as a continuum or scale, with a group or individual being able to ‘slide up and down the scale, between what is traditionally referred to as organised crime and terrorism’.<sup>12</sup> Makarenko further distinguishes three ways in which this crime-terror overlap can occur. Criminal and terrorist groups may (1) cooperate to further shared aims or benefit from each other’s activities. There may also be (2) convergence when one particular entity begins adopting skills or ways of operating that are ‘traditionally’ believed to be primarily the domain of either organised criminals or terrorists. Finally, when (3) transformation occurs, terrorist groups develop into a criminal enterprise or vice versa.<sup>13</sup>

In more recent work, Basra, Neumann and Brunner of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) have argued for an updated perspective on the crime-terror nexus. Basra et al. argue that the most recent crime-terror nexus is different in that it no longer centres on the convergence, cooperation, or transformation of either criminal or terrorist organisations. Instead, they find that the social milieus from which criminals or terrorists are drawn have come to overlap, leading to a ‘new’ crime-terror nexus.<sup>14</sup> As a result, ‘criminal

and terrorist groups have come to recruit from the same pool of people, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps that have consequences for how individuals radicalise and operate’<sup>15</sup> In the kick-off report for GLOBSEC’s overarching project on the crime-terror nexus, the phenomenon is also referred to as ‘gangster jihadism’. As the report states, ‘gangster jihadis’ are individuals who have the criminal skills and familiarity with violence that make them suitable to both criminal and terrorist activities.<sup>16</sup> Jihadism as represented by ISIS may be particularly appealing for such people as it offers a means of attaining redemption for a life of sin, in the process turning criminal skills into terrorist assets.<sup>17</sup>

Turning to the specific case of the Netherlands, there appears to be at least some degree of empirical support for the existence of such a ‘new’ crime-terror nexus. In a detailed study of Dutch jihadists who had travelled (or attempted to) to Syria, police researcher Anton Weenink found that of the 140 individuals he analysed, 47% had (extensive) criminal records. In fact, the men in Weenink’s sample were involved in crime twice as often as other Dutch young men while the women showed a five-time increase over the national average for other females.<sup>18</sup> Weenink was, however, careful to acknowledge the limitations of his approach and the incomplete nature of some of his data.

Such a tentative approach appears to be validated by slightly more recent work carried out by Leyenhorst and Andreas. These two Dutch researchers gathered biographical information on 26 Salafi-Jihadist ‘clients’ then under the supervision of the Dutch Probation Service. Their analysis initially supports the idea of a (new) crime-terror nexus, as 42 percent of these clients were found to have had criminal records, almost three-quarters of which related to violent

9 See, for instance: Walter Laqueur, “Postmodern Terrorism,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 5 (1996).

10 Chris Dishman, “Terrorism, Crime, and Transformation,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 24, no. 1 (2001).

11 Rajan Basra, Peter R. Neumann, and Claudia Brunner, “Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus,” (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2016), 11. See also: Javier Argomaniz and Rut Bermejo, “Jihadism and Crime in Spain: A Convergence Settings Approach,” *European Journal of Criminology* Online first (2019); Jonathan Ilan and Sveinung Sandberg, “How ‘Gangsters’ Become Jihadists: Bourdieu, Criminology and the Crime-Terror Nexus,” *ibid.*; Cameron Sumpter and Joseph Franco, “Migration, Transnational Crime and Terrorism: Exploring the Nexus in Europe and Southeast Asia,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 5 (2018); Suraj Lakhani, “Extreme Criminals: Reconstructing Ideas of Criminality through Extremist Narratives,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* Online first (2018).

12 Makarenko, “The Crime-Terror Continuum,” 130.

13 *Ibid.*, 131.

14 Basra, Neumann, and Brunner, “Criminal Pasts.”

15 *Ibid.*, 11.

16 Kacper Rekawek et al., “From Criminals to Terrorists and Back? Kick-Off Report,” (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2018), 7.

17 Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, “Crime as Jihad: Developments in the Crime-Terror Nexus in Europe,” *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 9: 1-4.

18 Anton W. Weenink, “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 2 (2015): 23.

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crimes.<sup>19</sup> However, Leyenhorst and Andreas go on to caution against drawing an overly simplified relation between prior involvement in crime and current involvement in terrorism. “[T]o 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>20</sup>

As this brief overview indicates, research on the most recent iteration of the crime-terror nexus is still very much in development. Perhaps contrasting with the cautionary assessment of a potential link between crime and terrorism given by Leyenhorst and Andreas, an assessment of the Dutch reintegration program for extremist offenders published in 2018 notes that programme staff have seen their clients become more strongly characterized by criminal backgrounds over time.<sup>21</sup> As is often the case in the field of terrorism studies, particularly where (relatively) new phenomena are concerned, there is an ongoing need for more research. Hopefully, this country-report on the Netherlands can contribute useful empirical data to assess the degree to which a crime-terror nexus has characterised European jihadism in recent years.

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<sup>19</sup> Maarten Van Leyenhorst and Ada Andreas, “Dutch Suspects of Terrorist Activity: A Study of Their Biographical Backgrounds Based on Primary Sources,” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 12 (2017): 317.

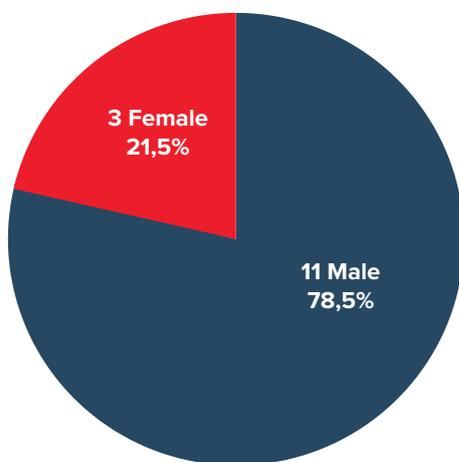
<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Liesbeth Van der Heide and Bart Schuurman, “Reintegrating Terrorists in the Netherlands: Evaluating the Dutch Approach,” *ibid.*, no. 17 (2018).

# RESULTS: ARRESTS ON TERRORISM-RELATED CHARGES IN THE NETHERLANDS, 2015

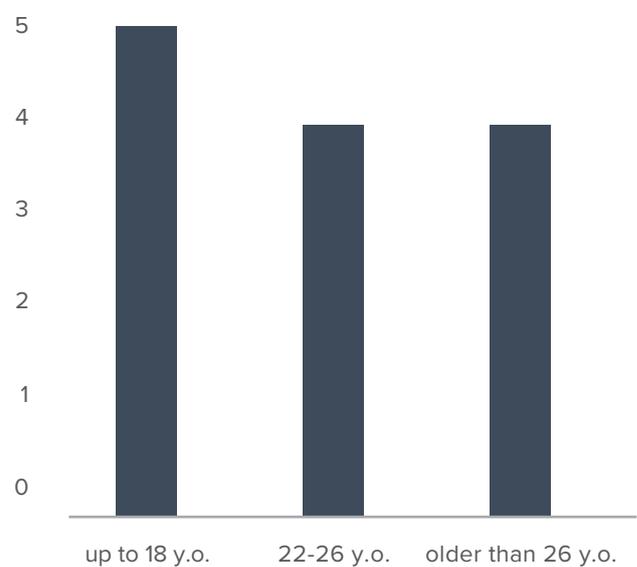
The following paragraphs provide a succinct overview of the most important findings as they relate to the 14 individuals arrested in the Netherlands in 2015 on suspicion of involvement in terrorism-related criminal offences. Unless stated otherwise, the information presented below is drawn from the Dutch police investigative files accessed by the authors. By way of introduction, it is interesting to note that all but one of these 14 individuals were convicted for terrorism-related offences, although two were later acquitted.

## SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS



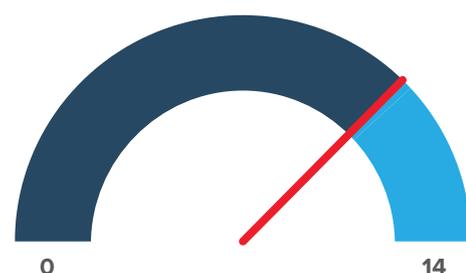
Of the 14 individuals studied, 11 were male and 3 were female. At the time of arrest, 5 were 18 or younger, 4 were between 22 and 26, and another 4 were older than 26. The age of 1 individual could not be accurately ascertained. In terms of country of birth, 7 individuals were born in Europe and 7 outside of its borders.<sup>22</sup> Nationality-wise, the sample contained 4 Dutch nationals, 1 non-Dutch individual, and 9 people with a dual-nationality.<sup>23</sup> Information on their educational achievements was unavailable for 5 out of 14, whereas 3 had finished high school, 2 had intermediate vocational training,

## Age at the time of arrest



2 had higher vocational training, and 1 attended university, indicating quite a broad variation in terms of educational background. At 13 out of 14, almost all of these individuals were unemployed at the time of arrest. Finally, based on the assessment of mental-health professionals, 6 out of 14 individuals were found to have suffered from some form of mental health-related issues. Further details, however, could not be ascertained.

## 10 out of 14 individuals in the database have a record of previous arrest



<sup>22</sup> This information is not specified further to protect arrestee privacy.

<sup>23</sup> This information is not specified further to protect arrestee privacy.

## FOREIGN-FIGHTING EXPERIENCE

Of these 14 individuals, 1 appears to have actually gained experience as a foreign fighter with jihadist groups outside of the Netherlands. Two others appear to have attempted to reach the conflicts in Syria or Iraq but did not get further than Turkey, which for years was an important point from which entry into Syria could be gained relatively easily.<sup>24</sup> A fourth individual went to Bulgaria. The Dutch public prosecutor believed all 3 of these travellers were en route to Syria or Iraq to link up with jihadist groups there. The remainder were what could be considered 'homegrown' jihadists who had not (yet) shown an interest in travelling abroad.<sup>25</sup>

## CRIMINAL HISTORY

At 10 out of 14, a majority of almost three-quarters of those arrested on suspicion of terrorism-related offences in the Netherlands in 2015 had a criminal history. **In terms of the type of offences, there is an almost fifty-fifty split between relatively minor crimes such as shoplifting and much more serious offences including attempted murder.** The ratio of 10 out of 14 is higher than the percentages reported by both Weenink and Leyenhorst and Andreas, as discussed above. The discrepancy is likely due to the much smaller sample-size utilized for this report and should, therefore, be treated with considerable care. The relatively high prevalence of criminal backgrounds does, however, match a similar finding on the increasing frequency with which Dutch probation service staff encounter clients with a criminal record in their specialised terrorism and extremism team.<sup>26</sup>

## RADICALISATION PATHWAYS

Accurately gauging how and why these 14 individuals became involved in terrorism remains a difficult exercise, even with access to privileged information drawn from police investigative files. Several of the 2015 arrestees maintained they had not become radicalised and had not been involved in terrorism. For 8 of the 14, no information on motive could be discerned. With regard to the other 6, the available information indicates a variety of radicalisation pathways. For some, the radicalization trajectories began with disruptive life-events, such as the loss of work and home. **Others sought to redeem themselves, wishing to start over in life by leaving behind debt and addiction.** One individual appears to have had a more ideology-centred radicalisation trajectory, with a turn to a stricter form of Islam while in detention functioning as a starting-point for involvement in terrorism. Finally, the role of friends and family already involved in extremism and a desire to help Syrian civilians oppressed by the Assad regime were recurrent motives.

24 See, for instance: Jasper L. De Bie, Christianne J. De Poot, and Joanne P. Van der Leun, "Shifting Modus Operandi of Jihadist Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands between 2000 and 2013: A Crime Script Analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015).

25 Manni Crone and Martin Harrow, "Homegrown Terrorism in the West," *ibid.* 23, no. 4 (2011).

26 Van der Heide and Schuurman, "Reintegrating Terrorists."



# CONCLUSION

The findings presented here are ambiguous with regard to the existence of a crime-terror nexus in the Netherlands. It must be kept in mind, of course, that the data is limited to a single year and a small number of cases. The greatest utility of this data lies in its ability to contribute to the much larger overall picture at the European level of analysis that will be detailed in the final overall report to come out of the Globsec project.

When viewed by themselves, the results show that, on the one hand, what is known about these individuals' radicalisation trajectories does not provide explicit support for the idea that a crime-terror nexus, in other words, an overlap between criminal and terrorist social milieus, played a role. However, when looking at criminal antecedents, it is striking that 10 out of 14 individuals had a criminal past, with half of that number involved in serious offences that often included an aspect of interpersonal violence. In other words, based on the individuals arrested in 2015, a conclusive answer of the existence of a crime-terror nexus in the Netherlands is difficult to provide. The backgrounds of the individuals assessed do seem to uphold this hypothesis, yet it remains unclear to what extent and how the surprisingly high percentage of criminal antecedents played a role in their subsequent radicalisation trajectories.

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IDEAS SHAPING THE WORLD



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