

Dutch Suspects of Terrorist Activity: A Study of Their Biographical Backgrounds Based on Primary Sources.

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Abstract

With the impending defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, supporters of terrorist groups, among them home-grown supporters and returning foreign fighters, have become a huge security threat to their country of return. Some have committed attacks in western countries, even while under the surveillance of authorities. Counter-terrorism is confronted with enormous challenges. One of the most prominent issues is the absence of evidence based knowledge on early warning signs. Experts on radicalization and terrorism have emphasized that neither typologies of terrorists nor accurate descriptions of generalizable risks can be made. This leads to opportunities for those who are willing to prepare and commit acts of terrorism to do so, without the agencies in charge of monitoring such individuals being able to accurately identify relevant threats. An additional deficiency in counter-terrorism research, is its dependency on historic and secondary source material. One of various actors in the Netherlands tasked to evaluate and mitigate relevant risks of terrorist suspects and offenders, is the Dutch Probation Service (DPS). In response to today's prevailing terrorist threat, a specialized section of the DPS is set up to identify and supervise potential problem behaviour of those who are suspected or convicted of terrorism. The authors have been involved in this Unit Terrorism, Extremism and Radicalization (TER) for years. As professionals of TER, the authors have had unique access to both judicial data, such as police files and prosecutor's data, as to experts in the Dutch field of counter-terrorism. The authors have analysed the pre-sentencing advices of twenty-six clients of the DPS. These files are comprised of several socio-economic, historical, psychopathological and behavioural indicators. The goals are to learn from the analysis of the biographical backgrounds of the suspects and to stimulate the debate on management and supervision of terrorist offenders.

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Introduction

After each terrorist attack (inter-)national security and intelligence agencies are criticized for failing to prevent it (Vervaeke, 2017). The alarming but sad reality is that most

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‘successful’ violent extremists were already on the radar of intelligence agencies. Anis Amri (Berlin), Esteban Santiago (Fort Lauderdale), Cherif Kouahchi (Charlie Hebdo), Khuram Shazad Butt (London), Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (Boston), Ibrahim and Khalid Bakraoui (Brussels) and Salah and Brahim Abdeslam (Paris) were all mentioned in the course of terrorism investigations or in internal police communications in the months prior to their attacks.

Of course, this does not justify unsubstantiated criticism of governmental organizations. It does, however, raise concerns about the difficulties of identifying and interpreting warning signs. This is becoming even more complicated now that both encrypted communication apps and propaganda such as *How to Survive in the West*, *Rumiya* and *Dabiq*² are widely used by violent extremists. Moreover, the limited communication of lone-wolves presents further challenges for the early identification and subsequent interpretation of relevant signs.

This has created opportunities for those who are willing to prepare and commit acts of terrorism to do so without the agencies in charge of monitoring such individuals being able to accurately identify possible warning signs. In recent decades, scholars of radicalization and terrorism have agreed that neither typologies of terrorists nor accurate descriptions of generalizable risks can be made (Bakker, 2006; Bjorgo, 2011; Hoffman, 1983; Monahan, 2012; Pressman, E., 2009; Pressman & Flockton, 2012; Sageman, 2004). This is because terrorists vary too much in their sociological, psychological, historical, and cultural backgrounds (Bakker, 2006; Hudson, 1999; Monahan, 2012; Pressman & Flockton, 2012; Roberts & Horgan, 2008; Sageman, 2004; Weenink, 2015).

Before being able to establish a risk-factor for the prediction of future behaviour, it is necessary to identify a variable that statistically correlates with an outcome and also precedes that outcome in time (Kraemer, et al., 1997). The low base rate of terrorists, combined with the wide diversity of their backgrounds and motivations, has, thus far, made *statistical correlation* impossible. Furthermore, most research into terrorism is dependent on historical

² In such handbooks and magazines, potential terrorists share tips and tricks as to how they should behave without attracting any attention and how weapons and bombs can be made.

cases (Bakker, 2006; De Graaf & Weggemans, 2015; Sageman, 2004; Schuurman & Horgan, 2016) or secondary source data (Eijkman & Schuurman, 2013). Recent discussions in the media have, among others, focussed upon the poorly-integrated backgrounds of the attackers with origins in the Parisian Banlieues and Brussels' Molenbeek (Blasic, 2015; Renout, 2015). The explanatory value of this thesis of relative deprivation is, however, questionable: we simply do not know what leads an aggravated young man (or woman) towards violent extremism. Eijkman, Schuurman and Bijen conducted a study on the potential warning signs of terrorist attacks and concluded that “there is no such thing as an indicator that both *precedes* a terrorist attack and *directly attributes* to terrorism as well.” (2011, p. 183). The Joint statement of EU Ministers for Justice and Home Affairs and representatives of EU institutions on the terrorist attacks in Brussels on 22 March 2016 mentions in point 7: “We need to continue to develop effective preventive measures, especially by improving early detection of signs of radicalization at a local level” (www.consilium.europa.eu, date of consultation August 17, 2017).

The Dutch Probation Service (DPS)³ is one of various actors in the Netherlands tasked with analysing and managing the risks of those suspected or convicted of terrorism-related crimes.⁴ In response to today's prevailing terrorist threat, a specialized section of the DPS focusses entirely on the subjects of *Terrorism, Extremism and Radicalization (TER Unit)*.⁵ In their capacity as frontline workers, the probation officers of TER are involved in all local platforms, so-called Safety Houses⁶, where potentially radicalized individuals are being discussed. Both authors have years of experience working for this specialized unit. It is our experience that Dutch suspects and perpetrators of terrorist offences differ greatly from one

³ The Dutch Probation Service plays an advisory and supervisory role when a suspect is detained, suspended awaiting trial or convicted under mandatory conditions. The DPS enforces supervision and oversees that the offender adheres to their conditions. The DPS also develops and organises multiple types of (behavioural) training and other crime-reducing interventions.

⁴ We refer to those individuals as clients of the DPS.

⁵ The Terrorism, Extremism and Radicalization Unit of the DPS will henceforth be referred to as TER.

⁶ Safety Houses (Veiligheidshuizen) are local networks of organizations that combine interventions of criminal law with care and support approaches from civil law and municipalities. These networks stimulate cooperation between judicial and municipal agencies. Their objectives are to explore and mitigate individuals' risks, decrease recidivism rates and improve social safety in society. In 2016 there were thirty-three such networks covering the entire country (Ministry of Safety & Justice, 2016).

another in their historical, psychopathological and socio-economic features and motivations. Drawing on the authors' access to official police and prosecutor's data, this article structures DPS information on certain characteristics and motivations of twenty-six Salafi-Jihadi clients. This analysis is based on primary source information only, interpreted and analysed by experienced frontline workers and academics. The following research questions will be discussed:

- 1) What can be learned from the analysis of the biographical background of the suspects?
- 2) Can a structured overview of the database sample lead to more insights into the issues of reintegration, risk management and the supervision of terrorist offenders?

We do not claim to offer a pathway that leads to a profile of *the terrorist*. It is, however, our aim to explore the statistics and potential push- and pull-factors of a group that is generally not available for research purposes. We identify some overlapping and diverging indicators that can improve our understanding of people wanting to leave the security of the Netherlands in order to support or even commit acts of violent extremism abroad and in their homelands. Our aim is to contribute a structured overview of the biographical backgrounds of suspected terrorists to the debate on risk management and supervision of terrorist offenders. By using primary-source data, this study adds new insights to existing information and historical findings.

In the next section, we discuss the sample selection, the methods we employed in this research, some ethical issues and limitations of the research design, followed by our findings. In the conclusion, we reflect upon and discuss the research questions and offer recommendations for probationary work and future research.

Methodology

This article is based on the thesis "Characteristics and Motivations of Dutch (suspected) Terrorists" (Van Leyenhorst, 2016). This thesis was distributed under embargo

between the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the National Coordinator for Terrorism and Security and the Dutch Probation Service.

Sample selection

Due to today's threat from foreign fighters, we decided to focus this research on those who, in the Netherlands, are suspected of, or prosecuted for, terrorism-related offenses connected to Salafi-Jihadi terrorism in and around Syria. Our sample was restricted to prosecutions where the DPS was tasked to perform advisory, supervisory and/or reintegration work. This selection comprises a research sample of twenty-six cases. Most suspects from the two main national criminal investigations into terrorism - the *Context-case*⁷ from The Hague and *Cumbria*⁸ from Arnhem - were included in this sample.

The files were selected on May 1st, 2015. This means that the criminal allegations were made about acts that occurred prior to that date. All of the files were compiled in the pre-trial period, so all of the individuals in our sample were *suspects* at the time their files were selected.

On the date of publication however, it has become clear that sixteen suspects are indeed convicted of their alleged crimes, three have died in Syria and seven have been acquitted, or their prosecution has been terminated prior to a court appearance. A conviction rate of 62% confirms the significance of the findings in this exploration of terrorist offenders. It is moreover relevant to point out that all four women of this sample were part of the seven that were acquitted or terminated prior to their court appearance.

Data analysis

Our file-analysis focusses on DPS pre-sentence reports. These reports were put together from the items that are included in the risk-assessment instrument of the DPS, RISC

⁷ This investigation is directed at ten individuals from the city of The Hague. Some face(d) charges of joining a terrorist organization, others of having tried to depart to Syria with the intent to join terrorist organizations. There are also some who have been charged for recruitment activities.

⁸ This investigation is directed at several suspects from Arnhem, who are being prosecuted for joining, facilitating or otherwise supporting Salafi-Jihadi terrorist groups.

(Reclassering Nederland, 2016).⁹ RISC comprises a structured questionnaire relating to indicators that correlate with certain risks. These indicators contain socio-economic, historical and psychological items. The files are structured around two themes. The first is the criminal allegation, which is the starting point for the probation officer, who studies it and discusses it with the suspect in order for him¹⁰ to be able to share ‘his side of the story’. The second is a description of the suspect’s life prior to the (alleged) criminal behavior, and also of his needs and responsivity as regards reintegration after judicial interference. These two themes together provide an impression of the life of the suspect.

Probation officers are required to incorporate all the available information they can accumulate. At the least, this means that a substantial part of the current criminal investigation (among other official police documents and files from the prosecutor’s office) and all historical judicial data is included. Other available information is case-dependent. Some suspects approved, for example, contact between their probationary officer and their school, parents, employer, doctor, psychologist, etc. Others did not. The probation officer assembles and analyzes all findings and describes these in a pre-sentence report. This article structures the information derived from these reports.

The profession of the authors has not only provided clearance for access to primary sources, it has also enabled access to other experts in the field, among whom were several probation officials and an expert in extremist Islamic ideologies.¹¹ This helped the authors to interpret the findings and explore a relatively new research sample. This proved to be of great value, particularly as regards ideological and Islamic topics, as consultation with an expert provided significant aid to the authors in recognizing and interpreting relevant nuances and signs. Additional value resulted from the opportunity to conduct interviews throughout the

⁹ RISC (Hildebrand & Bosker, 2011) is a diagnostic tool based on the model of Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). RISC stands for ‘Recidive Inschattings Schalen’ (recidivism assessment scales). It entails a decision-making procedure based on a structured analysis of someone’s risks, needs and responsivities. The goal is to determine individualized risks and suitable interventions in order to reduce such risks.

¹⁰ Terrorist suspects can be both male and female. For readability reasons however, the male reference is used throughout this article.

¹¹ In the field of counter terrorism “experts” do not always agree. Consulting national experts therefore does not imply that these “experts” should be considered as the absolute *bearers of truth*.

whole research period, as interviewees were able to reflect upon the issues and provide more contemporary knowledge as time passed.

Research ethics

Clients of the DPS start their trajectory by signing a document acknowledging and accepting that the information they share with probation officers will be used by the DPS for its policies and will be saved in its database. The internal privacy guidelines of the DPS elaborate on the conditions for employing its data for academic research as well. Article 3.4 details on the permissibility of conducting research without the explicit consent of its clients. Based upon this article, individual permission from all 26 suspects for utilizing their files for research purposes was not required. The required clearance was granted by the General manager of the Dutch Probation Service, the Department of Justice and Security and the National Coordinator of Terrorism and Security. The ambition of the DPS was to optimize its risk-management and reintegration policies. Motivated to improve the empirical and statistical foundations for its approach, the DPS co-developed this study under the condition that all findings are processed anonymously.

In order to safeguard principles of anonymity the authors have made sure that:

- All original data is kept secure and processed on secured systems of the DPS.
- All information processed is limited by relevance and accuracy.
- The data does not identify any individual and is unlikely to allow any individual to be identified through its combination with other data. Therefore, they will not be affected in any way by this research.
- Potentially identifiable data is altered as much as possible, without doing harm to the relevance of the information.
- No identifiable quotes are described in this article. To personalize some of our findings we have developed narratives that are based on recurring storylines. These narratives were presented to an independent third-party researcher from the

International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT), who confirmed that they were both realistic and representative.

Limitations

The authors were confronted by several methodological limitations while conducting this research. Firstly, the file-analysis was based on information obtained from suspects. The DPS is often seen as a representative of the justice department and therefore, inevitably, receives limited cooperation from its clients. Suspects generally believe that they have little to gain when cooperating fully with a judicial institution and are, furthermore, very much aware that everything they say can be held against them when appearing before a judge. Furthermore, it is safe to assume that this research is slightly biased due to our sample selection: a sample taken from probation will probably contain more aggravated young men holding grudges against society than a sample taken from the average population. Both of these issues have undoubtedly influenced the validity and the reliability of our findings. Secondly, the files were (partly) based on police investigations. Although police files should be regarded as relatively reliable documents, according to Eijkman and Schuurman they have essentially “been created to facilitate criminal prosecution and therefore cannot be considered completely objective accounts” (2013, p. 5).

Thirdly, RISC is designed for assessing principles from RNR regarding generic crimes, such as violence and theft. That tool is not based on empirical evidence regarding risk-factors that correlate specifically with terrorism. Several authors have stressed that most currently-used risk assessment protocols for terrorism have questionable relevance to their target group because the factors they use to assess risks do not relate to the backgrounds and motivations of terrorists (Monahan, 2012; Pressman, Duits, Rinne, & Flockton, 2016). Thus, in addition to the risk of subjectivity, the file-analysis was based on an instrument that is not designed to identify terrorism-related risks. This may also have affected the validity of the study.

The fourth limitation was the size of the sample: a sample size of only twenty-six cases would generally be considered small, which can make “comparison and generalisations problematic, and findings provisional” (Schmid, 2013, p. 55). Although this is usually correct

and valid, there are few available studies in terrorism research that are grounded upon primary sources and, as such, our sample of twenty-six is significant.

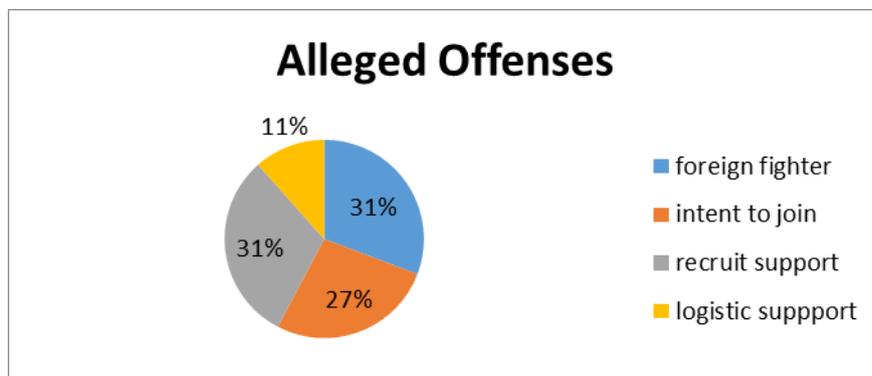
The fifth and final limitation relates to the professional capacity of the authors. Van Leyenhorst was involved as a probation officer in five of the twenty-six cases and Andreas attended in her capacity as policy advisor several meetings where cases were discussed. The authors have aspired to obtain all information exclusively from the pre-sentencing reports in order to guarantee objectivity. However, we do acknowledge that potential professional biases may have occurred.

Findings from File Analysis

RISc starts with a description of a suspect's criminal history and is followed by an analysis of the allegation that has been investigated.

DPS files show that 42% of the suspects had prior criminal convictions. This is a much higher percentage than some historic studies on terrorist offenders have shown (Bakker, 2006; Sageman, 2004), but ressembles the more contemporary findings of Weenink (2015). Of this 42%, an overwhelming percentage of 73% had prior convictions involving violence. Most violent offences were gang-related crimes such as burglary and assault and most offences had been committed when the suspects were juveniles.

The alleged terrorism-related acts in our sample were represented in the following proportions:



All of the suspects denied any wrongdoing and claimed that they were being prosecuted due to their (Islamic) beliefs. Given the potentially devastating sentences and stigmatization that can result from convictions for terrorist offences, such denials were to be expected. However, due to the approach and expertise of the professionals in TER, most suspects were willing and able to give details of their judicial status and their ideas about reintegrating into Dutch society. Moreover, some, whether or not confronted with overwhelming evidence, acknowledged that they had travelled to Syria. Their reported motivations, however, varied from trying to start a company, to providing humanitarian support for people in need or to having had an ambition to live in an Islamic country, where Syria was considered the most accessible destination. Two admitted having transferred money to peers in Syria, although both denied any intended support for terrorist groups. They simply claimed that they had wanted to “help a friend.”

To provide insights into actual personal motivations for potential terrorist behavior, we have collected multiple recurring storylines into four narratives.

Narrative 1

“There is a hardening in the way Muslims are treated in the Netherlands. Job applications are not evaluated justly, people look at you differently in the streets, and specific examples of Muslims that are molested do not appear on the eight o’clock news. Dutch policies and media are subjective and discriminatory and, therefore, Muslims are developing the feeling that they do not matter and have started to seek comfort in each other. [...] These gatherings become more and more important and replace previously known routines and networks.”

Narrative 2

“I wanted to distance myself from my previous lifestyle involving drugs and a criminal lifestyle so I started to visit the nearby mosque. I was approached by others who informed me about a correct way to behave according to religious guidelines. These people seemed smart, experienced in Islamic tradition, and made me believe that they could assist me in my desire

to turn my life around. They made me believe that I was on the right track and helped me find my way so I, gradually, considered this new network as the ones who were important for me, as my friends. I lost contact with my parents and started to limit my social contact to these new friends. After a while, they showed me all kinds of movies of children dying in Syria and of radical preachers who claimed that Islam requires you to go to Syria. Within weeks, this was all I saw.”

Narrative 3

“After my uncle died I wanted to learn more about life and the afterlife. Because my mother and sisters did not live in accordance with Islamic guidelines and were not able to provide answers to my questions, I started to search online. The first search I conducted was about how to live like a proper Muslim. This search led me to a group called ‘sisters’. Pretty soon, I joined their Facebook and WhatsApp groups, where we exchanged various forms of information regarding religion and the oppression of the Ummah. I came to the conclusion that I could only become a better Muslim if I went to an Islamic State such as the one in Shaam, in order for me to help my brothers and sisters in need.

[.....]

Now I’m back I recognize that my failure to arrive in Syria has to be a sign from Allah. It was his way of showing me that I was wrong and that I have to focus my life on having a future in the Netherlands.”

Narrative 4

“My parents were divorced and my stepfather favoured his own kids over me. [...] I was bullied at school and was eventually placed in foster homes. [...] I felt I belonged to no one and asked myself questions about belonging and meaning in life. I started to find answers in religion and I was offered a Quran by Afghan friends from my football team. This brought me in contact with Islam. Alongside these new friends, I discovered that Islam is the answer to all my questions.”

In general, most suspects endured a lack of feelings of belonging or acceptance, dealt with existential questions, or were motivated to redeem prior personal misconduct. They were convinced that they had religiously and spiritually outgrown their parents and started seeking explanations for their ideological or existential dilemmas elsewhere. They developed the idea that living in the Netherlands was no longer possible. This process led to an intentional discarding of their national identity, as all efforts to abide by the norms of that society had become irrelevant to them. New networks and online environments came to replace their previously protective peers. Although some files included concerns regarding mosques, no actual prosecution was directed at any specific mosque. Multiple files, however, showed that suspects had been in contact with imams who had been denied access to mosques¹² but remained active on the street or at in-house meetings.

Extracting narratives from clients that were suspected for recruiting proved to be a more difficult task. This was not only because these clients were particularly intelligent and persuasive but also because such recruitment doesn't necessitate international travel activities or documented travel plans. Judicial evidence is dependent on establishing a direct link between ones' communication and the behaviour of others. Most recruiters realize this and consistently invoked their right to freedom of speech during their contacts with probation officers.

Researchers have highlighted the influence of the emerging usage of the Internet over the last decade (Sageman, 2004; Venhaus, 2010). The underlying analysis confirms that the Internet has played an enormous role in the process of Dutch individuals coming to support Salafi-Jihadism. With the exception of one, all investigative reports included elements of digital extremist propaganda. Reoccurring examples are Salafi-Jihadi *nasheeds* (songs that praise the necessity and requirements of the violent jihad), lectures by extremist preachers like Anwar al-Awlaki and media platforms where acts of violent extremism were glorified. In

¹² During the first decade of the 21st century political awareness arose that radical imams were able to influence susceptible (young) Muslim in certain mosques. Governmental policies and internal regulations were executed in order to prevent such imams from maintaining official positions. Although this objective was achieved, this study shows that displacement issues resulted from it.

addition to its value as a source for obtaining information, the Internet was an important medium for communication between suspects and offenders, whether foreign fighters in Syria or recruiters and potential travelers in the Netherlands. The handbook ‘*How to Survive in the West*’ was found increasingly often from early 2015. WhatsApp groups were also widely used, especially by female suspects. The more recent prosecutions, however, entailed better-encrypted communication apps such as Telegram.

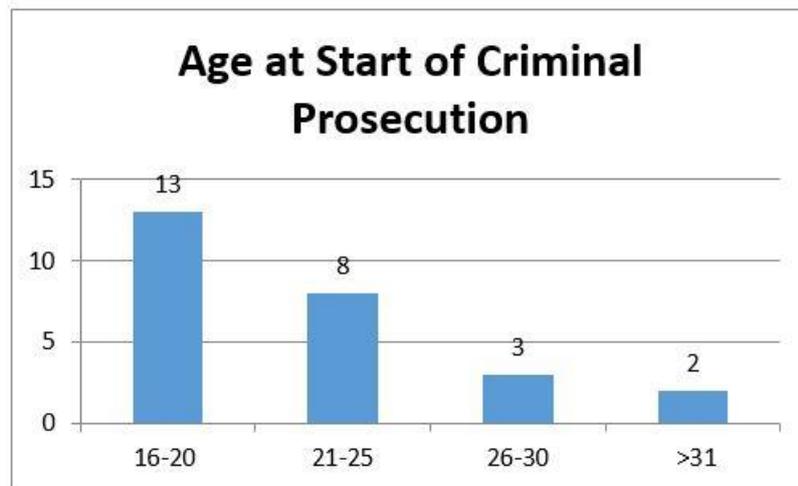
The relatively high number of six suspects had conducted an online search with the query ‘how to be a good Muslim’. According to an expert assigned to TER for assistance with ideological subjects, “extremist propaganda is linked with such search items. An estimated eighty percent of what is offered online is connected with extremist propaganda” (personal communication, April 15, 2015). This means that searching, vulnerable and rather isolated (young) individuals have a genuine risk of coming into contact with (professional) recruiters.

Criminogenic Factors

Age

We have recorded the age at which *criminal prosecution began*, to compensate for variations in the lengths of investigations and prosecutions.

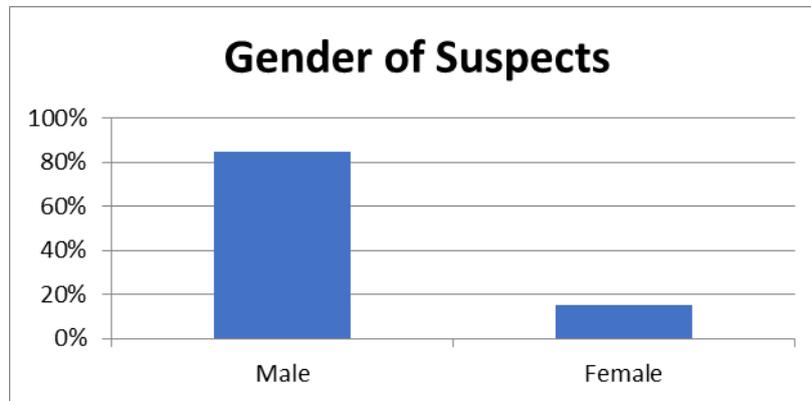
Most suspects were around twenty years old when they started attracting attention from judicial authorities, with a mean of twenty-one years old. There were three extremes: one suspect was sixteen years old, one was thirty and one was thirty-eight years old. According to probation officers from TER, contemporary prosecutions are directed at an increasing number of younger suspects compared with prior cases. These suspects come from networks of individuals between sixteen and nineteen years old that include a high prevalence of converted Dutch teenagers (personal communication, May 2, 2016).



This sample shows a (much) younger group of (suspected) terrorists than seen in previous studies. Sageman (2004) reported a mean age of twenty-six years old in his al-Qaeda group and Bakker's European sample (2006) had an average of twenty-seven years old. Bakker and De Bont (2016) conducted a recent study on Dutch (and Belgium) foreign fighters. They found a mean age of Dutch terrorists of 23.2 years. We compared the age findings with the types of criminal allegations as well, but found no significant correlations. There were recruiters from all age categories, as well as (attempted) foreign fighters with ages ranging from sixteen to thirty-one years old.

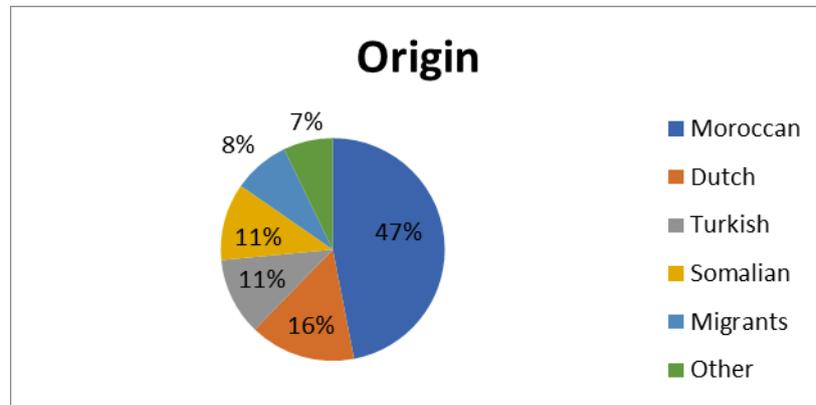
Gender

Although male suspects dominated the sample, four of the files (15%) included in it were for female suspects. This 15% corresponds with Weenink's (2015) findings (16% female) but is considerably lower than the latest study of Bakker and De Bont (2016). Their study of open sources and interviews with families, peers and professionals estimated a 24% rate of females among Dutch foreign fighters.



Increasing numbers of women and families have departed to Syria since the start of the uprisings in Syria. On a national level, females fulfill very specific roles within the networks of Salafi-Jihadi groups. These range from coordinating online platforms to collecting money for the parents and partners of those who have been arrested or are in Syria. It is also believed that females have an intermediary role in maintaining contacts between male suspects who are forbidden by law to communicate with each other. Such behaviour, however, is not necessarily criminal. The Prosecutor's Office is confronted with severe difficulties in successfully prosecuting females for terrorist acts. Most trials have resulted in acquittals or premature terminations of the prosecutions, primarily due to insufficient legal evidence. This potentially explains, in addition to methodological differences, the gap with the high percentage from the study of Bakker and De Bont (2016). Probation officers, however, have raised concerns about the intermediary and recruiting role of some females that they see reoccurring in multiple investigations (personal communication, May 2, 2016).

Origin



The majority of the clients were second-generation immigrants, born in the Netherlands from Moroccan parents (46%). Other recurring origins were Dutch (15%), Turkish and Somalian (both 11%). Eight suspects were born in another country but migrated to the Netherlands at a young age (prior to ten years old) and only one client (4%) did not have Dutch nationality. Again, compared with Weenink's study (2015), and acknowledging the differences in samples and methodology, this percentage (5%) equals his findings.

National spread

With the exception of four, all of the suspects were born in or around major Dutch cities in areas with clusters of immigrants. The majority of the suspects were registered in or around The Hague. Because different cities have different priorities and municipal approaches, registration may have been affected in several ways. For example, in Arnhem and The Hague Safety Houses are operational for many years. Several participants from the social and judicial domains participate in this multi-agency approach. In these meetings, all known (potentially) radicalized inhabitants are discussed and analyzed. Such broad attention influences the signaling behavior of the relevant actors in those cities and, consequently, the subsequent awareness of potential terrorists.

Based on data from electronic monitoring and from contacts with the police and the prosecutor's office, the probation officers of TER do not consider the spread of (suspected)

terrorists throughout the country a regional matter but rather a national one (personal communications, May 2, 2016; October 12, 2016). It is the experience of the DPS that most suspects have active contact with each other; some of these had not known each other before their criminal prosecutions began. Such get-togethers have been witnessed at several recurring meeting spots throughout the country, as well as in Belgium. This makes geographical distribution a somewhat diffuse area of study and one that is more relevant to regional policies than it is to national security issues.

Family and living situation

More than half of the suspects (54%) were brought up in large families with six or more siblings. Fourteen suspects experienced one or more separations and nine grew up without a father being present. Weenink's study provides similar figures on broken homes (2015). This sets today's Dutch group of suspected terrorists apart from the al-Qaeda members of the first decade of the 21st century, of whom Sageman concluded the majority "grew up in caring, mildly religious and intact families (2004, p. 96)".

Eight suspects were married and almost half (46%) had children. Six were single at the time of their arrest or departure, four were in a relationship or were engaged. Three files offered no data on relationship status. Only two suspects were married according to Dutch law, whereas six were married only through Islamic procedures. Four suspects had been married more than once and all of these marriages had been conducted solely according to religious procedures.

Several media outlets have argued that parents of foreign fighters should be held accountable for negligence that resulted in the terrorist behavior of their offspring (Ellian, 2015; Targhi Bakkali, 2015). This cannot, however, be supported by our findings. Fifteen files (!) detail on parents that went to the authorities with concerns regarding the (changing) behavior of their children. These parents experienced that their sons started to impose strict religious rules at home, for instance towards their sisters concerning the way they dressed and behaved in the public domain. There were also examples of children that accused their parents

of being ignorant and disrespectful to their Islamic commitments by living in a western country. Some parents have seized their child's passport and two parents even went to Syria in order to retrieve their children.

TER aspires to include parents in some cases as well. The probation officers are in contact with several parents that appear determined to monitor their children and thereby actively contribute to a successful reintegration of their offspring. Some of them are for example present at the structural meetings of their children with probation officers (personal communication, May 2, 2016). However, at the time of writing this article, it appears that the number of parents cooperating with judicial authorities declines due to their lost confidence in judicial authorities. This appears to be resulted from long-lasting preventive custodies, a subsequent lack of communication from the authorities and a fear of being subjected themselves by criminal prosecution or by child protections services (personal communication, August 18, 2017).

The majority of the research group (54%) lived with their parents before being arrested or departing to Syria. Only two suspects lived with friends and six shared houses with their partners. Three suspects lived on their own, one suspect lived with his grandmother and none were officially homeless before their arrest or departure. All roommates other than (grand) parents were considered as co-suspects or were otherwise subjected to terrorism investigations.

The increased involvement of siblings and roommates in diverse terrorism prosecutions, which have been seen in connection with recent European attacks, is relevant for investigative purposes. People that live under the same roof will be more comfortable sharing illicit propaganda or plans with each other, while brothers often have an authoritarian aspect in their relationship that enables one (generally the older brother) to influence and indoctrinate his (younger) sibling.

Religion

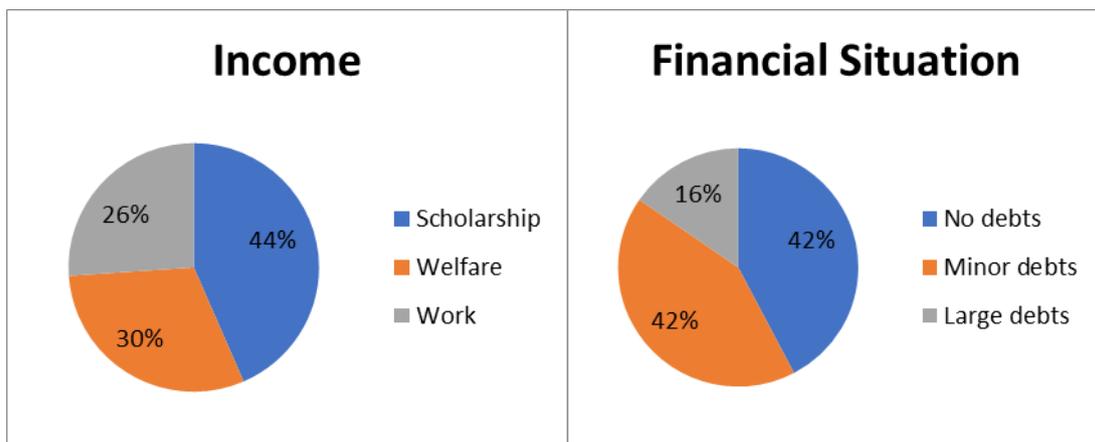
Despite the absence in RISC of questions referring to childhood faith, some information pertinent to this arose from the extensive conversations between probation officers and the suspects. Sixteen files included specifics of suspects' childhood faith and, of these sixteen, eleven were considered similar to what an expert of extremist Islamic ideologies referred to as "a more cultural interpretation of Islam" (personal communication, April 15, 2015). By this, we mean that while certain basic traditions were followed the foundations of their childhoods did not rest upon strict Islamic beliefs. Two suspects were children of an imam and were raised according to Islamic guidelines. There were no files that suggested an upbringing under strict Islamic or Salafi ideology. Four of the files (15%) were for converts.

Buys, Demant and Handy (2006) and Geelhoed (2011) have interviewed young (Islamic) men who were in the process of (converting to) Islamic fundamentalism. Both studies led to insights into *why* people turn to fundamentalist Islam and how they view the Western world and their place in it. Most scholars of radicalization consider fundamentalist views as an important breeding ground for Salafi-Jihadism (Feddes, Nickolson & Doosje, 2015; Moghaddam, 2005). However, while fundamentalist Islamic ideologies *may* lead to susceptibility to Salafi-Jihadi influence, it cannot be emphasized enough that the majority of people with such beliefs do not engage in terrorist activity. No relation between someone's religious history and their eventual support for terrorism can be substantiated by the findings of this study.

The DPS witnesses an increasingly vigorous lobby in several online Islamic communities and on Twitter that emphasizes and stimulates polarization in society. Within these online environments, the idea is constructed and spread that contributing to Dutch society is incompatible with honouring *one's true Muslim duties*. Although these groups accentuate their Muslim identities, dominant topics in these discussions are political and societal in nature. The interpretation of religion is merely the sauce that binds all the other ingredients together, rather than it being the direct impetus for supporting terrorism.

Finances

Twenty-three of the files contained financial details. Eighteen suspects had an official income (78%) prior to their arrest or departure to Syria. These were in the form of scholarships (55%), welfare (39%) or salaries from work (33%). Some received a scholarship in addition to another form of income. Thirteen suspects (57%) had debts, of which three (13%) had debts of several thousands of Euros.



The financial situation of several suspects clearly deteriorated in the months prior to their support for violent extremist groups. Multiple files showed a clear and intentional rejection of the Dutch democratic state of law and its values. Previously accepted national norms were no longer considered important and this resulted in increased separation from Dutch society. An often-read remark was that suspects found it valid to stop paying back (student-) loans because they felt *that this money would ultimately be used to fund the bombing of their brothers in Syria and Iraq*.

School and occupation

Thirteen suspects were attending school immediately prior to their arrest or departure to Syria.¹³ Eight of them (31% of the sample) attended higher education or university.

¹³ The education that was actively attended by the suspect at the time of their arrest, regardless of the award of any actual diploma, was recorded in this study. It is believed that this provides a more complete understanding of someone's intellectual abilities than officially licensed diplomas alone, especially since most suspects were still of school- (or university-) going age.

Dominant educational specialisms were various forms of social studies and Islamic studies. Three attended the Islamic University Rotterdam (IUR) and two others had applied to this institution but had been denied access due to insufficient grades.

In order to classify different levels of occupation, we have employed the divisions applied by Sageman (2004) as a benchmark. He differentiated between *skilled workers* (doctors, officers, scientists), *semi-skilled workers* (electricians, administrators, storekeepers) and *unskilled workers* (cleaners and factory workers). The majority (nineteen) of suspects in our sample had experience of work, although none of their jobs could be classified as “skilled work.” Eleven (42%) had occupations best categorized as semi-skilled work (community workers, nurse, courier) and eight had unskilled professions (various jobs from employment agencies). The remaining seven (26%) had no work experience at all. As was the case with their educational specialisms, a large number of suspects performed some type of social work, such as working in shelters, community homes or hospitals.

Historic behavior and trigger events

Nine suspects (35%) demonstrated behavioral issues at school or at home, which manifested as various forms of problem behavior towards authorities. Three suspects had a history of substance abuse and, in a similar amount of cases, a personal trauma such as the death of a loved one can, in hindsight, be described as a “concrete experience point or trigger-event” (Feddes, Nickolson, & Doosje, 2015, p. 13). This low percentage does not support findings from other studies that highlight the influence of trigger events in processes leading to violent extremism (Feddes, Nickolson & Doosje, 2015; Vermeulen & Bovenkerk, 2012). Four suspects described a solitary, lonesome childhood or a childhood characterized by multiple, severe changes (such as repeated relocations or new schools) that had led to them feeling detached from their peers and families.

Mental issues

At the time the sample was selected, the files showed four suspects who were, prior to their current prosecution, diagnosed with a DSM-IV disorder (15%). The diagnosis were ADHD, psychotic disorder, borderline personality disorder and PTSS. The organization that performs judicial diagnoses in the Netherlands (the NIFP) had not completed all forensic diagnoses prior to May 1, 2015. Multiple initial screenings conducted by the NIFP, however, led to recommendations for follow-up diagnoses based on initial concerns. These primary concerns pointed out that at least three more suspects are believed to have (traits of) a personality disorder, borderline personality disorder or PDD-NOS. Moreover, all interviewees were convinced that the more recent clients assigned to TER were increasingly affected by certain psychopathological issues than its preceding clients (personal communication, May 2, 2016).

There is a significant debate among scholars on the role of mental health issues when it comes to terrorist offenders. This debate can, roughly, be divided into two schools: (1) terrorists are essentially normal individuals (Crenshaw, 1981; Sageman, 2004) and (2) mental health issues have to be identified and included in assessments of terrorist suspects and offenders (Duits, Rinne, & Van Leyenhorst, 2017; Weenink, 2015). Although our findings hint towards a higher prevalence of mental illnesses in today's group of (suspected) terrorists than other studies have found (Bakker, 2006; Crenshaw, 1981; Sageman, 2004), they are based upon merely four finalized diagnoses and some additional preliminary findings. It therefore falls beyond the scope of this research to place its data within the perspectives of the two aforementioned schools.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The majority of the research sample came from large families, without a father being present, and grew up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in major cities in the Netherlands. The spread and scope of the problem, however, should not be framed and managed in a regional

context. Suspected terrorists and their followers have nationwide contacts, some even international. There are networks in which its members have known each other for years, while also many new contacts have emerged of which the common denominator appears to be its members' support for a violent extremist ideology.

The socio-economic statuses of the suspects have proved to be diverse, similar to those found in prior studies on terrorists (Bakker, 2006; Sageman, 2004). The majority of the suspects had work and had completed, or were still actively following, some form of education. Although some suspects were in an unhealthy financial situation, with enormous debts, most of these debts did not have a direct effect on their susceptibility to a terrorist ideology. Nonetheless, further financial deterioration did appear to be a consequence of the radicalization processes of several clients.

Neither socio-economic motivations nor limited career opportunities were mentioned by suspects as (ideological) grievances. These issues are also not substantiated as potential warning sign by the statistics of this study. However, large numbers of sociologically- or economically-deprived individuals could, in theory, have resulted in cognitive openings for terrorism. This is especially feasible when combined with a lack of parental supervision or protective guidance.

Specific trigger events that have led to susceptibility to engaging in terrorism were also hardly discussed by the suspects, in contrast to conclusions of other studies on motivations for terrorism. Neither were we able to document overlapping ideological or religious experiences that led to such susceptibility. Most suspects were raised rather secularly and the majority of their parents had openly and actively contributed to the prevention or repression of their children's engagement with Salafi-Jihadism.

With a mean age of twenty-one years old, the Dutch (suspected) terrorists presented in this research were significantly younger than those found in other studies. Interviewed experts have pointed out that Dutch judicial attention regarding terrorism is currently shifting towards teenagers. DPS files, furthermore, show a higher prevalence of (historical) psychological

problems among suspected terrorists than previous studies, and suspects from this study had a higher rate of prior criminal convictions, especially for violent acts.

Moreover, our analysis indicates an increase in the influence of females, roommates, spouses and siblings in suspects' involvement in, and susceptibility for, terrorism. Females have certain, very specific, tasks in national networks. They function as important hubs in these networks and in recruiting processes, but many prosecutions of females have terminated prematurely due to a lack of evidence. As a result, probation officials see the same females reappearing in numerous cases and are worried that these females are able to exploit their 'operational freedom' fully.

Our sample of twenty-six has shown itself to be a diverse group, with grudges, characteristics and personal histories comparable to thousands of youngsters in cities throughout Europe who do not engage in or support acts of terrorism. No significant overlaps nor differences, no profiles nor actual risk factors that statistically correlate with an outcome can be established.

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 findings and has proven to be rather short-sighted. Moreover, most individuals in our sample had clearly (temporarily) given up important foundations in their (for some) prosperous lives. These include protective peers and families, promising career opportunities and clean sheets on criminal records. It is imperative to understand why such, sometimes very young, individuals are drawn to war and disruption and have made such far-reaching decisions that have lead them to support or contribute to terrorism.

Risk Management for Probation

The issues on risk management and the reintegration of terrorist offenders were the second focus of this study. Prior research highlighted the versatility and diversity of terrorist offenders. Our data confirms the complexity involved in identifying any distinguishing or

overlapping early warning signs. We therefore questioned the extent to which a structured overview of a sample of suspected terrorists would lead to practical guidelines on the management of risks for probation services. The wide implementation of propaganda materials such as ‘How to Survive in the West’ has introduced new and additional challenges. Previously relevant and manifest (ideological) indicators are deliberately manipulated by potential Salafi-Jihadists. This creates a countermeasure to counter-terrorism that necessitates new approaches. Notwithstanding these challenges and although only a small number of suspects is up for parole and most are still in custody, experiences thus far make it possible to discuss some do’s and don’ts when it comes to the reintegration of (suspected) terrorists. Whereas the recommendations described below are grounded upon Dutch data, they are designed to be of value for all European probation services.

Risk assessment

In general, there are two (recurring) stages when DPS conducts individual risk assessments. The first is on behalf of their pre-sentencing advices, the reports that form the foundation of this study. The second phase is when mandatory probation of its clients starts and risks that need to be supervised are identified. A structured and periodical evaluation of these risks is advised.

As explained earlier in this article, the instrument the DPS uses for its assessments has no empirical grounds for estimating risks for terrorist acts. The data of this research indeed displays neither identifiable nor overlapping and generalizable warning signs within the research sample. Maghan and Kelly (1989) conducted a review of terrorists and the criminal justice system. They concluded that there are important differences between offenders of ‘regular’ violence on the one hand and violent extremists on the other. Risk assessment instruments for regular crimes and violence are considered not sensitive to known characteristics and motivations of terrorists. Specific risk assessment tools related to this particular hazard are thus recommended (Duits, Rinne, & Van Leyenhorst, 2017; Maghan & Kelly, 1989; Monahan, 2012; Pressman & Flockton, 2012; Sarma, 2017).

Research on risk assessment tools for violent extremism and terrorism is a field of its own. It is “fraught with difficulty” (Sarma, 2017, p. 278). There is a wide debate on the value and limitations of these specific instruments (Beardsley & Beech, 2013; Duits, Rinne, & Van Leyenhorst, 2017; Lloyd & Dean, 2015; Monahan, 2012; Pressman, Duits, Rinne & Flockton, 2016; Sarma, 2017). Dominant topics detail on the validity of the assessment, the empirical foundation of the individual indicators and the determination of “the behaviour of concern” (Sarma, 2017, p. 281). Looking at the diversity of the allegations in our sample, it is clear that most allegations are not acts of violent extremism, but diverse terrorism related offences (recruitment and financing). The limitations mentioned in the academic debate lead to precautions on the applicability of such assessment tools: they cannot be considered a *silver bullet*.

This study is not designed to influence this debate or to deny the limitations. Nonetheless, it has become clear that a comprehensive identification and evaluation of warnings signs requires appropriate assessment tools. Moreover, the variations throughout the research sample and the manipulative tactics that are described in certain handbooks, require that assessments are tailor-made. In the Netherlands, several organizations within the judicial domain, partners of the DPS, have commenced with conducting assessments based on the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (VERA-2R) (Pressman, Duits, Rinne, & Flockton, 2016). This instrument, specifically designed to assess the risk of violent extremism, has the potential to periodically evaluate how individual risks evolve over time. In addition to the usage of the VERA-2R by its domestic partners, the DPS witnesses clients crossing the border into Belgium, where the VERA-2R is also used by several security agencies. Cooperation between partners and countries is increasingly becoming important in counter-terrorism. It is necessary that the DPS implements the VERA-2R as soon as possible in its risk-assessment procedures. This facilitates multi-agency communication due to the possibility to exchange information using a shared risk-language. Forensic experts of the NIFP are obliged to include the VERA-2R assessment in their forensic diagnosis. It may therefore be suggested that the

DPS imposes similar guidelines into its everyday practice, whether requested by the prosecutor's office, or stimulated by internal regulations.

Client communication

All suspects denied any wrongdoing and believed that the interference of the government attacked their ideological and religious convictions. This complicates the assessment of someone's commitment to a hostile ideology and the determination of potential early warning signs. It is therefore required to make personal contact and to establish a working alliance. In general, the daily approach of institution such as the DPS should be tailor-made: pragmatic and consistently based on individually assessed risks and needs. One should discover, for instance, whether or not there are personal factors that prevent a suspect from living in the Netherlands. Ask about the specific individual motivations that made them want to leave the Netherlands, as departures have often appeared to be a subject that suspects were willing to acknowledge and give details about (it was their destination that was either argued about or denied). Ask for details and explanations. Sidestepping personal beliefs by using abstract tips that are described in propaganda magazines will be difficult for suspects when dealing with experienced and well-trained probationary professionals. One should try, without judging, to develop an awareness about the choices the suspect has made and how he sees his personal future.

No us-and-them-thinking

Remarkably enough, no suspect in our sample was able to provide personal specific examples of *individual* discrimination or rejection. Even 'successful contributors' to society, however, described feelings of discrimination and rejection. Moreover, regardless of convictions, most of the suspects firmly declared that they considered their prosecutions to be confirmation of (religious) discrimination against them by the hypocritical Dutch government, and all were aggravated by the label *terrorist* (which is hard to avoid, given the fact that their prison is referred to as the "Terrorist Wing"). This shows that objective grievances are not the

core of the issue so much as *perceptions* of such emotions are. If these unanimously-shared feelings of deprivation can teach us one thing, it is that polarization in the Netherlands is strongly felt among a population that is not afraid to actively act against this perceived injustice. This creates domestic foundations for susceptibility to extremist ideology that cannot be ignored when analysing the appeal of terrorist groups. Given the above, merely emphasizing objective arguments will be counterproductive. The DPS should therefore refrain from tactics including elements of *pointing the finger*, nor should they stress that the ideology of the (potential) terrorist *is wrong*. All efforts that incorporate naming and shaming can damage working alliances, as they amplify the experienced ‘us-versus-them’ dichotomy.

Although cognitive openings to a hostile ideology resulted from diverse motivations, they developed alongside comparable pathways. People tried to answer existential questions but national news networks were distrusted, previously protective peers were abandoned and online communities and networks that highlight deterministic visions of exclusion were believed to provide all the necessary answers. Reintegration management should, therefore, be directed at gradually widening cognitive openings in order to demonstrate to (suspected) terrorists that their deterministic vision *can be challenged*. The emphasis should be on developing an awareness for the possibility of co-existence and initiatives leading to inclusion. It is recommended to actively involve parents in these initiatives, especially now that we find ourselves in an era where terrorist suspects are getting younger and younger and many parents have already demonstrated themselves to be both observant and supportive of governmental agencies.

Multi-agency cooperation

It is important to realize that ‘traditional’ probationary methods based on practical support also apply in reintegrating certain suspected terrorists. The objective is to offer alternatives for support of terrorist organizations. This may especially be effective for those who became susceptible to terrorist propaganda after personal misbehaviour, those that aspired to stand up against perceived injustices (a possible driver of the suspects who

performed social work or studies), and for potential thrill-seekers and adventurers. However, Bjorgo (2011) argued that the types and roles of terrorists may change along several dimensions or continuums. Moreover, present-day propaganda hampers the identification of early warning signs and influences behaviour during the process of radicalization. This makes it more important than ever to invest in multidisciplinary analysis and cooperation. It is crucial to invest in cooperation and information-sharing on a local level. Community police, local community workers and local probation representatives are the eyes and ears of local communities and are thereby on the front row when it comes to recognizing potential warning signs. So, in addition to the importance of using similar assessment tools, this requires probation services to be (even more) visible and actively involved in multi-agency approaches, such as local Safety Houses. For optimal information sharing, it should be documented how information can be shared among participants in order to efficiently utilize this information in risk management policies.

Special focus has to be on cooperation with the police. Because terrorist networks operate nationwide, robust cooperation with the national counter-terrorism section of the police is essential, since the police is one of few involved organizations in the field that can also operate on a national level.

And finally, it is recommended that DPS generates and maintains a network analysis of its clients and continues with the structuring of all relevant details of its clients. The overall goal should remain to enhance the knowledge base of its clients in order to broaden its tool-kit for risk management strategies, developed by evidence and practice based principles.

Recommendations for Future Research

These findings suggest relevant new avenues for research. Why are present-day (Dutch) suspects of terrorism younger than previous groups? Why do we see an increasing amount of young converts in national terrorism investigations? Why have individuals with prosperous career opportunities and without any personal example of grievances chosen to

support terrorist groups? And how does a certain life-path or a violent criminal career influence one's future support for terrorist groups? An in-depth analysis of the life courses of people who are convicted of terrorism can help us to learn and understand more about the influence of their personal histories on the individual choices they made. References to control groups are hereby recommended, containing, for example, violent youth gangs that do not engage in terrorism, or Salafist adolescents that reject extremist violence. However, it is essential to bear in mind that the use of a control group is also subject to limitations. Bartlett and Miller (2012) for example, compared the backgrounds, ideologies, behaviours and attitudes of a sample of "violent radicals" with both radical and "mainstream" non-violent sample groups. They concluded that almost all grievances were shared between both reference groups. The work of Buys, Demant and Handy (2006) and Geelhoed (2011) led to insights on why people turn to fundamentalist Islam, but highlighting the association between fundamentalist Muslims and (suspected) Salafi-Jihadism can "contribute to the polarization between Muslims and non-Muslims." (Bakker E. , 2006, p. 54).

A prominent debate in counter-terrorism elaborates on the issue of bystanders and gatekeepers. Some argue that families don't recognize radicalization or simply will not go to the police. Our study, however, shows that parents have a very important signalling function when it comes to identifying behavioural changes in the lives of their children and that the majority have indeed contacted authorities with their concerns. Nevertheless, lack of trust in these same authorities pending the judicial trajectories, have led some parents to withdraw their cooperation with diverse institutions. It remains essential to involve parents and families as gatekeepers. Future research should therefore focus on the consequences of the parents reporting their children: what happens with their concerns and how are they involved in the process? This can lead to better insights in how to utilize the involvement of families in disengagement and reintegration of suspects and offenders of terrorist crimes.

The findings of our research suggest that there is a higher prevalence of mental illnesses in today's group of (suspected) terrorists than other studies have found. The file-selection took place on May 1, 2015, when most forensic diagnosis were not yet conducted.

The outcomes are herewith based on insufficient and preliminary data. We therefore recommend additional research directed at the manifestation and influence of mental health issues when it comes to identifying and assessing terrorist offenders. Recently, the Dutch institute of forensic psychiatry and psychology (NIFP) has completed the forensic diagnosis of all the suspects of our research sample. Hence, the required data for such a follow-up study already is available.

Future research should also focus on the same research group over five years, preferably by someone with similar access to the group and primary source data. The emphasis should be on investigating what has worked in disengagement and how the suspects have experienced this period in their lives. Furthermore, now that all suspects from this sample have been convicted, we can investigate what types of terrorist offences have been committed by Dutch terrorists.

It is imperative that other countries also document relevant features and motivations of their (suspected) terrorists, preferably by using similar sources. This will enlarge the base-rate of terrorism studies and enable international comparison instead of mere comparison over time.

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