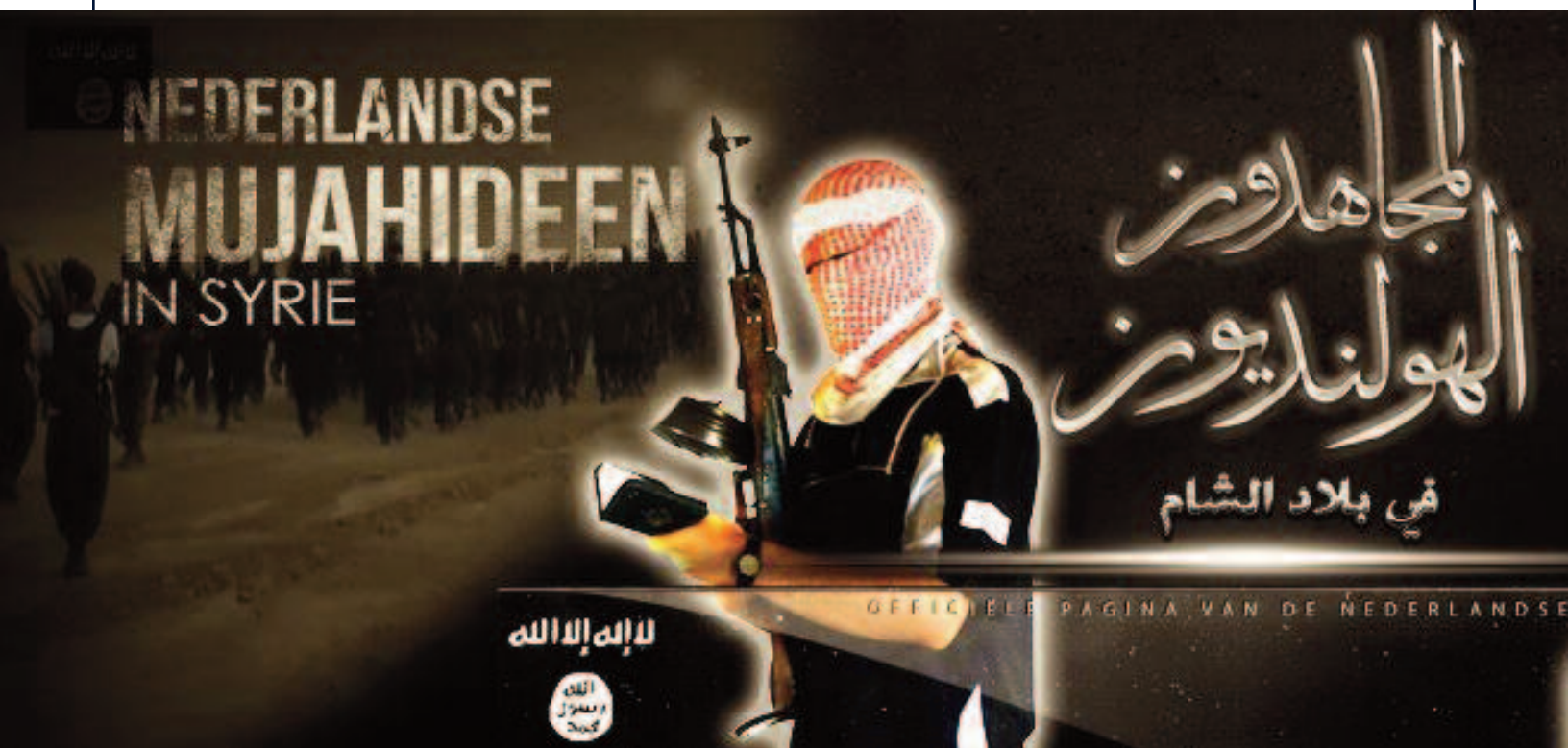


# INSIDE THE JIHAD

## DUTCH FIGHTERS IN SYRIA



K R O N O S

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Kronos is a strategic advisory firm founded by Major General James E. Livingston, USMC (Ret) and Michael S. Smith II to provide global stakeholders the situational awareness solutions they need to address strategic and tactical threats to their interests. We help our clients achieve their organizational goals by providing them the resources they need to better understand and define their operational environments — rather than allowing their organizational capabilities and goals to be defined by them.

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## FOREWORD

*By Kronos Chief Global Jihad Analyst Ronald Sandee and Kronos Principal Michael S. Smith II*

### **How might the Syrian Jihad impact the security environment in the West?**

This is perhaps one of the most important questions being asked by security analysts in Western capitals. And in the absence of a well-coordinated multinational effort to interdict the flow of would-be participants in the Syrian Jihad from the West to Syria many terrorism analysts are asking a more pointed question: Could the jihad underway in Syria today serve as an even greater springboard for attacks in the West than the Afghan Jihad of the 1980s led by Abdallah Azzam?

In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, prior to his retirement last summer former CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell offered a stark assessment: Syria's volatile mix of al-Qa'ida extremism and civil war now pose the greatest threat to US national security. He explained that, in his view, the risk is that the regime will collapse, and Syria will supplant Pakistan as al-Qa'ida's new haven. In addition to highlighting the potential that Syria's vast stockpiles of chemical weapons could end up in the hands of al-Qa'ida members, he noted that each month more fighters were arriving in Syria to take up arms with al-Qa'ida than in Iraq during the height of the war there.

Yet missing from the picture painted by this and many discussions about the downstream effects of the Syrian Jihad is much needed focus on the involvement of individuals holding citizenship in Western states.

When it comes to the number of Salafist Jihadis who have traveled from the West to join the Syrian Jihad, it is difficult to pinpoint a solid figure. Still, it is clear that the influx of Westerners into this jihad theater is unprecedented in both speed and size, with individuals from Europe constituting the largest contingent of Western fighters operating in Syria.

What does this mean?

To get a better understanding of the ongoing movement of Westerners going to fight in Syria, Kronos Advisory has launched a research project that takes a closer look at how Muslims from European countries are participating in the civil war in Syria. The first report is on the involvement of Salafist Jihadis from the Netherlands.

From this research we see that European governments have begun to recognize there is a need for more information sharing about the flow of their citizens to the world's newest and most attractive jihad theater. Meanwhile, the number of individuals leaving the West to participate in the Syrian Jihad keeps growing.

Conservative estimates indicate between 2,000 and 2,500 young Muslims from mainly European countries, but also from Canada, Australia and the US, are fighting the Assad regime's forces in Syria. Stunningly, *The Times* of London recently reported that estimates indicate as many as 3,000 individuals may have left Britain in recent years to join the jihad in Syria.

Leveraging reliable open source reporting, input from knowledgeable European sources, and materials posted online by citizens of European countries who are fighting in Syria, Kronos' terrorism

analysts have determined the full spectrum of members of the West's Salafist communities are represented in the Syrian Jihad. From first, second and third generation immigrants to women and converts, the backgrounds of those holding citizenship in Western states who have elected to participate in this war are indeed diverse.

In monitoring commentary offered by leaders of typically closed conservative Muslim communities in Europe, we assess it is highly likely many Western governments are understating the number of individuals who have left to fight in Syria. This may be due either to the sensitivities surrounding this issue, or simply a failure on the parts of authorities to begin tracking the movements of individuals to Syria early enough to generate complete lists.

Moreover, our research indicates most of the fighters who have left the comforts of life in the West behind to participate in this jihad are now supporting the various al-Qa'ida-affiliated militias operating in Syria today.

On the one hand, the case of Dutch Muslims participating in the Syrian Jihad demonstrates the tremendous pull of this cause. On the other, it raises important questions about the efficacy of Europe's counter-radicalization programs, which have become models for similar programs that have received substantial funding in the United States. Indeed, reflecting on the European Union Counter-Radicalization Plan launched in 2005, officials from several European countries have advised our researchers that the growing number of Muslims leaving Europe to fight alongside radical Islamists in Syria demonstrates many countries' counter-radicalization programs have failed.

The Salafist Jihadi current is not considered to be particularly strong in the Netherlands. Yet never before have this many young Muslims left the country for a jihad theater like the one in Syria.

Since September 2001, individual Dutch Muslims have tried and sometimes reached jihad theaters in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Chechnya, Iraq and Somalia. But it was not until fighting broke out in Syria that an entire football team openly left the Netherlands to fight for their religion in a strange, war-torn country. And during the past two years, as many as 200 mainly young Dutch Muslims have traveled to Syria to support the jihad.

Most of these jihadis are male, in their early twenties, and of Moroccan descent. Turks, Kurds, Somalis and converts who hold citizenship in the Netherlands are also now fighting in Syria.

The Dutch fighters are partly being recruited and partly self-radicalized. After 45 days of initial training in Syria, most of the new fighters join militias associated with al-Qa'ida. They are fighting in the north of Syria especially around Aleppo, Idlib and the Latakia province. And based on their own reporting using social media like Facebook it is clear that some of them have been involved with al-Qa'ida's executions of prisoners.

While social identification is perhaps the chief driver for Muslims residing in the West who have opted to fight in Syria, the availability of convenient, inexpensive travel options is also a relevant factor in their decisions to join the Syrian Jihad. Indeed, it has been relatively easy for these individuals to disembark from their countries of residence in the West for Syria. Additionally, authorities in Turkey, Egypt and other North African states have done little to interdict the flow of jihadis to Syria.

Multiple routes are being used by Muslims traveling from the West for Syria. Some are traveling through Egypt, undergoing training in the Sinai and Libya before arriving in Syria. But the most

common itinerary entails arrival in Istanbul via plane, followed by a bus ride to Antakya, from which travelers cross the border into Syria.

As many of them burn their passports upon arrival in Syria, the ease with which battle-hardened jihadis may return to the West from Syria remains to be seen. Yet there are reliable reports that reveal this is already occurring. Further, as we take the Dutch fighters as an example, and we see parts of this group return from the battlefield, our analysis points to the potential of serious threats mounting for the Western society.

Muslims traveling from Western states to Syria to join the jihad against the Assad regime have proved highly susceptible to the recruitment campaigns of al-Qa'ida-affiliated elements operating in Syria. Thus it is reasonable to anticipate some of these fighters who are familiar with travel in the West — especially harder-to-identify converts born in the West — will also be recruited in Syria to prepare for attacks in the West, including the US and Canada.

In terms of their candidacy for participation in terrorist plots beyond Syria, apart from their knowledge of travel in the West our research focused on the case of European Muslims fighting in Syria reveals two key issues.

First is the fact that recruits from the West have been involved with prisoner executions on the battlefield. Such activity demonstrates just how committed to al-Qa'ida's cause many fighters who have traveled to Syria from the West have become.

Second is the level of interaction we have detected between European jihadis and seasoned Chechen fighters who have also established a notable presence in Syria. Chechen jihadis were responsible for the first large-scale attacks on soft targets following 9/11, including the 2002 Dubrovka Theater attack in Moscow and the 2004 Beslan school attack. And the level of interactions taking place in Syria between jihadis who hold citizenship in Europe and fighters from Chechnya might increase the chances that fallout from the Syrian Jihad will include large-scale attacks on soft targets in the West, similar to the Westgate Mall attack that occurred earlier this year in Kenya.

The Afghan Jihad manifest the establishment of al-Qa'ida, and, with it, the most immediate threats to Western security interests we know today. In the absence of a well-coordinated multinational effort focused both on (a) preventing Muslims living in the West from traveling to Syria and (b) disrupting the flow of prospective new al-Qa'ida members back to the West from Syria, we assess it should not be ruled out that the Syrian Jihad is generating the resources al-Qa'ida will rely on to grow this threat tomorrow.

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# INSIDE THE JIHAD

## DUTCH FIGHTERS IN SYRIA



### DUTCH FIGHTERS IN DIFFERENT JIHAD THEATERS

The Salafist Jihadi current is not considered to be particularly strong in the Netherlands, yet never before have so many young Muslims gone to a jihad theater like the one we now find in Syria. Since September 2001, individual Dutch Muslims have tried and sometimes reached jihad theaters in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Chechnya, Iraq and Somalia. But it was not until fighting broke out in Syria that an entire football team openly left the Netherlands to fight for their religion in a strange, war-torn country. While it is clear that convenient travel options and social identification have prompted some 200 mainly young Dutch Muslims (men and women) to travel to northern Syria, the potential downstream effects of such developments as these remain to be seen.

*Prepared by Ronald Sandee*  
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Following al-Qa'ida's September 2001 attacks on the US homeland, Dutch intelligence services initiated rigorous investigations of the radical Islamic current in the Netherlands. These efforts shed light on a pattern of recruitment of Dutch Muslims by individuals linked to groups like the Algerian Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat (GSPC) and Pakistani groups.

The first shock came in January 2002 when two young men, Ahmed Bakiouli (age 20) and Khalid el-Hassnoui (21), were killed by Indian security forces in Kashmir.<sup>1</sup> Bakiouli was the son of a former secretary of the al-Fourkaan Mosque in Eindhoven. Together with Khalid el-Hassnoui, Bakiouli participated in courses at the Mosque that inspired them to go to Kashmir to fight. Investigators also determined that, while preparing to join the jihad in Kashmir, the pair sought advice from Fawaz Jneid, who was the imam of the As-Soennah Mosque in The Hague.<sup>2</sup>

Others tried to reach jihadi battle zones like Chechnya or Somalia, but were tracked and arrested before they could join the jihad. Through the investigations that led to these arrests authorities determined there were not organized pipelines from the Netherlands to those jihad theaters.

While the instances of Dutch Muslims traveling abroad to undergo terrorist training were few, the Hofstadgroup (sometimes Hofstad Group or Hofstad Network), a homegrown Salafist Jihadi organizations whose members are mostly Dutch Muslims of North African descent, included jihadis who spent time in Southwest Asia. Two members of the Hofstadgroup, Jason Walters and Ismail Akhnikh, traveled to Afghanistan via Pakistan, and underwent training at terrorist camps in Afghanistan before returning to Europe. This training led them to use a hand grenade against police when they were arrested in November 2004 in The Hague, wounding several officers.<sup>3</sup>

Assessing the numbers of Dutch Muslims who joined the different jihad theaters over the years is difficult as there is little reporting on this issue. Sources in Pakistan claim two dozen Dutch Muslims presently live in the Peshawar area, but it is not known whether these émigrés are actively participating in fighting there. Intelligence sources also indicated another two dozen Dutch citizens joined the jihad in Iraq. Some of them were killed, and one, Wesam al-Delaema,

1. Marlise Simons, Militants recruiting young Dutch Muslims for foreign war, The New York Times, May 31, 2002; <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/31/world/militants-recruiting-young-dutch-muslims-for-foreign-war.html>

2. Janny Groen and Annieke Kranenberg, Strijdsters van Allah. Radicale moslima's en het Hofstadnetwerk (Amsterdam, 2006) 342-343

3. Novum, Jason W. bekent gooien granaat, Trouw, December 9, 2005;

<http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/4324/Nieuws/article/detail/1554214/2005/12/09/Jason-W-bekent-gooien-granaat.dhtml>

was charged by criminal complaint of participating in a conspiracy to attack Americans based in Iraq after he returned to the Netherlands from Fallujah.<sup>4</sup> (Following extradition to the US, in February 2009 al-Delaema pleaded guilty for conspiring to murder US nationals outside of the United States and was later sentenced to serve 25 years in prison.<sup>5</sup>) Additionally, the Somalian theater attracted some volunteers from the Netherlands, notably young men of Somalian descent.

## THE SALAFIST ENVIRONMENT IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Salafist current in the Netherlands went public nearly three decades ago. The first Salafist Mosque was established in Amsterdam in 1986 with financial support from al-Haramain in Saudi Arabia, followed in 1989 with a second Mosque in Eindhoven funded by the al-Waqf al-Islami Foundation of Saudi Arabia. In the next decade two more Salafist Mosques were established in the Netherlands to service mainly members of the country's Moroccan community.<sup>6</sup>

As the first and main Salafist center in the Netherlands, the al-Fourkaan Mosque in Eindhoven became the center of many conferences, and controversies. Following the September 2001 attacks on the US, German authorities determined 9/11 plot ringleader Muhammad Atta and others from the Hamburg Cell had attended conferences and lectures in Eindhoven. In light of these revelations, leaders of the al-Fourkaan Mosque declared they are linked to the Saudi government, and thus proponents of the apolitical stream within the Salafist current named after Rabi' Ibn Hadi 'Umayr al-Madkhali, the former head of the Sunnah Studies Department at the Islamic University of Medina. (Adherents of the Madkhali movement claim Salafism is strictly religious, and, as such, it should not become entangled with political activism.)

The other three important Salafist centers in the Netherlands, the As-Sunnah Mosque in The Hague, el-Tawheed Mosque in Amsterdam<sup>7</sup> and the Islamic Association for Education and Transmission of Knowledge (ISOOK) in Tilburg, are all part of the political Salafist current.

4. [http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2005/July/05\\_crm\\_393.htm](http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2005/July/05_crm_393.htm)

5. <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/April/09-nsd-355.html>

6. See Annex 1

7. Confidential Cable, U.S. Embassy The Hague, May 18, 2004 (04THEHAGUE1213); [http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04THEHAGUE1213\\_a.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04THEHAGUE1213_a.html)



The leading politically oriented Salafist imams in the Netherlands today are Mahmoud Shershaby, Ahmed Salam and Fawaz Jneid. All belong to the Foundation for the Islamic Committee for Ahl-Sunnah in Europe, which is mostly focused on promoting the spread of Salafism. Salam is seen as the most learned of the three, and serves as the committee's chairman. Shershaby is Egyptian and has ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Salam and Fawaz are both Syrian and have strong ties to the Syrian Salafist scholar and television preacher Adnan Ibn Muhammed Al-Arour, who resides in Saudi Arabia.

The Dutch Ahl-Sunnah foundation is part of a European network of politically oriented Salafists which is run from the offices of al-Arour in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Salafist imams in the Netherlands are invited to conferences abroad and often deliver lectures during these conferences. Unlike Fawaz and Salam, Shershaby does not enjoy the spotlight, is known to avoid having his picture taken, and is equally averse to making television appearances.

There is a small Salafist Jihadi presence in the Netherlands. They do not have their own Mosques or Islamic centers.

Following al-Qa'ida's September 2001 attacks on the United States, Dutch intelligence services and the police began infiltrating entities associated with the political Salafist movement in the Netherlands. Once authorities developed a clear picture of what was going on within the main Salafist centers a robust effort was undertaken to disrupt their activities.

This disturbance campaign that targeted the most radical of Dutch Islamic centers was led by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism. When these entities hosted conferences, authorities set up extra border control checkpoints. Cars carrying conference participants were stopped and searched. Planes carrying attendees and speakers were also subjected to special searches, with extra passport controls awaiting visitors at airport gates. Police officers were also present during the conferences. Further, immigration officials sought to embarrass organizers by checking the validity of prominent figures' documents, which, in the case inspections conducted at the al-Fourkaan Mosque, resulted in the deportations of two or three imams.

As authorities cracked down on Dutch radical Islamic centers and their leaders a new generation of Salafist preachers stepped in. Trained by the imams who came under pressure from Dutch authorities, most were born in or grew up in the Netherlands, and many were of Moroccan descent. They preached in Dutch, which made it easier for them to spread their radical views throughout the country.

As these young preachers had endured the same upbringings as members of their target audiences, their Dawah proved quite compelling. And as they worked to broaden their reach new websites popped up, on which they published lectures, studies and other materials.

Initially, their followers were mostly second or third generation Moroccans. Yet over time many Dutch converts also joined the political Salafist stream.

Two influential youth preachers are Jamal Ahajjaj, a Moroccan with an eclectic goatee, and Abdul-Jabbar van de Ven, a convert who has developed a large following on the Internet (he recently moved to Manchester). Van de Ven speaks fluent Arabic, according to people who know him well, and studied at the Islamic University of Medina after dropping out of the Radboud University in Nijmegen, where he was enrolled in courses offered by the university's Arabic department

A third group of Dutch Salafist Jihadis do not congregate in Mosques. Instead, they come together in houses and discuss their positions and actions outside Islamic centers.<sup>8</sup>

Some academics see the so-called "Salafist hoppers" as a possible fourth category.<sup>9</sup> This group of young Muslims consists of some members who call themselves Salafists, and others who don't. They espouse the same critical view of the Dutch culture and people promulgated by the Salafists. Like the Salafists, the suffering of the Umma is also their suffering. But what stands out is their emphasis on portraying themselves as victims, while at the same time demanding respect and acceptance from the elements of Dutch society they claim seek to oppress Muslims.<sup>10</sup>

It is true that many who went to Syria can be placed in this fourth group. Indeed, recruiters for the jihad in places like Syria are able to assert influence over members of this group faster than any of the others.

## THE SALAFIST JIHADI SCENE IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Salafist Jihadi scene can essentially be split into two distinct groups. One group believes it is permissible to wage violent jihad outside Europe. Individuals like Fawaz Jneid, formerly the imam of the As-Sunnah Mosque, are proponents of this view. Members of the other group believe that it is not only

8. NCTb, *Salafism in the Netherlands* (2008), 44

9. Martijn de Koning, *Zoeken naar een 'zuivere' islam*, (Amsterdam 2008) 376-377

10. Martijn de Koning, *Zoeken naar een 'zuivere' islam*, (Amsterdam 2008) 376-377

permissible, but a duty to wage jihad inside the West, and especially within the Netherlands. This latter group includes members of the aforementioned Hofstadgroup like Mohammed Bouyeri, who killed Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, and Jason Walters, who resisted arrest by throwing a grenade at police officers.

Most of the jihadis stay away from Mosques and meet in houses or other places. The Salafist Mosques are too moderate for them. For instance, the Hofstadgroup came together in an internet café/phone center in Schiedam, near Rotterdam.<sup>11</sup> Some of the members of the Hofstadgroup got to know one another through volunteer work for the Hamas-linked charity Foundation al-Aqsa (Samir Azzouz met his wife while working with al-Aqsa).<sup>12</sup>

In a July 2013 report for the Dutch Parliament, the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism advised: “there are signals of growing Islamic radicalization of small groups of youngsters in different cities in the Netherlands. This leads to a strong growth in the number of jihad travelers, but also in the growth of radical discussions on the Internet and in social media. The radicalization seems to be occurring predominately outside the Mosques, in youth groups where the members meet one another in the virtual and physical world to share their jihadi philosophy. In these circles are persons who are actively facilitating the jihad travel of some of the youngsters.”<sup>13</sup>

## RECRUITMENT OF VOLUNTEERS FOR THE JIHAD IN SYRIA

While pundits in the Netherlands with little investigative experience see a process of self-recruiting, reports about recruitment efforts from inside the different Muslim communities provide clear evidence that jihadi elements have been actively recruiting in the Netherlands for some time. Of note, recruiters are offering money and other incentives to those willing to join the fight in Syria.

11. Dutch Police Dossier RL8026AZ, investigation into an armed robbery of an EDAH grocery store in Rotterdam on April 8, 2004; Frank J. Buijs, Froukje Demant and Atef Hamdy, *Strijders van eigen bodem. Radicale en democratische moslims in Nederland* (Amsterdam 2006) 245-255

12. Ronald Sandee, *The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Netherlands*, NEFA Foundation, December 2007; <http://globalmbreport.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/27712073-The-Influence-of-the-Muslim-Brotherhood-in-the-Netherlands-NEFA-Foundation.pdf>

13. Letter from the minister of Security and Justice to the chairman of the Second Chamber of Parliament, The Hague, July 2, 2013; *Tweede Voortgangsrapportage Contra Terrorisme en Extremisme*, 5; <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/ministeries/venj/documenten-en-publicaties/kamerstukken/2013/07/03/tweede-voortgangsrapportage-contraterrorisme-en-extremisme.html>

A catalyst for these recruitment programs may be seen in the activities of groups like Sharia4Holland, Behind Bars, Straat Dawah (Street Dawah) and De Waarheid (The Truth) whose leaders are young and charismatic. Their primary target groups are youngsters in their teens and early twenties. Sharia4Holland and Behind Bars have been active in the Netherlands since late in 2010. Despite their work spreading jihadi ideology, these groups claim to be peaceful. Since mid-2012, these groups have become less active in Holland. Indeed, in early 2013, it became clear the leaders and most members of their inner circles had traveled to Syria to join the jihad alongside fighters from their brother organization Sharia4Belgium.

Of the issue of recruitment of Muslims, Abu Fidaa asserts in one of his dispatches from Syria that “the story about recruiting is a fable. How can the fighters use young men who do not really want to fight? If the boys are being recruited, it is by the West, with its barbaric wars in Muslim countries. The pictures we saw for years from Iraq and Afghanistan planted the seeds of jihad in our hearts.”<sup>14</sup>

Investigations have identified the main recruiting tools are lectures and speeches delivered in Mosques, as well as during small group meetings. After listening to inspirational speeches, groups of friends observed by Dutch authorities took great interest in the plight of Syrian Muslims and became determined to assist their brethren in Syria by joining the jihad there.

The first larger groups began leaving the Netherlands for Syria around Christmas of 2012. Groups from The Hague, Delft, Zoetermeer and Zeist included young Muslims of Turkish and Moroccan descent, along with Kurds and Dutch converts. Coordination with elements already engaged in fighting in Syria was made evident by the fact these groups were provided detailed travel instructions and phone numbers for contacts in Syria.

## IDENTIFIED RECRUITERS AND INFLUENCERS

During the past year, locals and parents have identified several recruiters and key influencers involved with cultivating support for the jihad in Syria.

The Moroccan-Dutch preacher Talbi, who is more commonly known as Abu Bashir, inspired at least four jihadis with his preaching and lectures delivered

14. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2844/Archief/archief/article/detail/3459145/2013/06/15/Het-is-hier-heftig-de-laatste-tijd.dhtml> <http://www.eo.nl/tv/devijfdedag/reportage-detail/reisinstructie-onthult-syrieroute/>

on Friday evenings at the al-Qibla Mosque in Zoetermeer. Talbi was also active with De Waarheid, which is closely associated with Straat Dawah and Behind Bars. In his preachings, Talbi spoke out strongly against participation in a democracy. Instructions for travel to Syria were also distributed to visitors of the al-Qibla Mosque.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, however, due to pressure from the board of the al-Qibla Mosque, Talbi discontinued his work in the Netherlands and probably returned to Morocco.<sup>16</sup>

Another Muslim preacher of Turkish descent who has become outspoken about the situation in Syria is Izzet al-Nour (37).<sup>17</sup> Al-Nour has a Dutch passport. Izzet is his real given name, but al-Nour is a reference to the Salafist political party in Egypt. He has studied at the Islamic University in Medina, and for many years called himself Izzet al-Medinah. He often speaks in Rotterdam and The Hague, as well as in other parts of the country. While he prefers to speak at smaller Mosques where it is common to find guest speakers, most Mosques do not extend him invitations to speak and call him too radical. Some religious leaders have claimed he is paid by the Saudis, which he admits. Presently, he has a significant youth following.<sup>18</sup> Al-Nour does not call himself a recruiter for the jihad. As he puts it, the focus of his work is “the confession of the true religion, Islam.” Still, according to al-Nour, a responsible Muslim cannot stay at home and do nothing if he is able to help his persecuted brethren. Al-Nour is not active on the Internet. He believes he is being followed by the AIVD and frequently changes apartments. He is careful not to issue direct appeals for Muslims to join the jihad in Syria, saying only that people should go to Syria if they are ready. Meanwhile, he is willing to help those interested in supporting their Syrian brethren, and has played a role in facilitating travel to Syria through Germany and Turkey, where he connects volunteers with persons and organizations who can further assist them. He describes his involvement in such activities as limited to providing “travel tips.”

Parents of young men who have traveled to Syria say Azzedine Choukoud (aka Abou Moussa) is one of the recruiters presently active in the Schilderswijk

16. Alex van der Hulst, Prediker in Zoetermeer inspireerde jihadisten, NRC Handelsblad, April 24, 2013; <http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2013/04/24/prediker-in-zoetermeer-inspireerde-jihadisten/>

17. Izzet al-Nour is born in Eastern Turkey close to the Syrian border.

18. Perdiep Ramesar, ‘Ronselen voor Syrië, dat is mijn djihaad’, Trouw, May 6, 2013; <http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/4496/Buitenland/article/detail/3437058/2013/05/06/Ronselen-voor-Syrie-dat-is-mijn-dji-had.dhtml>



quarter of The Hague.<sup>19</sup> Choukoud called himself the emir of a home study group that came together at 440 Meppelweg in The Hague, and he is the chairman of the foundation that rented the space. Additionally, he is an influential figure within the Straat Dawah and Behind Bars groups. Through Behind Bars and Foundation Intisaar, Choukoud organized campaigns to raise funds for the jihad in Syria.

Although not a recruiter in the most literary sense of the word, Fawaz Jneid, the former imam of the As-Sunnah Mosque in The Hague, is probably the least expected, albeit most effective recruiter for the jihad in Syria. A Syrian by birth, Jneid is a follower of the Saudi-Syrian Salafist preacher Adnan al-Arouf. While at the helm of As-Sunnah, Jneid was positive about the jihad outside Europe, but for strategic reasons he always tried to distance himself from jihad in the Netherlands and within Europe. After multiple incidents took place at the As-Sunnah Mosque between Jneid and the board of the Mosque, a quarrel escalated in late 2011 that resulted in his dismissal in 2012. Jneid has since become a member of the Association of Muslim Scholars, a group of Salafist preachers from multiple countries who are heavily focused on toppling the Assad regime. Also since his dismissal from the As-Sunnah Mosque, Jneid has spoken at several Islamic conferences, including one held in Kasserine, Tunisia, and he has been working to establish a new Mosque in The Hague named Qanitoen. After losing his platform at As-Sunnah, Jneid has been working in the shadows in the Netherlands, Spain and Tunisia. A charismatic preacher, his preaching is characterized by emotional and apocalyptic overtones that are reminiscent of the works of late bin Laden mentor Abdallah Azzam and Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>20</sup> For years, people visiting and talking with Jneid have said that, while he never tells someone to join the jihad, he is quite good at imbuing his followers with a sense that they should do more than just provide financial support alone.<sup>21</sup> Further, he isn't shy about pronouncing religious justifications for young people to join the jihad in Syria.

19. Perdiep Ramesar, 'Syriegangers, dat zijn pas echte helden', Trouw, May 11, 2013; <http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/4492/Nederland/article/detail/3439674/2013/05/11/Syriegangers-dat-zijn-pas-echte-helden.dhtml>

20. Janny Groen and Annieke Kranenberg, *Strijders van Allah. Radicale moslima's en het Hofstadnetwerk* (Amsterdam 2006) 336

21. Janny Groen and Annieke Kranenberg, *Strijders van Allah. Radicale moslima's en het Hofstadnetwerk* (Amsterdam 2006) 342

## PREPARATION FOR THE SYRIAN JIHAD

In an interview with the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*, Abu Fidaa, the official spokesman of the Dutch Mujahidin in Syria, explained that many of the young men who have traveled to Syria followed what he calls a strategic and tactical curriculum. This includes physical training such as martial arts and a regular fitness routine.<sup>22</sup> Others just started jogging, and some apparently attended survival training courses at Ardennes in Belgium. It has been noted that they avoided making such preparations in large groups, limiting their training team sizes to two or three in order to avoid attracting the interest of Dutch authorities.<sup>23</sup> Abu Fidaa also advised that it is a duty for a Muslim to live healthy and prepare himself physically in a hostile world as Muslims always need to be ready to help defend the weak and helpless.

Lessons for preparing for the jihad in Syria are available on the Internet. Two books that are popular with the jihadis are Robert Greene's *The 48 Laws of Power* and *The 36 Stratagems of War* by Wang Xuanming, both of which can be downloaded from multiple websites.<sup>24</sup> Special Facebook pages were also created by Dutch Muslims to provide would-be participants in the jihad information about how to start small fitness and martial arts training groups.

## WHY BECOME A MUJAHID?

A returnee from Syria named Jordi de Jong told a journalist that most Dutch volunteers had a clear idea why they thought they should go to Syria. Accordingly, the potential of achieving either martyrdom or victory over the Assad regime are key factors in their considerations.<sup>25</sup>

In a lengthy interview with *De Volkskrant*, Abu Fidaa explained that “we are not afraid for death, to the contrary we came here for the noble cause to die.” He continued: “You only die once, so it would be great if you die for a

22. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

23. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

24. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2844/Archief/archief/article/detail/3459145/2013/06/15/Het-is-hier-heftig-de-laatste-tijd.dhtml>

25. <http://www.eo.nl/tv/devijfdedag/artikel-detail/hollandse-jihadist-vecht-in-syrie-aan-het-front/>

noble cause. A martyr is actually a bad translation of the Islamic concept of a Shaheed. Because a Shaheed means literally a witness. Why is a martyr called a witness in Islam? Because you show with your deeds, with your own soul and life, that witnessing for the cause for what you are fighting, is so noble and exalted, that it is even worth your beloved life. Life is the most cherished and most precious thing a human has, and you witness that even this cause is worth more than that. And not with words, but with the actual sacrifice of this beloved precious life.”<sup>26</sup>

Later in the interview, Abu Fidaa claimed that most of the Dutch and Belgian fighters who are now in Syria are not planning to return to the Netherlands or Belgium: “we are not planning to return to the Netherlands, the liberation of Syria will take some time. A real Mujahid, who is sincere, will never want to leave Syria. There are many prophetic narratives that deal with the favors of Ash-Sham and the battle in this area. The Prophet Jesus will also descend in Damascus, Syria, as almost every Muslim knows. In the Jihad there is always a group who die as Martyrs, another group triumphs, and it may be so that there is a group that eventually pulls out. If we give up then all our efforts and sacrifices have been in vain. Therefore it is very important to be sincere and to purify your intentions in the Jihad. The brothers from the Netherlands and Belgium feel good here and do not want to return. The great Armageddon will occur in this area, and if that is in the near future we do not want to miss that.”<sup>27</sup>

## TRAVEL TO SYRIA

Some of the early travel routes to Syria seem to have gone through Egypt, and from there to Syria. It is not clear if the routes went over land through the Sinai desert and Jordan to the south of Syria, or if the routes from Egypt went through Cyprus and Lebanon, but it is known that at least two Dutch jihadis who died in Syria traveled through Egypt. Sofian Elfassi, who was probably killed in March 2013, told his football coach in December 2012 that he would leave the country and move to Egypt to start studying at an Egyptian university. Choukri Massali, who was killed in late June 2013, went to Mecca for an Umra

26. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

27. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

in August 2013 with members of Sharia4Belgium. From there he traveled to Egypt in order to reach northern Syria.<sup>28</sup>

Authorities have also identified other travel routes. Late in November 2012, three individuals were arrested in Rotterdam while planning to travel to Syria via Turkey. A statement from the Public Prosecutor's Office noted, "The three had booked tickets earlier for flights to Turkey and a connecting flight to the border with Syria. This flight was cancelled and postponed. Two of the three were booked for a flight from Brussels to Turkey ..." <sup>29</sup> Accordingly, prior to their arrests, members of this group were being monitored by the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and, later, by the police.

Information obtained during the investigation of the three individuals arrested in Rotterdam has helped authorities understand techniques employed to reduce the likelihood that such travel plans will be detected. Of note, travel instructions used by this group dealt specifically with the matter of buying tickets just prior to departure at the airport.<sup>30</sup>

Travel instructions distributed to Dutch jihadis during the first quarter of 2013 also emphasize this technique, advising readers to "Buy a last minute ticket to Istanbul (two ways)." This set of instructions further notes that travelers should not take flights originating in the Netherlands. Instead, travelers are encouraged to go to Germany or Belgium to book flights at the last minute from Frankfurt, Dusseldorf or Brussels.

These travel instructions were notably concise:

*When arriving in Istanbul get a visa. Not needed for Turkish passports. When getting the visa people who are travelling together should separate. Then you go separately through passport control. Join each other again in the baggage-claim area.*

*After you collect your luggage you can do two things:*

*Option 1: Take a flight to Adana from Istanbul, takes about an hour.*

*Option 2: You can take a cab to the bus station (OTOGAR). You take a bus to Adana, takes about eight hours. This option is the safest one. ...*

28. Gissen naar gedode jongen, De Telegraaf, March 21, 2013; [http://www.telegraaf.nl/binnenland/21410661/\\_\\_\\_Gissen\\_naar\\_gedode\\_jongen\\_.html](http://www.telegraaf.nl/binnenland/21410661/___Gissen_naar_gedode_jongen_.html); Remarks by Abu Aymaan from Belgium <https://www.facebook.com/Jus83> at the facebook page of the Dutch Mujahidin in Syria commenting on the death of Choukri Massali [https://www.facebook.com/pages/Nederlandse-Mujahideen-in-Syri%C3%AB/142765595912474?ref=br\\_tf](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Nederlandse-Mujahideen-in-Syri%C3%AB/142765595912474?ref=br_tf)

29. Openbaar Ministerie, Drie 'uitreizigers' verdacht van terrorisme aangehouden, November 30, 2012; <http://www.om.nl/onderwerpen/verkeer/@159862/drie-uitreizigers/>

30. <https://www.aivd.nl/@2958/aanhouding-drie/>; <http://www.om.nl/onderwerpen/verkeer/@159862/drie-uitreizigers/>



*When you arrive in Adana call the brothers ... After arriving in Adana in the evening you can stay in a hotel when brothers say so. The next day take the bus to Antakya.*

*When arriving in Adana in the afternoon or during the day then you take the bus to Antakya (before you leave first call the brothers again.) After arriving in Antakya call the brothers for further instructions.*

When asked who was paying for such trips, Abu Fidaa, who serves as the spokesman for the Dutch Mujahidin in Syria, replied: “The costs to buy a ticket, hotel and taxi are not more than a few hundred euros. Furthermore, life here is really cheap. We get a good monthly payment and when you participate in big fights, you get your share in the spoils of war.”<sup>31</sup>

## FINANCING

Late in September, as part of its preparations for the Muslim Feast of Sacrifice (Eid-al-Adha) a fairly new Muslim NGO, World Wide Relief, which joined Facebook in July 2013, held meetings both in Hilversum at al-Amal Mosque and at the Nour Mosque in Gouda.<sup>32</sup> In total, €15.000 was raised for the “people in Syria.”<sup>33</sup> In the following days, two representatives of World Wide Relief from the Netherlands traveled to Turkey with the Belgian Salafi preacher Tarik Chadlioui, also known as Tarik Ibn Ali, and posted an update on the Facebook page of Abou Hafs. On October 7, 2013, the three appeared in a video produced during their car ride



*Photos posted online by World Wide Relief*

31. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2844/Archief/archief/article/detail/3459145/2013/06/15/Het-is-hier-heftig-de-laatste-tijd.dhtml>

32. Foundation World Wide Relief was registered at the chamber of commerce on July 3, 2013, and is based in Hilversum; <https://www.facebook.com/stichtingwwr/info#!/stichtingwwr>; <http://www.worldwiderelief.nl/>

33. [https://www.facebook.com/Actiesteunsyrie?ref=stream&hc\\_location=timeline&filter=1](https://www.facebook.com/Actiesteunsyrie?ref=stream&hc_location=timeline&filter=1)



from Adana to Antakya, from which they would cross into Syria. In the video they advised that people could still donate until Saturday, October 11.<sup>34</sup> After that they entered Syria and distributed cash, sheep, and other items.

## DUTCH FIGHTERS IN SYRIA



*Graphic posted on Facebook by “Nederlandse Mujahideen in Syrie” (Dutch Mujahideen in Syria)*

Small groups of Muslims from different backgrounds, including Moroccans, Turks, Kurds, Somalis and converts (some from Surinam and Cape Verde), have traveled to Syria since December 2012. Groups were from Delft (about 20)<sup>35</sup>, Zoetermeer, The Hague, Zeist and Rotterdam.<sup>36</sup> The first Dutch probably arrived in mid-2012 through the Egyptian route when radical groups like Behind Bars and Sharia4Holland almost seized activities. A cyber-attack by Anonymous in July 2012 was also the starting point for many members of Sharia4Holland to start preparing to leave the Netherlands.<sup>37</sup> The Egyptian route was in use before with British volunteers going to Syria. Other routes through Germany and Turkey soon opened up. Some of the volunteers who travel alone or with one other person seem to prefer the route through Turkey which is cheap and easy to access. The Egypt route seems to have been used mostly by groups like Sharia4UK, Sharia4Belgium and Sharia4Holland.

34. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Lisaanalarab/190243971158527#!/abou.hafs.5>

35. <http://nos.nl/op3/video/486935-nederlandse-jihadstrijder-komt-om-in-syrie.html>

36. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

37. <http://www.nieuws.nl/binnenland/20120726/Site-Sharia4Holland-op-zwart>

According to the Dutch fighters, they are one big family, in which some of the elder “brothers” like Yassin B.’s father (Abu Yassin) take good care of the younger men. It is likely only two or three fighters in Syria are younger than 18, and most of the fighters are between 23 and 26 years old.<sup>38</sup>

Most of the volunteers receive their basic training within Syria before they venture onto the battlefield. They are tested to determine how they will be deployed, and, if they do well, some might be picked to join Jabhat al-Nusra. If they are not good enough to join al-Nusra’s ranks, they are handed down to one of the other Islamic fighting groups in Syria. Some of the fighters burn their passports after they arrive in Syria and are not planning to return to



*The personal arms and effects of a Mujahid from the Netherlands: One Russian Kalashnikov model ‘saaroekh’ with extra clips, a Makarov pistol, two hand grenades (one defensive and one offensive), a good knife, a Casio watch, and a Dutch-Arabic Koran (Picture taken one hour before fighting near Homs 25 May 2013)*

38. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

the Netherlands.<sup>39</sup> As the group of Dutch fighters in Syria is operating in a noticeably disciplined manner, it would seem many of them have indeed joined Jabhat al-Nusra.

Unlike Swedish jihadis in Syria, there are not many Dutch fighters active on Social Media. One Facebook page titled “Nederlandse Mujahideen in Syrie” (Dutch Mujahidin in Syria) is reporting on the activities of the Dutch in Syria. The group’s official spokesman, Abu Fidaa, answers questions from time to time on the site, which also publishes eulogies of fallen Dutch fighters.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, family members in the Netherlands seem to receive text messages from Syria regularly, and friends receive updates through emails.

One returnee, Jordi de Jong, told Dutch journalists that in Aleppo there are houses where foreign fighters are stationed, and in which Dutch fighters commonly flock together. Some are regular houses in suburbs, and others are described as luxurious villas.

According to de Jong, it is a personal choice if someone ends up staying with a group of people from their own country or joining units comprised of fighters from other nations. Accordingly, some fighters choose to join units that mostly consist of Arabs in order to strengthen their knowledge of the Arabic language.<sup>41</sup>

Most of the Dutch fighters seem to operate in northern Syria in the vicinities of Aleppo, Idlib and Homs. Multiple sources have indicated Dutch fighters participated in some of the larger battles in the north.

Not all volunteers will serve as fighters in Syria. Some, including Jordi de Jong and a young Surinam convert from Delft called Mohammed, only serve as volunteers in the refugee camps and hospitals. Meanwhile, according to Abu Fidaa, most of the men who have travelled to Syria are on the battlefield fighting.<sup>42</sup>

For the fighters, an important part of the mission is the Ribaat, or border patrol. This work is regarded to be more difficult than a clash on the battlefield as one is for days extremely close to the enemy, and one never knows when an attack may occur. As a border guard, or Murabit, a fighter works to prevent

39. <http://www.eo.nl/tv/devijfdedag/artikel-detail/hollandse-jihadist-vecht-in-syrie-aan-het-front/>

40. Through extensive searching on social media

41. <http://www.eo.nl/tv/devijfdedag/artikel-detail/hollandse-jihadist-vecht-in-syrie-aan-het-front/>

42. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>



Syrian government soldiers from fleeing the area. While the focus of these activities is generally less offensive than participating in battles, as the situation is so fluid the fighters are prepared to attack on a minute's notice.<sup>43</sup>

When not on duty, the Dutch jihadis often organize gatherings with people they know from home. There is a close connection between the Dutch and Belgian Muslims joining the fighting in Syria. Many of them were active in groups like Sharia4Belgium, Sharia4Holland and Behind Bars.

The fighters also spend time studying and receiving lessons from “experts” and “brothers with knowledge.” Such lessons are seen as “honest lessons,” during which students “learn uncensored truths.”<sup>44</sup> When it is time to rest, some enjoy a relaxing swim, while others are invited to dinners hosted by the locals, where they feel appreciated.<sup>45</sup>

## TOTAL NUMBER OF DUTCH FIGHTERS IN SYRIA

The number of Dutch fighters in Syria is not clear. The first comments from the AIVD on the number of Dutch jihadis who have traveled to Syria came early in 2013. According to Dutch intelligence, dozens of young men were fighting in Syria.<sup>46</sup> This number grew fast to around fifty in late January 2013.

A March press report noted there were nearly 100 Dutch fighters participating in the jihad in Syria.<sup>47</sup> Later, members of the Kurdish community in the Netherlands estimated the number to be 160.<sup>48</sup>

While official reports suggest the flow of Dutch citizens to Syria has slowed significantly in recent months, there has been steady reporting of small groups leaving Europe for Syria, including women.

43. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

44. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

45. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

46. Nieuwsuur, AIVD waarschuwt voor jihadgangers, February 7, 2013; <http://nieuwsuur.nl/onderwerp/471454-aivd-waarschuwt-voor-jihadgangers.html>

47. Lex Runderkamp, Honderd jihadstrijders uit Nederland, Nieuwsuur, March 12, 2013; <http://nos.nl/artikel/483882-honderd-jihadstrijders-uit-nederland.html>

48. Wladimir van Wilgenburg, Dutch Jihadist Killed in Syria, Raising Concern over Foreign Recruits, July 31, 2007; <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/31072013>

Presently, it is reasonable to expect to find up to 200 Dutch volunteers participating in the jihad in Syria. This number is in line with assessments put forth by Belgian authorities, who believe 80-320 young men from Belgium have joined the fighting in Syria. According to Belgian sources, members of their country's closed Turkish and Moroccan Muslim communities typically do not report when family members disappear — some support their activities, while others feel embarrassed.

## TRAINING

For a new volunteer arriving in Syria training usually takes about 45 days. Following six weeks of basic training, one will be assigned to a unit and may go on to participate in fighting. It is only after one completes the six weeks of basic training that one receives “the right to search for martyrdom.”<sup>49</sup>

Advanced training is also offered. However, access seems limited to those who have experience on the battlefield.

There are rumors that people who have signed up for a year of work find themselves unable to leave even after a year has passed. This indicates the jihadi units may be using a contract system similar to the one the first al-Qa’ida fighters encountered in Afghanistan during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Yet Abu Fidaa seems not to have heard of these formal arrangements. Jokingly, in an interview he remarked he would like to know if there is also “holiday pay” available for the fighters. Changing his tone, he noted, “you realize that it is no playground here.” He added: “These are well-organized armed groups with many years of experience in the jihad. And they underestimate how much the Mujahidin invest in security. A mole planted by an intelligence service is easy to spot. In the Netherlands, we were able to unmask several moles with simple tricks. Let alone the people who have so many years of experience in the jihad. They know very well what they do, they have a long-term vision, ideologically and strategically they are very strong. This is also the advantage of the Islamic militias and the weakness the secular battle groups show.”<sup>50</sup>

49. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

50. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>



## FIGHTING IN SYRIA

There are reports that indicate Dutch fighters participated in the battle to capture the Syrian army base at Khan Tuman in mid-March, and that two, possibly three Dutch fighters were killed. Others have been fighting in Idlib. Dutch volunteers have also participated in raids near Homs. Additionally, Dutch fighters were included in the reinforcements sent to Qusair, a city near the border with Lebanon where Syrian rebels and foreign fighters are in a bitter fight with Iranian Revolution Guards Corps troops and Hizballah's forces.<sup>51</sup>

Discussing the *modus operandi* of the foreign fighters and rebel attacks in Syria, Abu Fidaa explained that almost all attacks are launched after dark as the Syrian army has superior weapons systems that make it difficult for the jihadis to strike Syrian forces in broad daylight. The rebels also believe the Syrian army does not like to fight in the dark as it is easier for rebels to sneak up on them. Discussing the rebels' efforts to orchestrate close combat situations, Abu Fidaa noted that a tank loses its strategic advantage in close combat.

Abu Fidaa has also asserted that volunteers derive further advantages from their willingness to take such risks as marching into the ranks of the enemy. He says there is a significant difference between a fighter who is willing to die for his cause and someone who is not.<sup>52</sup> In his words:

*We have the lesser weapons, and are always in the minority. Further, we have no powerful artillery like they have. And despite all these material defects and disadvantages they fear us on the battlefield, rather than the other way around! This is because we are fighting for a noble and just cause, and because God Almighty is our Ally. And the victory will surely come, anyway, sooner or later, with us or without us.*<sup>53</sup>

*It may sound strange but I have never heard of anyone who has had a rough time after he killed soldiers of Bashar, or when they saw slain bodies of soldiers. Indeed, the brothers who received the grace to kill a soldier of Bashar have finally gotten peace in their hearts. It is because of the unrest in our hearts that we have come here to protect the people against*

51. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

52. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

53. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

*these murderous soldiers, and to avenge innocent victims gives great satisfaction. You're not helplessly watching, you can finally do something about it.*<sup>54</sup>

Parents of some of the jihadis fighting in Syria told journalists that, based on phone conversations with their sons, it seems many are disillusioned. Accordingly, they do not enjoy what they have encountered in Syria; however, they don't dare return home as they do not know what will happen to them. Due to concerns they may be brought to justice at a later stage, they don't know what to do.<sup>55</sup>

## DUTCH FIGHTERS KILLED IN SYRIA



*Graphic posted on Facebook with the eulogy of Mourad Massali (aka Abu Baseer)*

While the number of Dutch fighters killed in Syria is unknown, the first two killed were 21-year-old Mourad Massali (aka Abu Baseer) from Delft, and former Delfia football player Sofian Elfassi, also age 21 and probably from Delft. Both were killed in March 2013.

The circumstances surrounding Elfassi's death are not clear, but it is assessed he was part of the group of Dutch fighters who took part in the battle for the Syrian army base Khan Tuman in mid-March. Interestingly, the death of

55. Janny Groen, Syriegangsters na terugkeer voorlopig niet vervolgd, De Volkskrant, October 19, 2013; <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/13828/Burgeroorlog-in-Syrie/article/detail/3529923/2013/10/19/Syriegangsters-na-terugkeer-voorlopig-niet-vervolgd.dhtml>

Elfassi is not mentioned in the eulogies published online by Abu Jandal, and a family member of Elfassi has claimed he is at home in Holland.<sup>56</sup>

The death of Mourad Massali (aka Abu Baseer) was described in a ten-page eulogy titled “The Mujahid Mourad Massali — Abu Baseer.” It described Massali’s recruitment activities back home in the Netherlands as service as a speaker who helped young men understand why they should join the jihad. Accordingly, he wanted to join the jihad in northern Mali, but ended up in Syria, where he fought under Abu al-Baraa al-Homsî. After spending most of his time in Syria on the frontlines, Massali was finally killed when he tried to attack a tank. According to another fighter named Abu Jandal, Massali died with a smile on his face. The eulogy states that Mourad Massali had been dreaming of martyrdom and green birds he believed he would find in paradise.<sup>57</sup>

The eulogy also contains the following story: “A good friend of Abu Baseer who is also in Syria dreamt this about Abu Baseer. He dreamt that he was sitting next to Mourad and he asked him, ‘Mourad, where are you?’ [Mourad]



*Choukri Massali burying his younger brother Mourad (aka Abu Baseer) in March 2013*

56. <http://nieuws.marokko.nl/26188/emotionele-moeder-van-soufian-in-syrie-kom-naar-huis/>

57. Abu Jandal, De Mujahid Mourad Massali – Abu Baseer



said: ‘I am in al-Jinnah.’ Next, he asked him, ‘Have you seen Allah?’ Mourad answered, ‘No, but he gave me his Salaam, and Allah asked me what I wished. I answered: I want again the Shahada, I want again the Shahada, I want again the Shadada.’”<sup>58</sup> A photo was also published online of Mourad’s brother Choukri looking over Mourad’s body just before his burial.

There are indications a third Dutch fighter known as Yassine B. also died during the same battle in which Mourad Massali was killed. Age 23, Yassine B. went to Syria with his father. He apparently died two days after Mourad Massali and Sofian Elfassi. Late in March 2013, Yassine’s mother acknowledged that her son had died in Syria.<sup>59</sup> Yassin was from Zoetermeer, and visited the Qibla Mosque with his parents for at least 15 years before he left for Syria.

The next Dutch volunteer who was reported to have been killed was a recruiter named Mourad Öfkeli.<sup>60</sup> Multiple sources inside Syria indicate he was killed, but his death has not yet been confirmed. On their official Facebook page, the Dutch fighters in Syria asked their spokesman for clarification about the death of Öfkeli, but an answer has not yet been published. One of Öfkeli’s kunya’s was Ibrahim the Turk, and speculation of his death seems to be the result of a reference to a martyr called Ibrahim in the eulogy of Choukri Massali.<sup>61</sup>

The next Dutch fighter to die was Mourad Massali’s older brother, Choukri. Age 26, Choukri Massali (aka Abu Walae) was also from Delft. He was shot in the head and died on July 28. His eulogy notes that his contributions to the jihad included executing Syrian prisoners of war after the battle of Khan Asal.



*Choukri Massali (aka Abu Walae)*

Before he was killed, a friend and his mother allegedly had dreams about his coming death.<sup>62</sup> According to the friend, “This brother dreamt about four

58. Abu Jandal, De Mujahid Mourad Massali – Abu Baseer

59. <http://www.nuij.nl/algemeen/moeder-bevestigt-dood-yassin-b.22352032.lynkx>

60. ANP, ‘Weer Nederlandse strijder in Syrie gesneuveld’, Algemeen Dagblad, June 29, 2013;

<http://www.ad.nl/ad/nl/1012/Nederland/article/detail/3467496/2013/06/29/Weer-Nederlandse-strijder-in-Syrie-gesneuveld.dhtml>

61. Twee heldhaftige broers

62. Twee heldhaftige broers



*Graphic posted on Facebook with the eulogy of Choukri Massali (Abu Walae)*

weeks ago that he met Abu Walae, and that he saw him drinking something. The brother asked him, ‘What are you drinking?’ Abu Walae said, ‘I am drinking the wine of Paradise!’ This brother saw the dream then as a sign of his martyrdom, and a few weeks later he really got the martyrdom.”<sup>63</sup>

Choukri Massali’s mother claims to have had a dream about her son a week before he died. In the dream she was laying on the couch in the living room when her son Choukri entered the room. He was wearing his qamis and had his gun around his left shoulder. He pushed the table a little to the side and gave his mother a big hug. She asked, “My son did you come home?” He said, “No, no, I did not come home, I came only to see you and then I will go again.” His mother and the rest of the family were sure that he would become a Shaheed.<sup>64</sup>

The most recent eulogy produced for a fighter associated with Dutch jihadis in Syria is that of Saddik Sbaa. Age 26, Sbaa, also known as Abu Adam al-Tazi, was from Morocco. He was granted permanent resident status in the Netherlands by the Dutch government. However, in 2011, Sbaa was extradited by the Netherlands to Morocco, where he was put in jail for nearly a year. Two

63. Twee heldhaftige broers

64. Twee heldhaftige broers



years earlier, Sbaa had attempted to join the jihad in Somalia, but was arrested in Kenya before he and three others could cross the border. He traveled to Syria following his release from a Moroccan prison in 2012. Information posted online indicates Sbaa was captured by the Syrian army. He was training to become a tank commander. A website in the Netherlands received pictures that suggested he was tortured prior to his death, but the site did not publish the photos because of their gruesome nature.<sup>65</sup> Sbaa was killed in the vicinity of the city Sahil.<sup>66</sup> According to the North African news site Maghreb.com, Sbaa was a “field commander” who fought in the Latakia province with a group called Sham al-Islam led by Brahim Bencheikroune.<sup>67</sup>



*Photos published online of “field commander” Saddik Sbaa*

In September, another young Dutch fighter was killed in Syria: Nineteen-year-old Soufian el-Hankouria, also known as Abu Abdelrahmaan, from Den Haag. According to his eulogy published on the website of the Dutch Mujahidin in Syria, Soufian asked a good friend from The Hague who was with him to ask everyone for forgiveness in his name. He said to others in Syria that he had the feeling that he would become a martyr soon.<sup>68</sup>



*Soufian el-Hankouria*

## **DUTCH FIGHTER TAKEN PRISONER BY SYRIAN TROOPS**

In mid August, Turgay Yaşar, a Kurdish man who left Zoetermeer early in 2013 with Ahmed Polat, was arrested by Syrian troops in the Latakia province

65. <http://dewarerelgie.nl/actueel/nederlandse-saddik-sbaa-vind-martelaarschap-in-syrie/>

66. [http://www.amazightimes.com/Weer-Marokkaanse-Nederlander-omgekommen-in-Syrie\\_a2533.html](http://www.amazightimes.com/Weer-Marokkaanse-Nederlander-omgekommen-in-Syrie_a2533.html)

67. [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/reportage/2013/09/06/reportage-01?goback=%2Egde\\_4657639\\_member\\_271753755#%21](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/reportage/2013/09/06/reportage-01?goback=%2Egde_4657639_member_271753755#%21)

68. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Nederlandse-Mujahideen-in-Syri%C3%AB/142765595912474>

and used by the Syrian propaganda machine. It was alleged Yaşar was among the foreigners who brought components used to make Sarin gas into the country.<sup>69</sup> The information about his arrest was accompanied by a series of pictures, including one of his Dutch passport and one of his Turkish ID.



*Turgay Yaşar*

## RETURNEES FROM SYRIA

In October, an investigation by Volkskrant journalist Janny Groen highlighted the return of a larger group of Syrian Jihad veterans to the Netherlands and Belgium. The group of Dutch fighters who returned is assessed to include 25 to 30 individuals. The returnees have been seen in The Hague, Delft (in small groups) and some in Zeist, Tilburg, Eindhoven and Arnhem. Some of the returnees have indicated the situation in Syria was far more complex than they expected, and that it was not simply a fight against one enemy, Assad. Rather, they noted there are many players in the conflict, and, to their dismay, they were ordered to fight against other Muslims. While many in this group returned disillusioned, others who returned are fully in agreement with the Jihadi ideology, and want to continue fighting their jihad in the West.<sup>70</sup>

One of the notable returnees is Jordi de Jong (aka Abdul Rahman Abu Moussa), a 19-year-old Muslim convert from Delft.<sup>71</sup> Following his return, he shaved off his beard and went to the local police station to give a statement.<sup>72</sup> Abu Fidaa says Jordi de Jong was one of the brothers who went to Syria to do volunteer work near the borders. According to Abu Fidaa, he was not involved

69. Ferhat Aktaş, 'Türkiyeli Militan'dan Tüylar Ürperten İtiraf "Sarin Gazını Hollanda'dan ben getirdim"', Genç Bakış, September 5, 2013, [http://www.gencbakis.org/HD10918\\_turkiyeli-militan-dan-tuyler-urperten-itaraf---sarin-gazini-hollanda-dan-ben-getirdim---.html](http://www.gencbakis.org/HD10918_turkiyeli-militan-dan-tuyler-urperten-itaraf---sarin-gazini-hollanda-dan-ben-getirdim---.html)

70. Janny Groen, 'Syriegangers na terugkeer voorlopig niet vervolgd', De Volkskrant, October 19, 2013; <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/13828/Burgeroorlog-in-Syrie/article/detail/3529923/2013/10/19/Syriegangers-na-terugkeer-voorlopig-niet-vervolgd.dhtml>

71. <http://nos.nl/artikel/490384-jordi-19-vond-rust-in-de-islam.html>

72. <http://www.eo.nl/tv/devijfdedag/artikel-detail/hollandse-jihadist-vecht-in-syrie-aan-het-front/>



*"Jihad-Jordi is home again" — Article in De Telegraaf newspaper*

in the armed struggle.<sup>73</sup> Jordi himself said he was close with another convert from the Netherlands who went to Syria in January, Victor Droste (aka Zakariya al-Hollandi), who is fighting in the greater Aleppo area.<sup>74</sup>

## THE THREATS FROM THE SYRIAN RETURNEES

Dutch authorities have expressed great concern about the impact Dutch Muslims' participations in the Syrian jihad may have on the security environment in the Netherlands. Concurrently, the Dutch jihadis fighting in Syria have diligently denied they intend to wage jihad in the Netherlands once they finish their work in Syria.

The AIVD in particular has been vocal about its concerns that returnees from the Syrian jihad might intend to wage jihad in the Netherlands. In February

73. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

74. <http://www.eo.nl/tv/devijfdedag/artikel-detail/hollandse-jihadist-vecht-in-syrie-aan-het-front/>



the head of the AIVD, Lieutenant-General (Ret) Rob Bertholee, said the returnees from Syria would become a serious problem for the Dutch society due to their experiences in Syria and their skills set.<sup>75</sup>

Meanwhile, as noted above, when asked about this issue the spokesman of the Dutch fighters in Syria, Abu Fidaa, stated the following: “we are not planning to return to the Netherlands, the liberation of Syria will take some time. A real Mujahid, who is sincere, will never want to leave Syria. There are many prophetic narratives that deal with the favors of Ash-Sham and the battle in this area. The Prophet Jesus will also descend in Damascus, Syria, as almost every Muslim knows. In the Jihad there is always a group who die as Martyrs, another group triumphs, and it may be so that there is a group that eventually pulls out. If we give up then all our efforts and sacrifices have been in vain. Therefore it is very important to be sincere and to purify your intentions in the Jihad. The brothers from the Netherlands and Belgium feel good here and do not want to return. The great Armageddon will occur in this area, and if that is in the near future we do not want to miss that.”<sup>76</sup>

As reported by the office of the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCSC), a quarterly national threat assessment published by the Dutch government states: “The threat posed by jihadist travelers who leave the Netherlands to fight in Syria (and by their potential return) remains one of the main elements of the current threat assessment. Although not every person to return from a jihadist conflict zone poses a threat, it should be remembered that these people are not only coming back with radical ideas; they are also traumatized and fully prepared to use violence. It is important to consider that prospective jihadist travelers that have been stopped before departing can also pose a threat. Some Western jihadists have become involved in domestic conspiracies after being prevented from reaching their destination abroad.”<sup>77</sup>

Due to the many unknowns and the large group of volunteers traveling to the jihad in Syria, in March 2013 the National Coordinator for Security and

75. Nieuwsuur, AIVD waarschuwt voor Jihadgangers, February 7, 2013;

<http://nieuwsuur.nl/onderwerp/471454-aivd-waarschuwt-voor-jihadgangers.html>

76. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>

77. Letter from the Minister of Security and Justice to the House of Representatives of the States General containing a summary of the 33rd edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN33); July 1, 2013:

<https://english.nctv.nl/publications-products/Terrorist-Threat-Assessment-Netherlands/>

Counterterrorism raised the threat level in the Netherlands to the Substantial level.<sup>78</sup>

The Dutch fighters in Syria are well aware of these government reports and authorities' perceptions. While he denies they plan to conduct attacks in the Netherlands, their spokesman Abu Fidaa's remarks have done little to allay concerns about his fellow jihadis' intentions: "the media claims that the Muslim who leaves for Syria may become a danger for the Netherlands, and there is a fear for possible attacks when they return. But the opposite is true. If the West continues to withhold the Muslims and it is made difficult for them to leave to Syria and other Islamic countries where they want to join the Mujahidin, then that can cause certain zealous Muslims with a gnawing conscience to commit attacks on Western soil. So we recommend the Dutch and other Western governments to become not an obstacle to the path of Muslims who wish to leave to trouble spots where their help is desperately needed. With that being said, we also ask anyone to commit attacks on Western soil. And we recommend and call them to leave and to go to Islamic countries where they can participate in the jihad. Syria needs them badly."<sup>79</sup>

78. 32nd Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN32); March 13, 2013;

<https://english.nctv.nl/publications-products/Terrorist-Threat-Assessment-Netherlands/>

79. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3459106/2013/06/15/Lees-hier-de-onbewerkte-en-onverkorte-versie-van-het-e-mail-interview-met-de-Nederlandse-jihadstrijders.dhtml>



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