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Rotten trees, bad apples? Understanding the intergenerational transmission of extremism

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CHAPTER 5

JIHADIST FAMILIES IN THE NETHERLANDS

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INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, it was observed that family members can play an important role in (stimulating or countering) radicalization processes. In the Netherlands, too, there are an estimated several hundred families in which at least one parent adheres to jihadist ideology. The National Coordinator of Counterterrorism and Security (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, NCTV) already warned in 2019 that children growing up in these families could adopt the ideology of their parent(s) and might thus pose a threat to national security later in life. However, as seen in the previous Chapters of this dissertation, only little academic attention has been paid to the backgrounds of these families.

These considerations prompted the General Intelligence and Security Service (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, AIVD) in 2021 to explore the possibility of collaborative research with Leiden University, with the aim of gaining insight into children growing up in jihadist families in the Netherlands. This led to a joint project – unique in the Dutch context – that gave us access to anonymized, aggregated intelligence data.

The use of such data is rare in academic research and brings with it a number of methodological and ethical challenges, particularly concerning transparency, verifiability, and academic independence. These concerns raise important questions – not only about how such data should be handled, but also about whether it should be used for academic purposes at all. While these limitations must be taken seriously, it is equally important to acknowledge that intelligence data can provide unique empirical insight into phenomena that are otherwise extremely difficult to access. In a field where complete datasets are often lacking, and given the national security relevance of the topic, this collaboration offered a valuable, though imperfect, opportunity to better understand the scale and structure of the jihadist community in the Netherlands. The broader implications of using such data, including the risks and trade-offs involved, are further addressed in Chapter 10 of this dissertation.

The date of reference for the data, which the AIVD collected in the context of its organizational mandate, is 12 September 2022. The outcomes of this endeavor are discussed in this Chapter. As such, it sheds light on the Dutch jihadist population known to the General Intelligence and Security Service (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, AIVD) on the one hand, and their family relationships on the other. The study presented in this Chapter provides insight into the estimated scope of this phenomenon for the jihadist population in the Netherlands (or with a strong link to the Netherlands) and establishes a baseline for future analyses. Whether, and to what extent, the parents in these families actually (actively) try to transmit their jihadist ideology to their offspring, cannot be determined on the basis of this study alone. Therefore, the results discussed in this Chapter need to be considered against the broader observations outlined Chapters 6 to 9 of this dissertation – in which the nature of extremist transmission processes will be examined through qualitative data analyses.

Regardless the study presented in this Chapter is innovative in both methodology and data used. For example, the Dutch population of jihadist parents has never been described at a national level before. However, this does not mean that jihadists in the Netherlands have never been quantitatively studied before. Weenink (2019) previously examined the characteristics of 316 Dutch jihadist foreign fighters using police data. Rodermond, Zalmé and Zuiderveld (2021) also looked at the background of 182 Dutch individuals who have been detained for a terrorist offence, using data from the Dutch Prison and Probation Service (Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen, DJI), the Judicial Information Service (Justid) and Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, CBS). Although both studies also looked at the family context of research subjects, the data in these studies is limited to case studies from the criminal justice system. This approach carries a risk of distortion, because only a very small proportion of the jihadists known to the AIVD prepare or commit a terrorism-related offence, or are officially suspected of doing so.

Moreover, in their study, Rodermond, Zalmé and Zuiderveld (2021) not only looked at (former) jihadist detainees, but also at non-jihadist individuals who were detained at the terrorist wing of Dutch correctional facilities. This study seeks to overcome these limitations by using aggregated and anonymized data collected by the AIVD as part of its statutory mandate. The AIVD aims to gain insight into all jihadists in the Netherlands (or with a strong link to the Netherlands), as those adhering to the jihadist ideology pose a potential threat to national security. Due to the organizational tasks of the AIVD, its dataset is very likely more complete than the data used in previous research (e.g., Rodermond, Zalmé & Zuiderveld, 2021; Weenink, 2019). Nevertheless, it is still possible that a portion of the jihadists in the Netherlands remains missing from the data presented in this Chapter.

The results presented in this Chapter shed a first light on the children that might grow up in households where at least one parents adheres to the jihadist ideology. Furthermore, the value of this study is not just in its findings, but also in the unprecedented nature of the collaboration between intelligence and academia that lie at its roots. For years, scholars have pointed at the mutual value that intelligence services and academics can have for each other (e.g., Agrell & Treverton, 2015; Kovacs, 1997; Sageman, 2014; Van Leeuwen, 2016), but to little avail. The current study shows that collaboration between security and intelligence services and academia is indeed possible, and that such endeavors might prove valuable in the study of complex security phenomena, such as the intergenerational transmission of extremism.

RESULTS

According to the AIVD, the jihadist population in the Netherlands consists of approximately five hundred people. The AIVD examined their family background and living situations based on the Dutch Personal Records Database (Basisregistratie Personen, BRP). Additionally, it analyzed the family details of Dutch jihadists (or jihadists with strong ties to the Netherlands) who were living abroad or had died in the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq as of September 2022.

Within this population, 364 individuals were identified as parents (202 males, 162 females) at the reference date (Table 10). Of these, 24 individuals (6.6%) were deceased – presumably all in conflict zones abroad. Among living parents, the modal age category was 30-40 years (47.4%). The majority (82%, or 301 individuals) had at least one minor child (169 males, 132 females). The national average is slightly lower: of all Dutch parents with resident children, approximately 71% had a minor child in 2022 (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2022; Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2023).

Of parents with minor children, 91% (274 individuals; 145 males, 129 females) were living in the Netherlands at the reference date (274 persons; 145 men and 129 women). Their birthplaces included the Netherlands (55.8%), Morocco (11.5%), Somalia (4.9%), Turkey (4.1%), and Iraq (2.2%). These proportions diverge from national demographics. These proportions diverge considerably from national demographics, where 2022 figures indicate birth country distributions of: Netherlands (85.5%), Morocco (0.97%), Somalia (0.14%), Turkey (1.1%), and Iraq (0.26%) (CBS, 2023).

Table 10. Total number of parents in the jihadist population in the Netherlands, or with a strong link to the Netherlands.

	Total			***Alive***			***Deceased***		
	N	M	F	N	M	F	N	M	F
Total amount of parents in the study population	364	202	162	340	181	159	24	21	3
Of which parents of a minor in NL	301	169	132	292	161	131	9	8	1
Of which parents of a minor in NL, residing in NL	258	129	129	258	129	129	0	0	0
Non-jihadist parents[4]	123	27	96	123	27	96	0	0	0

Family context of the study population

The 364 identified parents had 665 children collectively (Table 11). The distribution of children per parent was: one (23.6%), two (29.2%), three (23.6%), and four (11.5%), with a small fraction (3.8%) having seven or more children. This distribution differs from national patterns, where according to Statistics Netherlands, Dutch parents had one (43.3%), two (40.9%), or three or more (15.8%) resident children in 2022 (CBS, 2023).

Of these children, 551 were minors (289 males, 262 females) and 114 adults (67 males, 47 females). Among minors, 71% were aged 10 years or younger at the date of reference, with 38.3% younger than five. This figure is notably higher than the national proportion of under-fives (20%) in 2022 (CBS, 2023). Most adult children of the study population (73.7%) were under 30

[4] The dataset contains data of 123 parents who are not classified as jihadists by the AIVD. These are parents whose partner, or another person living at their residential address, has been identified as a jihadist, and whose children may therefore also be growing up in a jihadist family. This group consists largely of women.

years old. The birthplaces of all 665 children predominantly included the Netherlands (83.8%), Syria (5.1%), and Somalia (2.7%). In 2022, the number of Dutch residents born in the latter two countries at the national level was 0.61% (Syria) and 0.14% (Somalia) (CBS, 2023) – indicating an overrepresentation of these birth countries among the children in the study population, despite small absolute numbers.

Table 11. Total number of children of parents in the study population, in the Netherlands and abroad.

	N	*%*	*M*	*%*	*F*	*%*
Minor	551	82,9%	289	81,2%	262	84,8%
Adult	114	17,1%	67	18,8%	47	15,2%
Total	665	100%	356	100%	309	100%

Of the 551 minor children, 276 had two jihadist parents. This means that the AIVD considered both their father and mother as jihadists. In total, 52.5% of this subgroup was five years old or younger at the date of reference. Among adult children, 26 had two jihadist parents. Additionally, 257 children (213 minors, 44 adults) had one jihadist parent. This indicates that only their father or mother was identified as a jihadist by the AIVD. Of this subgroup, 213 were minors and 44 were adults.

Of the 665 children of jihadist parents, 52 had (a) deceased parent(s). Finally, there are 29 children of jihadist parents who are also known to the AIVD as jihadists themselves (20 males, 9 females) – all but one being adults. In thirteen of these cases, it concerns children whose parent(s) has/have died – all of them are located abroad.

Residential distribution of the study population

The 364 jihadist parents in the dataset collectively have 559 children residing in the Netherlands (229 male, 260 female). The majority of this group is minor-aged (87.5%) with an average age of 7.1 years old. Their geographic distribution (Figure 4) shows concentration in the provinces of South Holland (37.5%) and North Holland (19.2%), suggesting that this is a predominantly urban phenomenon. Moreover, these patterns align with national demographical distributions, where according to Statistics Netherlands, in 2022 most children and young adults also resided in these provinces (CBS, 2022a). Among adult children of the study population, the majority is between 20 and 25 years old (37.1%). In addition to the subgroup of children living in the Netherlands, 106 children of jihadist parents resided abroad at the date of the reference. This subgroup consists of 58.5% minors, of which with the majority (85.5%) was born in the Netherlands.

The 559 children of jihadist parents in the Netherlands, consists for 13.9% of first-generation children (76 children) – indicating that they were not born in the Netherlands, but immigrated here. The majority of this subgroup was minor-aged on the reference date (71.1%). This approaches

the national foreign-born proportion of 15% (CBS, 2022), though age-specific comparisons are unavailable. Additionally, 106 children of jihadist parents emigrated from the Netherlands, with minors constituting 58.5% of this group.

Figure 4.

Geographical distribution of children of the study population (N=559), per province.

Household composition analysis

The 559 children of the study population living in the Netherlands are distributed across 260 distinct households (Table 12). Traditional nuclear households – comprising of cohabiting (officially registered) parents – accounted for 35.8% of households (251 children). These households typically contain three (17.2%), four (34.4%), or five (25.0%) members, including parents. In a minority of cases, traditional nuclear households consisted of seven or more individuals (11.9%). This distribution differs from national patterns, where in 2022, Dutch multi-person households with children comprised three (29%), four (34%), and five or more members (13.6%) (CBS, 2023).

Furthermore, 26 of the children of the study population living in the Netherlands resided in a blended household (3.8%), consisting of one officially registered parent and their (new) partner, who may or may not have had children together. Single-parent households represent 33.1% (184 children). These households are predominantly headed by mothers (79 households, of which 37 with jihadist-identified mothers) versus fathers (seven households, of which five with jihadist-identified fathers). In total, 93 children are residing in a single-parent household of a jihadist father

or mother, which could cause children to grow up in an ideological 'bubble', and might contribute to processes of intergenerational transmission in the long run. According to Statistics Netherlands (CBS, 2023), in 2022 the entire Dutch population consisted of 23% single-parent households (versus 77% two-parent households). At the national level, too, most single-parent households involve a single mother with one or more children (CBS, 2023).

Table 12. Household (hh) types in the study population (N=260).

	All households (hh)			***Households of jihadist parents***			***Other***		
	N (hh)	%	N (child)	N (hh)	%	N (child)	N (hh)	%	N (child)
Traditional hh	93	35,8%	251	93	55.3%	251	0	0,0%	0
Blended hh	10	3,8%	26	5	3,0%	18	5	5,4%	8
Single parent hh (mother)	79	30,4%	172	37	22,0%	84	42	45,7%	88
Single parent hh (father)	7	2,7%	12	5	3,0%	9	2	2,2%	3
Extended hh	30	11,5%	49	27	16,0%	46	3	3,3%	3
Other	16	6,2%	22	1	0,6%	1	15	16,3%	21
Adult child hh	25	9,6%	27	-	-	-	25	27,2%	27
Total	260	100%	559	168	100%	409	92	100%	150

Of the 559 children of the study population residing in the Netherlands, 49 (or 8.7%) lived in an extended household, distributed across 30 households. Households are considered 'extended' when single-parent, traditional or extended households incorporate least one additional relative, such as grandparent(s) or an uncle/aunt. Most of these extended households comprise four (30%), five (26.7%) or six members (23.3%) – including parents and additional relatives. In 16.6% of cases, the extended household consists of seven or more individuals. National comparative data is unavailable for extended household arrangements.

Alternative household arrangements account for 4% of children (22 individuals, across 16 households). This includes children residing in adoptive families, foster care and institutional settings. This figure is notably below the national youth residential care[5] rate of 8.12% for individuals under 23 years (CBS, 2022b). Since these living conditions may indicate an unstable family situation, and at the same time limited pedagogical influence of parents, it would be interesting for future research to contrast (possible ideological transmission within) this group with children who grow up in stable families.

Finally, 27 adult children of the study population (4.8%) lived in an independent household without parents (distributed across 25 households). These are probably non-resident adult children of the study population.

[5] This type of youth care includes residential placements where individuals live with foster families, stay in family-style residential homes, live in group homes run by youth care organizations, or receive care in secure youth facilities. It does not include children living with adoptive families.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Analysis of the data reveals distinctive patterns in jihadist family structures within the Netherlands. When we compare this group to the entire Dutch population, the study population shows considerably higher proportions of children of jihadist parents with migration backgrounds. Additionally, the fact that more than five percent of the children of the study population was born in Syria, suggests that these children may have spent the first years of their lives in Islamic State territory. This could indicate that these children may be struggling with PTSD and war-related trauma – a concern echoed in contemporary research (see Ahdash, 2020; Rousseau et al., 2023). The observation that (at least) 6.6% of the jihadist parents in the study population probably lost their lives in the conflict zone, may further compound trauma risks among these children. Moreover, it is possible that deceased parents continue to exert (indirect) influence on the potential radicalization of their children posthumously through narratives of martyrdom, which constitutes an important element of the jihadist ideology (Nanninga, 2018). Chapter 2 of this dissertation already suggested that narratives of collective victimhood and collective memories of trauma can indeed facilitate the intergenerational transmission of extremist ideas (e.g., Rowland-Klein & Dunlop, 1988; Vollhardt 2012; 2020), which may put the children of deceased parents in the dataset at risk.

Compared to the entire population of Dutch parents, a larger proportion of jihadist parents has at least one minor child (82% versus 71% at the national level). The minor-aged children in jihadist families are also younger, with 38.3% being under the age of five (versus 20% at the national level). These figures likely reflect the relatively young age of the study population, in combination with their relatively large families: of this group, nearly half has three or more children, compared to a national rate of 15.8%.

An earlier study by Alkhadher and Scull (2019) found no correlation between jihadists' family size and their willingness to commit violence. However, other studies suggest that individuals who grow up in a large household might have a higher risk of jihadist radicalization (see Nawaz, 2021; Rodermond, Monster & Weerman, 2020). According to Rodermond, Monster and Weerman (2020), this can be explained by the fact that large households tend to involve blended families, with parental divorces serving as a mediating risk factor for radicalization. Another possible explanation is that parents in larger households might be less emotionally involved in raising their children, which could increase the risk of radicalization (Nawaz, 2024). It is unclear to what extent these observations also apply to children of extremist parents. Chapter 3 of this dissertation already suggested that (ideologically moderate) siblings may be able to provide counterbalance to parents' efforts at jihadist socialization. Additionally, reduced emotional involvement from jihadist parents may actually contribute to children abandoning their parents' extremist ideology, due to reduced family cohesion and subsequent loyalty (see also Chapter 2). Producing large numbers of children is generally an important theme within the jihadist ideology, especially for mothers (Al-Dayel, 2021; Matusitz, 2022). However, the question of whether larger families may indicate stricter ideological

beliefs among parents – and thus perhaps a greater risk of ideological transmission – cannot be answered on the basis of the data.

Of the children of the study population living in the Netherlands, 8.7% reside in an extended household, with relatives other than parents and siblings. This observation might be explained by the fact that having a migration background has already been linked to (living in) an extended family (Charsley et al., 2020). While national comparative data is unavailable, these observations suggest that in the majority of jihadist households parents are the primary caretakers of children, and that exposure to moderate perspectives from non-jihadist extended family members might thus be limited. All in all, this may ultimately contribute to the transmission of jihadist beliefs from parent to child.

It was observed that almost half of the minor-aged children in the study population reside in a dual-jihadist parent household. This is not surprising: religious homogeneity is generally considered an important factor in partner choice and a significant predictor of relationship success (see Heaton, & Pratt, 1990; Schafer & Kwon, 2019), and this is probably particularly true for extremist individuals. Moreover, in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, it was observed that studies on religious households indicate that ideological homogeneity between parents contributed to the successful transmission of such ideas to children (e.g., Myers, 1996). As such, the relatively large proportion of children in the dataset growing up with two jihadist parents, might indeed suggest that intergenerational transmission takes place in these families.

At the same time, the data indicates that 33.1% of the children grow up in a single-parent household in which the father (2.7%) or mother (30.4%) is the sole caregiver. In total, 93 children are residing in a single-parent household of a jihadist father or mother. Both observations are worrying, since the findings discussed in Chapter 3 suggest that for children, having a moderate or non-extremist parent can be a protective factor against the intergenerational transmission of extremism. Parental absence, and the potentially resulting lack of counter-narratives, might contribute to the (ideological) isolation of the family and could thereby facilitate the transmission of jihadism from parent to child.

Finally, the data suggests that the intergenerational transmission of jihadism indeed occurs in the Netherlands, with 4.4% of children of jihadist parents identified by the AIVD as jihadists themselves for their (involvement in) the jihadist ideology, activities or networks. While the direction of ideological influence in these cases remains unclear – since examples of child-to-parent radicalization exist as well (Elibol, 2018) – this observation nevertheless suggests the potential role of the family environment in jihadist radicalization processes.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

This Chapter aimed to shed light on the family relationships of individuals identified as jihadists by the AIVD, and their offspring – in order to determine the potential scope of intergenerational transmission within the jihadist community in the Netherland. It presented the findings of an innovative research endeavor, in which the Dutch intelligence service AIVD collaborated with academia to gain insight into this phenomenon. Considering that such collaboration has never taken place before, and that the dataset used in this study represents the most comprehensive national-level information available on the Dutch jihadist population, the current project is ultimately unique in both its approach and the data it presents. Nonetheless, and regardless of its empirical value, the methodological and ethical drawbacks that come with this approach are profound. Specifically, the transparency and replicability of the data and its origins are limited. These aspects are discussed more extensively in Chapter 10 of this dissertation.

The results of the study advance our understanding of the jihadist community in the Netherlands and the possible intergenerational transmission of the jihadist ideology. While the findings presented in this Chapter do not allow for any hard claims regarding the exact number of children in the Netherlands that is being raised with jihadist ideas, the data suggest that the parent-to-child transmission of jihadist ideas does indeed occur – and that this is a phenomenon that warrants further attention in the years to come. Moreover, the data indicates that various elements observed in the theoretical framework of Chapter 2 – such as ideological homogeneity between parents, intergenerational trauma, and narratives of collective victimhood – might provide a starting point for additional inquiries into the intergenerational transmission if jihadism within families.

However, the study also demonstrated that intergenerational transmission as a process (rather than an outcome) cannot be studied trough quantitative methods alone: the data only allowed us to identify families where the intergenerational transmission of jihadism *may* occur, either directly or indirectly. If we want to understand whether children are indeed socialized into the jihadist ideology, and the ways in which such transmission may take place, qualitative inquiries into this phenomenon are crucial. The precise mechanisms with which such transmission processes can take place, will therefore be at the heart of the Chapters to come.