



Universiteit Leiden

# TERRORIST THREATS IN THE NETHERLANDS

## RISK PERCEPTION AND POSSIBILITIES FOR RISK COMMUNICATION

### SUMMARY

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## 1. Introduction

The last fifteen years have been marked by several large-scale terrorist attacks in European countries, including Paris (January and November 2015), Brussels (March 2016), Nice (July 2016), Berlin (December 2016), London (March 2017), Stockholm (April 2017), Manchester (May 2017), again London (June 2017) and Barcelona (August 2017). In the case of the Netherlands, there have been several terrorist threats. In the summer of 2017, for example, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) investigated a terrorist threat in the context of the European Football Championship for Women in Utrecht (Volkskrant, July 2017). Also in 2017, a concert of the American pop group Allah-Las, scheduled to perform in Rotterdam, was cancelled by order of the police, due to a terrorist threat (NOS.nl, August 2017). According to the NCTV, the current national threat level is substantial (four out of five), implying that a terrorist attack in the Netherlands is likely to occur. Currently, the biggest threat stems from jihadist extremism (NCTV, 2017a).

Recent attacks and threats may have an impact on the risk perception of the Dutch population. The *Risk and Crisis Barometer* (RCB), carried out by the NCTV, showed that people's fear of a terrorist attack in the Netherlands has increased slightly over the years (NCTV, 2017j). Prior research has shown that a population's risk perception can increase due to an attack in another (Western) country. For example, Sjöberg (2005) concluded, based on Swedish data, that after the attacks in New York and Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001, risk perception in Sweden increased.

### *This research*

It is unclear whether and to what extent the attacks in neighbouring countries affect the risk perception among the Dutch population. The question arises whether and to what extent the relatively long-term threat level (substantial, since March 2013) influences the risk perception of the Dutch population. Research suggests that terrorist attacks can lead to behavioural changes among the population, such as changes in mobility (for example the use of public transport or avoiding busy places) and voting behavior (Baird et al. 2015; Huddy et al. 2005; Mumpower et al. 2013; Rubin et al. 2005). It remains unclear whether this may also occur in case of a terrorist threat. Further, so far we do not know as to what possibilities the government has when communicating to its citizens about possible terrorist threats.

In order to shed light on the abovementioned voids in research, the following questions have been formulated: "*What is the risk perception of the Dutch population regarding terrorist threats?*" and "*What are the possibilities for the Dutch government to communicate about terrorist threats and*

*counterterrorism policies?"* For the purpose of this research, these two questions have been divided into the following sub-questions:

1. What is the risk perception of terrorism and what are (possible) differences in current risk perception levels amongst the Dutch population?
2. How does the Dutch population perceive government communication on terrorist threats?
3. What is the population's awareness with regard to the current threat level and the Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands (DTN)?
4. To what extent does risk perception amongst the Dutch population result in mobility changes (i.e. avoiding busy places or public transport)?
5. What are the possibilities for the government to communicate about terrorist threats and (counter-) terrorism policy?

In order to answer these questions, we used various sources of information:

- A literature review;
- An analysis of existing surveys [the Risk and Crisis Barometer (RCB) of the NCTV and Continuous Reports (COB) of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP)];
- An online survey specifically sent out to a representative sample of the Dutch population (the LISS-Panel) consisting of 1,077 respondents;
- A trend analysis of Google searches and an analysis of the top 25 Google search results prior to, and following a recent terrorist attack in a neighbouring country; and
- Interviews with sixteen professionals working in the field of risk perception and risk communication.

This study consists of three parts. The first part pays attention to the methods and the theoretical framework. In the second part, we examine, analyse and present the empirical findings. The third part presents conclusions and reflections.

## **2. Theoretical insights: risk perception and terrorism**

Risk perception is a combination of an objective threat and commotion, in which commotion is determined by the extent to which one can give meaning to an event (Furedi, 2007). A review of the literature shows that the gap between the statistical probability of risks and the individual perception of risk is particularly large in policy areas that relate to health and safety: citizens overestimate the statistical probability that a terrorist attack will affect them (Renn, 2015). The literature study

further showed a distinction between personal and collective risk perception: personal risk perception appears to be related to a fear of being personally affected by an attack, whilst collective risk perception occurs when citizens fear that a terrorist attack affects other people (Huddy et al. 2002).

#### *Factors that influence risk perception*

The literature review shows that a number of factors influence the perception of risk:

- Time: the time passed since an attack is an important factor that influences risk perception. For example, McArdle and colleagues (2012) put forth that the feeling of insecurity increases immediately after an attack, but stabilizes after a maximum of two years: however, this stabilization is at a higher level than before the attack, which they term “the new normal”.
- Personal characteristics: personal and collective risk perception are thought to be influenced by gender, age, income, political preference, level of education and religion (Mumpower et al, 2013; Sjöberg 2005; Skitka, Bauman and Mullen, 2004). Generally, women have a higher risk perception than men, older people have a higher risk perception than younger people and lower educated people have a higher risk perception than higher educated people (ibid.).
- Emotions: emotions such as anger, fear and sadness in particular, may affect the perception of risk (Fisschof et al. 2003). For example, anger leads to optimism and a lower estimate of risks with regard to terrorism, while fear leads to a higher risk perception (ibid.).
- Characteristics of an attack: being confronted with visible images of a terrorist attack may lead to an increase in risk perception (Sunstein, 2003).

#### *Adjustments in behaviour in response to a terrorist attack*

The literature shows that increased risk perception can lead to changes in citizen’s behaviour. For example, people might avoid certain locations after an attack or do not use public transportation as often (Rubin et al. 2005).

### **3. Theoretical insights: possibilities for risk communication**

Another factor that influences risk perception is confidence in the government. If a government frequently issued a false alarm, the confidence and credibility in the alarm system would decline (Bos et al. 2011) and as a result, confidence in the government would decline. This is of importance as confidence in government is an influencing factor when it comes to the effectiveness of risk and crisis

communication (Fisher-Liu et al. 2016). In addition, the literature shows that the choice of the type of medium outlet plays a role in the effectiveness of risk and crisis communication. For example, it is important to use various media forms, such as text and images, in order to get the message across reliably and effectively.

It appears that increased exposure to media coverage on a particular risk increases risk perception (Slone, 2000). Social media is able to speed up the information process, both by social media posts from the government to citizens and by posts between citizens. Messages (and rumours) spread faster when social media platforms are used (Eriksson and Olsson, 2016; Ferris et al 2016; Houston et al. 2016; Keim and Nooij, 2011). The literature also shows that best practices of risk and crisis communication by the government are characterized by transparency, proactively informing and offering a clear manner in which the public can react (Seeger, 2006).

#### **4. The perception of risk in the Netherlands regarding terrorist threats**

An analysis of previous RCB and COB survey reports showed that concerns about a terrorist attack in the Netherlands have increased since 2012. A trend analysis of Google search results showed a clear peak in searches carried out after each of the nine attacks in neighbouring countries (that occurred during period January 2015 and June 2017) when searching for the terms "terrorism Netherlands" (terrorisme Nederland) and "attack Netherlands" (aanslag Nederland). The online survey specifically set out for this study, showed that individual risk perception was lower than collective risk perception (respondents were more worried about an attack in their place of residence than to personally become a victim of an attack). This phenomenon is also known as the *optimism bias*: people underestimate the likelihood of them personally falling victim to an attack, while they overestimate the chance of somebody else becoming the victim of a terrorist attack (Caponecchia, 2012).

#### **5. Perception of (risk) communication about the terrorist threats**

Since 2012, confidence in the Dutch government has seen a slight decline: from 51 per cent of the population in 2012 to 48 per cent in the spring of 2017, according to an analysis of the previous RCBs surveys. This finding is of importance as the literature shows that trust is an important factor in the effectiveness of risk and crisis communication (Fisher-Liu et al 2016; Rogers et al. 2007; Seeger, 2006). In the online survey, we specifically questioned the extent to which people trusted the government in terms of their ability to prevent a terrorist attack. Approximately 85 per cent of the respondents felt that the government acted 'reasonably', 'sufficient' or 'well' to prevent a terrorist

attack. However, slightly more than half of the respondents (50.2%) felt that the Dutch government was hardly able to prevent a terrorist attack. Based on these results, we may tentatively conclude that the government, through its communication, is able to paint a realistic picture of its activities and possibilities in terms of preventing an attack.

## **6. Awareness of the current threat level and the Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands (DTN) of the Dutch population**

Population awareness of the general disaster policy has declined in recent years. In 2012, one third of the respondents were familiar with the general disaster policies, which declined to one in seven in 2016, according to the RCB. The findings of the online survey confirmed this tendency: the current threat level, the DTN, the activities of the NCTV and the website crisis.nl were relatively unknown among the respondents. According to the literature review, information appears to be the best way to counteract an overreaction with regard to terrorism risks (Sunstein, 2003). Nonetheless, Sunstein argues that a large amount of information is needed to counter the effects of strong emotions (ibid.).

Additionally, the Google trend analysis results showed there was no increase in the use of search term "DTN" (DTN) after the nine attacks. The term "threat level" (dreigingsniveau), however, did show an increase in post-attack searches. Citizens therefore seemed to be searching for information about the threat level after a terrorist attack. This need for information corresponds with the literature: Braithwaite (2017) puts forth that government communication should mainly focus on informing and reassuring citizens about risks (Braithwaite, 2017).

Feelings of insecurity related to a terrorist attack seem to increase, according to earlier surveys of the RCB, whereas the RCB at the same time shows a decline in knowledge about policy and risk communication is visible. This could result in a decline in trust in the government and subsequently to unrest and panic, since citizens do not know how to act. Professionals we talked to mentioned that the government providing information on how to act during a terrorist attack would increase trust in the government. This was supported by the literature (Deisler, 2002).

## **7. Behavioural adjustments as a response to a terrorist threat**

In spite of a visible increase in risk perception, we found that changes in mobility only occurred infrequently. Results from the RCB, a trend analysis of Google searches and the online survey showed that only a few people were inclined to avoid crowded places as a result of a terrorist attack. Additionally, only a relatively small percentage of respondents (40%) indicated that, in the case of a terrorist attack in the Netherlands, they would avoid a high-risk foreign destination. In general, it

appears that, as demonstrated by both the online survey and an analysis of previous RCBs, mobility changes out of fear of a terrorist attack are relatively uncommon among the Dutch population. However, our survey suggested that some behavioural changes would occur: more than 80 percent of the respondents of our survey said that they would be extra alert, pay more attention to newsreports (77,1%) and actively search for travel advice (72.4%).

## **8. Possibilities for communication from the government regarding terrorism threats**

The survey set out for the purpose of this research found that 53 per cent of respondents believed that the government should actively inform its citizens on how to act during a terrorist attack. These outcomes correspond with the analysis of prior RCBs (NCTV, 2017a; NCTV, 2017j). However, our survey also found that when it comes to information on how citizens can prevent a terrorist attack and how the government contributes to the prevention of a terrorist attack, citizens wish to know where to find this information. When it comes to informing the public, sending out one coherent message is important, but it is equally important to differentiate between subgroups within Dutch society. The need to apply such distinctions was frequently mentioned during the interviews we held with professionals.

The online survey showed that although respondents often used traditional media outlets such as TV-stations, newspapers and radio-stations as a new source, one third of respondents relied on social media as their primary news source.

## **9. In conclusion**

Concerns in the Netherlands about a terrorist attack seem to relate to a possible attack in the place of residence or elsewhere in the Netherlands, rather than a personal fear of becoming victimized in a terrorist attack. Such collective fear could be reduced by means of transparent communication by the government about the terrorist threat in the Netherlands. The majority of the online survey respondents confided in the government regarding taking action to prevent a terrorist attack from taking place.

Possibilities for government communications are to be found in a range of possibilities. In multiple instances, the interviews revealed that “the Dutch citizen” does not exist, and various subgroups within Dutch society need to be taken into account: for example, young people are found to be more likely to be active on social media than the elderly. Respondents indicated that they would like to be actively informed about changes in the threat level.

In conclusion, these results indicate that the Dutch population reacts relatively calmly to attacks in neighbouring countries and to the possible risks of a terrorist attack. The respondents of the survey sent out for this research stated that they wish to be informed about changes in the current threat level and information on how to act during a terrorist attack. Providing citizens with a clear message on the current terrorist threat should therefore be a focus of the Dutch government in terms of risk communication.

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