

Message: children may pose a threat, but they are victims above all.

Good afternoon,

Thank you very much for inviting me to this symposium on an extremely delicate and complex topic. When it comes to the threat of terrorism coming from the jihadist fighters, there is a great sense of urgency in Europe.

This sense led to the creation of an active and operational platform by the members of the Counter Terrorism Group, which consists of the 28 member states plus Switzerland and Norway. The members use this platform, which was established two years ago, to effectively exchange information on foreign fighters, in order to define the risks. With great success! But the demise of the caliphate created a new issue: what to do with the children of the caliphate?

As I was reflecting on what to say today, I recalled a news report I read a year ago. It was late 2016, and a twelve-year-old boy in Ludwigshafen wanted to attack a Christmas fair with a nail bomb. This boy, born and raised in Germany, apparently received direction from Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham.

They helped him plan his attack with the purpose of bringing death and destruction to his home town: the place where he grew up, went to school, made friends.

In my job I am used to the dark side of society, but deliberately using and grooming a 12 year old boy for such an attack is on the top of my list of sick things.

I believe it is the first time in the history of the AIVD that children play such a prominent part in our investigations. The AIVD protects national security by identifying and revealing invisible threats. The threat emanating from children of the caliphate really is an unprecedented, invisible and very complex one. One that we have to deal with right now. Although the caliphate appears to be nearing its end, the threat is most definitely not yet diminishing.

ISIS itself has been a serious threat for some time now. For a number of years the threat level in the Netherlands has been at level 4 out of 5, which signifies a very real possibility of a terrorist attack. Ever since the end of 2012, when the first people left the Netherlands to travel to the conflict area in Syria and Iraq, this has been one of my service's top priorities.

Over the past years approximately 290 persons have left the Netherlands to join ISIS. At least 60 of them have been killed and some 185 are still in the area. Today the caliphate is practically non-existent and geographically ISIS is almost defeated. There is no more territory for ISIS supporters, the fortune seekers of the caliphate. It is expected that these foreign fighters will gradually try to return to the Netherlands. Not all of them, and certainly not all of them at the same time.

In the past five years children with ties to the Netherlands have been taken to the conflict area, and many more were born there. We estimate there must be at least 100 in all. When we say "ties to the Netherlands", we mean that one of the parents has Dutch citizenship, or that the parents lived in the Netherlands for an extended period of time. All these children, therefore, have some kind of connection to the Netherlands, to Western Europe, but the thing they hear all day long is that they should hate us.

Children are prepared for the jihad from a very young age. They are groomed to adhere to a strict interpretation of Islam, the jihadist ideology. They learn that the West represents all that is bad: freedom of speech, equality of rights, freedom of religion, freedom of press and all the other achievements we pride ourselves on. These children, called 'ashba' or cubs by ISIS, are expected and groomed to grow into 'usud', or lions of the caliphate.

Essential to this upbringing is a good education. ISIS leadership has even more faith in the still malleable ISIS youth than in its current crop of fighters. Taking care of this aspect specifically was the ISIS ministry of Education, which preached the sharia and indoctrinated children.

The educational programme of the children is fully synchronized with this ideological basis. Physical education is focused on stamina, obedience and cooperation. History lessons discussed the life of the prophet Mohammed and what it means today. Course

books contained pictures of weapons and instructions on how to use them.

Add to this the fact that the parents of these children, who generally set an example for their offspring, have also been indoctrinated by ISIS ideology. This adds and gives even more depth to the level of indoctrination of these children.

Children become a threat to us precisely because of this indoctrination. I have seen footage, and I take it you have seen it as well, of a little boy who was told by his parents to decapitate his teddy bear. Parents like to photograph their children holding weapons and then send these pictures to their relatives in Europe or post them on social media. If and when these children return to the West, to your country, to our country, that will surely pose a challenge.

As far as children are concerned, the threat to our national security comes from those children who have had actual combat training, which they receive from age 9 and up. This training confronts them with horrific acts of violence, and perhaps even forces them to commit those acts of violence. It is like what we have seen in other parts of the world with child soldiers.

In a testimony, a 15-year-old boy described how his group was made to watch the beheading of a prisoner by someone his age. It made him feel uncomfortable and he sensed that the others felt the same, but in the frenzied passion of peer pressure they all cheered along. Experiences like these are traumatic. It could

definitely lower a person's threshold to the use of violence.

When one hears and sees what these children have been through, it is not difficult to imagine how they can pose a threat. But I think we should not forget that these children are victims above all. They did not choose to leave. They did not choose to be born in such violent surroundings and they did not choose to be confronted with such a twisted worldview. Most likely they will be traumatized for life.

As an intel and security service I consider it our task to share our knowledge and expertise to enable other parties, including child care services, including municipalities, including health care and including the police, to take adequate measures, based on facts and not on feelings.