Summary

The violent jihad and facilitating environments – a review of the evidence. The individuals and cells that are responsible for the support and preparation of the violent jihad may be labelled facilitators. In the attacks that were committed over the past few years in the name of the jihad, they may have acted in all secrecy, but definitely not in total seclusion. The reason for this is that facilitators are dependent on their social environment. At the same time, these contacts put them at risk, for their social environment is not part of the organization to which they belong. This means that facilitators are unable to function without social contacts, while at the same time, these contacts make them vulnerable. Insight into this weak link may offer clues for fighting terrorism. Against this background, the problem has been defined as follows: who are used by facilitators for supporting and preparing the violent jihad and how do they do that?

The results of the study will come from interviews held between May and July 2004 with eight professionals who themselves were involved in Dutch criminal cases concerning the violent jihad. In addition, publications in newspapers, papers, reports, articles and books on the violent jihad in Western countries were used.

For the answer to the problem defined, Donald Black’s (2004) specification of the conditions under which terrorism manifests itself was used. According to Black, terrorism only occurs if there is a significant social distance between one group that feels under attack and another group, which is held responsible for those attacks, whereas the physical distance between both groups is small. Social distance paves the way to a clear picture of the enemy and lowers the threshold to make random victims among this group of enemies, while the physical proximity offers the opportunity to make such victims.

These conditions also apply to groups of jihadist militants. Many Muslim extremists live in the physical proximity of a dominant non-Muslim majority. At the same time, there is a big social distance between them and their targets. From a cultural point of view, they divide the world into Muslims and nonbelievers. They also consider disloyal and unorthodox Muslims to belong to the latter category. From a relational point of view, they advocate keeping themselves apart from the Western society and having as little interaction as possible with non-Muslims.

It has been investigated whether facilitators also bring their convictions into practice in terms of supporting and preparing the violent jihad. In other words: do they indeed fall back on sympathizers as much as possible? And vice versa: do they only tap nonbelievers — i.e. unorthodox Muslims and non-Muslims — if these have knowledge, means or opportunities that the sympathizers in their social environment are lacking? In answering these questions, three activities were distinguished, which always precede terrorism, but do not necessarily result in it. This concerns the financing of and communication among themselves concerning the violent jihad and getting people into the countries in which the jihad militants want to be active — i.e. have them settle there. In these three supporting and preparatory activities, Muslim extremists appear indeed to fall back on sympathizers as much as they can. However, they cannot avoid using migrants and Muslims that do not profess the ‘pure’ Islam to which they devote themselves. They engage hawala bankers to transfer money, people smugglers to cross
national borders, they use call shops and the Islamic *online community* for communications and they misuse the religious Muslim obligation to hand over part of their wealth to the less fortunate. This means that migrants and Muslims unconsciously enable Muslim extremists to keep a low profile and rely on traditions and customs that they know and are familiar with. Muslim extremists also engage non-Muslims. In order to get access to countries and reside in them, they rely on civil servants implementing the aliens’ policy, they marry non-Muslims and they steal personal documents from non-Muslims. For financing, they involve the non-Muslims as their business partners, their markets and as targets for their criminal activities. Muslim extremists are therefore prepared to set their principles aside if it serves the ‘higher’ purpose of the violent jihad. The social distance to their intended victims in this respect does not form an insurmountable barrier.

However, that does not alter the fact that Muslim extremists run less risk when they can fall back on sympathizers of the violent jihad. The possibilities to do so show a different development for each of the three distinguished activities. For the purpose of communication, Muslim extremists so far have fallen back on sympathizers, and given the presence of call shops and the Internet, this situation probably will remain the same for the time being. As for settling, the opportunities to rely on sympathizers are expected to increase rather than decrease. The fact that Al Qaida has become more widely known and the attractive force of it on radical Muslims cause a rise in the number of new recruits in numerous countries. On the other hand, it seems to become increasingly difficult for jihad groups to engage sympathizers for financing. Thanks to the stricter supervision of financial transactions and international sanctions against countries associated with the sponsoring of terrorist organizations, and the isolation of influential Al Qaida members, cells are more and more left to their own devices in terms of finance.

Given these developments, most possibilities of fighting terrorism relate to financing. However, this is not only true because jihad groups are dependent on parties that they regard as the enemy, but also because they are weakened due to financial pressure from inside. Financial pressure increases the criminal behaviour of groups of militants, the result being that they are more inclined to allow their own or the group’s interest to prevail over the common interest of the jihad. That means that increasing the financial pressure can contribute to undermining the call of the forces.

Summarizing, it can be argued that the violent war on the hegemony of the ‘pure’ Islam does not prevent contact with nonbelievers for practical reasons. Moreover, objects are pursued in the name of the violent jihad, which are at odds with them. Both are mainly true with regard to financing. Financing is linked to dependence on parties that are regarded as the enemy and may lead to pursuing profit rather than their good cause. Muslim extremists are therefore not just the religious fanatics they are often thought to be. Realizing this may keep both researchers and those fighting terrorism from blind spots.