

PREFACE

On 20 May 2013 Edward Snowden, a 30-year old infrastructure analyst, employed by the American company Booz Allen Hamilton, arrives in Hong Kong with four laptops. The past few years Snowden has worked through his employer for, among others, the National Security Agency (NSA), the largest of the American intelligence services. Working for the NSA he cannot help feeling, as he states himself, that the American intelligence services, in their eagerness to hoard telephone and internet data of American citizens, have crossed a border. The United States has turned into a surveillance state, Snowden says, and it is time US citizens are informed of this.

For that reason he purloins masses of data. With the help of among others the journalist Glenn Greenwald Snowden initiates a carefully orchestrated revelation campaign. In a few years' time all kinds of PowerPoint presentations and all kinds of documents have been revealed, which show in what ways the NSA collects (personal) data in the present -day digitized world.

As more and more about the scope of the signals intelligence activities becomes public knowledge, a growing number of questions are posed about this form of collecting intelligence. Are intelligence agencies allowed at all to collect so much and so intensively about their own nation's and other citizens? Have we not gone too far since 9/11? In many western debates about intelligence and security agencies it is emphasized that in this digital era they are allowed too much access to the digital behavior of citizens and by means of this collect too much data. It is said privacy has evaporated completely.

Even though recent attacks –as usual- have forced this debate into the opposite direction (more money, more power), the perception of the data-hungry intelligence services is still dominant. In the Netherlands, for instance, this plays a great part in an upcoming change of law, one allowing the services access to fiberglass cables - a power described in public debate as 'dragnet'.

The fact that using mass data – whatever we think of it socially, ethically and in relation to the law, can be very effective, is a seldom-heard voice. Of course, this has to do with the fact that intelligence and security services cannot be open about recent cases. However, they can be so about past cases.

In this case, a historic case is depicted where these very far-reaching powers were of vital importance. This will show that 'mass data' and extensive involvement by partner services can play a major role in preventing a terrorist attack. This is not meant to state that secret services should always be given free reign, but for once to shed light on the effect of far-reaching powers. Of course we should see this in its historical context – it is a case from the seventies – but it nevertheless shows the effect of some intelligence means.

INTRODUCTION

In 1975 four Syrians intended to hijack an international train with Russian Jews in Amersfoort, the Netherlands, but following a tip-off by the Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst (BVD Dutch Security Service) they were arrested by the Amsterdam police on 5 September of that year.

The Syrians had been lifted off their beds in Hotel Neutraal at the Damrak in Amsterdam. When the police raided their rooms, pistols, submachine guns and a fake bomb, with wires and a battery, were found. A terror attack by four armed freedom fighter of the Syrian 'al Saiqa' resistance movement had been prevented.¹

With the aid of SIGINT (signals intelligence) foreign intelligence services had intercepted (parts) of telephone numbers in the Middle East and shared these metadata with the BVD ².Every day long lists were manually compared by the BVD with data of international telephone conversations from the Netherlands. In 1975 calls were not yet effected automatically, but with the aid of a telephone operator.

¹ Theater van de Angst', pagina's 215-217 door Beatrice de Graaf

² Frontdienst' De BVD in de koude oorlog, pagina 178-179 door Dick Engelen

JOURNEY TO THE NETHERLANDS

The four terrorists had travelled to the Netherlands in two groups. The first group, consisting of 34-year old Amin Selamih and 27-year old Joseph As'ad Azar – aka: Ziad Homsi/Homcy – flew from Damascus to Rome on 15 August 1975. They continued their journey to Modena (Italy) by train. There they purchased a grey Alfa Romeo registered MO 255182, in which the two terrorists left for Amsterdam. In Modena they collected weapons as well from a non-identified Arab.

The second group, Abdul Sattar Ahmed Ammar, 24 years old, - aka: al-Afghani - and Abdullah Mustapha Ataya, 32 years old, flew from Damascus to Budapest on 31 August 1975 and on 3 September from Budapest to Amsterdam. Selamih and Azar put up at Hotel Neutraal at Damrak 8 in Amsterdam, with room number 54. They received orders from Damascus to collect their fellow fighters Abdullah Ataya and Abdul Satar Ammar at Schiphol on 3 September. The latter two moved into room 59 of the same hotel.³

On 4 September 1975 the four had a meeting in the hotel about the taking of hostages they were to carry out the following day. It was their intention to hijack the last carriage of the Warsaw Express on its way to the Hook of Holland because they thought that Russian Jews were in it. Planned place and time were Amersfoort at 8.36 a.m. During their meeting they already divided the weapons they had acquired in Italy: one Makarov pistol, one Pietro Beretta pistol and two Skorpion submachine guns.

The four Syrians, members of the Palestinian resistance organisation 'al Saiqa' carried with them a stencilled pamphlet, in English and in French, with the demands for the Dutch government, on behalf of the 'Eagles of the Palestinian Revolution'.

They demanded that the Dutch government stopped assisting Russian Jews emigrating to Israel, and that prime minister Joop den Uyl would deliver a television speech stating his support for the Palestinian cause. If the Dutch government did not meet these demands it would be held responsible for the fate of the hostages.⁴

ARREST IN AMSTERDAM

Unknown to the terrorists the Dutch authorities already had them in their sights. Even before they were able to leave for Amersfoort they were arrested in the night of 4/5 September. Beforehand, hotel staff had given a close description of the appearance of the guests and the lay-out of their rooms. The snatch squad acted as quickly as lightning. Even before the Syrians were able to think of a reaction, they had already been taken by surprise. Story has it that one of the police officers dived straight from the room door onto the bed of the Syrians.⁵

Some hours later, in the morning of 5 September 1975, during the so-called Aurora meeting, which was held every Tuesday and Friday in the room of the director-general of the BVD, deputy

³ ^{BV} 'Niet bang om te sterven' pagina's 106-109 door Siem Eikelenboom

⁴ ^{BV} Ministerraad 5 september 1975 agendapunt 21a Nationaal Archief, bestanddeel 1598

⁵ ^{BV} Interview Jaap Veenman, Amsterdamse politieman betrokken bij de arrestatie

commissioner Hans Neervoort reported triumphantly that as a result of information supplied by the BVD the Amsterdam police had been able to prevent a terrorist action.⁶

MOSSAD AND NSA ASSIST BVD

The Dutch were able to act in time owing to alertness of the American National Security Agency (NSA) and the Israeli Mossad, who closely watched contacts between Europe and the Middle East, among other means by SIGINT stations in the region. The NSA and the Mossad had been focused on Palestine terrorism since the bloody attacks on Israeli athletes during the 1972 Olympic games in Munich. From various previews and after-battle reports on the 1973 October War it has appeared that the Israelis had at their disposal an ingenious monitoring system. On Mount Hermon, for instance, on the Golan Heights near Mitzpe Shlagim ("Snow Lookout") data traffic was intercepted.

In the 21 November 1998 issue of NRC- Handelsblad Cees Wiebes and Bob de Graaff explain how the BVD was assisted several times by the American CIA.⁷ At the time of the hostage- taking in the French embassy in The Hague by members of the Japanese Red Army the CIA offered a room opposite the French embassy and means of assistance. A camera was aimed at the French embassy and directional microphones were used to intercept conversations between the hostage takers. In addition, the CIA made available communication intercepted by the NSA. When the BVD was not able to extract telephone numbers from the communication intercepted from the Middle East the CIA managed to do so themselves within a few hours.

DATA MINING

After the Munich Olympic Games the security services agreed on more cooperation in order to prevent new calamities.⁸ Every day the head office of the BVD received telexes with phone numbers of suspected persons and organisations in the Middle East. In a time without advanced automation those data were at the most the raw material for a complicated approach of potential terrorists. This data mining *avant la lettre*, looking for potentially dangerous contacts, was like the proverbial looking for a needle in the haystack.⁹

PTT IMPORTANT PARTNER BVD

The BVD also owed the trail to the four Syrian terrorists to the PTT. At a few hundred meters distance from Hotel Neutraal, in the PTT-building behind the Palace on the Dam, at Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 182, at the corner of Raadhuisstraat and Spuistraat, the central desk could be found where in those days all calls abroad were processed. Data of calls with the Middle East were put onto punch cards. The BVD compared these with numbers of suspected persons and organisations supplied by fellow services . Thus it became clear that calls had been made from Hotel Neutraal with suspected contacts in the Middle East.

⁶<http://www.inlichtingendiensten.nl/aurora/aurora75-3.pdf> : AURORA OCHTENDBESPREEKING op vrijdag 5 september 1975

⁷<http://www.burojansen.nl/afluisteren/Hfst1.htm> De Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst

⁸Historical Dictionary of Israeli Intelligence door Ephraim Kahana pagina's 145 – 146

⁹'Frontdienst' De BVD in de koude oorlog, pagina 178-179 door Dick Engelen

In the book 'Frontdienst' by BVD historian Dick Engelen (PP. 178-179) he describes extensively how in the seventies long lists with data from abroad were compared daily and by hand with PTT-data on calls made from the Netherlands.

In those days nobody would have been able to think that forty years later developments in the world of data mining would have advanced as much as they have. Technical developments have resulted in the fact that requesting data has become more or less normal, and that only the most ardent privacy proponents raise objections to this. After the first decade of the 21st century it is only natural to see cooperation between secret services and telecom providers in the fight against terrorism.

SOURCE PROTECTION ALMOST FATAL

The cooperation between the PTT and the BVD in 1975 was so secret that this operation even had been given a code name. This code name not only protected the source(s), but also the national and international cooperation –referred to as *modus operandi*. This source protection produced various problems in the necessary exploitation of data by the Ministry of Justice, the police and the Office of the Public Prosecutor. The Chief Public Prosecutor did want to take action against possible terrorists, but on the basis of what? In any case not on the basis of anonymous sources at the BVD.

During an extra visit to Hotel Neutraal a check of the hotel records showed that 'four Arabs' with Syrian passports were staying there. The hotel owner told that indeed calls had been made with foreign numbers, and that at the moment the men concerned were not present. A request by the police to have a look in the rooms was allowed. The police found the weapons, but in order to be able to arrest the Syrians the weapons had to remain in the rooms. The police kept the hotel under observation until the moment of the raid.

The in itself fully logical visit by the Amsterdam Foreigners Police turns out to be a fortunate move. After the police had obtained information from the owner they could file a charge with the Ministry of Justice, who could then start prosecution.¹⁰

In 'Niet bang om te sterven' by journalist Siem Eikelenboom¹¹ we read that prior to the arrest of the four Syrians a tip-off was given to the police by the BVD. The BVD writes about this in an issue of 'PANORAMA'¹² dealing with the period from 1 April to 1 October 1975:

"Thanks to information supplied by the Service the Amsterdam police could arrest four Palestinians staying in the Netherlands with Syrian passports. According to their statements and papers found on them they intended to take hostage the passengers of the Russian carriage of the Warsaw Express at the moment that it was at Amersfoort railway station on its way to the Hook of Holland, on orders of 'al Saiqa', a Palestinian resistance organisation supported by the Syrian government. The intention was to force the Dutch government to make certain statements on Israel and the Palestinian issue."

THE PRO-SYRIAN 'AL SAIQA'

¹⁰Tweede Kamer, zitting 1976-1977, 14515, nr. 1 - Verslag van de vaste commissie voor de inlichtingen- en veiligheidsdiensten omtrent haar werkzaamheden. Vastgesteld 7 juni 1977

¹¹¹¹Niet bang om te sterven' pagina's 106-109 door Siem Eikelenboom

¹²¹²Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst PANORAMA pagina 13 - Arabisch en Japans Terrorisme <http://www.inlichtingendiensten.nl/panoramas/panorama-75apr.pdf>

'Al Saiqa' was founded shortly after the 1967 June War as the military arm of the 'Vanguards of the Popular War of Liberation'. Ideologically they followed the line of the Syrian Baath party. Because of this they can be considered as an instrument of the Syrian government and to a high degree dependent on the Syrian intelligence Service.

'Al Saiqa' was headed by Zuheir Mohsen, a high-ranking Syrian army officer¹³. Mohsen was also one of the leading people in the Palestinian Liberation Organisation of which 'al Saiqa' was part. He was responsible for military matters in the PLO Executive Committee. Taking into account the contacts of 'al Saiqa' with the Syrian intelligence service and considering Mohsen's high position it is likely that the Syrian authorities were aware of 'al Saiqa's' activities.

PREVIOUS 'AI SAIQA' ACTIVITIES IN EUROPE

On 30 August 1973 two Saiqa members, in the possession of weapons, were arrested at Beirut airport. The two intended to travel to Bratislava, the town where the train carrying Jewish emigrants to the Schönau (Austria) transit camp made a stop.

On 8 September 1973 two persons with Lebanese passports were stopped at the Czechoslovakian -Austrian border and sent back. They had started their journey in Bratislava.¹⁴

On 28 September two persons – possibly the same persons- returned from Bratislava by train. They had submachine guns and hand grenades and took three train travellers hostage. According to a pamphlet brought by one of the terrorists they were members of the organization 'Eagles of the Palestinian revolution'.

In the hostage taking of three Russian Jews in a train in Austria the terrorists demanded the closing of the transit station in Schönau. The Austrian government, headed by Bruno Kreisky (a Jew himself), gave in.

The Austrian chancellor Bruno Kreisky argued in the Austrian parliament on 23 October 1973 in favour of continuing giving Russia Jews travelling to Israel free and unrestricted passage. The chancellor said so during a special debate about the events on 28 and 29 September when two Arab terrorists took hostage four persons among whom three Russian Jews. The terrorists let the hostages go after Mr. Kreisky had promised them that the transit camp for Russian Jews , Schönau, would be closed. Mr. Kreisky emphasized in his speech that the terrorists had never demanded to obstruct unrestricted passage via Austria.

Since the hostage-taking of 28 and 29 September 1973 the reception of Jews in Schönau has continued as usual. At the moment the Austrian government is wondering in what way the Jews must be given passage without receiving them in Camp Schönau. The Schönau estate , since 1971 transit centre for more than 80,000 Jews emigrating to Israel through Austria, will close on Monday after the departure of the last group. The government of chancellor Kreisky decided so in exchange for the lives of the four hostages who had been taken prisoner by the Arab guerilla fighters.

¹³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zuheir_Mohsen

¹⁴<http://www.inlichtingendiensten.nl/jaarkwartaalmaand/1975-10c.pdf> BVD Maandoverzicht nr. 10 - 1975

After Austria the Netherlands was a logical new target for Al Saiqa because the country played a prominent role in the emigration of Russian Jews¹⁵. After the Soviet Union had severed diplomatic relations with Israel as a reaction on the Six-Day War of 1967 the Dutch consulate in Moscow, and as a consequence of this, the Foreign Office in The Hague, took care of the exit visas of this group.

TRAINING CENTRE IN MOSCOW

Just like the members of other Palestinian liberation organisations the Al Saiqa fighters were trained in the Soviet Union. In the training centre of the then-KGB tin Balishika, North-East of Moscow, they were taught military skills, but also the *finesses* of political indoctrination. At least two of the four terrorists who had been sent to the Netherlands, Amin Selamih and Joseph Assad Azar, had attended the indoctrination course¹⁶. After he had been arrested Selamih said: "During my training to become a resistance fighter I learned to handle all kinds of weapons."

JEWISH EXODUS FROM THE SOVIET UNION

In the seventies Al Saiqa carried out several attacks in Western Europe. Among other things these were meant to terminate emigration of Russian Jews to Israel. In 'Carlos: Portrait of a Terrorist' the British journalist and military historian Colin Smith refers to an article in the newspaper 'The Times' at the end of 1975 which states that the Soviet Union was closely involved in the prevented hostage-taking action by the four Syrians in the Netherlands, because Moscow wanted to stop the brain drain of Jews. However, the Netherlands has never expressed itself about this. But how else can it be explained that Mr Aleksandr Rylov of the Russian embassy in The Hague contacted the Dutch Ministry of Justice and offered his assistance in identifying the Syrians using their passport numbers. The Ministry did not react to this offer.

DUTCH CONSULATE IN MOSCOW

The analysis by 'The Times' was that if hijacking the train and hostage-taking of Russian Jews had been successful, the Soviet authorities could have exerted pressure on the Dutch government (after all, the Dutch embassy took care of Israeli interests in Moscow) to cease issuing visas to Soviet Jews who wished to emigrate. Of course, nobody had an interest in the fact that these trains were targets of terrorist attacks. That was exactly the reason why Bruno Kreisky had closed the transit camp Schönau in Austria.

Also the Dutch daily 'De Telegraaf' attempted a reflection on Moscow's role. On 30 October 1975 its headlines stated:

"Russians played a strange role in hostage plot"

¹⁵^qGeschiedenis van de Joden in Rusland https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geschiedenis_van_de_Joden_in_Rusland

¹⁶^qCarlos: Portrait of a Terrorist: In Pursuit of the Jackal, 1975-2011 by Colin Smith

The Russians have played a strange role in a recently foiled plot by four Syrians who wanted to attack the Russian carriage of a D-train here in the Netherlands, and who in the meantime have been sentenced.

It has turned out that the leader of the plot and one of the other terrorists received a comprehensive training in the Soviet Union. This concerns both the political training and weapons training.

As soon as the news of the arrest of the four Syrians became known, an official of the Russian embassy visited the Ministry of Justice to ask for the passport numbers of the arrested Syrians. He told that his embassy might be of assistance in identifying the four detainees.

The Dutch authorities did not comply with this request. It has not become clear what the real motives were behind this Russian offer for assistance. Also, it has remained a mystery why the Dutch government has wanted to keep the Russian role in both the training of the Syrian terrorists and the dénouement of the plot a secret. For the initiated it is certain that the Dutch government, if the attack, which was to take place at the Amersfoort railway station, had taken place, would have been greatly embarrassed vis-à-vis the Soviet government.

This is the case, the more so because it was not certain if the Syrians without using explosives could have entered the Russian sleeper. West of the "Iron Curtain" the Russian guard of the sleeping carriage usually keeps the entrance doors, including those to other carriages, locked, except for allowing passengers to get on or off the train. Assuming the most likely fact that the guard was not in the plot, he would probably not have opened the door, and a small explosive charge would have been necessary to forcefully open the door. For this purpose the Syrians had explosives with them.

All this would have put the Dutch government in a position that they should have expressed their regrets to the Soviet government, but in practice the Soviets always use such situations to gain advantage out of it; most probably our country would have been forced to limit providing consular facilities at our embassy in Moscow to emigrating Jews.

DID THE RUSSIANS WANT TO EMBARRASS THE HAGUE?

Indications are growing that the Russians must have known more of the plans of the four Syrians - in the meantime arrested and sentenced- who had wanted to take hostages in the Russian sleeping – carriage of the D-train from the Hook of Holland. It cannot be ruled out, in fact it is even most likely, that by means of these Syrians the Russians intended to force the Netherlands, being consular chargé d'affaires for Israel in Moscow to do certain things, possibly restricting or even ceasing the issue of entrance or transit visas for Jews wanting to emigrate to Israel from the Soviet-Union.

REACTION BY THE BVD (BINNENLANDSE VEILIGHEIDSDIENST)

The article in 'De Telegraaf' must have been bull's eye: the BVD's management reacted as if stung by a wasp. The BVD was of the opinion that there must be a leak.¹⁷

Whether there was a leak indeed and where this leak existed cannot easily be traced. In great haste the Information Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was contacted to decide on a common policy towards the press.

¹⁷AURORA - OCHTENDBESPREEKING op vrijdag 31 oktober 1975 <http://www.inlichtingendiensten.nl/aurora/aurora75-4.pdf>

THE DUTCH GOVERNMENT DOES NOT CAPITULATE.

The Netherlands had for a moment been in doubt what to do with the detainees, Justice Minister Dries van Agt admitted on Dutch television in 1975. Put them on trial or expel them? The four Syrians possessed Syrian passports (remarkable detail: two of the four passports listed “freedom fighter” as their professions). There was a chance that Damascus would deny that those passports were not forged. In that case the men could not be expelled.¹⁸

And why would one choose that road? Emprison the four in the Netherlands carried the risk that sympathisers would undertake action in the Netherlands with their brothers-in-arms as a their goal.

Therefore, Dries van Agt called a possible expulsion “yielding for terror that has not even become reality, but which one fears might come: it would be one step more towards the capitulation for terror.”¹⁹

TRIAL

Even before Palestinian terror had also struck in the Netherlands in September 1969, the relations between the BVD and the Israeli intelligence service were reaffirmed and strengthened. For instance, Mossad agents provided assistance in translating the statements that the four arrested terrorists made in court.²⁰

Josef Asad Azar, born in Lebanon, nicknamed Homcy, hinted in conversations with the BVD and the Mossad that he and his friend Amin Selamih entertained good contacts with ‘Al Saiqa’ and the PLO in Damascus, or that they were even part of the PLO’s intelligence service.

In the court room it became once again clear that the Syrians had indeed intended to use the confiscated weapons ‘in earnest’.

According to the court Selamih stated the following:

“On or about 22 August 1975 I arrived in Amsterdam by car from Italy together with Josef Asad Azar. In Italy we purchased weapons. At the orders of a sub-division of the PLO in Damascus – of which I am a member- we, Selamih and Azar, in cooperation with two fellow fighters, Abdullah Ataya and Abdul Satar Ammar, had to ask attention for the Palestinian cause and, if necessary, carry out a hostage-taking action.”²¹

During the morning meeting of the BVD, the Aurora meeting, on Friday 10 October 1975 it was mentioned that the director-general of the BVD, Andries Kuipers, had spent some time in Rome with the so-called European course. A BVD-employee directly involved in this prevented hostage-taking and who wants to remain anonymous, remembers that during this

¹⁸Ministerraad 5 september 1975 agendapunt 21a Nationaal Archief, bestanddeel 1598

¹⁹Televisie interview met Van Agt op 6 september 1975

²⁰‘Frontdienst’ De BVD in de koude oorlog, pagina 178-179 door Dick Engelen

²¹Arr. Rb Adam - 4e kamer dd 8 oktober 1975 rolnummers: 75.6787 t/m 75.7690.

course Andries Kuipers was told by an Italian colleague that the Soviet Union regularly supplied weapons to terrorist organizations in Italy, in which the Communist party (Partito Comunista Italiano /PCI was allegedly involved. In Modena (where al Saiqa had collected the weapons from an unidentified Arab) the PCI was the largest political party between 1946 and 1990, with 90% of the votes.

In *Near and Distant Neighbours*, Jonathan Haslam, professor of international relations at Cambridge University, mentions training given to the PLO by the Russians since September 1973. He also writes that the Russians, probably using the presence of the PFLP, supplied weapons to, among others, the Italian' Brigate Rosse' and also taught them how to make bombs.

Nevertheless, the court did not take into account the planned hostage-taking action in the final verdict because carrying out that action had not yet been initiated. For violation of the Firearms and Munitions Act the four were sentenced to one year imprisonment minus the time already spent in custody.²²

²²BVD (nr.: 1.254.696) PANORAMA periode 1 april 1975 - 1 oktober 1975

CONCLUSION

The prevented attack has shown a number of interesting things. First of all the involvement of the Soviet Union is noteworthy. Additionally, the lists of telephone numbers from the Israelis were decisive in discovering who in the Netherlands was regularly calling with Syria.

Of course the BVD targeted innocent citizens, who had nothing to do whatsoever with the plot. But the method was effective: four conspirators in ONE hotel could be localized and arrested.

Intelligence and security services usually do not mention successes. For reasons of security they cannot give names and players' numbers, let alone numbers of attacks that were prevented. The fact whether using far-reaching powers, such as metadata analysis and processing data of a large number of citizens, is really necessary remains an inherently complicated question. That question can never be answered easily, and the debate about this will always, under changing circumstances, be held again. Historians, however, can partly lift the blanket of secrecy about the past. Research into the effect of the work by security and intelligence services, into the tangible results of using intelligence means can be an indication of its use and necessity.