

Stopped Before the Act

Pre-emptive interdiction as the price test of a country's intelligence strength

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Summary

An intelligence service works in secret, so almost nothing it does can be checked from the outside. There is one exception. An attack that is carried out is public, it has a body count, and it cannot be classified away. That makes the gap between plots that were started and plots that were completed the only output of an intelligence system that a citizen can measure. This document argues that **arresting people before they act, in cases that hold up in court, is the correct price test of a country's intelligence strength**, and applies that test to the European data, to the Netherlands, and to the major failures of 9/11, 7 October and Manchester.

Key findings

- The Netherlands has one of the highest terrorism-arrest rates in the EU: 63 arrests in 2025, about 3.5 per million inhabitants, against 1.2 for France and 0.4 for Germany. It had one completed attack that year, carried out by a lone actor.
- Every attack completed on Dutch soil since 2019 (Utrecht 2019, Rotterdam 2024, Amsterdam 2025) was carried out by a single person. The one organised, Paris-style plot on record in this period, the Arnhem cell of 2018, was stopped with bomb vests and rifles already in use for practice.
- The Dutch record also has a cost that the price test cannot ignore. In 2025, 54% of concluded Dutch terrorism proceedings ended in acquittal on the terrorist charge, one of the highest rates in the EU. The Netherlands also reported **zero** “foiled attacks” to Europol. Its interventions happen at a stage earlier than a plot, so they do not appear in the one statistic built to measure interdiction.
- In the record of 9/11, 7 October and Manchester, the warning was there and was not acted on. Every official inquiry found failures of analysis, integration and imagination. None found a decision to let an attack happen. The price test does not need to settle that question: for the victims, a warning that was ignored and a warning that was deliberately passed over carry the same price, and the metric scores both as failure.
- Arrest counts alone reward over-arresting and manufactured plots. The metric only works if it counts **interdictions that hold**: arrests leading to conviction, in plots the state did not instigate.

- The document proposes an annual **Interdiction Scorecard** that every EU member state should publish. It would record plots stopped by stage, conviction rates, the share of cases involving state agents, and cost per interdiction that held.

1 Where the suspicion comes from, and what the record supports

The suspicion that attacks are allowed to happen does not come from nowhere. It comes from a repeated, documented pattern: after a major attack, an inquiry finds that the warning was already inside the system. Three cases set the pattern.

September 11, 2001

The 9/11 Commission titled its chapter on the months before the attack “The System Was Blinking Red”, quoting CIA director George Tenet. The 6 August 2001 President’s Daily Brief, “Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US”, was the 36th PDB item that year about Bin Ladin or al-Qaeda, and the first devoted to an attack inside the United States. In August 2001 the Minneapolis FBI field office had already detained Zacarias Moussaoui. The Commission concluded that if his links had been known in late August, the case “would almost certainly have received intense, high-level attention”. It described him as “a missed opportunity”.

October 7, 2023

Israel’s own investigations are unusually direct. Hamas’s attack plan, known as “Jericho Wall”, reached the Shin Bet twice, in 2018 and again in 2022. The IDF identified at least ten warning signs in the two years before the attack, and five signs of unusual Hamas activity on the night itself, and decided none of them meant an imminent attack. The external review panel appointed by the chief of staff concluded that the surprise “did not emerge from an absence of information” and that the intelligence available that night, “had it been professionally analyzed, could and should have led to a warning”.

Manchester Arena, 22 May 2017

The public inquiry chaired by Sir John Saunders found “a significant missed opportunity to take action that might have prevented the attack”. MI5 had received two pieces of intelligence on Salman Abedi in the months before, and did not fully appreciate their significance at the time. The Director General of MI5 apologised publicly: “MI5 exists to stop atrocities ... I am so sorry that MI5 did not prevent the attack.”

What the record does and does not show

Across all three cases the documented pattern is the same: **the information existed, and the system failed to turn it into action**. That is established by the states’ own inquiries. What the public record does not contain is evidence of a decision to let an attack go ahead: an order, a record of a stand-down, a witness to such a choice. Under this corpus’s rule that claims must be sourced or explicitly flagged, the claim that attacks were knowingly allowed cannot be made on the present evidence, and this document does not make it.

Price-test position. The price test judges conduct and outcomes, not stated intent, and that works in both directions. A service cannot excuse a failure by pointing to good intentions. A critic should not need to prove bad intentions to condemn the failure. Whether a warning

was ignored through incompetence or passed over by design, the bill arrives in the same currency, paid by the same victims. The metric proposed below is built to be **intent-blind**. It needs no proof of a conspiracy to hold a service accountable, and if a service were in fact letting attacks through, the metric would catch that too.

2 The metric: what counts as intelligence strength

Budgets, headcounts, surveillance powers and data volumes are inputs. They say what a service has, not what it achieves. The output is simple to state: **of the people who set out to kill for a political or ideological cause, how many were stopped before they could?** Because the count of stopped plots can be inflated and the count of completed attacks cannot be hidden, the test needs four parts.

Table 1 — The four components of the interdiction test

Component	Definition	What it guards against
Interdiction Ratio (IR)	Plots stopped ÷ (plots stopped + attacks failed + attacks completed)	The basic measure: the share of attack attempts that never reach their target.
Holding Rate (HR)	Share of terrorism arrests that end in conviction on a terrorist offence	Over-arresting: a service that arrests everyone looks strong on counts but fails in court.
Instigation Filter	Exclude plots where an informant or undercover agent proposed, led or supplied the plot	Manufactured plots: sting operations that create the threat they then “foil”.
Lethality Weight	Weight completed and stopped attacks by intended or actual casualties	Averaging away catastrophe: one mass-casualty attack that gets through outweighs many small arrests.

Stopping a plot only counts as strength when the arrest holds, the plot was real, and the scale is weighed.

Europol itself warns against reading too much into raw totals. Its 2026 report states that rising arrests “may reflect the effectiveness of law enforcement efforts, but simultaneously indicates that the terrorism threat in the EU cannot be assessed solely on the basis of the number of attacks and arrests”. The four-part test is an answer to that warning, not a way around it.

3 The European data, 2025

Europol’s EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT 2026), published in July 2026, covers 2025. It recorded 45 terrorist attacks in the EU: 22 completed, 3 failed and 20 foiled, with 486 arrests across 21 member states and 406 convictions against 99 acquittals in concluded proceedings. The table below sets the member states with the most activity side by side.

Table 2 — Attacks, arrests and court outcomes, selected EU member states, 2025

Member state	Completed	Failed	Foiled	Arrests	Arrests per million*	IR (Europol basis)	Acquittal rate
Austria	1	0	6	40	4.3	86%	19%
Belgium	0	0	2	44	3.7	100%	3%

Member state	Completed	Failed	Foiled	Arrests	Arrests per million*	IR (Europol basis)	Acquittal rate
Netherlands	1	0	0	63	3.5	0%	54%
Spain	1	0	0	117	2.4	0%	29%
France	3	0	11	84	1.2	79%	6%
Italy	10	1	0	48	0.8	0%	58%
Germany	4	0	0	37	0.4	0%	6%
EU total	22	3	20	486	1.1	44%	20%

Source: Europol, TE-SAT 2026 (attack, arrest and Eurojust conviction tables for 2025). *Per-million figures use rounded 2025 population estimates (AT 9.2m, BE 11.9m, NL 18.0m, ES 49.1m, FR 68.6m, IT 59.0m, DE 83.6m, EU 450m) and are indicative. Acquittal rate = acquittals on terrorist offences ÷ concluded proceedings. Italy's completed attacks were mostly anarchist arson against property, with no casualties.

Three things stand out.

1. **Arrest intensity.** Measured per inhabitant, the Netherlands arrests at roughly three times the French rate and eight times the German rate, and is in the same band as Austria and Belgium. Germany, with four completed jihadist attacks in 2025 including the Munich car-ramming that killed two, reported no foiled attacks at all.
2. **The Europol ratio does not see the Dutch model.** The Netherlands reported zero foiled attacks, so on Europol's own basis its Interdiction Ratio is 0%, the same as Germany's. That does not mean Dutch services stopped nothing. It means they intervene before an activity counts as an "attack plot": at the stage of propaganda, incitement, recruitment or training. The Europol case example for the Netherlands in 2025 is exactly that: fourteen young suspects arrested on 22 April 2025 for producing and spreading Islamic State propaganda, some of whom were urging others to commit attacks. The current statistic cannot tell an early-intervention system apart from one that does nothing.
3. **The Holding Rate splits the high-arrest countries.** Belgium (3% acquittals) and France (6%) arrest and convict. The Netherlands (54%) and Italy (58%) arrest, and then lose in court on the terrorist charge more often than they win. Eurojust notes that some people acquitted of the terrorist offence are convicted of other crimes, such as weapons offences, so an acquittal is not always a wrongful arrest. Even so, a service that cannot make its terrorism case stand in more than half of concluded proceedings is paying a real price for its early-arrest model.

4 The Dutch record, tested

Table 3 — Netherlands: arrests, completed attacks and concluded proceedings, 2023–2025

Year	Terrorism arrests	Completed attacks	Concluded proceedings
2023	28	0	46
2024	40	1 — Rotterdam, Erasmusbrug	51
2025	63	1 — Amsterdam, near the Dam	52 (24 convictions, 28 acquittals)

Sources: Europol TE-SAT 2026, annex tables (arrests by type and state, 2023–2025; Eurojust proceedings 2023–2025). Arrests summed across all ideological categories.

What supports the claim

- **Arrests are high and rising:** 28, then 40, then 63 in three years. Jihadist-related arrests alone more than doubled, from 18 to 40.
- **Completed attacks are rare, and all were lone actors.** The government's letter presenting the NCTV threat assessment (Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland) of December 2024 stated that, if the Rotterdam stabbing proved to be terrorism, it would be the first terrorist attack in the Netherlands since the Utrecht tram shooting of 2019, in which four people were killed. It did prove to be terrorism. On 19 September 2024 a 23-year-old man killed a 32-year-old and seriously injured a second victim near the Erasmusbrug. The court found terrorist intent proven but held him not accountable because of a severe psychosis, and ordered TBS (compulsory psychiatric detention). On 27 March 2025 a 30-year-old Ukrainian national stabbed five people near the Dam in Amsterdam. The prosecution charged five attempted murders with terrorist intent. Both attackers acted alone.
- **The one organised mass-casualty plot was stopped.** In September 2018 the Arnhem cell was arrested at a holiday park in Weert, where members were trying on bomb vests and practising with deactivated Kalashnikovs in the presence of police infiltrators. The court found a plan for a bloody attack on a large event, which the prosecution called an attack on the scale of Paris, and imposed sentences of 10 to 17 years.
- **The budget is modest.** The AIVD's total budget for 2026 is €544 million (Open Jaarplanbrief AIVD 2026). That covers all of its tasks, including state threats and cyber, not only counterterrorism: roughly €30 per inhabitant.

What the price test finds against it

- **Acquittals.** In 2025 more than half of concluded Dutch terrorism proceedings ended in acquittal on the terrorist offence. Measured by what holds in court, the Dutch record is weaker than its arrest totals suggest.
- **Undercover involvement.** In the Arnhem case the main suspect said he had been “provoked and brainwashed” by AIVD undercover agents. The court rejected the entrapment defence. That is the correct procedure, but it shows that the instigation filter has to be applied to Dutch cases as well, not only to American ones.
- **Base rate.** A low number of completed attacks may partly reflect how often a country is targeted, not only how well it defends. France has long been a primary target of jihadist propaganda. Whether the Netherlands faces a comparable threat intensity cannot be settled from arrest data, which itself partly depends on how hard a service looks. *This is flagged as an open question, not a finding.*
- **Budget comparison.** The claim that the Netherlands does this “on a much lower budget than the large nations” is plausible in absolute terms but cannot be proven like-for-like. The United Kingdom, France and the United States do not publish counterterrorism spending per service in a comparable form. That absence is itself a price-test finding: a cost-per-interdiction figure cannot be calculated for any major power from public data.

Verdict on the Dutch claim. Partly confirmed. The Netherlands intervenes early and often, organised plots have not got through, and completed attacks since 2019 have all been lone-actor stabbings or shootings. The claim that it stops “almost all plots” cannot be demonstrated in the terms Europol uses, and the 54% acquittal rate is the price of the model. A strong system on arrests. An unproven system on arrests that hold.

5 How the metric can be gamed, and why that is a reason to use it properly

Any metric that rewards arrests invites a service to produce arrests. The clearest documented case is the United States after 2001. The 2014 report by Human Rights Watch and Columbia Law School, *Illusion of Justice*, found that nearly half of the more than 500 federal counterterrorism convictions it considered came from informant-based cases, and that in almost 30% of cases the informant played an active role in the plot itself. It concluded that, with four exceptions, the high-profile domestic plots of the preceding decade were FBI sting operations. In one case the FBI gave a man with evident mental-health problems fake weapons and funding for a plan to attack the Pentagon and the Capitol.

A service that manufactures a plot and then “foils” it adds nothing to public safety. It has turned a vulnerable person into a statistic, often at great human cost. That is why the Instigation Filter and the Holding Rate are part of the test rather than optional additions. Applied properly, the metric does not reward the service that arrests the most. It rewards **the service that stops real attackers, with evidence a court accepts, before they strike.**

6 The failures, measured the same way

Run through the interdiction test, the three cases from Section 1 produce one verdict each.

Table 4 — Major attacks scored on the interdiction test

Case	Warning in the system (documented)	What happened to it	Test verdict
9/11 (US, 2001)	PDB of 6 Aug 2001; Phoenix memo; Moussaoui detained in August	Not integrated across CIA and FBI; Moussaoui not linked to al-Qaeda in time	Fail — mass casualty
Manchester (UK, 2017)	Two pieces of intelligence on Abedi in the months before	Significance not appreciated; action too slow	Fail — MI5 accepted
7 October (Israel, 2023)	“Jericho Wall” plan received in 2018 and 2022; at least ten warning signs; five on the night	Plan judged unrealistic; alert level not raised	Fail — systemic
Arnhem cell (NL, 2018)	Months of observation, infiltration	Arrested during rehearsal with weapons	Pass — held on appeal

Sources: 9/11 Commission Report ch. 8; Manchester Arena Inquiry vol. 3 (2023); IDF and Shin Bet investigations (2025); Rechtbank Rotterdam (2020) and appeal (2022).

The lesson running across the failures is not a shortage of data. In each case the warning was collected and then lost somewhere between collection, analysis and action. The United States and Israel run some of the largest and best-funded intelligence systems in the world. If size and money bought safety, these would be the safest countries. The evidence points instead to

integration, a willingness to question the prevailing assessment, and a readiness to act on incomplete information as the qualities that decide the outcome.

The difference in scale matters for fairness. Al-Qaeda's 9/11 operation and Hamas's military assault on 7 October were organisational threats of a size the Netherlands has not faced. A Dutch service that stops a six-man cell has not been tested against a state-sponsored army. The comparison supports a narrower conclusion, but a firm one: **what a service does with the warnings it already holds matters more than its budget.**

7 Why a smaller system might do more with less: hypotheses

The following explanations are offered as hypotheses to be tested, not as established findings. Each points to a mechanism that could be checked against evidence.

- **Short lines.** In a small country, the distance between an intelligence officer, a prosecutor and a local police officer is short. The Dutch CT Infobox, a joint unit in which intelligence, police, prosecution and other agencies pool information on individuals, is designed to prevent exactly the collection-to-action gap that sank 9/11 and 7 October.
- **Early legal thresholds.** Dutch criminal law penalises preparation, training and recruitment for terrorism. That makes it possible to arrest at a stage where other systems would still be watching. The same feature helps explain the high acquittal rate: the earlier the arrest, the harder it is to prove intent.
- **Local case management.** Municipal multi-agency case tables allow worrying individuals to be approached through care, supervision or disruption without waiting for a criminal case.
- **Fewer stings.** If Dutch services rely less than the FBI on informant-led plots, a larger share of their arrests would involve real threats. This is testable if case files are opened to researchers.

If these hypotheses hold, the Dutch lesson for larger states is not “spend less”. It is “shorten the path between the warning and the action, and accept that you will sometimes arrest early and lose in court”. Whether that trade-off is acceptable is a political choice. It should be made openly, with the numbers on the table.

8 Proposal: an annual Interdiction Scorecard

At present no government publishes the data needed to run the full test. The following six items, published annually by each member state and aggregated by Europol in the TE-SAT, would make it possible. None of them requires disclosing sources or methods.

1. **Plots disrupted, by stage:** intent/propaganda, preparation, acquisition of weapons or materials, imminent. This would make early-intervention systems like the Dutch one visible in the statistics.
2. **Completed and failed attacks,** with casualties.
3. **Holding Rate:** convictions on terrorist offences per terrorism arrest, tracked by arrest cohort over the years it takes to conclude cases.

4. **Instigation share:** the proportion of disrupted plots in which an informant or undercover officer played an active role.
5. **Prior-knowledge flag:** for every completed attack, whether the perpetrator was known to the services beforehand, and whether a post-attack review was carried out and published.
6. **Cost per held interdiction:** counterterrorism spending divided by interdictions that ended in conviction.

Item 5 answers the suspicion at the root of this document directly. If a country's attackers are repeatedly found to have been "known to the services", the public will see it year after year, whatever the explanation. That is the price test institutionalised: judge the service by the record, and make the record public.

9 Conclusion

In politics it is not about what you say, it is about what you do. In intelligence it is not about how many people you watch, how much data you hold or how large your budget is. It is about how many attackers you stop before they act, in cases that stand up in court, without inventing the threat yourself.

On that test, the great failures of the last quarter-century share one pattern: the warning was in the building. Whether that reflects incompetence or something worse is a question the public record cannot yet answer, and the test does not need it answered to deliver a verdict. The Netherlands scores well on intervening early and on keeping organised plots from reaching their targets. It scores poorly on making its cases hold. The strongest intelligence system is not the one with the most arrests. It is the one whose arrests are real, whose convictions hold, and whose attackers were not already on a list.

Sources

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Open-source document. Figures are sourced to the documents listed; items marked as hypotheses or open questions are not established findings.