



# JIHADIST TERRORISM IN JIHADISM IN BELGIUM EUROPE



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and Guy Van Vlierden



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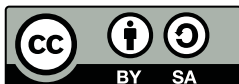
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# **JIHADISM IN BELGIUM**



**A country that has suffered  
badly and still needs to be vigilant**

Pieter Van Ostaeyen  
and Guy Van Vlierden

# AT A GLANCE



In 2020, it became clear that the danger emanating from terror organizations like the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda has not been eliminated. Instead, there is talk of a new outbreak of jihadist terrorism. This paper is part of the “Jihadist Terrorism in Europe” series, in which renowned experts analyze the current state of the jihadist threat in various countries, as well as the related counter-terrorism strategies and the political debates.

- › In this paper, the authors, Guy Van Vlierden and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, look at Belgium as one of Europe’s hardest hit countries in the current wave of jihadist terrorism.
- › In 2014, Belgium suffered the first-ever attack by the so-called Islamic State on Western soil, and in 2016 one of the deadliest, with the bombings at the Brussels Airport and one of its metro stations.
- › Comparing the recent events with Belgium’s terrorist history, and looking at the extent of Belgium’s foreign terrorist fighters phenomenon, the authors demonstrate how the Syrian war has placed Belgium in its toughest chapter ever.
- › A detailed overview of all jihadist attacks and thwarted plots since 2017, when the Islamic State’s caliphate began to crumble, seems to indicate that the jihadist threat in Belgium has passed its peak.
- › However, the authors argue that this threat is by no means over. Looking at the whole of Western Europe, there was again a slight increase in 2020, both in the number of incidents and in the number of casualties.
- › With 645 jihadists in the official Common Database of Belgian security services, the number of potential terrorists remains high for a country with less than twelve million inhabitants.
- › It is important to bear in mind that small-scale attacks with a relatively low number of victims can contribute disproportionately to a further polarization after the terror that Belgium has experienced.
- › The authors believe that Belgium is reasonably well armed against future terrorism in terms of competence within its security services and its legal framework. However, the trial of terror suspects is often still a weak link.



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Belgium has suffered badly from the wave of terrorism that resulted from the Syrian war, and the associated phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters. The 32 dead in the March 22, 2016 attacks catapulted the country to third place in the European ranking of most affected countries in the last decade – only preceded by France and the United Kingdom. In this contribution, we show that Syria-related jihadism has placed Belgium in the toughest chapter in all of its terrorist history. We briefly outline the preceding history, and then zoom in on the consequences that jihadism has had in Belgium over the past three and a half years – since the so-called Islamic State's caliphate began to crumble in 2017. We identify some strengths and weaknesses of Belgium's first line of response, and conclude that the threat of Jihadism has changed in the meantime, but not necessarily diminished and certainly did not disappear.



*A commemoration after the terror attacks on Brussels Airport and the Maelbeek metro station on March 22, 2016*

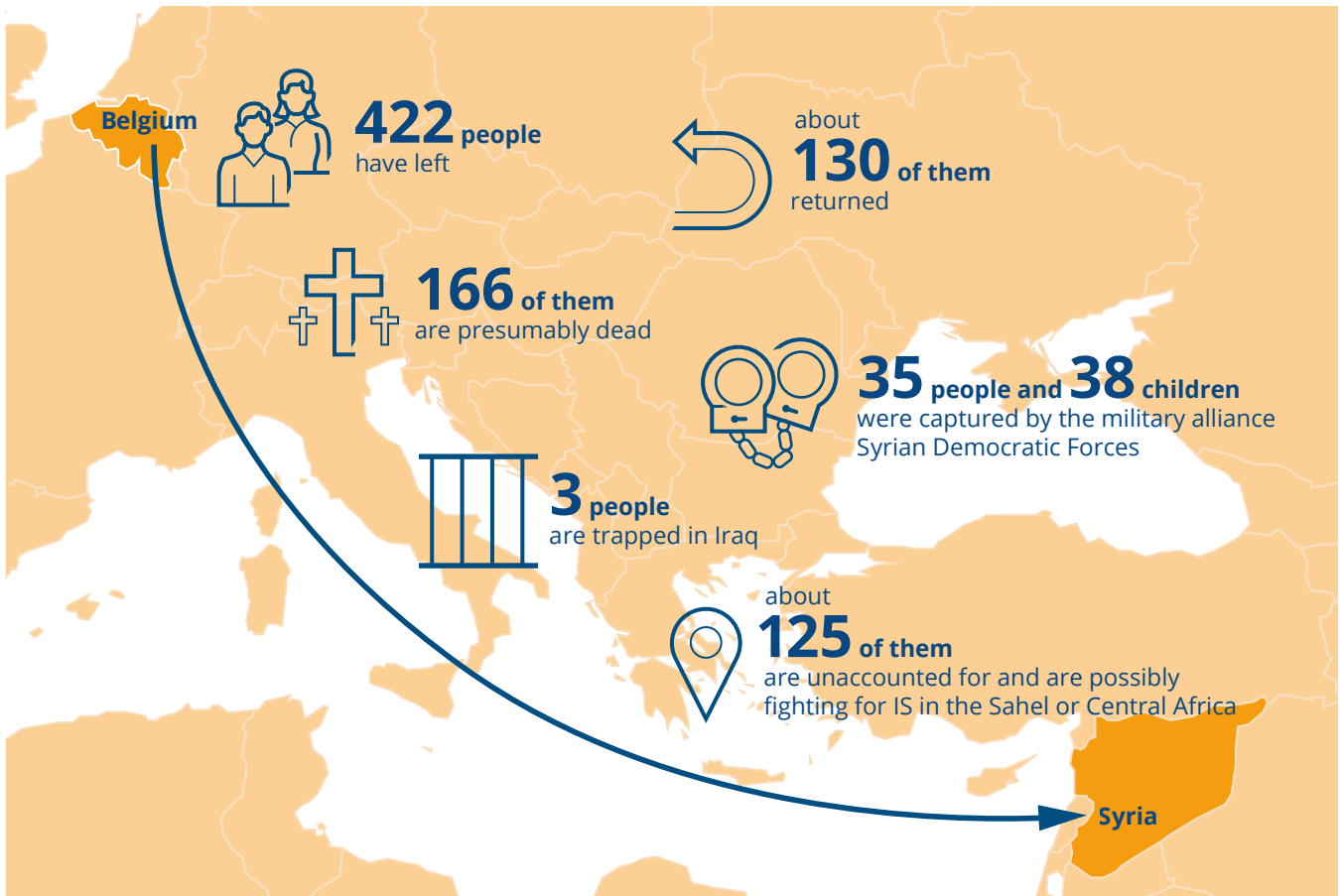
# 1. BELGIUM AND ITS FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS PHENOMENON

Early September 2012, the then 21 year old Houssien Elouassaki left his hometown of Vilvoorde, north of the Belgian capital, Brussels, for Syria. Not knowing exactly how to get in, he travelled to southern Turkey and eventually crossed the border to Syria. Shortly after he entered Syria, he joined Majlis Shurat al-Mujahidin, a semi-independent group of jihadis operating in northwestern Syria. After successfully recruiting dozens of Belgian and Dutch fighters for the group, he was rewarded by the group's leader, Abu Atheer, with the leadership of all foreign fighters joining the group.<sup>1</sup>

Elouassaki was one of the very first men from Belgium to join the Syrian jihad, but certainly not the last one. Over the course of the years, 422 foreign terrorist fighters left Belgium to join the fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad.<sup>2</sup> In the first few years of the Syrian civil war, the majority of the Belgian fighters departed from the axis Antwerp-Vilvoorde-Brussels – most of them came from three particular networks: Shariah4Belgium, Resto du Tawheed and the network usually named after its leader, the Belgian-Moroccan veteran of jihad Khalid Zerkani.

In Antwerp and Vilvoorde, the main recruiting group was Shariah4Belgium, while in Brussels Resto du Tawheed and the Zerkani network dominated the scene. Over the course of the years, at least 80 individuals affiliated with Shariah4Belgium joined a jihadist group in Syria or Iraq, while Resto du Tawheed and the Zerkani network jointly recruited at least another 100 people.<sup>3</sup> There was already an overlap at the recruitment level, and after arriving in Syria, recruits from those different networks often ended up with the same militias. At first, it was Majlis Shurat al-Mujahidin, as described above.

Illustration 1: Foreign Terrorist Fighters – from Belgium to Syria





When Abu Atheer pledged his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in April 2013, the majority of the Belgian fighters followed his lead and joined what would become the Islamic State. Remarkable is that some refused and joined al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat an-Nusra; hereby the ranks of the Belgian fighters in Syria got split. An important faction of the Belgian fighters subsequently joined Katiba al-Battar al-Libi, a small subdivision of the Islamic State. It is notable that this branch, although it only existed over a short period of time, somehow managed to recruit almost every single member of the Islamic State cells that later attacked Paris (November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016).

In March 2019, the Islamic State's territorial existence ended with an massive air offensive by coalition forces on the last stronghold in the Syrian-Iraqi border town of Baghuz. Hundreds, if not thousands, of IS men, women and children were literally bombed to obliteration. As for the Belgians, we know that at least 14 men, 21 women and 38 children were captured by the Kurdish-led militia Syrian Democratic Forces<sup>4</sup> – while another two Belgian men and a man of French nationality departing from Belgium were detained in Iraq.

According to the latest figures, about 130 foreign terrorist fighters have returned to Belgium, while 166 of about 290 remaining at place are thought to have died.<sup>5</sup> Meaning that about 125 are unaccounted for. Chances that they have migrated to other theatres of war do exist, since the Islamic State is known to have transported fighters from Syria and Iraq, through Libya or Egypt, into the Sahel or Middle Africa. At this point, there is no evidence of that regarding any Belgian fighters, but it can't be ruled out.

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- 1 For a much more detailed account of Houssien Elouassaki's history and that of Belgian foreign terrorist fighters in the Syrian-Iraqi conflict, please see Pieter Van Ostaeyen/Guy Van Vlierden: The Role of Belgian Fighters in the Jihadification of the Syrian War. From plotting early in 2011 to the Paris and Brussels attacks. European Foundation for Democracy/Counter Extremism Project 2017. <https://europeandemocracy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/The-Role-of-Belgian-Fighters-in-the-Jihadification-of-the-Syrian-War.pdf> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
  - 2 Official figure at the end of 2018, while the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) confirmed to the authors in February 2021 that no new departures have been reported since 2018.
  - 3 Figures drawn from the database of Belgian foreign terrorist fighters in the Syrian-Iraqi conflict that the authors manage since 2014.
  - 4 Thomas Renard/Rik Coolsaet: From bad to worse: The fate of European foreign fighters and families detained in Syria, one year after the Turkish offensive. Egmont Institute Security Policy Brief No. 130, October 2020. [https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2020/10/SPB130\\_final.pdf?type=pdf](https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2020/10/SPB130_final.pdf?type=pdf) (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
  - 5 Figures communicated to the authors by the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) in February 2021.

## 2.

# AN OVERVIEW OF RECENT TERRORIST ATTACKS AND PLOTS

Belgium had experienced terrorist attacks long before the recent wave of jihadist violence. The Global Terrorism Database lists 141 incidents on Belgian soil from 1970 to 2010, including 19 deadly attacks. Lethal violence was perpetrated by a variety of actors, including Palestinian groups, Northern Irish nationalists, Armenian activists and home-grown extremists from both the left and the right.<sup>6</sup> Altogether, 33 people were killed and 224 injured in these four decades preceding the Syrian war.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast with neighbouring France, where deadly jihadist violence reared its head already in the 1990s, Belgium was spared from this kind of attacks until the start of the war in 2011. The very first casualty of jihadist violence on Belgian soil was Abdallah Dadou, imam of the largest Shia mosque in Brussels. He died on March 12, 2012 after an assailant set fire to the building. Perpetrator Rachid El Boukhari reportedly shouted that he wanted to avenge the fate of his Sunni co-religionists in Syria.<sup>8</sup>

Although a terrorist motive was discarded at his trial, later in prison El Boukhari no longer made it a secret that he was an ardent supporter of al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden.<sup>9</sup> Two years later, Belgium was also the stage for the very first attack by the Islamic State on European soil: the shooting perpetrated on May 24, 2014 in the Brussels Jewish Museum by French national Mehdi Nemmouche. Three people died on the spot, while a fourth succumbed to his injuries on June 6.<sup>10</sup>



From Nemmouche's attack until the fall of the Islamic State's Syrian capital al-Raqqa, in October 2017, Belgium suffered four more attacks. All of them were claimed by IS. The most lethal incident were the nearly simultaneous bombings at Brussels Airport and the Maelbeek metro station on March 22, 2016. Altogether, 42 people were killed (including six perpetrators) and 344 injured by jihadist attacks in Belgium from May 2014 to October 2017. In that same period, 18 terrorist plots linked to the Islamic State were disrupted in Belgium,<sup>11</sup> and one suspected plot that was linked to al-Qaeda.<sup>12</sup>



*Police operation after the terror attack on the Jewish Museum of Belgium, May 24, 2014*

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- 6 For an in-depth look into the most important chapters of Belgium's terrorist past, and a list of incidents starting in 1950, see: Paul Ponsaers: *Terrorisme in België. Polariserend en politiek geweld*. Oud Turnhout/'s-Hertogenbosch: Gompel & Svacina, 2020.
  - 7 National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), Global Terrorism Database. Available online at <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.
  - 8 Imam dies in mosque arson attack in Belgian capital. *BBC News*, 13.3.2012. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17346927> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
  - 9 Exclusif: Rachid El Boukhari fan de Ben Laden et du djihad. *Sudinfo*, 5.1.2015. <https://www.sudinfo.be/art/1183273/article/2015-01-05/exclusif-rachid-el-boukhari-fan-de-ben-laden-et-du-djihad> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
  - 10 Jean-Charles Brisard/Kevin Jackson: The Islamic State's External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus. In: *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 9, Issue 11, November/December 2016, p. 8–15. <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-islamic-states-external-operations-and-the-french-belgian-nexus/> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
  - 11 Guy Van Vlierden/Jon Lewis/Don Ressler: Beyond the Caliphate: Islamic State Activity outside the Group's defined Wilayat – Belgium. Combating Terrorism Center, 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/CTC-Beyond-the-Caliphate-Belgium.pdf> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
  - 12 At the time of their arrest in Brussels in August 2014, the Turkish-born Dutch citizen Adil Uyarer and his spouse Zaineb Khan were suspected of conspiring to stage an attack against the European Commission headquarters in the Brussels Berlaymont building, together with acquaintances in Syria. An investigation by the authors of their social media presence demonstrated links with the so-called Khorasan Group, a Syria-based entity within al-Qaeda allegedly coordinating attacks in the West. In January 2016, Uyarer and three co-defendants were convicted for terrorist offenses, but the suspicion that they were planning an attack could not be sufficiently proven. See: Van Ostaeyen/Van Vlierden: The Role of Belgian Fighters in the Jihadification of the Syrian War.

# 3. HOW SYRIA HAS INFLUENCED BELGIUM'S TERRORIST HISTORY

Of all the terrorist violence that Belgium has suffered in the last half century, jihadism was the most lethal. Based on the data of the Global Terrorism Database<sup>13</sup>, we counted ten jihadist attacks with a total number of 47 deaths, versus 147 other attacks with 36 deaths, perpetrators included.<sup>14</sup> Looking at their distribution over time, it becomes clear that the worst damage caused by terrorism in Belgium is closely related to the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and the emergence of the Islamic State.

Since October 2017, Belgium has suffered one or two completed jihadist attacks – depending on the source, and which definition it uses. An incident listed in the Global Terrorism Database, but not in Europol's annual TE-SAT reports, is the stabbing that occurred in Brussels on November 20, 2018. Perpetrator Issam Thouli (33) attacked a policeman with a knife, which resulted in injuring both. Thouli reportedly shouted "Allahu akbar",<sup>15</sup> but was previously not known for radicalism. He had been in psychiatric detention after an assassination attempt in 2014 – and while investigators did not consider his terrorist motive to be proven, he was again entrusted to psychiatry.<sup>16</sup>

There is much less doubt, if any, about the nature of what happened in the city of Liège earlier that year. Two female police officers and a civilian were killed on May 29, 2018. A lone assailant stabbed the officers with a knife, grabbed their firearms and shot dead a 22 year old student in a car waiting at a traffic light. Then he attempted to enter a school, but was persuaded by a maintenance worker to leave the scene. Moments later, the attacker was shot dead by the police.<sup>17</sup>

Illustration 1: Number of jihadist and other attacks in Belgium

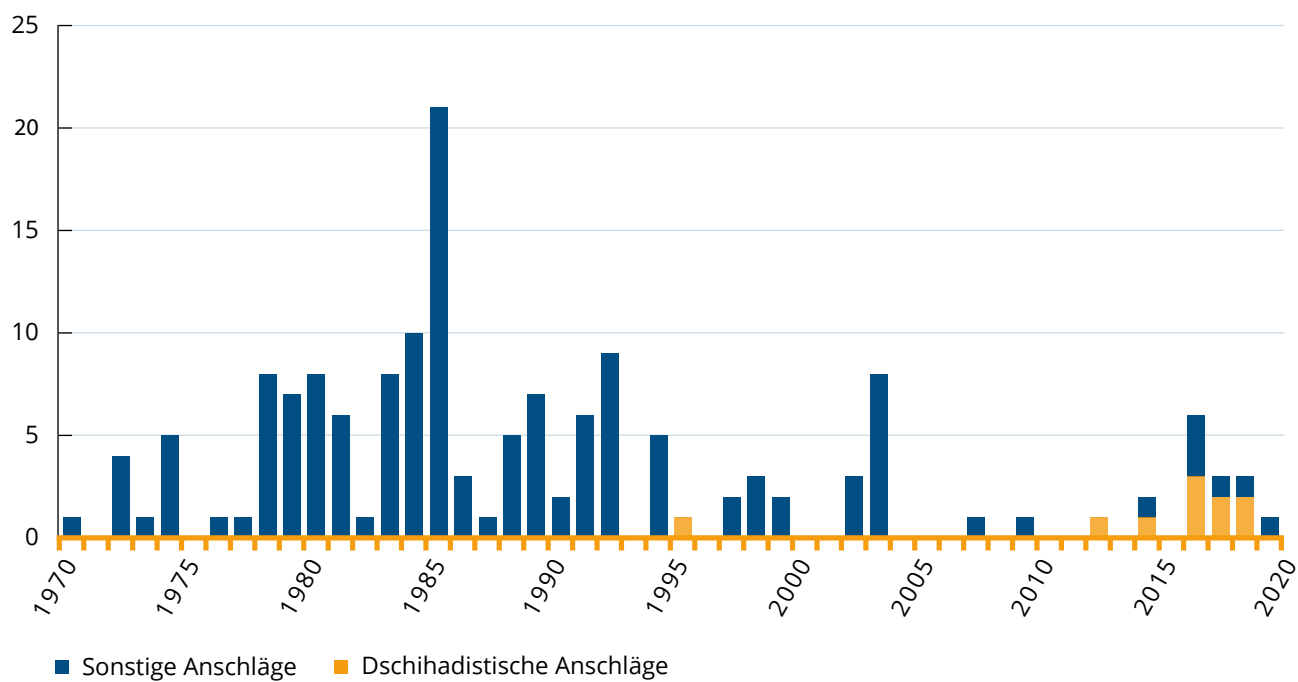
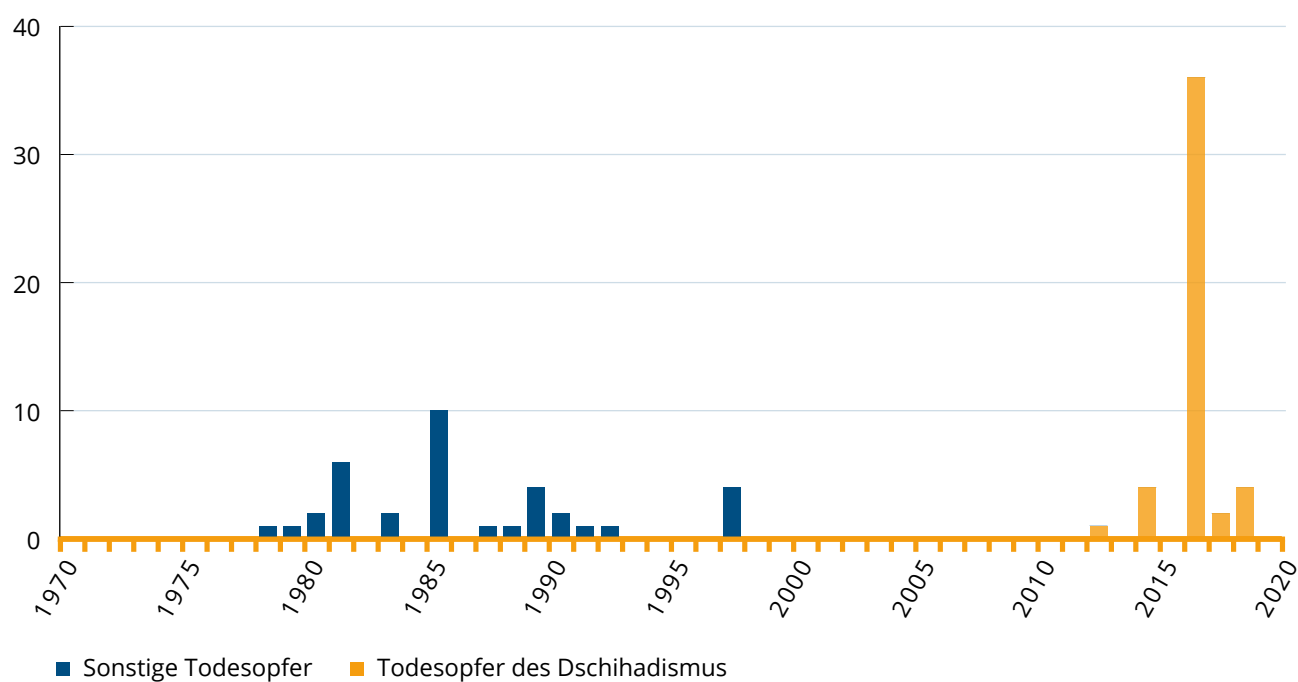


Illustration 2: Deaths by jihadist and other attacks in Belgium



The perpetrator was the 31 year old Benjamin Herman. Hailing from the town of Rochefort, he had accumulated convictions for drugdealing, assault and robbery. At the time of the attack, he was on a 36 hour prison furlough. It is likely that he converted to Islam as a detainee, and almost sure that he was radicalized behind bars. According to a media report, pointing at notorious terrorists such as Nizar Trabelsi that Herman would have met in jail, his radicalization already started in 2014.<sup>18</sup> But official sources state that it wasn't until 2017, that worrisome signs began to emerge.

Four days prior to the attack, the prison direction in Marche-en-Famenne had drafted a report in which Herman was labelled as the "errand boy" of a group of highly radicalized inmates. One of them is Yassine Dibi, a career criminal who himself was radicalized in jail. He was a friend of the March 2016 Brussels attack perpetrator Khalid El Bakraoui, with whom he had committed ordinary crimes before their radicalization. Other members of the group reportedly were Mohamed Bakkali and Jamal Eddine Ouali, both in pre-trial detention at that time as suspected logisticians of the Islamic State's November 2015 Paris and March 2016 Brussels attacks.<sup>19</sup>

According to Belgian public television RTBF, Herman and a co-detainee – the evenly converted and radicalized Joey Leclerc – had been approaching other inmates to obtain firearms shortly before the attack. The fact that Leclerc had requested a prison furlough at the very same time as Herman – which was denied to him<sup>20</sup> – is seen as an indication that they may have planned violent acts together.<sup>21</sup> But in March 2021, the investigation was closed without proof of a conspiracy of any kind.<sup>22</sup>

With what we know for sure, we consider Herman's attack as inspired by the Islamic State – in contrast to an attack directed or remotely controlled by IS.<sup>23</sup> It was far from complicated, and likely not prepared very long in advance. The attack was claimed by the Islamic State's Amaq News Agency as being perpetrated by a "soldier of the caliphate", but in spite of Herman's well-established connections with other Islamic State sympathizers, no proof of an operational link between Herman and the terrorist organization emerged.

In addition to these attacks, ten apparent plots related to Belgium were foiled since October 2017. Belgian security services do not tally thwarted attacks, at least not officially<sup>24</sup> – and in Europol's TE-SAT reports,<sup>25</sup> they are only listed for Belgium if the suspect was explicitly convicted of planning an attack. Knowing, however, that the Belgian judiciary often refrains from pressing that charge by lack of clear proof, resorting to a more general qualification such as participation in a terrorist group, we think it is relevant to mention all cases in which the suspicion of a plot was raised. Unless a terrorist context has since been completely ruled out.

We propose to distinguish between "confirmed plots" if a suspect was explicitly convicted of planning a terrorist attack, and "suspected plots" if such plans were publicly mentioned by relevant authorities without a subsequent explicit conviction. By doing so, we only count one confirmed plot thwarted on Belgian soil since October 2017: the plan to commit a vehicle-ramming attack against the U.S. embassy in Brussels, for which 23 year old convert Matthew Govaert was sentenced to seven years in jail on January 5, 2021.



Govaert was arrested on June 22, 2019 in the Brussels municipality of Forest. U.S. intelligence had warned its Belgian counterparts of alarming messages on Telegram. The investigation learned that Govaert had recorded a pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State already, and conducted several reconnaissance missions. On pictures of the embassy found on his telephone, security features were indicated by arrows, and he was also trying to purchase firearms, already negotiating the price.<sup>26</sup>

To Belgian security services, Govaert – alias Ibrahim Abu Abdullah – had been known since 2015, as he was listed as a candidate of foreign terrorist fighter. At that time, he was in touch with Firqatul Ghuraba, an independent jihadist militia in Syria.<sup>27</sup> It is led by the French-Senegalese Omar “Omsen” Diaby, and mainly consists of French speaking European jihadists.<sup>28</sup> While it is not clear if he ever tried to leave, it is fairly safe to say that Govaert belonged to the category of “wannabe travellers” for whom the failure of their departure may have added to their determination for violence at home.

A second plot, that can be considered as being confirmed, was foiled in June 2018 in Kosovo, in which the suspects had significant links to Belgium. The principal of five suspects, 29 year old Bujar Behrami, is a Belgian citizen of Kosovar descent. He was convicted to ten years in jail for planning attacks against two clubs and a church in Kosovo. A second suspect, 29 year old Gramos Shabani, also a Belgian citizen, was said to have planned a suicide bombing in Belgium or France. At first instance, he was sentenced to seven years, but he appealed and the final verdict was not known to date.<sup>29</sup>

The terrorist cell to which Behrami and Shabani belonged, appeared to have been remotely controlled from within Syria, where Behrami was in touch with an Islamic State operative through Telegram. Behrami already had been arrested in 2014 on the suspicion of plotting violent acts against the Kosovar police, and he was also named in a 2016 plot to attack a soccer game between the national teams of Kosovo and Israel.<sup>30</sup> Shabani for his part was known already as a jihadist since he was caught on his way to Syria in August 2014 at the airport of the Kosovar capital Pristina, and sent back to Belgium.<sup>31</sup>

In October and December 2017, two Belgian citizens of Iraqi descent were arrested in Leuven and Tienen on suspicion of plotting an Islamic State inspired attack. Brothers Ahmed (32) and Ayham Al Shammari (43) had conducted research into making explosives and actively tried to obtain firearms. During one of their conversations, Ahmed told: “When I’m on my way to do such things, God willing, no one will know. Only the one who gets into my car should know it, since it will be a deadly mission.” At their trial in December 2019, both were acquitted of planning terrorist attacks, however, only convicted of participation in a terrorist group and inciting violence. Ahmed was sentenced to jail for four years, and Ayham to 40 months.<sup>32</sup>

In April 2018, the 25 year old Semir Mujovic, a Belgian citizen of Serbian descent, was arrested in Zonhoven. Intercepted conversations linked him to a plot for an attack against a notorious sex club in the Dutch capital of Amsterdam. He declared explicitly that he was prepared to die, but the prosecution admitted that his plans were premature, and in January 2019 he was sentenced to jail for five years merely for participating in the activities of a terrorist group. In 2017, he had been sentenced to three years already for spreading Islamic State propaganda.<sup>33</sup>



In April 2019, the 24 year old Belgian convert Jimmy Ketels was arrested in Wavre at the behest of French security services. They suspected him of imminent terrorist plans, likely a stabbing attack. Possible targets included the metro in Paris and a shopping centre in Louvain-La-Neuve near Wavre. Until the time of writing this paper, the outcome of his case was not publicly known. That he was released on parole in the meantime, however, suggests that he is no longer considered a major threat.<sup>34</sup>

In October 2020, police apprehended two minors in Belgium's German-speaking East Cantons, reportedly acting on information from a foreign intelligence service. The suspects were not named due to their young age, but according to most media coverage they were 16 and 17 years old, living in Kelmis and Eupen, and of Chechen and Kosovar descent.<sup>35</sup> Their plot allegedly consisted in raiding a police station armed with knives. They had recorded a pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State, and testifying to the perceived threat is the fact that they were arrested a day after the investigation had started. Both were locked up in a youth institution awaiting the outcome.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to this latest case, four more minors were arrested in January and February 2021, Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne revealed at the 5th anniversary of the March 2016 Brussels attacks. They appeared to plot violent acts separately, seemingly encouraged by contacts on closed messaging channels. Although their planning was deemed to be premature, and no targets were identified, one of them had already obtained a machete, and a second was looking for knives. The youngest was 16 years old, and the oldest 18.<sup>37</sup> They were described as "Belgian youngsters with different backgrounds, including converts, coming from families not previously known for radicalism."<sup>38</sup> All four were detained in a juvenile institution.

- 13 National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), Global Terrorism Database. Available online at <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.
- 14 Four attacks, in which five victims were killed, have been attributed to the alleged Belgian-Moroccan jihadist Abdelkader Belliraj. However, because doubts remain about his involvement and the exact motive, we have classified them as "other attacks". This concerns the murders in October 1987 of the first secretary of the Syrian embassy, Antanios Hanna (claimed by a group calling itself "Syrian Mujahideen"); that in March 1989 of the rector of the Brussels Grand Mosque, Abdullah al-Ahdal, and his Tunisian librarian Salem el-Beher (claimed by the "Soldiers of Truth"); in June 1989 of an employee of the Saudi Embassy, Samir Jah al-Rasul (claimed by the "Arabian Peninsula Freeman") and in October 1989 of the Jewish leader Joseph Wybran (claimed by the "Soldiers of Truth").
- 15 Samuel Osborne: Brussels attack: Police officer stabbed in Belgium's capital before attacker shot. *Independent*, 20.11.2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/brussels-attack-stabbing-police-belgium-officer-shot-grand-place-terror-latest-a8642321.html> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 16 Internement prononcé pour Issam qui avait poignardé un policier. *La Capitale*, 29.4.2019. <https://lacapitale.sudinfo.be/381634/article/2019-04-29/internement-prononce-pour-issam-qui-avait-poignarde-un-policier> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 17 Allison Mazzoccatto: L'enquête sur la tuerie de Liège est terminée. *La Meuse*, 2.11.2019. <https://lameuse.sudinfo.be/465208/article/2019-11-02/enquete-sur-la-tuerie-de-liege-est-terminee> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 18 Benjamin Herman radicalisé depuis au moins 2014: ses premiers mentors seraient Nizar Trabelsi et Amor Sliti, deux figures belges de l'islam radical. *Sudinfo*, 9.6.2018. <https://www.sudinfo.be/id58575/article/2018-06-09/benjamin-herman-radicalise-depuis-au-moins-2014-ses-premiers-mentors-seraient> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 19 Cédric Lagast/Dirk Coosemans/Mark Eeckhout: Gevangenisrapport over Benjamin Herman: "Hij was de loopjongen van een groep radicalen". *Nieuwsblad*, 1.6.2018. [https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20180531\\_03539632](https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20180531_03539632) (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 20 In December 2016, Joey Leclerc had been on the run for a while, after he was told that his 36 hour prison furlough would be the last that was granted to him. At the Facebook account that he managed from jail, using the alias "Akhy al Belgiki", he wrote at that time, according to screenshots obtained by the authors: "Incarcerated since 2011, and last Tuesday parole was denied because I'm radicalized in their eyes. Today I'm on a 36-hour leave, and I've learned that they will refuse my future requests. I will be imprisoned until April 2020. So, who would return?"
- 21 Justine Katz: L'auteur de la tuerie de Liège Benjamin Herman cherchait à acheter des armes. *RTBF*, 7.6.2018. [https://www.rtf.be/info/societe/detail\\_l-auteur-de-la-tuerie-de-liege-benjamin-herman-cherchait-a-acheter-des-armes?id=9939131](https://www.rtf.be/info/societe/detail_l-auteur-de-la-tuerie-de-liege-benjamin-herman-cherchait-a-acheter-des-armes?id=9939131) (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 22 Marche: Benjamin Herman est le seul et unique responsable des tueries de Liège. *La Meuse*, 18.3.2021. <https://lameuse-luxembourg.sudinfo.be/764763/article/2021-03-18/marche-benjamin-herman-est-le-seul-et-unique-responsable-des-tueries-de-liege> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 23 For definitions of these three categories, please see: Reinier Bergema/Olivia Kearney: Rise O Muwahhid, Wherever You May Be. An Analysis of the Democratization of the Terrorist Threat in the West. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 12.5.2020. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/05/An-Analysis-of-the-Democratisation-of-the-Terrorist-Threat-in-the-West.pdf> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 24 Personal communication with a senior security source speaking on condition of anonymity.
- 25 These annual reports from 2007 (about 2006) until 2020 (about 2019) can be consulted here: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/tesat-report>.
- 26 Le terroriste qui visait l'ambassade américaine condamné à sept ans. *La Libre Belgique*, 5.1.2021. <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/judiciaire/le-terroriste-qui-visait-l-ambassade-americaine-condamne-a-sept-ans-5ff4bec79978e227df339490> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 27 Didier Haine: Le converti voulait faire un attentat au véhicule-bélier. *La Capitale*, 25.6.2019. <https://lacapitale.sudinfo.be/405092/article/2019-06-25/le-converti-voulait-faire-un-attentat-au-vehicule-belier> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 28 For a recent and insightful interview with the son of Firqatul Ghuraba's founder Omar Diaby, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: Interview with Firqatul Ghuraba. *Aymennjawad.org*, 27.9.2020. <http://www.aymenn-jawad.org/2020/09/interview-with-firqatul-ghuraba> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
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# 4. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN BELGIUM'S RESPONSE

Belgium has a fairly well established legal framework to address the terrorist threat, based on the 2003 Terrorist Crimes Act.<sup>39</sup> This already included the possibility of punishing the participation in the activities of a terrorist group, a charge now routinely used against foreign terrorist fighters whose specific acts abroad are difficult to document, and thus to prove. In the past few years, the Criminal Code has been amended several times to adapt it to new needs. In July 2015, for instance, an article was added to incriminate travel from and into Belgium for terrorist purposes – while in August 2016, inciting and recruiting for such travel was made punishable.<sup>40</sup>

For a small country with limited security resources, Belgian intelligence was relatively early on the job. The 2015 trial against 46 members of Shariah4Belgium was based on detailed observations that had started shortly after the group's establishment in 2010, well before the exodus to Syria.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, eavesdropping on conversations between members of the Zerkani network revealed their intention to carry out attacks as early as 2012.<sup>42</sup>

It is another matter, however, what was done with all that knowledge. Terrorist investigations are always a balancing act between gathering even more information and intervening in a timely manner – and it is easy to point out errors of judgment with the benefit of hindsight. But it has taken Belgian courts quite some time to understand the seriousness and the specificity of the terrorist offenses. Far too often, judges decided to give defendants the benefit of the doubt, after which they promptly disappeared from the radar and plunged even deeper into terrorism.<sup>43</sup>

That sense of urgency has improved, and recently there were even cases in which judges were demonstrably too harsh. It is likely due to the vast amount of investigations and lawsuits, that facts are sometimes carelessly handled nowadays to the detriment of the accused, too. In one case, a young woman was convicted as a member of IS, while she had served in purely locally-oriented Syrian Islamist militias which were hostile to that same Islamic State.<sup>44</sup>

In another case, it took a journalistic investigation and a subsequent retrial to acknowledge that a defendant had performed humanitarian work during most of his stay in Syria.<sup>45</sup> In general, however, Belgium does not follow the trend towards more severe punishment of terrorist offenses. While the average sentence in the European Union has increased from five to seven years since 2017, in Belgium it remained at five years.<sup>46</sup> An average that makes the U.S. State Department mention “Belgium’s short prison sentences” as a significant flaw.<sup>47</sup>

It is certainly debatable whether long prison sentences are the ultimate solution, but even the head of Belgium’s Federal Prosecutor’s Office – one of the leading counter-terrorism officials – does agree that they are much too short. In principle, he says, terrorism should be tried by a court of assizes,<sup>48</sup> where the maximum sentence for participation in the activities of a terrorist group is ten years in jail. However, due to a lack of suitable magistrates, in practice such cases appear before a criminal court, where defendants risk only five years.<sup>49</sup>

The debate about how to tackle radicalization in prison goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is concerning, at least, how many radicalized people are allowed to leave Belgian prisons without any further guidance. As of November 2020, there were 398 individuals at large who had been listed as radicalized prisoners since 2015<sup>50</sup> – while 25 percent of those released in 2020 were still considered radical, and another 20 percent still prone to violence.<sup>51</sup>

According to Hans Bonte, the mayor of Vilvoorde, a city from which dozens of foreign fighters have left, many convicts of terrorism are now deliberately choosing not to apply for early release and to serve their sentence in full. “In this way, they are released without conditions, and no one will bother them anymore”, Bonte says. “I don’t pretend that all these people will start to plot attacks, but I would like to have an opportunity to monitor them at least. In numerous crimes, the judge can impose a secondment in addition to a prison sentence, so that the judiciary can still keep an eye on them. A bill to make this possible for participation in the activities of a terrorist group has been ready for a long time, but it has still not been voted on in parliament.”<sup>52</sup>

In order to get rid of a part of the problem, the Belgian judiciary is increasingly revoking the Belgian citizenship of those convicted of terrorism who have another nationality. Since July 2015, this can be done as part of the trial for those who receive a sentence of at least five years, which is routinely implemented now. A separate procedure for those convicted earlier, has stripped more than 50 terrorists of their Belgian passports by now.<sup>53</sup> In addition to the question whether such measures do not constitute discrimination and whether it is ethically justified to deny people the right of residence in a country where they were born and raised, the efficiency is also questionable.

It depends on the goodwill of the countries where the convicted retain citizenship, whether or not they can actually be expelled. For one of the most notorious terrorists Belgium has ever known, this seems to be impossible, since Morocco is refusing to accept the so-called black widow of the jihad, Malika El Aroud.<sup>54</sup> The mayor of Vilvoorde, Hans Bonte, points to the problems he is faced with by a similar case: "It is about someone who has been in Syria, has been convicted and expelled. But Morocco says: we don't want him. He was released with an order to leave Belgium. That person is thus pushed into illegality. He feels rejected by society, but we can't help him and we can't do anything on a police level."<sup>55</sup>

As to now, we have only discussed the "first line" of response, being the work of intelligence services, law enforcement and judiciary. That evidently does not mean that efforts in the field of disengagement and prevention of radicalization are not equally important – and even more important in the longer term. However, a detailed assessment of these efforts would be a study in itself. In Belgium, large parts of that policy are a competence of the federal states, complicating its evaluation. And measuring their efficiency would quickly bring us to points of discussion that are far from specific to Belgium.



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- 47 United States Department of State: Country Reports on Terrorism 2019 – Belgium. 24.6.2020. <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/belgium/> (last accessed: 27.5.2021).
- 48 In Belgium, a court of assizes is the highest court with criminal jurisdiction, meant to try the most serious crimes. If a crime is correctionalized, meaning that it is entrusted to a lower criminal court, the existence of extenuating circumstances is automatically assumed, resulting in significantly lower sentences for comparable facts.
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5.

CONCLUSION:

AN

EVOLVING

BUT

CONTINUOUS

THREAT

At the time of writing, the official level of the terrorist threat in Belgium was at 2 (medium) on a scale from 1 (low) to 4 (very serious).<sup>56</sup> It was lowered to that level in January 2018, after it had been at level 3 (serious) since March 24, 2016 – and at level 4 the first two days after the Brussels attacks on March 22, 2016. Other times when it was raised are the foiled plot in Verviers (level 3 from January 15 to March 9, 2015) and the attacks in Paris (level 3 since November 17, 2015 and level 4 for Brussels from November 21 to 26, 2015). It has never been at level 1 since the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001.<sup>57</sup>

Looking at the profiles of all perpetrators and suspects in the past decade, it is clear that jihadists who went to foreign fighting theatres like the Syrian war, have caused most of the damage in Belgium. Of a total number of 39 deaths (perpetrators not included) from May 2014 until present, 36 were killed in attacks clearly directed from Syria and involving returnees. It is likely a result of the military operations against the Islamic State, and the ameliorated counter-terrorist efforts on European soil itself that such attacks have ceased to happen in Belgium after March 2016.

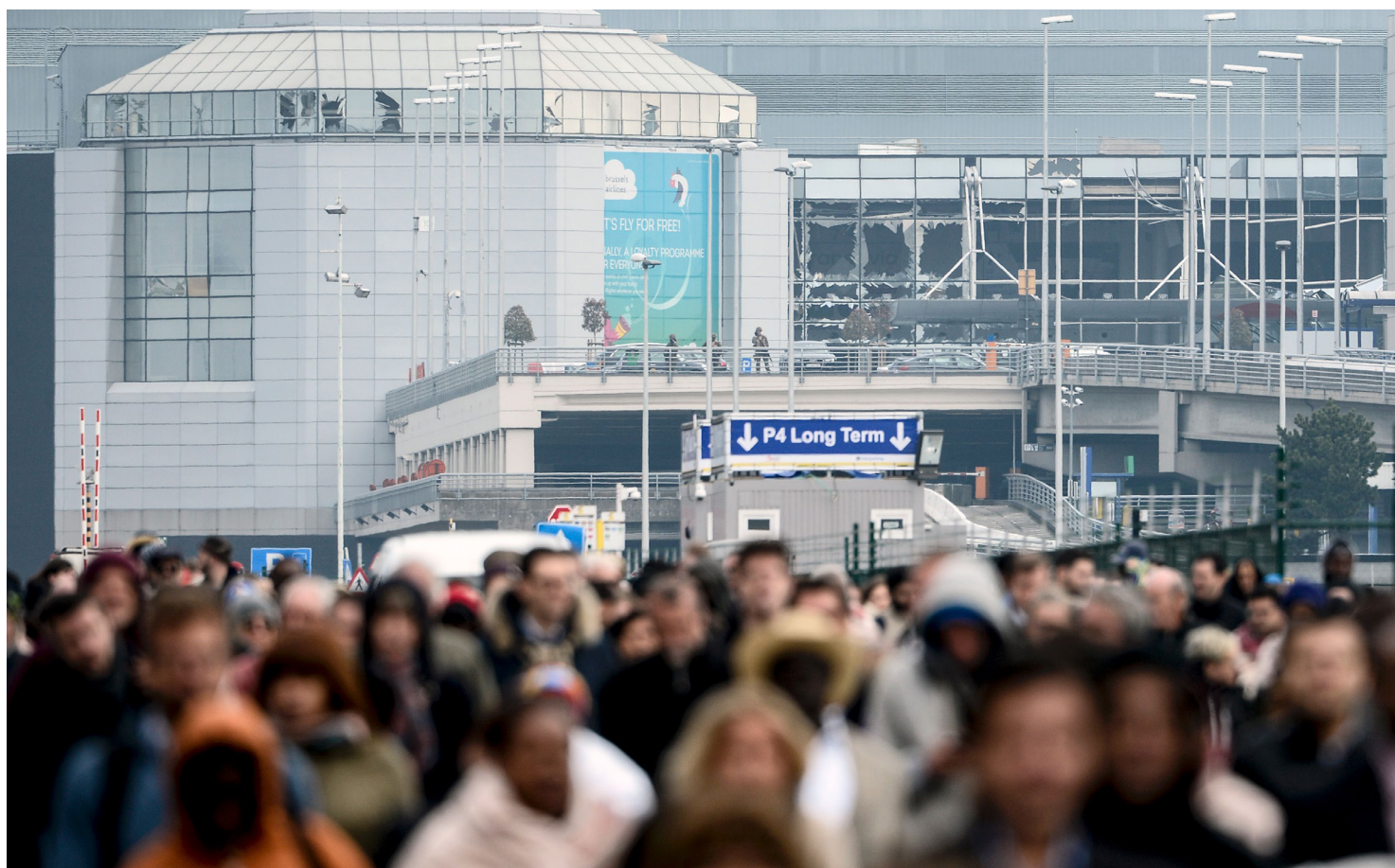
Anticipating the chances that the Islamic State or another group, possibly al-Qaeda, will be able to establish a comparable new base of operations in the near future, this absence in directed and foreign fighter related attacks should not be taken for granted, however. Meanwhile, there remains a continuous threat from less well-organized and less network-driven perpetrators. In general, they cause less damage in terms of victims,<sup>58</sup> but they keep contributing to a feeling of insecurity and a polarization in society – explicit objectives of terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State.

There is no good reason to believe that this type of terrorism will disappear anytime soon. While the number of jihadist attacks, the death toll and the number of countries affected dropped across Western Europe in 2018 and 2019, 2020 saw a slight rise in all three of those figures. In general, the perpetrators were younger and more diverse in background than at the height of the terrorist wave between 2015 and 2017. In 2020, most of them had been in touch with some sort of network, but acted alone.<sup>59</sup> A profile like that makes it harder to counter their actions, along with the fact that less organized conspiracies are harder to detect anyway.

In Belgium, the number of potential terrorists remains high. As of February 2021, there were 708 entities listed in the so-called Common Database of the security services. Of these, 645 were of jihadist signature, 49 right-wing extremists and 14 left-wing extremists. By status, there were 507 foreign terrorist fighters (almost all related to the war in Syria), 41 home-grown terrorist fighters, 79 hate propagandists, 75 potentially violent extremists and 26 terrorism convicts. It should be noted that the same individual can appear in more than one category.<sup>60</sup> In Germany, a country with a population seven times larger than that of Belgium, 627 Islamists were listed as *Gefährder* (meaning they are considered capable of carrying out attacks) at the end of 2020, and another 500 “relevant persons” able to assist in such attacks.<sup>61</sup>

In order to contain the continuous threat, Belgium should not fall into the trap of thinking that jihadism has become an issue of the past. With more and more attention being paid to other extremist threats, such as those from the extreme right – attention that is justified, no doubt about that – it is disturbing, for instance, that Belgium’s civil intelligence service VSSE saw its workforce and its budget shrink between 2018 and 2019: from 620 to 599 employees and from 63.4 million to 58.9 million euros.<sup>62</sup>

*Passengers are evacuating Brussels Airport after the attacks on March 22, 2016.*



Another danger is that the approach to terrorism itself will contribute to a new wave of radicalization. It pleads for Belgium that it has not overacted in the way that France and Austria did, for example. Both the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's intention to outlaw "political Islam"<sup>63</sup> and the French Minister of Education's swipe at the "Islam-Gauchism" allegedly professed in universities,<sup>64</sup> foster the impression that a part of the own population is excluded from the very same democracy that jihadists want to destroy.

There is another issue, however, in which Belgium has served this potential future wave of radicalization for a long time: The refusal to repatriate Belgian women and children from the detainment camps in northeastern Syria is not only highly unwise from a security point of view,<sup>65</sup> but also fuels propaganda about a status of second-class citizens that these people would have always had. Regardless of all other considerations, bringing them back could be a signal of compassion to the individuals in question, their families and their acquaintances that stops a lot of radicalization in its tracks.

The Belgian government has very recently opened up to such repatriations, clarifying that 13 mothers and 27 children are eligible to return.<sup>66</sup> Until then, the repatriation of adults had been a no-go for the Belgian government, as is still the case for many other European countries. The only Belgians actively retrieved so far, were five minors aged between six and 14 who were in detention camps without parents, and a woman who had just turned eighteen, all repatriated in June 2019 – and one minor boy whose mother, also imprisoned in Syria, agreed to let her son leave in December 2020.<sup>67</sup> If Belgium keeps its promise to repatriate mothers too, it can set an example for other European countries. At the time of writing this paper, however, details about modalities and timing had not yet been announced.



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Pieter Van Ostaeyen studied Medieval History with a specialisation in the history of the Crusades (KULeuven 1999) and Arabic and Islamic Studies, focusing on the history of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi and the Assassins (KULeuven 2003). Van Ostaeyen has been analyzing the conflict in Syria since the outset in 2011. In 2012, he began reporting on foreign fighters and extremist groups such as Jabhat an-Nusra and the Islamic State. Since September 1, 2016, he is a PhD applicant at the University of Leuven researching the ideology of the Islamic State. Van Ostaeyen is a Visiting Fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy (EFD) and member of the editorial board at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT). (Twitter: [@p\\_vanostaeyen](https://twitter.com/p_vanostaeyen))

Guy Van Vlierden works as a journalist for Belgium's largest daily newspaper, *Het Laatste Nieuws*. He has a special interest in political and religious extremism, and was the first to investigate infiltrations by Turkish far-right groups in Belgian political parties 20 years ago. In 2009, he gained international attention with his interview with Moez Garsallaoui, a prominent Western fighter in the ranks of al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. He regularly contributes to specialized media, such as European Eye on Radicalisation (EER), CTC Sentinel (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point), and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT). (Twitter: [@GuyVanVlierden](https://twitter.com/GuyVanVlierden))





Belgium is one of Europe's hardest hit countries in the current wave of jihadist terrorism and has seen unproportionally high numbers of foreign terrorist fighters leave to Syria. Guy Van Vlierden and Pieter Van Ostaeyen describe past jihadist attacks in Belgium, analyse the current terrorist threat in the country and assess the state's ability to fight it.