

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

BELGIUM: EXTREMISM AND COUNTER EXTREMISM

On January 15, 2015, two jihadists were reportedly killed in a counter-terrorism raid in Belgium. The raid came as Belgium has begun to adjust its historical stance of conciliation towards religious extremism.

Overview

On January 15, 2015, Belgian police conducted a counter-terrorism raid against a group of jihadists in the town of Verviers in eastern Belgium. According to media reports, two extremists were killed in the raid and another seriously wounded. (Sources: [Guardian](#), [NPR](#)) The arrests came after a bomb threat on the offices of Belgium's *Le Soir*, a French daily newspaper that ran the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons. Though a false alarm, heightened security after the Paris attacks spurred Belgian police to arrest a number of its suspected terrorists. (Source: [Flanders](#), [Belga News Agency](#))

The day earlier, Belgian police arrested a man on suspicion of selling weapons to Amédée Coulibaly, the gunman who allegedly killed a French police officer before besieging a kosher grocery store in Paris, killing four. In a video posted online, Coulibaly pledged allegiance to ISIS, and claimed to have coordinated attacks with the Kouachi brothers, who killed 12 in the January 7 *Charlie Hebdo* attack. (Sources: [Guardian](#), [New York Times](#))

The January 15 raid in Verviers occurred as the Belgian government prosecutes its biggest trial of Islamic extremists to date. 46 members of the group Sharia4Islam stand accused of recruiting for terrorism and facilitating the travel of Belgian nationals to fight alongside terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria. The trial began in September 2014 and only nine of the accused members appeared in court, with the remainder suspected to be in Iraq and Syria. The verdict has been postponed until February 11. (Source: [Reuters](#), [De Standaard](#))

Both the raid and the trial came in the context of Belgium's longstanding history of promoting religious tolerance and acting to safeguard the human rights of suspected terrorists. Belgium has pushed the European Union to search for the 'root causes' of extremism and terrorism. (Source: [Egmont](#))

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

According to September 2014 statistics from Belgium's Ministry of Interior, between 300 and 350 Belgians have fought with militants in Iraq and Syria since 2012. (Source: [Le Soir](#)) In January 2015, Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* reported that 10 Belgian foreign fighters travel to Iraq and Syria each month. According to *Le Soir*, 184 Belgian nationals were fighting with ISIS and the Nusra Front as of December 2014, while 100 foreign fighters had already returned to Belgium. (Source: [Le Soir](#)) As of August 2014, Belgium produced the most foreign fighters per capita in Europe. (Source: [Economist](#))

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Members of the Islamist group Sharia4Belgium stand accused of radicalizing, recruiting, and facilitating the travel of a number of Belgium's foreign fighters. The group, which officially disbanded in 2012 to avoid government arrests, aspires to institute *shariah* (Islamic law) in Belgium. It is headed by Fouad Belkacem, who has made extreme and violent statements, including advocating the death penalty for gays. In 2011, Belkacem was called to a correctional court for incitement to hate. He has a history of arrests for violence and burglary back to 2002. (Source: [Nieuwsblad.be](#), [Humo.be](#))

According to Belgian authorities, Sharia4Belgium sent its first jihadist to Syria in May 2012. The group sent 70 of its members to Syria by March 2013, and has been charged with recruiting non-members and facilitating their travel to Iraq and Syria. (Sources: [De Standaard](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Reuters](#))

History of Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

Belgium suffered its most prominent terrorist attack in May 2014, when French national and ISIS fighter Mehdi Nemmouche murdered four at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. The attack had a major impact on Belgium, spurring new debate on the threats of Islamic extremism and returning foreign fighters.

Timeline of major extremist and terrorist incidents

- 1970s and 1980s: Belgium suffers attacks from the European terrorist group the Communist Combatant Cells (CCC).
- Mid-1980s: Belgium discovers cells of the Fouad Ali Saleh network, which had carried out a number of attacks in Paris, are operating within Belgium. The government establishes a branch devoted to countering Islamic extremism within its Anti-Terrorist Unit of the Gendarmerie.
- Mid-1990s: Belgian authorities discover that support cells of the Algerian GIA (Armed Islamic Group) are operating in Belgium.
- September 9, 2001: Two suicide bombers assassinate anti-Taliban leader Ahmad Shah Massoud in Afghanistan. Belgium authorities later arrest and convict over ten individuals, Belgian and Tunisian nationals, in connection with the assassination.
- May 24, 2014: Ex-ISIS fighter and French national Mehdi Nemmouche goes on a shooting rampage at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, killing four.

(Sources: [Egmont](#), [Guardian](#))

Domestic Counter-Extremism

Belgium is in the midst of its largest scale Islamic extremist trial to date, as 46 members of the now disbanded group Sharia4Islam stand accused of belonging to a terrorist organization.

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Historically, Belgium has sought to address ‘root causes’ of terrorism when confronting issues of terrorism and Islamic extremism. It seeks to address the terrorist issue without stigmatizing Muslims. Belgium’s leading expert on Islamism within its police force has emphasized the need for empathy in order to understand and effectively combat terrorism.

Belgium’s 2003 Terrorist Offences Act criminalizes terrorism and participation in terrorist groups, but notes that an “organization whose real purpose is solely of a... religious nature... cannot, as such, be considered a terrorist group.” (Sources: [Egmont](#), [Council of Europe](#))

Overarching policy on countering extremism and terrorism

Belgium is distinct in its emphasis on the need to incorporate empathy in a comprehensive counterterrorism program. According to Alain Grignard, the leading expert on Islamist terrorist groups in Belgium’s police force, one of the critical elements of a successful counterterrorism strategy to address Islamic extremism is “the empathy one has to entertain with the subject at hand. This is a characteristic sensibility of some European countries, including Belgium. This empathy has to start with real knowledge of the ‘other’, first empirically, then scientifically, and has to be build upon the units’ contacts in the field. The approach has to be based on neurons, not hormones. Herein probably resides the real Belgian specificity when dealing with jihadi terrorism.” (Source: [Egmont](#))

Belgium has pressured the EU to search for ‘root causes’ of terrorism, and advocates on the international stage for the fundamental rights of suspected terrorists. (Source: [Egmont](#)) Belgium’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website provides an informational section on “terrorism and human rights.” According to the site, “Belgium believes that the fight against terrorism must not be allowed to infringe human rights, fundamental freedoms or international humanitarian law.” The country “condemns the use of secret prisons” to interrogate suspected terrorists, and asserts that “the principle of the right to a fair trial must be respected, regardless of the accusations levelled against the defendant.” (Source: [Belgium’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#))

Intelligence and security infrastructure

In the 1980s, the Belgian government established a branch devoted to countering Islamic extremism within its Anti-Terrorist Unit of the Gendarmerie. In 2001, the Gendarmerie merged with Belgium’s general police force. (Sources: [Egmont](#), [Encyclopedia of Law Enforcement](#))

Today, Belgium’s Criminal Investigation Department acts as its civilian intelligence service. The intelligence unit cooperates with Belgium’s local and federal police forces to prevent terrorism and crime. Belgium’s Threat Analysis Co-ordination Body (OCAM) analyzes the threat of terrorism and extremism on the basis of intelligence gathered from Belgium’s various counterterrorism bodies. Belgium’s overarching counterterrorism program is controlled by its Minister of Interior. Belgium’s Prime Minister oversees the counterterrorism program, and chairs the Ministerial Committee on Intelligence and Security. (Source: [Council of Europe](#)) To

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coordinate between the judicial and executive components of Belgium's counterterrorism program, a new 'nerve centre' was created in 2006: OCAM (*Organe de Coordination et d'Analyse de la Menace*). OCAM is under joint authority of the Ministers of Justice and the Interior. (Source: [Egmont](#))

Legislative efforts to combat extremism and terrorism

In Belgium, suspected terrorists are treated with the same procedural rights (including the right to a fair trial) as ordinary criminals. In accordance with United Nations resolutions and EU law, Belgium has criminalized terrorism, including participation in acts of terrorist groups and financing terrorism.

In December 2003, Belgium enacted the Terrorist Offences Act, which translated the EU Framework Decision on terrorism from June 2002 into Belgian law. (Sources: [Council of Europe](#), [Eur-Lex](#)) The Act defines terrorism as a set of offences which "by its nature or context may cause serious harm to a country or an international organization," including those "committed intentionally with the aim of seriously intimidating a population or unduly forcing public authorities or an international organisation to take or refrain from taking certain action or seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation." (Source: [Council of Europe](#)) In defining terrorist groups, the Act qualified that an "organization whose real purpose is solely of a political, trade union or philanthropic, philosophical or religious nature, or which solely pursues any other legitimate aim, cannot, as such, be considered a terrorist group." (Source: [Council of Europe](#))

Under the 2003 Terrorist Offences Act, investigations of acts on the list of terrorist offenses are authorized to use telephone tapping, proactive investigations, infiltration measures, observation measures involving the use of technical devices to spy into people's homes, questioning of witnesses under conditions of complete anonymity, secret surveillance, and special protection measures granted to a threatened witness by the Witness Protection Board. (Source: [Council of Europe](#))

In February 2013, three new offences were added to the Belgian Criminal Code on terrorism: public provocation to commit a terrorist offense, recruitment for terrorism, and training for terrorism. (Source: [Council of Europe](#))

As of February 2014, none of the terrorism cases tried in Belgium involved victims and only one woman in Belgium has received a final conviction for committing terrorist offences. (Source: [Council of Europe](#)) In May 2014, French national and returning ISIS fighter Mehdi Nemmouche killed four at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. He is awaiting trial in Brussels on terrorism charges. (Source: [De Standaard](#))

Policy on radicalization and foreign fighters

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According to a Belgian government official, returning foreign fighters are treated to “particular attention” from the government. Former Interior Minister Joelle Milquet explained that there is usually an arrest or follow-up on the suspect. If there is no open criminal record, the suspected foreign fighter is often followed by the local intelligence service or police. (Source: [Le Soir](#)) According to Belgian officials, the targets of the January 15, 2015 raid in Verviers were under government surveillance after returning from Syria. (Source: [Guardian](#))

In 2013, the government started radicalization-prevention programs to address the rising trend of foreign fighters. The efficacy of these programs is dubious. According to an adviser to the Belgian government on radicalization, “The preventive proposals were not well thought through.” (Source: [Wall Street Journal](#))

International Counter-Extremism

Role in international counter-extremism policy

At the time of the September 11, 2001 attacks, Belgium held the rotating, six-month EU presidency. Ten days after the attacks, Belgium convened a European Council and adopted a Plan of Action to counter terrorism. The plan outlined five EU goals to combat terrorism: (1) strengthen police and judicial cooperation, (2) develop international legal instruments, (3) combat the financing of terrorism, (4) strengthen air security, and (5) coordinate the EU’s global action. (Source: [Egmont](#))

In December 2005, the European Union adopted a counterterrorism strategy based on four pillars: prevention, protection, prosecution, and response. Belgium successfully petitioned the EU to address possible “root causes” of terrorism under its “prevention” counterterrorism strategy. In 2006, the EU decided to forsake the use of the word “root causes” in favor of terms like “underlying conditions” or “conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.”

Sanctions

Belgium abides by the U.N. and EU counter-terrorism sanctions lists, but advocates for clarified “measures enabling people’s names to be included in or deleted from the lists of suspects. The aim of such clarification is to enable suspected persons to defend themselves and appeal any decisions made against them.” (Source: [Belgium’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#))

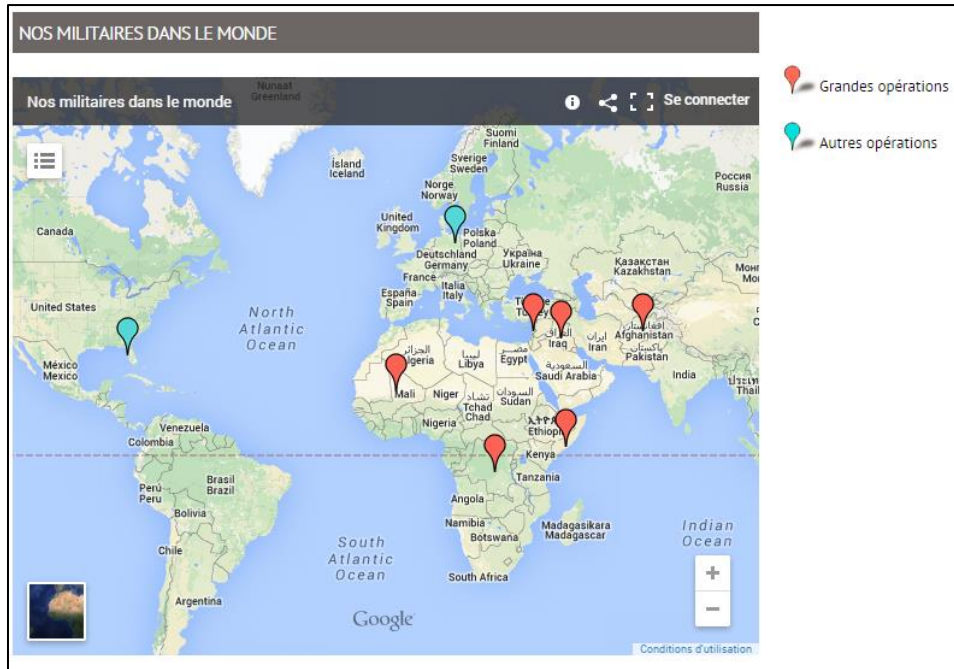
Foreign military engagements

Belgium contributes soldiers and materiel to various U.N., EU and coalition-led operations. It is engaged in the international fight against ISIS and, under EU missions, has deployed soldiers to Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo. For years, Belgium participated in the International

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Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. In mid-December 2014, Belgium completed an eight-year UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon.



Source: [La Defense, January 13, 2015](#)

Belgian Forces against ISIS

Belgium has contributed 120 soldiers, pilots and technicians, and a fleet of six F-16s to the international fight against ISIS. The government authorized an extension of Belgium's participation in the operation for the end of June 2015. (Sources: [La Defense](#), [Global Aviation Report](#))

Belgian Forces in Afghanistan

Belgium contributed to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. In 2012, Belgium reduced its military participation in Kabul and transferred the bulk of its authority to Hungary. After 2012, Belgian soldiers transitioned to a logistical and advisory role in Afghanistan. Belgium's most recent count put 20 Belgian soldiers in Kabul and 54 in Mazar-e-Shariff. (Source: [La Defense](#))

Belgian Forces in Lebanon

In December 2014, Belgian forces ended an eight year peacekeeping mission for the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Almost 5,500 Belgian soldiers

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served over the years to clear thousands of mines and other explosives along Lebanon's border with Israel. (Sources: [La Defense](#), [UNIFIL](#))

Belgian Forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Belgium is participating in the E.U. security mission for the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (Source: [La Defense](#))

Belgian Forces in Mali

Belgium has around 80 soldiers stationed in Mali as part of the European Union Training Mission (EUTM). The government has authorized their participation in the EUTM until mid-June 2015. (Source: [La Defense](#))