

***BELGIUM: EXTREMISM & COUNTER-EXTREMISM***

The deadly November 13 attacks on Paris—killing at least 129 and wounding more than 350 people—are believed to have been orchestrated by Belgian-born jihadist Abdelhamid Abaaoud and executed by eight jihadists, several of whom are Belgian nationals. As France reels from the attacks, scrutiny has fallen upon Brussels’ infamous suburb of Molenbeek, considered a hotbed of extremism, a major producer of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria, and a destination for obtaining illegal weaponry.

The manhunt continues for Belgian suspect Salah Abdeslam. Belgium’s counterterrorism branch, Organe de Coordination pour l’Analyse de la Menace (OCAM), has raised the national security threat level from 2 to 3 (out of 4). The government has also deployed 520 members of the military to aid Belgian police officers.

**Overview**

The November 13 massacre is not the first time this year that an attack on France has been linked to Belgian-based jihadists. On January 15, 2015, days after the *Charlie Hebdo* and kosher supermarket attacks, two heavily armed suspected jihadists were killed in a counterterrorism raid in Verviers, in eastern Belgium. Seven months later, on August 22, 2015, a man linked to the disrupted Verviers network was allegedly responsible for an attack on a high-speed train from Amsterdam to Paris. In both of these cases, as well as in a thwarted attack on a Parisian church in April 2015, Belgian jihadist and ISIS fighter Abdelhamid Abaaoud—from Molenbeek—has either been considered the primary orchestrator or has been linked to the attack. Other Belgian nationals suspected in conjunction with the November 13 attacks are deceased assailants Bilal Hadfi and Ibrahim Abdeslam as well as suspected accomplice Salah Abdeslam, brother to Ibrahim Abdeslam and the subject of an ongoing manhunt in Belgium. Belgian suspect Hamza Attou and Moroccan-born Mohamed Amri have also been arrested in Belgium and charged with participation in terrorist activity after they allegedly drove Salah Abdeslam home from Paris.

In addition to hosting jihadist cells and actors, Belgium has recently come under criticism over its inability to quash the weapons black market in Molenbeek. The day before the January 2015 Verviers raid, Belgian police arrested a man on suspicion of selling weapons to Amédy Coulibaly, the ISIS gunman accused of killing a French police officer before killing four people at a kosher grocery store in Paris. Alleged August 2015 train assailant Ayoub El Khazzani is also believed to have secured his weapons in Belgium.

The Belgian government has made several arrests in connection with the November 13 Paris attacks. After the recent surge of jihadist attacks, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel called for a crackdown on the Molenbeek borough, saying, “Almost every time, there is a link to Molenbeek.” The mayor of Molenbeek has herself called the borough “a breeding ground for violence.” (Sources: [Guardian](#), [New York Times](#), [Reuters](#))

Since 2010, an estimated 500 Belgians have left or attempted to leave the country to serve as foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, making Belgium the highest per capita exporter of foreign

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fighters in Western Europe. Estimates from [April 2015](#) showed an average of two Belgians leaving the country each week. In response to the phenomenon, and surge of jihadist attacks with links in Belgium, the United Nations sent a delegation to the country to investigate the phenomenon. As of November 2015, Belgium is monitoring 272 jihadists in Syria, reportedly stretching thin the country's intelligence capabilities. Other factors reportedly hindering Belgian intelligence are the country's language divide and overall budgetary constraints. After the November 13 Paris attacks, Belgium's Interior Minister announced plans to double the federal police officers patrolling Brussels, from 20 to 40 during the day and from 15 to 30 at night. (Source: [U.N.](#), [Express.be](#), [Le Soir](#), [New York Times](#))

The wave of 2015 raids comes after Belgium prosecuted dozens of Belgian nationals on terrorism charges. Many of the accused were tried in absentia for their role in recruiting Belgians to jihadist groups in Syria. Belgium's crackdown on extremism comes in the context of its longstanding history of promoting religious tolerance and acting to safeguard the human rights of suspected terrorists. After the thwarted August 2015 attack on a high speed train from Amsterdam to Paris, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel [called](#) for a review of EU policy on security for international trains, saying that Europe must consider reinstating identity and luggage inspections. The country will also host an emergency EU meeting to deal with longstanding concerns about illegal weapons trafficking. (Source: [Egmont](#), [Telegraph](#), [France24](#))

**Radicalization and Foreign Fighters**

Belgium faces a grave threat posed by ongoing radicalization and the mounting threat posed by Belgian foreign fighters. Already, foreign fighters pose a threat to Belgian and European security. Among Belgium's returning ISIS fighters were the November 13 mastermind Abdelhamid Abaaoud and at least one of the November 13 assailants, Ismaël Omar Mostefaï. Mehdi Nemmouche—the French national who carried out the May 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum of Brussels—had also returned to Europe after fighting with ISIS. (Sources: [Telegraph](#), [Telegraph](#))

Belgium has produced the greatest number of Western foreign fighters per capita in Iraq and Syria. In April 2015, Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* quoted one analyst as saying that 481 Belgians had attempted or succeeded to act as foreign fighters in Syria or Iraq, with two Belgian foreign fighters traveling to Iraq and Syria each week. A U.N. delegation in October 2015, commissioned to address the jihadist threat in Belgium, estimated the number of Belgian foreign fighters at 500. (Sources: [Le Soir](#), [Le Soir](#), [Economist](#), [Express.be](#))

According to the U.N. report, jihadist recruitment is typically conducted through informal networks of friends and family, as well as through social media outlets online. Friends and family members who are in Syria are compensated monetarily, given anywhere between \$2,000 to \$10,000, based on the number of people they are able to recruit, the specialized skills of a given recruit, and whether their recruits are able to find a spouse. (Sources: [U.N.](#), [Express.be](#))

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The Brussels suburb of Molenbeek has also come under scrutiny recently, and is known for a set of conditions believed to be conducive to radicalization. The November 13 attackers Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Salah Abdeslam, and Ibrahim Abdeslam were all raised in Molenbeek. Suspected August 2015 train assailant Ayoub El Khazzani also resided in the Molenbeek neighborhood, and May 2014 assailant Mehdi Nemmouche is believed to have passed through Molenbeek. Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel has called for a crackdown on the Molenbeek borough, saying, “Almost every time, there is a link to Molenbeek.” The mayor of Molenbeek has herself called the borough “a breeding ground for violence.” (Sources: [France24](#), [Guardian](#), [New York Times](#), [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#))

The October 2015 U.N. report is consistent with trends that emerged during Belgium’s Sharia4Belgium trial, wherein the Islamist group was accused—and ultimately convicted—of radicalizing, recruiting, and facilitating travel for a number of Belgium’s foreign fighters. The group, which officially disbanded in 2012 to avoid government arrests, aspires to institute sharia (Islamic law) in Belgium. It was headed by notorious Islamist Fouad Belkacem, who is known to have 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 dating back to 2002. 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: [Nieuwsblad.be](#), [Humo.be](#), [De Standaard](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Reuters](#))

While the October 2015 U.N. report indicates that jihadist recruits are primarily lured through informal social networks and online social media, at least one notable Belgian jihadist is believed to have been radicalized in a Belgian prison: Abdelhamid Abaaoud, mastermind of the November 13 ISIS attacks in Paris. Other foreign suspects with ties to Belgian jihadist networks carry a prior criminal record, including:

- November 13 assailant Ibrahim Abdeslam, arrested alongside Abaaoud in 2010 for minor offenses.
- November 13 assailant Ismaël Omar Mostefai, arrested as a youth for various petty offenses but reportedly never jailed. Mostefai was part of Abaaoud’s jihadist cell and is believed to have been radicalized by a Belgian preacher in France. Mostefai attacked concertgoers at Paris’s Bataclan concert hall.
- August 2015 alleged train gunman Ayoub El Khazzani, who had a history of drug trafficking. El Khazzani resided in France’s Molenbeek neighborhood and was reportedly linked to the jihadist cell targeted in Belgium’s January 2015 police raid in Verviers. He is suspected of attempting a gun attack on a high speed Thalys train from Amsterdam to France.

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- January 2015 gunman Amedy Coulibaly, a convicted armed robber and drug dealer whose arrest history dates back to 2001. Coulibaly reportedly bought weapons for his intended assault from a dealer in Molenbeek before killing a police officer, and later attacking a kosher supermarket, killing four.
- May 2014 gunman Mehdi Nemmouche, imprisoned time and again in France for a range of charges including theft, robbery, and driving without a license. After returning to Europe from Syria, Nemmouche attacked the Jewish Museum of Brussels, killing four.

In March 2015, Belgium announced its intention to isolate prisoners who may radicalize others. It has also announced efforts to recruit social workers and Muslim staff in its prisons, in an effort to rehabilitate inmates who are radicalized or on the path to becoming radicalized.

(Source: [Telegraph](#), [New York Times](#), [NPR](#), [Guardian](#), [Le Monde](#), [Times of Israel](#), [New York Times](#))

**Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents**

Belgium suffered its most recent terrorist attack in May 2014, when French national and ISIS fighter Mehdi Nemmouche killed four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. The May 2014 attack and the subsequent 2015 attacks in France that were heavily linked to Belgian jihadist activity have had major impacts on Belgium, spurring new debate on the threats of Islamic extremism and returning foreign fighters.

*Timeline of Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents*

- **November 13, 2015:** Belgian-born ISIS fighter Abdelhamid Abaaoud masterminds a coordinated set of gun and bombing attacks on Paris, killing at least 129 and wounding more than 350. Like Abaaoud, many of the suspected assailants and their accomplices had lived in Belgium, including Bilal Hadfi and Ibrahim Abdeslam as well as suspected accomplice Salah Abdeslam. According to French news outlets, French-born Ismaël Omar Mostefaï was reportedly radicalized by a Belgian imam at a mosque in the French suburb of Luce.
- **August 21, 2015:** A man—believed to be Ayoub El Khazzani—boards a high-speed Thalys train from Amsterdam to France armed with a Kalashnikov assault rifle, pistol, ammunition, and a box cutter. While traveling over Belgian territory, two Europeans and three Americans, including two U.S. servicemen, observed the suspect preparing to attack and intervened, preventing what French President Francois Hollande said could have been “[a true carnage](#).” El Kahzani had been kept on [security alert](#) in Belgium but reportedly traveled to Syria in 2014. Following the thwarted attack, Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* [reported](#) that “if his identity is confirmed, this man would have been identified by

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the Belgian services as related to the terrorist networks recently dismantled in Belgium in the wake of the dismantling of Verviers network.”

- **January 7, 2015:** Cherif and Said Kouachi launch a deadly assault on the offices of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing 12 in the name of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In the days following the attack, gunman Amedy Coulibaly goes on a shooting rampage, killing a policewoman before taking and killing hostages at a kosher supermarket in the name of ISIS. Coulibaly reportedly bought his weapons, and those of the Kouachi brothers, from a dealer in Brussels.
- **May 24, 2014:** Ex-ISIS fighter and French national Mehdi Nemmouche goes on a shooting rampage at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, killing four.
- **March 11, 2004:** A series of bombs explode on four trains in Madrid. One of the suspects jailed in connection to the attacks hailed from Molenbeek, 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.
- **Mid-1990s:** Belgian authorities discover that support cells of the Algerian GIA (Armed Islamic Group) are operating in Belgium.
- **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.
- **1970s and 1980s:** Belgium suffers attacks from the European terrorist group the Communist Combatant Cells (CCC).

(Sources: [Egmont](#), [Guardian](#), [BBC](#), [France24](#), [Telegraph](#))

**Domestic Counter-Extremism**

In February 2015, Belgium concluded its largest scale Islamic extremist trial to date, as 45 members of the now disbanded group Sharia4Islam were found guilty of belonging to a terrorist organization. Throughout 2015, Belgium has conducted raids on suspected terrorist cells, following spurts of jihadist attacks in neighboring France.

*Overarching Policy*

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Belgium has recently conducted police raids on jihadist cells in Molenbeek and Brussels, and worked to dismantle Sharia4Belgium in Antwerp. Historically, however, Belgium has tended to opt for less law-enforcement oriented solutions to the threat of terrorism, seeking to instead address terrorism's "root causes" in an effort to combat the threat without unnecessarily stigmatizing the Muslim community.

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." Belgium's 2003 Terrorist Offences Act also treads cautiously around the concept of terrorism, criminalizing participation in terrorist groups while noting 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](#))

In this vein, Belgium has pressured the European Union to search for 'root causes' of terrorism, and advocates on the international stage for the fundamental rights of suspected terrorists. 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." (Sources: [Egmont](#), [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. To coordinate between the judicial and executive components of Belgium's counterterrorism program, a new 'nerve centre' was created

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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. (Sources: [Council of Europe](#), [Egmont](#))

Belgium's intelligence infrastructure has recently come under criticism for its failure to quash jihadist activity and illegal weapons trading within its borders. One factor blamed for compromising intelligence is the country's language divide, with some Belgian intelligence officers operating in Flemish and others in French. This occasionally leads to gaps in intelligence, even for officers operating within the same neighborhood, like Molenbeek. Other issues facing the intelligence service include a lack of resources and lack of "cultural and political" prioritization of the intelligence service. (Sources: [France24](#), [Le Soir](#))

As of November 2015, Belgium's intelligence community is reportedly monitoring [272](#) jihadists in Syria. (Sources: [Le Soir](#))

*Legislative Efforts*

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. 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." 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. As of February 2014, none of the terrorism cases tried in Belgium involved victims

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and only one woman in Belgium has received a final conviction for committing terrorist offences. 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. (Sources: [Council of Europe](#), [De Standaard](#))

### *Policy on Radicalization and Foreign Fighters*

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. According to Belgian officials, the targets of the January 15, 2015, raid in Verviers were under government surveillance after returning from Syria. (Sources: [Le Soir](#), [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](#))

The effects of failed policies aimed at Belgium’s foreign fighters are already evident. Among Belgium’s returning foreign fighters from ISIS were the November 13 mastermind Abdelhamid Abaaoud and at least one of the assailants, Ismaël Omar Mostefai. Mehdi Nemmouche—the French national who carried out the May 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum of Brussels—had also returned to Europe after fighting with ISIS. (Sources: [Telegraph](#), [Telegraph](#))

According to the October 2015 U.N. report, Belgium needs to develop a national vision to address the issue of foreign fighters at the federal, regional, community and local levels, “[o]therwise, the threat to the country is significant.” (Source: [Express.be](#))

### *Combatting the Illegal Weapons Trade*

Belgium has come under pressure recently for its failure to quash the illicit weapons market in Molenbeek. Assailants who are believed to have acquired weaponry in Molenbeek include August 2015 train suspect Ayoub El Khazzani, January 2015 kosher supermarket gunman Amedy Coulibaly, and May 2014 Jewish Museum gunman Mehdi Nemmouche. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [CNN](#))

In response to the danger, Belgium is slated to host an emergency meeting of EU interior ministers to deal with longstanding concerns about illegal weapons trafficking. (Source: [France24](#))

## **International Counter-Extremism**



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*Role in International Counter-Extremism Policy*

Belgium has seen its role in international counter-extremism evolve as the country has increasingly become associated with European terrorist attacks. After the thwarted August 2015 attack on a high speed train from Amsterdam to Paris, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel [called](#) for a review of EU policy on security for international trains, saying that Europe must consider reinstating identity and luggage inspections. Belgium has long played a key role in European counterterrorism efforts. After the November 13 attacks on Paris, Brussels is slated to host an emergency meeting of EU interior ministers to deal with longstanding concerns about illegal weapons trafficking. Before the surge of Belgium-tied attacks, first in May 2014 and then throughout 2015, Belgium has historically approached counterterrorism measures with caution and an emphasis on the need for providing suspected terrorists with due process.

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 European Union'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 European Union to address possible "root causes" of terrorism under its "prevention" counterterrorism strategy. In 2006, the European Union 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."

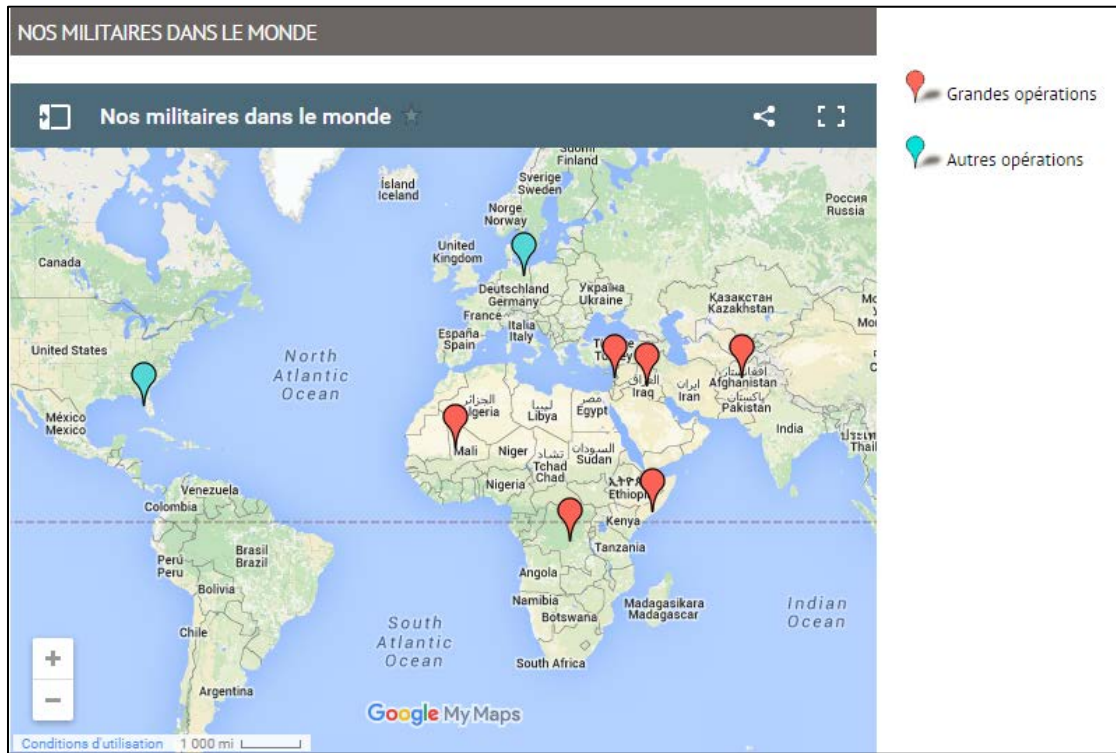
*Sanctions*

Belgium abides by the U.N. and EU counterterrorism 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 Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. In mid-December 2014, Belgium completed an eight-year UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon.

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Source: [La Defense, November 16, 2015](#)

*Belgian Forces against ISIS: Opération Desert Falcon*

As of August 2015, Belgium has contributed at least 120 soldiers, pilots and technicians, and a fleet of six F-16s to the international fight against ISIS. According to the Belgian government, the country’s contribution constitutes 5.5 percent of the international coalition effort. (Source: [La Defense](#))

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

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*Belgian Forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*

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

*Belgian Forces in Mali*

Belgium has about 80 soldiers stationed in Mali as part of the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) as of November 2015. (Source: [La Defense](#))