

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

On May 29, 2018, imprisoned drug-dealer Benjamin Herman, out on temporary leave, killed four people in Liège. Herman attacked two female police officers with a knife, stabbing them repeatedly. He then stole their pistols, which he used to shoot and kill them and a passenger in a nearby car while reportedly shouting “Allahu akbar.” He then fled to the nearby Atheneum Léonie de Waha school and took a cleaning woman hostage. Police shot and killed him during a confrontation outside the school, which wounded four officers. Herman had also killed a former criminal accomplice the night before. Belgian authorities had granted Herman a two-day release in preparation for his 2020 release. Herman reportedly converted to Islam in prison and authorities confirmed that he likely radicalized there after coming into contact with Islamic extremists. Belgian officials labeled the killing spree a terrorist attack but did not believe Herman was connected to a terrorist network. ISIS later claimed responsibility via Telegram, referring to Herman as one of its “soldiers.” Belgium did not raise its terrorism threat level. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [1], [New York Times](#) [2], [Associated Press](#) [3], [France24](#) [4])

The attack was Belgium’s first fatal terror attack since March 22, 2016, when ISIS-affiliated terrorists launched a series of bomb attacks in Belgium, together killing 32 people and wounding more than 300 others. The attacks—the deadliest in Belgium’s modern history—came nearly two years after the May 2014 shooting attack at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, perpetrated by former ISIS fighter Mehdi Nemmouche. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [5], [NPR](#) [6], [Telegraph](#) [7])

Overview

On the morning of March 22, 2016, two suicide bombers—later identified as former ISIS fighter [Ibrahim el-Bakraoui](#) [8] and suspected bomb-maker [Najim Laachraoui](#) [9]—launched attacks at Zaventem airport, killing 16 people. An hour later, another suicide bomber—identified as Ibrahim’s brother [Khalid el-Bakraoui](#) [10]—struck the city’s metro system, killing 16 people at the Maelbeek station. In the wake of the attacks, Belgium temporarily raised its national threat level to the highest level (four), closed the metro system, evacuated the airport, and shut down two nuclear power plants. The attacks also propelled the country into a weeks-long manhunt for attacks suspect [Mohamed Abrini](#) [11], who was arrested alongside several co-conspirators on April 8, 2016. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [12], [Guardian](#) [13], [New York Times](#) [14], [Guardian](#) [15], [CNN](#) [16], [New York Times](#) [17])

The Brussels terrorist attacks were the deadliest in the country’s history. Several government representatives resigned or offered to resign, after it emerged that the government had failed to follow through on leads flagged by the Turkish government and anticipate major national security lapses flagged by the European Union. Turkey had previously arrested one of the bombers—Ibrahim el-Bakraoui—and deported him to the Netherlands on suspicion of being a foreign fighter. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that he had alerted Belgium of the arrest, but that Belgian authorities did not effectively pursue the lead. (Sources: [Politico](#) [18], [Reuters](#) [19], [Atlantic](#) [20], [Independent](#) [21], [BuzzFeed](#) [22], [New York Times](#) [23], [U.N.](#) [24], [Express.be](#) [25], [Le Soir](#) [26], [New York Times](#) [27], [BuzzFeed](#) [22], [New York Times](#) [28], [Telegraph](#) [29])

The attacks highlighted Belgium’s struggle to meet surveillance demands. More than 500 Belgians are suspected to have left the country to serve as foreign terrorist fighters abroad, according to the Belgian government. As of January 2018, the government suspected that at least 100 foreign fighters had returned to the country. Other factors reportedly hindering Belgium’s intelligence apparatus are the country’s language divide and overall budgetary constraints. As one anonymous official told media, “We just don’t have the people... and, frankly, we don’t have the infrastructure to properly investigate or monitor hundreds of individuals suspected of terror links, as well as pursue the hundreds of open files and investigations we have.” (Sources: [International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague](#) [30], [Soufan Group](#) [31], [Deutsche Welle](#) [32], [Politico](#) [33], [Express.be](#) [34], [United Nations](#) [35], [Pieter van Ostayen](#) [36], [New York Times](#) [37], [BuzzFeed](#) [22], [New York Times](#) [38], [U.S. State Department](#) [39])

Despite Belgium’s efforts to improve its national security since the Brussels attacks, the country has continued to experience lone-wolf terror attacks. On August 7, 2016, ISIS claimed an attack in which a machete-wielding man wounded two Belgian policewomen in the city of Charleroi. On August 22, 2016, a machete-wielding woman attacked passengers on a bus in Brussels, wounding three people. On October 5, 2016, a knife-wielding assailant stabbed two policemen in Brussels. On March 23, 2017, a man was intercepted while driving at high-speed on De Meir, the major shopping street in Antwerp. The incident—while not producing casualties or injuries—bore the hallmarks of similar vehicular attacks in Nice, Ohio, Germany, and London. On November 20, 2018, a knife-wielding assailant stabbed a police officer in the city center of

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

Brussels while allegedly shouting “allahu akbar.” (Sources: [Reuters](#) [40], [Telegraph](#) [41], [Independent](#) [42], [Wall Street Journal](#) [43], [CNN](#) [44], [BBC News](#) [45], [Express](#) [46])

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Radicalization

According to an October 2015 U.N. report, jihadist recruitment in Belgium 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 for their recruiting efforts, given anywhere between \$2,000 to \$10,000 based on the number of people they are able to recruit to terror, the specialized skills of a given recruit, and whether their recruits are able to find a spouse. (Sources: [United Nations](#) [47], [Express.be](#) [25])

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. 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. Of 46 Belgian foreign fighters prosecuted as of October 2015, all 46 belonged to Sharia4Belgium. (Sources: [Nieuwsblad.be](#) [48], [Humo.be](#) [49], [De Standaard](#) [50], [Wall Street Journal](#) [51], [Reuters](#) [52], [United Nations](#) [53])

Sharia4Belgium—which officially disbanded in 2012—aspired to institute sharia (Islamic law) in Belgium. The group was headed by notorious Islamist Fouad Belkacem, 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. (Sources: [Nieuwsblad.be](#) [48], [Humo.be](#) [49], [De Standaard](#) [50], [Wall Street Journal](#) [51], [Reuters](#) [52])

The Brussels suburb of Molenbeek has specifically come under scrutiny, and is known for a set of conditions believed to be conducive to radicalization. As of 2017, Molenbeek housed 49 terror suspects per 100,000 people. The ratio in the rest of Belgium was three out of 100,000. As of 2015, Molenbeek’s unemployment rates almost four times higher than the rest of Belgium’s. As of 2017, Molenbeek housed 26 times as many mosques per 100,000 people than the rest of Belgium, and more than twice as many foreign residents per 100,000 people than the rest of Belgium. (Source: [Wall Street Journal](#) [54])

Of the 413 foreign fighters who left Belgium in 2015 and 2016, 47 (11 percent) were from Molenbeek. November 2015 assailants 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.” As of February 2018, authorities suspect some two dozen Molenbeek families of fomenting radicalization. (Sources: [France24](#) [55], [Guardian](#) [56], [New York Times](#) [57], [Reuters](#) [58], [New York Times](#) [59], [Wall Street Journal](#) [54])

The Molenbeek government has taken several steps to fight radicalization in the suburb. Authorities have increased monitoring of extremist messaging in mosques. At least five mosques and schools have been shut down since 2016. Some groups in Molenbeek have sought to fight radicalization by breaking down preconceptions about Muslims. Authorities have also increased the number of surveillance systems and the number of officials monitoring suspected extremists. In 2017, the Get Me collective launched a project called “Hipster/Muslim: the New West.” The photo project saw similar looking individuals swap hipster and traditional Muslim clothing. After the March 2016 terror attacks in Brussels, an organization called Brussels Sounds Good launched with the goal of increasing cross-cultural understanding. That December, the group led a campaign of Belgian Muslims sending out Christmas greetings over social media to show respect for other religions. (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#) [60], [Deutsche Welle](#) [61], [Wall Street Journal](#) [62])

The Belgian government has also sought to monitor and decrease extremist messaging in the country’s mosques. The Grand Mosque of Brussels is the country’s largest. After Belgian Muslims played primary roles in major terror attacks in November 2015 and March 2016, Belgian officials accused the mosque’s imams of espousing radical messages. The

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

mosque is administered by the Saudi-based World Muslim League, which critics also accuse of espousing extremist messages. Belgium's migration agency previously sought to expel the mosque's primary imam, an Egyptian cleric named Abdelhadi Sewif, for preaching an ultraconservative version of Islam, but a Belgian court blocked his deportation. The Saudi government maintains a 99-year, rent-free lease on the mosque, which was a goodwill gesture from Belgium's king to the Saudi monarchy in 1969. In November 2017, a Belgian parliamentary commission recommended breaking the lease. According to commission member Servais Verherstraeten, there is a "perception that there is something to hide in the most important mosque in the country." Belgium terminated the lease in March 2018. A government statement said it is seeking "to put an end to foreign interference in the way Islam is taught in Belgium." The decision gave the World Muslim League a year to vacate, after which the government would turn administration over to the Muslim Executive, Belgium's government-backed umbrella group for the country's Muslims. Following the announcement, Interior Minister Jan Jambon tweeted, "With this, we end Salafist, violent extremist influences." (Sources: [Washington Post](#) [63], [Washington Post](#) [64], [Washington Post](#) [65])

Belgium's prisons have also been a source of radicalization. According to Belgium's State Security Service, nearly 5 percent of all prisoners in Belgium—450 prisoners in all—posed a radicalization threat as of 2017. Indeed, at least one notable Belgian jihadist is believed to have been radicalized in a Belgian prison: Abdelhamid Abaaoud, one of the masterminds of the November 13, 2015, ISIS attacks in Paris. After Benjamin Herman killed three people and took a fourth hostage while on 48-hour prison leave in Liège, authorities suspected he was radicalized in prison. Police shot and killed Herman, and ISIS called him one of a "soldier of the Islamic state." (Sources: [La Libre](#) [66], [Reuters](#) [1], [New York Times](#) [2])

Other foreign suspects with ties to Belgian jihadist networks carry a prior criminal record, including:

- Ibrahim el-Bakraoui, suspect in the March 22, 2016, bombing in Belgium's Zaventem airport. In 2010, el-Bakraoui was [sentenced](#) [14] to nine years in prison after robbing a currency exchange office and shooting at police.
- Khalid el-Bakraoui, suspect in the March 22, 2016, bombing in Brussels' Maelbeek metro station. In 2011, el-Bakraoui was [sentenced](#) [14] on charges of an attempted auto theft and illegal possession of assault rifles.
- Salah Abdeslam, suspect in the November 13, 2015, attacks in Paris.
- Ibrahim Abdeslam, suspect in the November 13, 2015, attacks in Paris.
- Paris attacks suspect 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.
- 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.

Following the example of neighboring France, Belgium has begun to quarantine prisoners who they believe pose a radicalizing danger. France ended its prison isolation experiment in 2016, however, after finding that their methods had the opposite intended effect, deepening radicalization networks within prisons. (Sources: [La Libre](#) [66], [Wall Street Journal](#) [67])

Since the announcement in October 2016, however, Belgium has continued to isolate radicalized prisoners from the rest of the prison population. According to Belgian officials, the isolated areas at Hasselt and Ittre prison house around 20 people in all. According to Belgium's State Security Service Administrator-General Jaak Raes, however, there are already signs that the isolation method may not be working, as inmates are often able to communicate with each other through their cells in Arabic, which Belgian guards do not typically understand. One of the isolated inmates is Moroccan recruiter [Khalid Zerkani](#) [68], who has been linked to at least 22 known extremists. (Source: [La Dernière Heure](#) [69], [Washington Post](#) [70], [Wall Street Journal](#) [67])

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

Foreign Fighters

Returning foreign fighters pose a deadly threat to Belgium and its neighbors. Belgian officials estimate that at least 125 foreign fighters have returned to the country. Belgium reportedly has one of the highest numbers of returning ISIS fighters in Europe. Among Belgium's returning ISIS fighters were the November 2015 Paris attacks mastermind [Abdelhamid Abaaoud](#) [71] and at least one of the November 2015 assailants, Ismaël Omar Mostefai. [Mehdi Nemmouche](#) [72]—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: [Albawaba News](#) [73], [Telegraph](#) [74], [Telegraph](#) [7])

Belgium has produced the greatest number of European foreign fighters per capita in Iraq and Syria. In April 2015, Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* quoted one analyst saying that two Belgian foreign fighters were traveling to Iraq and Syria each week. A U.N. delegation in October 2015 estimated the number of Belgian foreign fighters at 500, though government officials speaking in November 2015 claimed that the figure was around 470. In September 2016, one expert put the high-end estimate of Belgian foreign fighters at more than 614 people. As of mid-2016, more than 30 people returning from the conflict zone have been tried or convicted on terrorism-related charges. (Sources: [Le Soir](#) [75], [Le Soir](#) [76], [Economist](#) [77], [Express.be](#) [25], [Le Vif](#) [78], [Soufan Group](#) [31], [Pieter van Ostayen](#) [36], [Deutsche Welle](#) [32], [La Libre](#) [66])

Belgian officials believe that 413 Belgians left to fight in Syria in 2015 and 2016. As of February 2018, authorities believed one-third of those 413 were dead, one-third remained in the Middle East, and one-third had returned to Belgium. The government reported no foreign fighters leaving Belgium in 2017. (Sources: [Wall Street Journal](#) [79], [Deutsche Welle](#) [80])

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

March 2016 Airport and Metro Attacks

On the morning of March 22, 2016, two suicide bombers—later identified as ex-convict Ibrahim el-Bakraoui and suspected bomb-maker [Najim Laachraoui](#) [9]—launched attacks at Brussels' Zaventem airport, killing [16 people](#) [12]. An hour later, another suicide bomber—identified as Khalid el-Bakraoui—struck the city's metro system, killing [16 people](#) [12] at the Maelbeek station. Following the attacks, Belgian officials also arrested two other suspects who had appeared on the crime scene. Mohamed Abrini and Osama Krayem were caught on camera before the Zaventem airport attack and Maelbeek metro attack, respectively. Abrini reportedly admitted that he had intended to carry out a third suicide bomb attack at Zaventem airport. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [12], [Guardian](#) [13], [New York Times](#) [17], [BBC News](#) [81])

Also reportedly linked to the attacks was [Khalid Zerkani](#) [82], also known as "Papa Noel." Zerkani is allegedly an ISIS recruiter based in Belgium, and has been linked to at least 22 extremists, including March 2016 suspects Najim Laachraoui and Mohamed Abrini, as well as November 2015 Paris suspects Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Salah Abdeslam. (Source: [Telegraph](#) [29], [New York Times](#) [83])

Before the March 2016 attacks, Belgium suffered its most recent terrorist attack on Belgian soil 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 had major impacts on Belgium, spurring new debate on the threats of Islamic extremism and returning foreign fighters.

- **November 20, 2018:** A knife-wielding assailant stabs a police officer outside the central police station near the Grand Place in Brussels at approximately 5:30 a.m. He is subsequently shot and wounded by another police officer. Witnesses report that the perpetrator shouted "allahu akbar." The perpetrator was known to have links to weapons trafficking but not to terrorism. He has also recently been released from a psychiatric institution. Belgian Minister of the Interior Jan Jambon has said that the attack is not being treated as a terrorist incident. Sources: [Express](#) [46], [New York Times](#) [84]
- **May 28, 2018 - May 29, 2018:** On May 28, imprisoned drug-dealer Benjamin Herman is temporarily released for 48 hours in Liege. That night, he kills a former criminal accomplice. On May 29, Herman attacks two female police officers with a knife, stabbing them repeatedly. He steals their pistols, which he uses to shoot and kill them and a passenger in a nearby car while reportedly shouting "Allahu akbar." Herman enters the nearby Atheneum Léonie de Waha school and takes a cleaning woman hostage. Police shoot and kill Herman during a confrontation that leaves four officers wounded.

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

Herman reportedly converted to Islam in prison and authorities confirm that he likely radicalized there after coming into contact with Islamic extremists. Belgian officials label the killings a terrorist attack but do not believe Herman was connected to a terrorist network. ISIS later claims responsibility via Telegram, referring to Herman as one of its “soldiers.” Sources: [Reuters](#) [1], [New York Times](#) [2], [Associated Press](#) [3], [France24](#) [4]

- **June 20, 2017:** Belgian security forces neutralize an assailant who is responsible for a small blast at Brussels Central Station.
The assailant is later discovered to have been a Moroccan national with possible ISIS sympathies, hailing from the Molenbeek section of Brussels. Sources: [NBC News](#) [85], [Guardian](#) [86]
- **March 23, 2017:** A man is intercepted while driving at high-speed on De Meir, the major shopping street in Antwerp. The incident—while not producing casualties or injuries—bears the hallmarks of similar vehicular attacks in Nice, Ohio, Germany, and London, although Belgian prosecutors later drop terrorism-related charges. Sources: [BBC News](#) [45], [Reuters](#) [87]
- **October 5, 2016:** A knife-wielding assailant stabs two policemen in Brussels in a suspected terrorist incident. Source: [BBC News](#) [88]
- **August 6, 2016:** A machete-wielding man wounds two Belgian policewomen outside a police station in the Belgian city of Charleroi.
A third officer shoots the attacker, who is taken to the hospital where he subsequently dies of his wounds. ISIS claims responsibility for the attack via its Amaq News Agency, describing the assailant as a “soldier of the caliphate.” Sources: [Reuters](#) [40], [Telegraph](#) [41], [Independent](#) [42], [Wall Street Journal](#) [43]
- **March 22, 2016:** Two suicide bombers—later identified as ex-convict Ibrahim el-Bakraoui and suspected bomb-maker Najim Laachraoui—launch attacks at Zaventem airport, killing 16 people.
An hour later, another suicide bomber—identified as Khalid el-Bakraoui—strikes the city’s metro system, killing 16 people at the Maelbeek station. In the wake of the attacks, Belgium temporarily raises its national threat level to the highest level (four), closes the metro system, evacuates the airport, and shuts down two nuclear power plants. In a subsequent raid of a house in the Brussels neighborhood of Schaerbeek, Belgian police discovered an explosive device and an ISIS flag. ISIS claims responsibility. Sources: [Reuters](#) [12], [Guardian](#) [13], [New York Times](#) [14], [Guardian](#) [15], [CNN](#) [16], [New York Times](#) [17], [New York Times](#) [89]
- **November 13, 2015:** Belgian-born ISIS fighter Abdelhamid Abaaoud masterminds a coordinated set of gun and bombing attacks on Paris, killing 130 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 Mostefai was reportedly radicalized by a Belgian imam at a mosque in the French suburb of Luce. Sources: [New York Times](#) [90], [Telegraph](#) [74], [Telegraph](#) [91]
- **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 the Belgian services as related to the terrorist networks recently dismantled in Belgium in the wake of the dismantling of Verviers network.” Sources: [Telegraph](#) [92], [New York Times](#) [93], [Los Angeles Times](#) [94]
- **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. Source: [Guardian](#) [95]
- **May 24, 2014:** Ex-ISIS fighter and French national Mehdi Nemmouche goes on a shooting rampage at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, killing four.
Nemmouche is arrested and convicted of murder in 2019. He is sentenced to life in prison. Nacer Bendrer is sentenced to 15 years in prison for helping plan the attack and supplying Nemmouche with weapons. Sources: [Guardian](#) [96], [BBC News](#) [97]
- **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. Sources: [BBC News](#) [98], [France24](#) [55]
- **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. Source: [Egmont](#) [99]
- **1995:** Belgian authorities discover that support cells of the Algerian GIA (Armed Islamic Group) are operating in Belgium.
Source: [Egmont](#) [99]
- **1985:** Belgium discovers cells of the Fouad Ali Saleh network, which had carried out a number of attacks in Paris, are operating within Belgium.

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

The government establishes a branch devoted to countering Islamic extremism within its Anti-Terrorist Unit of the Gendarmerie. Source: [Egmont](#) [99]

- **1970 - 1989:** Belgium suffers attacks from the European terrorist group the Communist Combatant Cells (CCC). Source: [Egmont](#) [99]

Domestic Counter-Extremism

On March 4, 2018, Belgian police arrested eight people in Molenbeek during a counterterrorism raid based on suspicions of a forthcoming terrorist attack. Since the March 2016 Brussels attacks, Belgium has devoted more than \$400 million to improving its capacity to investigate and preempt terrorist attacks. Belgium has conducted a series of police raids on suspected terror cells around the country, including in Molenbeek, Brussels, Forest, and Schaerbeek, Anderlecht, Bruges, and Laeken. Prior to the March 2016 attacks, Belgium had dismantled the foreign fighter pipeline Sharia4Belgium in Antwerp in one of the largest terror trials in the country's history. Following the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in neighboring France, the government proposed 30 counterterrorism measures, at least 26 of which have been implemented as of March 2017. These measures include eliminating unregistered prepaid SIM cards for cellular phones and empowering the government to suspend passports of terrorism suspects without judicial approval. Human Rights Watch and other civil rights groups have accused the Belgian government of trampling on human rights in the name of security since the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels attacks. (Sources: [Sun Daily](#) [100], [Le Soir](#) [101], [La Libre](#) [102], [Fox News](#) [103], [New York Times](#) [104], [BBC News](#) [105], [Politico](#) [106], [Economist](#) [107], [Human Rights Watch](#) [108], [U.S. State Department](#) [39])

In early 2017, the Belgian parliament passed a law empowering the government to deport legal foreign residents suspected of engaging in terrorism, without criminal charge or a judicial ruling. Civil rights groups have contested the law as a threat to civil liberties. In particular, Human Rights Watch has accused the Belgian government of "abusive" new policies that overstep its authority. In March 2018, the Belgian government began discussing a proposed law to allow police to raid immigrants' homes and deport people whose asylum requests had been denied. Belgian citizens reportedly shelter 500 illegal immigrants each night. Prime Minister Charles Michel called the proposed law "a matter of public order and security." (Sources: [New York Times](#) [109], [Newsweek](#) [110], [Washington Post](#) [111])

Prior to these efforts, however, Belgium has historically 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. As Belgium looks to investigate terror suspect leads and dismantle extremist networks, one anonymous official has admitted that the police is stretched too thin to adequately address the terrorist threat. The U.S. State Department validated this concern in its 2016 Country Reports on Terrorism, noting that Belgium "still faced resource and institutional constraints" in its efforts to combat the threat of domestic terrorism. Due in part to Belgium's decentralized government structure, the country suffers from poor information-sharing practices among its various government agencies. As the U.S. State Department notes, Belgium also continues to suffer from an overburdened court system that prevents individuals from engaging in plea agreements, and levies "relatively light sentences" on individuals convicted for terrorism-related offenses. (Sources: [Egmont](#) [99], [Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [112], [BuzzFeed](#) [113], [U.S. State Department](#) [39])

Belgium's Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (OCAM) maintains the country's terror-threat level on a scale of one to four. The country has largely maintained its second-highest level of three, indicating an attack is "possible and likely," since police broke up a terror cell in Verviers in January 2015. The government briefly raised the terror threat level to four, indicating a "serious and imminent threat," in the wake of the March 2016 terror attacks in Brussels. In January 2018, Belgium lowered its threat level to two, indicating that an attack is "unlikely," though it maintained the level three in specific areas. In announcing the lower threat level in January 2018, the government also announced that military patrols would continue around high-target areas, including nuclear power stations and synagogues. (Sources: [Kingdom of Belgium](#) [114], [Politico](#) [115], [Agence France-Presse](#) [116])

Overarching Policy

In 2015, Belgium established a task force to create a national counterterrorism and counter-extremism strategy. Historically, however, Belgium has tread cautiously around the word terrorism and worked to incorporate empathy into its

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

counterterrorism efforts. Belgium's 2003 Terrorist Offences Act tread 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." According to Alain Grignard, a 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 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." (Sources: [U.S. Department of State 2015](#) [117], [Egmont](#) [99], [Council of Europe](#) [118])

In this vein, Belgium has historically 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](#) [99], [Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [112])

Today, Belgium works to address the underlying concerns stemming from a relatively high percentage of foreign terrorist fighters to Iraq and Syria and suspected terrorists in the country. Belgium is also working to address the concerns of prison radicalization, and has accordingly increased funding for counter-extremism counseling within the prison system. The government has worked to train imams that work in prisons to identify signs of radicalization among prisoners as well as potential terrorist recruiters that may be playing an influential role in radicalizing other inmates. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [39])

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](#) [99], [Encyclopedia of Law Enforcement](#) [119])

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 Coordination 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 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](#) [118], [Egmont](#) [99])

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. Belgian's intelligence community is also strained to meet the high surveillance demands. Belgium's intelligence community is reportedly responsible for monitoring more than 200 jihadists in Syria. (Sources: [France24](#) [55], [Le Soir](#) [26], [U.S. Department of State 2015](#) [117])

Legislative Efforts

Belgium has increasingly bolstered its counterterrorism legislation in order to meet mounting terrorism concerns. In 2015, Belgium announced efforts to crack down on suspected foreign fighters and terrorists, including by strengthening legislation that would prohibit Belgians from traveling abroad to join militant groups, and stripping convicted terrorists of their Belgian citizenship if they have dual citizenship. In early 2017, Belgium passed legislation authorizing the government to deport legal residents on suspicion of engaging in terrorist activities. In accordance with United Nations

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

resolutions and EU law, Belgium has criminalized terrorism, including participation in acts of terrorist groups and financing terrorism. Suspected terrorists in Belgium have historically been treated with the same procedural rights (including the right to a fair trial) as ordinary criminals. However, the Belgian judiciary and the Belgian government are independent of one another which can lead to ambiguous classifications of what and who are considered to be agents of terrorism. Despite the Belgian government criminalizing terrorism, in March 2019, the Belgian Court of Appeals stated that the terrorism label does not apply to forces engaged in an armed conflict. When Belgian federal prosecutors were seeking to try around 30 suspected members of the PKK who allegedly recruited and trained young Kurds in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe, the Brussels appeal court ruled that “insufficient elements were provided to conclude that the PKK is guilty of terrorist offenses.” The Brussels Appeals Court ruled that the counterterrorism laws cannot be imposed on the suspects since they are not waging a war on Belgium, but Turkey. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [117], [New York Times](#) [109], [Deutsche Welle](#) [120], [Daily Sabah](#) [121])

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 that “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](#) [118])

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](#) [118])

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. (Sources: [Council of Europe](#) [118], [De Standaard](#) [122])

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. (Sources: [Le Soir](#) [75], [Guardian](#) [56])

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.” In 2016, the government opened its first deradicalization center, modeled on a Canadian center for countering radicalization. The center features a 24-hour hotline for parents and loved ones to call for help, and a staff of 15 criminologists, psychologists, and other specialists. In a June 2018 assessment, a U.N. special rapporteur on human rights and terrorism chastised Belgium for not instituting any deradicalization or disengagement programs in its prison system. She called on Belgium to implement deradicalization programs and make strides in protecting the children of imprisoned extremists. (Sources: [Wall Street Journal](#) [123], [Montreal Gazette](#) [124], [United Nations](#) [125])

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, 2015, mastermind Abdelhamid Abaaoud and at least one of the 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](#) [74], [Telegraph](#) [7])

According to the October 2015 U.N. report, Belgium needs to develop a national vision to address the issue of foreign

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

fighters at the federal, regional, community and local levels, “[o]therwise, the threat to the country is significant.” (Source: [Express.be](#) [25])

Combating the Illegal Weapons Trade

Prior to 2006, Belgium had non-restrictive gun-ownership laws and was largely considered a hub for weapons dealers because of a flood of weapons from the war in the former Yugoslavia and also lax gun laws stemming from state-owned FN Herstal sidearm manufacturer, which supplied weapons to a number of foreign armies. In 2006, the government passed legislation criminalizing ownership of automatic weapons and enacting tougher procedures to purchase guns. Nonetheless, media reported in November 2015 that criminals could obtain military-grade weapons within one hour in Molenbeek. Analysts reported that they could not accurately estimate how many illegal guns were on the streets in Molenbeek, and Belgium came under pressure for its failure to quash the illicit weapons market there. Assaultants 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: [Reuters](#) [126], [Expatica](#) [127], [New York Times](#) [128], [CNN](#) [129])

In response to the danger, Belgium held an emergency meeting of EU interior ministers in November 2015 to deal with longstanding concerns about illegal weapons trafficking. (Sources: [France24](#) [55], [Globe and Mail](#) [130])

International Counter-Extremism

Role in International Counter-Extremism Policy

Before the surge of Belgian-tied attacks in Europe, the country historically approached counterterrorism measures with caution. Belgium has, however, taken on a more proactive role in the counterterrorism space in recent years. 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 2015 ISIS attacks on Paris, Brussels was slated to host an emergency meeting of EU interior ministers to deal with longstanding concerns about illegal weapons trafficking. (Source: [Telegraph](#) [131])

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](#) [99])

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.” (Source: [Egmont](#) [99])

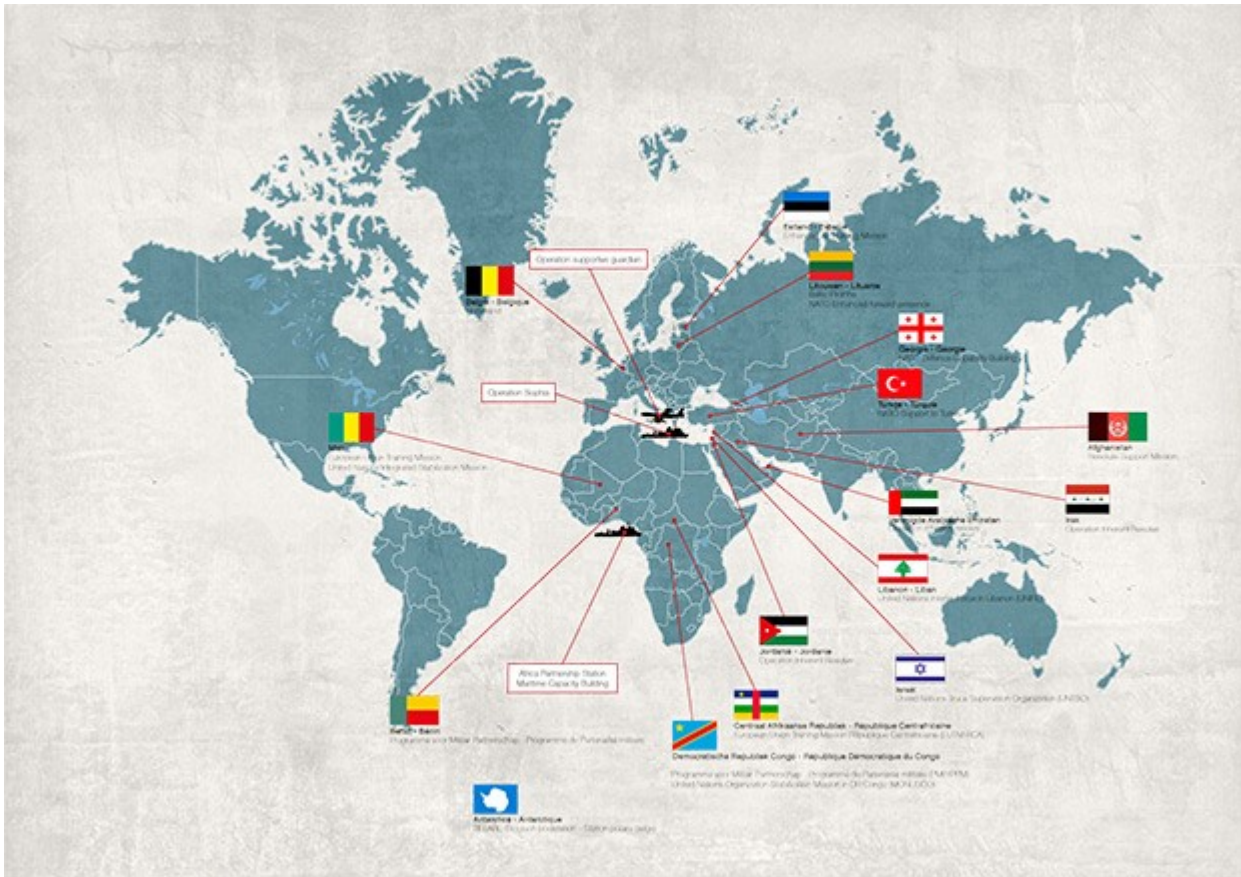
Sanctions

Belgium abides by the U.N. and EU counterterrorism sanctions lists, but has advocated for clarified “measures enabling people’s names to be included in or deleted from the lists of suspects.” According to Belgium’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the “aim of such clarification is to enable suspected persons to defend themselves and appeal any decisions made against them.” This language was removed from the Belgium’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website following the wave of European terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016. (Source: [Belgium’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [132])

Foreign Military Engagements

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

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.



Source: [La Defense, August 2017](#) [133]

Belgian Forces against ISIS: Opération Desert Falcon

Belgium has contributed at least 350 soldiers, pilots and technicians, and a fleet of six F-16s to the international fight against ISIS. The government has also contributed members of its Special Forces to help train, support, and advise Iraqi security forces. (Sources: [La Defense](#) [134], [New York Times](#) [135], [U.S. State Department](#) [39])

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. (Source: [La Defense](#) [136])

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](#) [137], [UNIFIL](#) [138])

Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

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](#) [139])

Belgian Forces in Mali

Belgium has about 80 soldiers stationed in Mali as part of the European Union Training Mission (EUTM). Although Belgium is set to reduce the number of soldiers stationed in Mali in early 2016, the country will continue to provide a smaller group soldiers to the U.N. mission in Mali. (Source: [La Defense](#) [140], [PressCenter.org](#) [141])

Public Opinion

Belgians are highly concerned with threats from terrorism, according to 2016 public opinion surveys. A Gallup poll from 2016 found that 88 percent of Belgians surveyed considered acts of terrorism by residents “a serious problem” and 92 percent found that acts of terrorism from non-residents constituted a “serious problem. Research commissioned by the European Parliament found that 50 percent of Belgians believed that the risk of a terrorist attack was elevated. The surveys were conducted in April of 2016, one month before ISIS launched its March 2016 Brussels attacks. (Sources: [Gallup](#) [142], [EPRS](#) [143])

In March 2017, one year after the Brussels attacks, Belgians continued to perceive the terrorism threat as very high. Seventy-seven percent of Belgian respondents considered the threat from terrorism to be strong or very strong, compared to 69 percent of respondents who felt similarly in March 2015. According to the survey of 2,898 respondents from around the country, the fear was especially pronounced in Brussels, where roughly 25 percent of respondents characterized the terrorism threat as “very high” in 2017. (Source: [La Libre](#) [144])