



BEYOND *the* CALIPHATE

Islamic State Activity Outside the Group's Defined Wilayat

BELGIUM



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BEYOND THE CALIPHATE: ISLAMIC STATE ACTIVITY OUTSIDE THE GROUP'S DEFINED WILAYAT

Belgium

BY GUY VAN VLIERDEN, JON LEWIS, AND DON RASSLER

In late May 2014, a lone gunman opened fire and killed four people at the Jewish museum in Brussels, Belgium. At first blush, the attack appeared to be an isolated incident. Additional details that would emerge about the attacker, Mehdi Nemmouche, and events that would soon follow, however, showed how Nemmouche's attack was not a random one-off event, but actually a leading indicator of a wave of Islamic State-connected violence that would target European and other Western cities. Nemmouche was just a preliminary warning.

Indeed, less than one month after the attack in Brussels, in mid-June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the creation of the Islamic State's self-stylized caliphate—a territory that encompassed broad swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq. Investigators would also quickly learn how Nemmouche, a dual citizen of France and Algeria, had recently returned from fighting alongside the Islamic State in Syria. While there, he also helped the group hold Western hostages. The personal background of Nemmouche, and his flight to and eventual arrest in France, would also point to an important French-Belgian-North African Islamic State nexus that has been a fairly consistent feature of Islamic State-linked attacks, plots, and arrests in Belgium and France since Nemmouche's attack. For example, investigators learned that Nemmouche had had a phone conversation in January 2014 with Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the Molenbeek-born Belgian-Moroccan leader of the November 2015 terror attacks in Paris.¹

While there have been relatively few terror attacks in Belgium since 2014, the prevalence of numerous terror networks operating within the country highlights the challenges facing Belgian law enforcement. To unpack

KEY FINDINGS

- The Islamic State threat in Belgium is both international and homegrown, as the 135 individuals in the dataset were citizens of 12 different countries. Sixty-five percent were Belgian citizens. Thirty-eight individuals (33%) were either Moroccan citizens, or were born or had ancestral ties there.
- While Islamic State-related incidents occurred across Belgium, 71% of all incidents (arrest actions and attacks) occurred in Brussels and Charleroi from June 2014 to October 2017. A surprisingly low number of incidents took place in Antwerp.
- Ninety-one percent of all arrest actions had some form of direct link to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. The Islamic State-linked individuals were structurally organized into at least 10 different named networks, most of which overlapped with one another.
- Attack data highlights a different trend, as individuals inspired by the Islamic State conducted three out of the four Islamic State-related attacks in Belgium over the timeframe studied.
- Seventeen percent of all arrest actions revealed evidence of a plot, which suggests that those arrested were serious in their intent to conduct an operation.

COVER PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BELGIAN FEDERAL POLICE
REPORT DESIGN BY LARISA BASTE

1. Soren Seelow, "Abdelhamid Abaaoud, l'instigateur présumé des attentats tué à Saint-Denis," *Le Monde*, November 16, 2015.

some of these dynamics and better situate the evolution of the Islamic State’s reach and activity in Belgium, the following analysis employs an open source dataset of directly linked and conceptually inspired Islamic State attacks, arrests, and plots (disrupted or discovered as a result of arrests) that occurred in the country between June 2014 and October 2017. Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) researchers coded events as being linked to or inspired by the Islamic State only if credible media and/or government sources asserted that the Islamic State was responsible for or had inspired the event.²

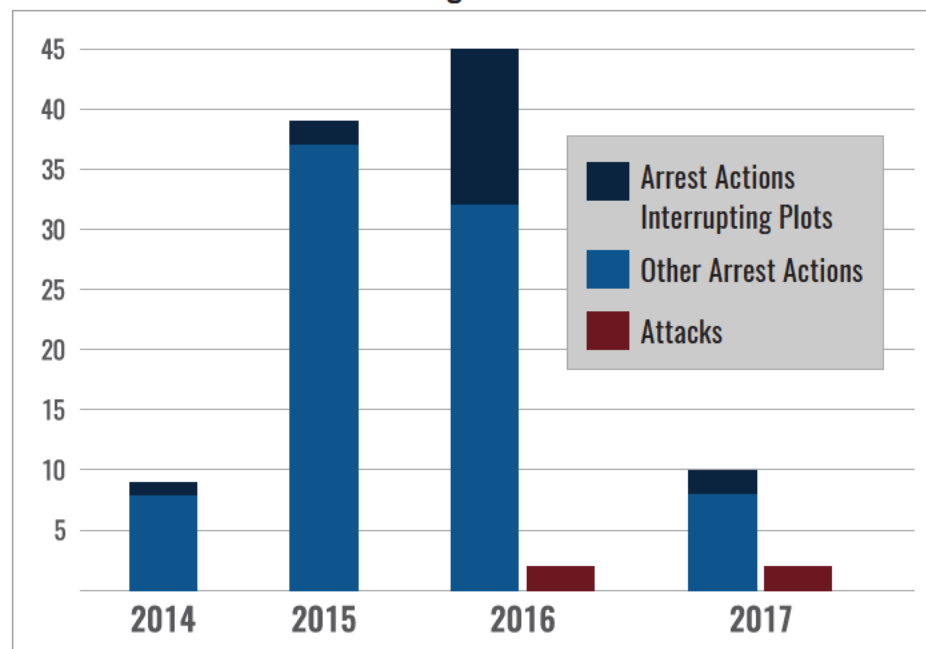
Data and Geographic Overview

The dataset consists of four attacks and 103 arrest actions³ in Belgium linked to or inspired by the Islamic State during the observed time period. A total of 135 individuals were arrested as a result of the 103 arrest

actions. Only individuals who were indicted for a terrorist offense were included. As demonstrated in Figure 1 below, the number of arrest actions rose considerably from 2014 to 2015, and reached its peak in 2016—the same year that attacks also first appear in our dataset. This increase was followed by a significant drop in incidents from 2016 to 2017.⁴ Another noteworthy trend is that 17% of all arrest actions resulted in the disruption of a plot, where evidence was found that the individual(s) arrested had developed operational plans or targets, or both.⁵ The overwhelming majority of these plots, 72%, were disrupted in 2016 by authorities.

The geographic breakdown of all incidents leads to some predictable, as well as some surprising, trends. Sixty-two incidents (57%) occurred in Brussels, Belgium’s capital, including three of the four attacks.⁶ This in itself is not

Figure 1: All Islamic State–Linked and –Inspired Arrest Actions and Attacks in Belgium JUN 2014–OCT 2017



2. For more information on all categories and how incidents were coded, see the CTC’s Beyond the Caliphate project webpage at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/beyond-the-caliphate-2>
3. An “arrest action” is defined as being a successful (resulting in either the arrest or death of at least one individual) arrest operation that law enforcement or security forces conducted. It is not a measure of how many individuals were arrested during that particular operation.
4. When the data we have for 2017 (until the end of October) is annualized, a 70% decrease in the number of incidents (when compared to 2016 figures) is observed.
5. There were 18 plots disrupted over the time period studied.
6. One of these attacks, the March 2016 attack, was a dual-pronged operation during which attackers struck the Brussels airport located in Zaventem and the Maalbeek metro station in central Brussels. That event was coded as having occurred in both places.

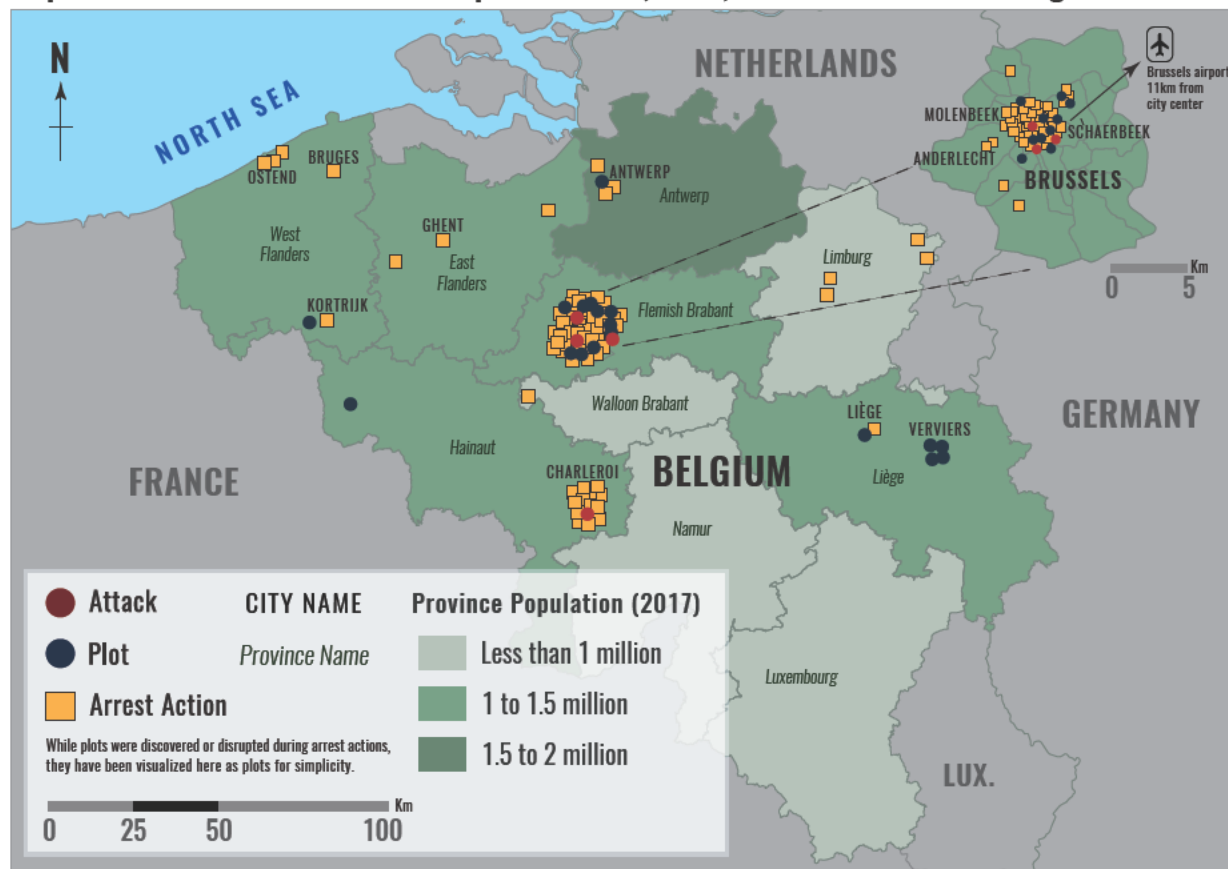
particularly surprising, given the prominence of both the city of Brussels and the larger surrounding Brussels–Capital Region.⁷ To gain a better understanding of where arrest actions and attacks occurred within the Brussels metropolitan area, neighborhood/municipality level information was also coded. This level of detail was available for 20 incidents (out of 62 total incidents in Brussels), and the data highlights known “hotspot” areas, with 45% and 25% of all incidents occurring in the municipalities of Molenbeek and Schaerbeek, respectively.

The Belgian city with the second-highest number of incidents was Charleroi, where 13 arrest actions and one attack took place. The following cities also had more

than one arrest action occur: Zaventem (5)—where Brussels’ international airport (which was also attacked during the March 2016 operation) is located and where four out of five of these incidents occurred—Verviers (4), Antwerp (4), Ostend (2), and Liège (2).

One surprising trend from the geographic data is the high number of incidents in Charleroi, Belgium’s third-largest city, and home to its fifth-largest Muslim community.⁸ In 50% of the 14 incidents that occurred in Charleroi, at least one of the individuals arrested had previously traveled or attempted to travel to Iraq or Syria—an even higher share than the 44% in the much larger sample size of Brussels. But when the data collected for this report is

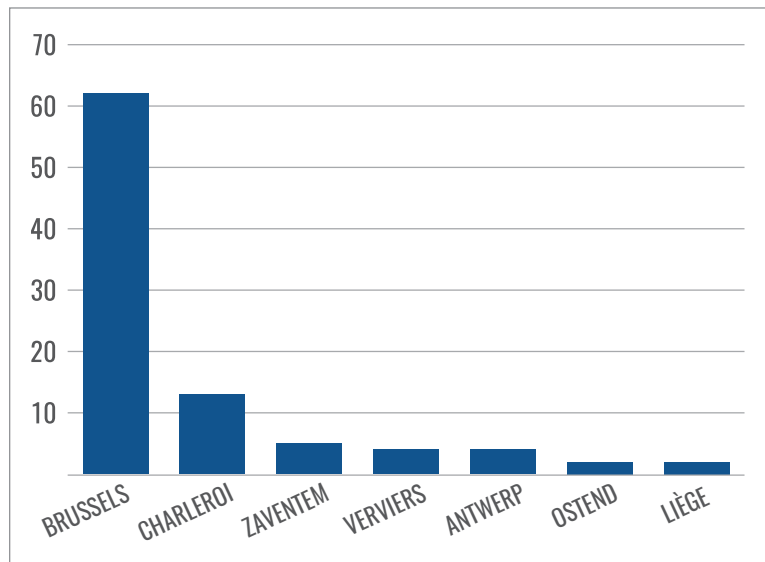
Map 1: Islamic State–Linked and –Inspired Attacks, Plots, and Arrest Actions in Belgium



Mapped by Brandon Mohr for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

- The bilingual Brussels–Capital Region is one of Belgium’s main administrative entities, together with Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia. It consists of 19 municipalities, one of which is the City of Brussels—Belgium’s de jure capital. When the term Brussels is used without further clarification, it most often refers to the entire region.
- The high number of incidents in Charleroi is not tied to Charleroi being home to Belgium’s second-largest international airport, as only one individual in the dataset was arrested at that airport without having any other link to Charleroi.

Figure 2: Number of Incidents in Belgian Cities with More than One Incident



"Although the number of inspired arrest actions was low, three out of the four attacks (75%) were perpetrated by inspired individuals who did not have a proven connection to the Islamic State operating in the Levant."

viewed in relation to other data, a more complicated and nuanced threat picture emerges. For example, a separate dataset compiled by Pieter Van Ostaeyen and one of the authors of this report points to a remarkably low share of Belgians from Charleroi who left the country to join armed groups, including the Islamic State, in Syria and Iraq over a similar time period.⁹ So even though a comparatively low number of Belgians from Charleroi left Belgium to join armed groups in the Levant, a comparatively high number of arrest actions involving Charleroi residents linked to and inspired by the Islamic State and who either left as foreign fighters or tried to leave populate our dataset.

Another surprising trend is the low number of incidents (4) in Antwerp, which resulted in a total of 11 people being arrested. While Antwerp is Belgium's second-largest population center and its second-most populated Muslim area (preceded only by the Brussels-Capital Region),¹⁰ prior research conducted by one of the authors found that Antwerp was home to 20% of

all Belgian foreign fighters in the Syria-Iraq conflict.¹¹ That Antwerp's relatively high degree of radicalization did not result in commensurate level of arrests may be a consequence of its location in Dutch-speaking Flanders. It was mostly French-speaking networks that plotted and carried out attacks in Belgium up until now, a phenomenon discussed in more detail below. Three out of four arrest actions in Antwerp involved individuals who were in contact with known Islamic State operative Hicham Chaib and were recruiting on behalf of the Islamic State in the city. This included a brother and sister of Hicham Chaib.

Operational Dynamics: Connections to Islamic State/Local Networks

When viewed at a high level, the individuals and incidents in the dataset were both closely tied to representatives of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and fairly well networked. For example, 94 of the 103 arrest actions that appear in the dataset (91% of the total) had some form of direct link to members of the Islamic State's central hub

9. Guy Van Vlierden, "Molenbeek and Beyond: The Brussels-Antwerp Axis as a Hotbed of Belgian Jihad," in Arturo Varvelli ed., *Jihadist Hotbeds: Understanding Local Radicalization Processes* (Milan, Italy: ISPI Report, July 2016).

10. While there is no official data about the number of Muslims in Belgium, let alone their distribution throughout the country, independent research has estimated that 260,902 Muslims live in the Brussels Capital Region, while an estimated 88,810 Muslims live in Antwerp. See Jan Hertogen, "Moslims in België van 6,3% naar 6,5% van de bevolking," npdata.be, October 8, 2014.

11. For background, see Guy Van Vlierden and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, *Belgian Fighters in Syria and Iraq – An Update of Our Data*, pietervanostaeyen.com, December 7, 2016.

in Iraq and Syria. That means that only nine arrest actions, which resulted in 14 people being arrested, lacked such a connection and were coded as “inspired.”

Although the number of inspired arrest actions was low, three out of the four attacks (75%) were perpetrated by inspired individuals who did not have a proven connection to the Islamic State operating in the Levant. There were important differences in the capabilities of the attackers between those who conducted the three inspired attacks and the one that was directly connected to the Islamic State. Indeed, while the three inspired attacks resulted in zero fatalities (notwithstanding the death of two of the attackers), the March 2016 attack against the Brussels airport and train station killed more than 30 people. The latter attack was also a much more high-profile event. The low or limited effectiveness of the three Islamic State–inspired Belgian attacks (versus those attackers who had direct connections to the group) comports with the work of Thomas Hegghammer, and others, who found evidence of “a veteran effect that makes [foreign fighter] returnees more lethal operatives” in the West.¹²

Statistically, 25% of all the incidents coded as inspired were attacks, versus 1% of all linked incidents. This makes it tempting to conclude that “inspired” actors in Belgium are much more prone to commit an attack, albeit with a lower likelihood of that attack being very lethal or causing much damage, than those connected to the Islamic State. But it has to be stressed that while the number of arrests and arrest actions gives a fairly good indication about the potential number of linked actors, it may underestimate the inspired ones. While members of a network often are caught as a consequence of their connections, inspired actors are much harder to detect and typically only surface when they try to commit an attack.

It is fair to say, however, that the total number of attacks has been rather low, given what the arrest action numbers reveal about the Islamic State’s connected presence in Belgium. In France, for example, a similarly complex operation as the Brussels attacks, carried out by multiple actors, was followed by a wave of single-perpetrator attacks.¹³ One can only guess why such a wave did not occur in Belgium after the March 2016 attacks, but it

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raises questions about the role that Belgium plays, or has played, for the Islamic State over time.

Historically, Belgium has often served as a logistical hub for jihadi activity, and as a result, it is thought that terrorists have spared the country from major attacks in order to maintain its safe haven status.¹⁴ There have been indications that the Islamic State has viewed Belgium in a similar way. Intercepted communications from the terrorists behind the Islamic State–linked March 2016 Brussels attacks confirm that they preferred an operation in France. “If you want to work on long term, we shouldn’t strike in Belgium but keep it as a fallback base,” they told a commander in Syria less than a month before the attacks.¹⁵ It is thought these plans were hastily changed after the March 18 arrest of fellow terrorist

12. For background and a review of other work on the topic, see Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice Between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” *American Political Science Review* 107:1 (2013): pp. 11-12.

13. We purposefully do not use the term “lone wolves,” since that would imply that the perpetrators did not have any connection, nor do we call them small-scale attacks, since the July 2016 terror attack in Nice, for example, killed many more people than the Brussels attacks.

14. This assumption was, for instance, formulated by Hugo Vandenberghe, a honorary senator and member of the Belgian parliamentary commission for the oversight of intelligence and security services from 1992 to 2010: “Terrorists have been building their points of support [in Belgium] since the turn of the century already, but security services signaled that this network was intended for violent operations in other countries. We were not in sight ... Belgium was a kind of resting place where the terrorists withdrew.” In “België was rustplaats voor terroristen” *Tertio* 17:851 (2016).

15. Quoted from police documents in the possession of the authors.

Salah Abdeslam and the identification of coordinators Khalid and Brahim el-Bakraoui in Belgian media. The Islamic State may also prioritize other, potentially higher profile European targets—such as Paris and London. A possible indication of this is the drop in incident numbers for Belgium from 2016 to 2017, while the number of foiled plots in France further increased from 17 to 20 in the same period.¹⁶

The data also provides a number of important takeaways about the nature and organizational structure of Islamic State–linked incidents in Belgium. For example, 70 of the 94 linked arrest actions had enough details to discern if the connection to the Islamic State’s core in Iraq and Syria occurred as a result of a local individual or cell who did not travel to Iraq or Syria but had received some form of support from an Islamic State member based there, or if the individual or cell involved an Islamic State operative who had been deployed to Belgium by the group in Syria/Iraq. Sixty arrest actions (85.7% of the total) were connected to the Islamic State through a local cell, while 13 arrest actions (a little more than 18%) had a connection to a deployed operative. This level of connectedness with local cells could also help to explain the low number of inspired incidents, since it seems relatively easy for a local Belgian recruit to get in touch with the organization.

The association of individual arrest actions with specific, identifiable, and named terror networks also helps sharpen our understanding of how the various Islamic State–linked incidents overlapped and were interconnected. The data revealed that there are at least 10 named Islamic State network clusters in Belgium, and coders were able to associate or tie 56 of the 94 Islamic State–linked arrest action cases—more than half of the applicable data—to at least one of those networks. The breakdown of those associations is shown in Table 1.

It is crucial to highlight that five of these entities (the Zerkani network and the Paris, Brussels, Verviers, and Argenteuil cells) can be considered as parts of a whole, mainly distinguished by their appearance in time. There are sufficient indications that the Paris and Brussels attacks and the attack that was foiled in Verviers all were plotted from within the same circle¹⁷—a part of the Islamic State’s external operations division in Syria (known as the “Amniyat”) dominated by French-speaking planners.¹⁸ As a result of personal links, the French-speaking planners within the Amniyat recruited heavily from the foreign fighter contingent that was sent to Syria by the Brussels-based network of Khalid Zerkani—such as Paris attacks coordinator Abdelhamid Abaaoud himself. And while French and Belgian authorities insisted that there was no link between the Brussels or Paris attacks and the plot that was foiled in late March 2016 in the French town of Argenteuil, the main suspect of that failed plot—Reda Kriket—was also a high-profile

Table 1: Network Associations of Islamic State Arrest Actions in Brussels

NETWORK	NUMBER OF ARREST ACTIONS
Zerkani network*	13
Paris cell*	12
Brussels cell*	10
Verviers cell	6
Jumet cell	4
Ostend Chechen network	4
Maaseik network	3
Argenteuil cell	3
The Way of Life	2
Kamikaze Riders	1

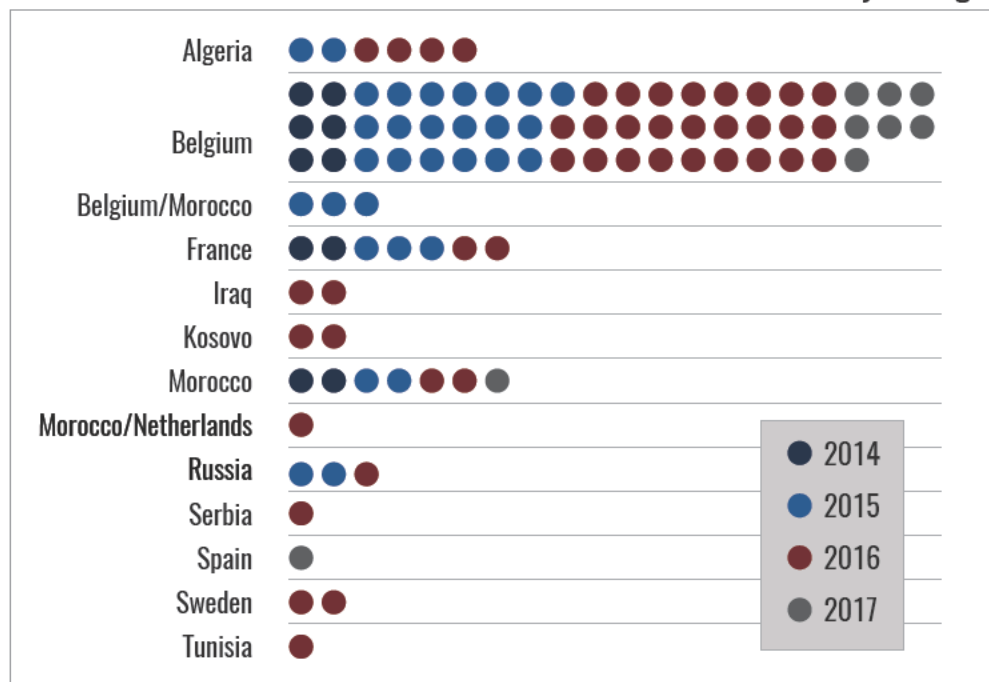
* One arrest action was connected to both the Zerkani network and the Brussels cell. One arrest action was also connected to both the Paris and Brussels cells. The numbers above reflect the total number of links for each network.

16. For background, see Jean-Charles Brisard, “#Terrorisme: 20 attentats déjoués en France en 2017 (contre 17 en 2016) @gerardcollomb @Le_Progres#Terrorisme: 20 attentats déjoués en France en 2017 (contre 17 en 2016) @gerardcollomb @Le_Progres,” Twitter, January 8, 2018, and “France foils 20 planned terror attacks in 12 months,” *Local*, January 9, 2018.

17. Belgium’s Federal Prosecutor Frédéric Van Leeuw recently spoke about “one big operation,” including the botched attack on a high-speed Thalys train in August 2015 in France. For background, see “Single IS plot behind string of French, Belgian attacks: prosecutor,” *Expatica*, November 13, 2017.

18. For background, see Jean-Charles Brisard and Kévin Jackson, “The Islamic State’s External Operations and the French Belgian Nexus,” *CTC Sentinel* 9:11 (2016).

Table 2: Nationalities of Individuals Arrested for Islamic State Activity in Belgium



Zerkani recruit.¹⁹Altogether, these five networks account for almost 80% of all the incidents that could be tied to an identified network.

The role of the Zerkani network as a provider of terrorist operatives may explain why the Islamic State’s threat on Belgian soil has been mainly a Francophone phenomenon. Most of the Dutch-speaking foreign fighters were recruited by the Antwerp-based Shariah4Belgium, which was not greatly instrumentalized for the Islamic State’s external operations—likely because none of its members reached an important position within the Amniyat. Of the clusters listed above, only the Maaseik network and The Way of Life were connected to Shariah4Belgium—the first rather loosely, while the latter was meant to become its successor.²⁰

In between the plots that were directed from the highest echelons of the Islamic State and the inspired type of incidents, Belgium has also had cases of so-called “remote-controlled terrorism.” In this kind of plot, an

Islamic State operative tries to help people conduct violent operations outside of Iraq and Syria remotely using social media, often without really knowing them. A notorious example was Rachid Kassim, the French Islamic State operative based in Mosul who was reportedly responsible for the July 2016 Normandy church attack in France.²¹ In Belgium, Kassim’s plotting has resulted in three arrests. A similar recruiter was the Belgian citizen Tarik Jadaoun, connected with at least two arrests on Belgian soil. After he was caught in Iraq, Jadaoun confessed that he, too, was implicated in several plots remotely controlled by Kassim, suggesting that they worked together.²²

Nationality, Place of Birth, and Ethnic Heritage

When possible, the place of birth, nationality, and ethnic heritage of the individuals listed in the dataset was coded. This type of data was fairly well-represented, as coders were able to enter details for at least one of these three categories for 116 individuals. This included citizenship details for 94 people, data about the ethnic

19. Guy Van Vlierden, “The Zerkani Network: Belgium’s Most Dangerous Jihadist Group,” Jamestown Foundation, April 12, 2016.

20. For some background, see “8 IS jihadi fighters face trial in Antwerp,” FlandersNews.Be, December 12, 2016.

21. Bridget Moreng, “ISIS’ Virtual Puppeteers: How They Recruit and Train ‘Lone Wolves,’” *Foreign Affairs*, September 21, 2016.

22. “IS-terrorist die wil terugkeren naar ons land bekend: ‘Ik was kandidaat voor aanslag in België,’” *Het Laatste Nieuws*, January 5, 2018; Guy Van Vlierden, “Confessions of Belgian IS terrorist Tarik Jadaoun in Iraq,” *emmejihad*, January 5, 2018.

heritage of 55 individuals, and the place of birth for 48. In 41% of cases, data was available and entered for at least two of these categories. All three categories were filled out for 19 individuals.

The citizenship category reveals both the international and homegrown nature of the Islamic State threat in Belgium. For example, the 94 individuals for whom we have this type of information were citizens of a total of 12 different countries.²³ Sixty-one of these individuals, 65% of the total, were citizens of Belgium.²⁴ Of those that were Belgian citizens, at least 27 individuals (44%) were also born in the country.²⁵ The prominence of Belgians in the dataset points to what is, at least in strong part, a localized and homegrown Islamic State threat picture.

Another important thread in the citizenship data are the countries whose citizens appear consistently across the June 2014 to October 2017 timeframe. There are only two countries—Belgium and Morocco—whose citizens appear across each of those four years. In addition to these two countries, France is the only other country whose citizens appear across three years in the dataset, a finding that speaks to the Belgian-Moroccan-French Islamic State nexus that the group has leveraged to gain influence, and to execute a number of attacks, in the region.

The importance of the Moroccan dimension is confirmed by the high proportion of individuals having some type of Moroccan connection in the data. Thirty-eight individuals, 33% of the total, were either born in Morocco, had Moroccan citizenship, or had family roots in the country. It is also important to note that 29 of the 38 Moroccan-linked individuals were Belgian citizens, a statistic that reinforces the homegrown yet transregional nuances with which Belgian counterterrorism authorities must grapple.

People of Moroccan descent represent the largest group within Belgium's Muslim population, so it may seem logical that they figure prominently in the dataset—as they do

in the Belgian foreign fighter contingent. But while the Belgian-Turkish community is only slightly smaller than the Belgian-Moroccan, is also predominantly Islamic, and is similarly exposed to discrimination and social exclusion, there are very few foreign fighters of Belgian-Turkish descent. In fact, individuals with this type of ethnic heritage are completely absent in our dataset. The level of social cohesion within the Belgian-Turkish community and the influence of Turkish authorities on religious life in their diaspora provides one possible explanation for why this is the case. The large number of recruits from the Moroccan community might also have something to do with close social ties, especially those between brothers and friends. A recent article about the Moroccan-Turkish gap within the Belgian jihadi landscape noted, "Many of the high-profile European terror cells, most notably the Paris/Brussels cell, were made up of individuals who did not initially unite around an ideology, but rather around the common bonds of being friends and family."²⁶

"While Belgian-Moroccan terrorists have tried to use their ancestral background to go underground and escape...we haven't seen evidence yet of real operational links between Belgian networks and Islamic State cells on Moroccan soil."

While Belgian-Moroccan terrorists have tried to use their ancestral background to go underground and escape from European law enforcement (such as Zerkani recruit Gelel Attar, who was convicted in absentia by a Brussels court in 2015 and could only be arrested after he surfaced in Morocco in 2016²⁷), we haven't seen evidence yet of real operational links between Belgian

23. This included citizens of Algeria, Belgium, France, Iraq, Kosovo, Morocco, Netherlands, Russia, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, and Tunisia.

24. Four of the 61 individuals were also dual citizens of another country.

25. According to our data, 27 Belgian citizens were born in Belgium, three were born in Morocco, and one was born in Lebanon. There were also 30 Belgian citizens for whom place of birth could not be identified.

26. Paige V. Pascarelli, "Identities 'Betwixt and between': analyzing Belgian representation in 'homegrown' extremism," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, September 10, 2017.

27. Dana Ford and Merieme Arif, "Morocco Arrests Belgian with Links to Paris Attacks," CNN, January 19, 2016.

networks and Islamic State cells on Moroccan soil. Such connections would not be all too surprising, however, as the CTC's previous *Beyond the Caliphate* report on Morocco documented "a sizeable amount of activity" that has been either directly linked to or inspired by the Islamic State. While there have been no Islamic State-connected attacks in Morocco to date, between June

"Belgium has one of the highest numbers of foreign fighters per capita. According to a 2016 study about foreign fighter flows to the Islamic State, Belgium ranks fourteenth in the world."

2014 and May 2017, 33 plots were uncovered and 12 arrests for Islamic State support occurred in the country. The majority of disrupted plots in Morocco also had some type of formal tie to Islamic State Central in Syria or Iraq.²⁸ Estimates from 2015 also suggest that approximately 2,000 Moroccan citizens or individuals of Moroccan origin have traveled to Syria or Iraq to fight.²⁹

All of this presents two unique and equally troubling potential issues: the return of additional veteran foreign fighters to Belgium and would-be foreign fighters who are sympathetic to and motivated by the Islamic State who decide to conduct a violent operation at home rather than traveling to a conflict theater abroad. This issue is particularly relevant in the Belgian context, as Belgium has one of the highest numbers of foreign fighters per capita. According to a 2016 study about foreign fighter flows to the Islamic State, Belgium ranks fourteenth in the world, while Kosovo, Bosnia, Macedonia, and Montenegro are the only European countries with a higher per

capita number.³⁰ Belgium's prominence as a relatively high per-capita Islamic State foreign fighter-producing country is most likely caused by the presence of two successful recruitment organizations—Shariah4Belgium and the Zerkani network. According to the latest Belgian foreign fighter figures compiled by Pieter Van Ostaeyen and one of the authors, Shariah4Belgium has sent at least 101 people to the Syrian-Iraqi conflict, while the latter has recruited 85 foreign fighters.³¹ Both organizations were also well-established already at the start of the Syrian conflict. Shariah4Belgium evolved at that time from an overtly acting protest group into a jihadi recruitment machine, while the Zerkani network operated mainly underground. It had several veterans of previous jihadi waves in its ranks and was orientated toward militancy and violent operations at an early stage. Plans for an attack on Belgian soil, tied to Zerkani network operatives, were overheard in 2012³²—an incident that foreshadowed the role the network would play for and within the Islamic State.

Weapons and Targets

The low number of Islamic State-linked or -inspired terrorist attacks in Belgium and the lack of reported details limits what can be said about targets and/or weapon usage. Only eight incidents provided data regarding a weapon used or recovered, and nine provided actual or potential target locations. These figures include information from the four terror attacks that occurred in Belgium, where the weapons used and targets hit were known. As such, specific information about potential weapons and targets related to the 18 plots that feature in our dataset is not a well-filled category.

Yet, there are still some noteworthy variations that appear in the data. For example, two of the four attacks in the dataset were knife attacks that targeted police officers that took place within the last year. Public information available at the time of writing indicates that those two attacks were conducted by individuals inspired by and not directly connected to Islamic State Central in Syria or Iraq.

28. For background, see Ellen Chapin, *Beyond the Caliphate: Morocco* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2017).

29. Hasnaa El Jamali and Laurent Vinatier, "There and Back: Trajectories of North African Foreign Fighters in Syria," *Small Arms Survey Issue Brief 3* (2015).

30. Richard Florida, "The Geography of Foreign ISIS Fighters," CityLab, August 10, 2016.

31. Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "From Grozny to Raqqa with Stopover Brussels – The 'Eastern Contingent' of Belgian Foreign Terrorist Fighters," Bellingcat, August 29, 2017.

32. Guy Van Vliedden, "Belgium Knew in 2012 Already That Paris Suspects Were Plotting Attacks," emmejihad, January 26, 2016.

Explosive devices were used in the other two attacks, which targeted train stations and the Brussels airport. As has been well documented, the powerful but unstable explosive TATP was used by Islamic State operatives to execute the March 2016 dual-pronged attack against the Brussels airport and metro station. That same type of explosive was also used during the Islamic State-linked suicide attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Manchester in May 2017. Given the association between TATP and a number of Islamic State-linked attacks in Europe, it is worth pointing out that the only other time TATP appears in the dataset is when it was found in Verviers by police authorities in mid-January 2015, after the police disrupted what is now understood to be an Islamic State-linked cell that was in direct connection with Abdelhamid Abaaoud—the planner for both the November 2015 Paris and March 2016 Brussels attacks.

Conclusion

The data compiled for this report points at a highly significant Islamic State presence in Belgium. Since June 2014, there were four attacks and 103 arrest actions related to the terrorist group, of which an overwhelming majority was directly linked to Islamic State operatives in Syria or Iraq.³³ We also found that these connections relied heavily on local cells, making it easier for Belgian followers to get in touch with the organization. This may explain the rather low number of merely inspired incidents. The true potential of inspired actors in Belgium is likely underestimated, however, since they are harder to detect in preliminary stages. And in contrast to the findings above, we also found that three out of four attacks were conducted by inspired actors. This type of dual-pronged threat provides a counterterrorism prioritization and resource conundrum. The more local cells that are dismantled, the higher the chance that individual followers will act on their own. And while the attacks conducted by inspired actors were far less sophisticated and much less lethal, these plots are harder to foil and still help the Islamic State to maintain its relevance.

Adding to this complexity is our finding that while the threat in Belgium is predominantly homegrown, it also has strong regional, transregional, and international

dimensions. A clear majority of individuals in our dataset were Belgian citizens, but 11 other nationalities were detected as well. A significant part could be linked to Morocco, and our data also revealed a close cross-border coordination between Islamic State networks in Belgium and France. This confirms the existence of an important Belgian-Moroccan-French nexus that the group has leveraged already to execute a number of attacks—and altogether, Belgium is clearly facing a multifaceted terrorist threat.

"The true potential of inspired actors in Belgium is likely underestimated, however, since they are harder to detect in preliminary stages."

Looking at geography, we found that the capital city of Brussels is the undisputed hotspot of Islamic State activity in Belgium. Much more surprising, however, is the difference between the cities of Antwerp and Charleroi. Prior research conducted by one of the authors showed that the latter hardly contributed to the Belgian contingent of foreign terrorist fighters, while the first counted for a fifth of them. In our dataset, however, Charleroi is the second-most important hotspot with 14 incidents (of which one was an attack), while Antwerp only had four incidents. This means that the threat at home does not necessarily coincide with the locations from where most recruits left Belgium to join the Islamic State and other armed militant groups in the Levant. Other dynamics may be at play, such as the relatively separated ways of operating between French- and Dutch-speaking networks in Belgium. It is imperative for security services to keep that in mind while assessing the threat.

There was a sharp downturn in Islamic State-linked and -inspired incidents in Belgium in 2017. While the data clearly shows a reduction to 2014 incidents levels, the

33. According to other data compiled for the CTC's Beyond the Caliphate project, the Islamic State also had direct ties to a large number of incidents in a number of other countries. For background, see the Turkey, Southeast Asia, and Morocco product releases at <https://ctc.usma.edu/beyond-the-caliphate>.

"why" is a more difficult question to answer. The Islamic State has shown a resilience with Belgium, driven by its desire to establish a European staging ground for operations. This desire could potentially explain the low number of Islamic State attacks in Belgium—although it should be noted that the March 2016 Brussels attacks were among the deadliest on European soil and that a number of cells were disrupted while in the process of planning other attacks.

In their response to the threat, Belgian security services can boast of record high numbers in the legal prosecution of terror suspects. According to Europol figures, 138 verdicts were delivered in 2016 alone (all of these verdicts were for jihadi-linked cases, 127 of which were convictions). That is the highest number in the European Union, and even with an acquittal rate of 8%, the number of terrorism convictions in Belgium was higher than in much more populous France and Germany combined.³⁴ But this is only part of the picture. While the average sentence handed down by Belgian courts in 2016 for terrorism was only five years in jail, a majority of the convicted did not serve sentences that long. In July 2017, only 35% of all individuals convicted for a terrorist offense since August 2015 turned out to still be behind bars. Four percent had served their sentence already, and 19% were released conditionally, while 42% had never been in reach of law enforcement and were convicted in absentia.³⁵ If time in jail or local deradicalization efforts do not help those convicted of terrorism offenses to reject politically motivated violence as a method to achieve change, short sentences could compound or complicate what is already a fairly complicated problem over the longer term.

The apparent downturn in Islamic State activity made Belgian authorities very recently decide to lower the official terrorist threat level to level two.³⁶ It had been at level three since the November 2015 Paris attacks and was further raised to level four for a short period after the March 2016 Brussels attacks. It is questionable, however, whether the return to level two was not mainly the result of financial and political pressure to scale down the extra security measures (including the deployment of the army for safeguarding public places at an extra cost of 137.5 million euros), given that the true extent of the danger posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters is still not clear.

This return of foreign fighters is indeed one of the most significant developments to monitor, combined with the fate of the radicalized would-be foreign fighters who could decide instead to commit acts of terror locally. Belgium's large foreign fighter population has undoubtedly been thinned by the conflict in Iraq and Syria, and it is likely that some portion will decide to continue to fight in the region or seek out other conflict zones in Africa or Asia. However, if even 10% of those who left to fight alongside the Islamic State return to Belgium, that represents an extremely dangerous contingent of veteran, radicalized individuals that will be reintroduced to a fertile—and well-connected—recruiting ground. And while the Jewish Museum attack in late May 2014 has already showed how the danger can also come from near abroad (the attacker, Mehdi Nemmouche, was a dual citizen of France and Algeria), it should be worrying that in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and France combined, at least 500 of these returnees are currently free.³⁷

34. "TESAT – European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2017," Europol, available at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/tesat/2017>. The comparison across countries that is being made here is limited to jihadi-linked terrorism cases.

35. This is according to data provided by Justice Minister Koen Geens to the Belgian parliament. See <https://www.dekamer.be/QRVA/pdf/54/54K0131.pdf>.

36. In Belgium, the terrorist threat is indicated on a four-point scale. Level one means that the threat is low and an attack considered highly unlikely. Level two means that the threat is moderate and an attack still unlikely. Level three means that the threat is serious and an attack "possible and credible." Level four means that the threat is very serious and an attack is "imminent."

37. Isolde Van den Eynde and Guy Van Vlierden, "Terreurniveau zakt van 3 naar 2 – Maar wel 500 jihadi's op vrije voeten," *Het Laatste Nieuws*, January 23, 2018.

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