

## *Belgium: Extremism and Terrorism*

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On July 25, 2023, a Brussels court convicted Salah Abdeslam, Mohamed Abrini, and six others of complicity in the March 2016 Brussels bombings. The court also convicted Oussama Atar, Osama Krayem, Ali El Haddad Asufi, and Bilal El Makhoukhi. Two men, a Tunisian and a Rwandan, were cleared of murder but were convicted of taking part in terrorist activities, along with the other six. Brothers Smail and Ibrahim Farisi were cleared of all charges. The sentencing phase of the trial is expected to begin in September 2023. The March 2016 attacks—in which two suicide bombers launched attacks at Brussels’ Zaventem airport and another struck the city’s metro system—killed 32 people in total. Eight of the defendants were accused of supporting a terrorist cell or supplying the Brussels attackers with weapons and logistical assistance. Atar, the ringleader of the bombings, was allegedly a senior figure in ISIS’s intelligence service. Atar was tried in absentia as he purportedly died while fighting in Syria in 2017. During the defendants’ first preliminary hearing on September 12, 2022, Abdeslam refused to take the stand as he claimed the glass-enclosed cubicles used in the trial prevented the defendants from being able to effectively speak with their lawyers. On December 12, six defendants refused to attend the bombing trial due to unfair security measures, which included two strip searches a day. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Reuters](#), [Politico](#), [Euro News](#), [Agence France Presse](#), [Sky News](#), [National](#))

Brussels continues to grapple with terrorist incidents. On November 11, 2022, a knife-wielding man shouted “Allahu Akbar”—the Arabic phrase for “God is great”—before fatally stabbing one officer and injuring another near Brussels North station. The assailant was shot at by another officer from a different patrol and was taken to the hospital. According to officials, the suspect, Yassine M., had been in jail between 2013 and 2019 for non-terror offences and was on a violent extremist watch list. (Sources: [Sky News](#), [BBC News](#))

Islamic terrorism is not the only threat facing Belgium as police have been alerted of far-right activity. On September 28, 2022, Belgian police launched anti-terror raids targeting suspected far-right extremists in Antwerp and Ghent. According to authorities, the raid was conducted following an investigation of “the preparation of a terrorist attack and the violation of the legislation on weapons.” One suspect was killed following an exchange of fire, and according to Belgian broadcaster VRT, the man was reportedly a gold and silver trader who collected weapons and military items. (Source: [Associated Press](#))

## **Overview**

On the morning of March 22, 2016, two suicide bombers—later identified as former ISIS fighter [Ibrahim el-Bakraoui](#) and suspected bomb-maker [Najim Laachraoui](#)—launched attacks at Zaventem airport, killing 16 people. An hour later, another suicide bomber—identified as Ibrahim’s brother [Khalid el-Bakraoui](#)—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](#), who was arrested alongside several co-conspirators on April 8, 2016. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Guardian](#), [New York Times](#), [Guardian](#), [CNN](#), [New York Times](#))

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](#), [Reuters](#), [Atlantic](#), [Independent](#), [BuzzFeed](#), [New York Times](#), [U.N.](#), [Express.be](#), [Le Soir](#), [New York Times](#), [BuzzFeed](#), [New York Times](#), [Telegraph](#))

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](#), [Soufan Group](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [Politico](#), [Express.be](#), [United Nations](#), [Pieter van Ostayen](#), [New York Times](#), [BuzzFeed](#), [New York Times](#), [U.S. State Department](#))

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

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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 Brussels while allegedly shouting “allahu akbar.” (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Telegraph](#), [Independent](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [CNN](#), [BBC News](#), [Express](#))

### **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](#), [Express.be](#))

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](#), [Humo.be](#), [De Standaard](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Reuters](#), [United Nations](#))

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](#), [Humo.be](#), [De Standaard](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Reuters](#))

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](#))

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](#), [Guardian](#), [New York Times](#), [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#), [Wall Street Journal](#))

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](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [Wall Street Journal](#))

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 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.

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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](#), [Washington Post](#), [Washington Post](#))

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](#), [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#))

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](#) 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](#) 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](#), [Wall Street Journal](#))

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](#), who has been linked to at least 22 known extremists. (Source: [La Dernière Heure](#), [Washington Post](#), [Wall Street Journal](#))

Belgium’s Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (OCAM) maintains the country’s terror-threat level on a scale of one to four. As of 2022, the threat level remained at 2 or “medium” threat. OCAM releases an annual report that details terrorist and extremist threats on the country, and on December 2, 2022, OCAM released the findings from its 2021 report. According to the report, Belgium received 218 terrorist and extremist threats, with 50 percent of the threats rated as low-level and a third considered medium-level. One threat was considered serious and imminent, involving, Jürgen Conings, an armed far-right extremist former military man. In May and June 2021, Conings made threats against Belgian politicians and against virologist Marc Van Ranst. Furthermore, the report noted that Belgium has prioritized the monitoring of 64 jihadists, 64 right-wing extremists, and 14 left-wing extremists. (Sources: [Brussels Times](#), [Politico](#))

### *Foreign Fighters*

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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 fighter in Europe. Among Belgium's returning ISIS fighters were the November 2015 Paris attacks mastermind [Abdelhamid Abaaoud](#) and at least one of the November 2015 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: [Albawaba News](#), [Telegraph](#), [Telegraph](#))

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](#), [Le Soir](#), [Economist](#), [Express.be](#), [Le Vif](#), [Soufan Group](#), [Pieter van Ostayen](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [La Libre](#))

Belgian officials believe that 413 Belgians left to fight in Syria in 2015 and 2016. The government reported no foreign fighters leaving Belgium in 2017. In 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. In February 2020, estimates maintained that 125 Belgian fighters have returned home. (Sources: [Wall Street Journal](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [Foreign Policy Research Institute](#))

Additional reports in 2019 claim 602 Belgian citizens were believed to have joined or were affiliated with ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Of that figure, 93 of those supporters were women. Following the collapse of ISIS's caliphate, two women were returned to Belgium and charged in June 2020 and one woman was charged in July 2020. Additionally on July 16, 2021, Belgium repatriated six mothers from al-Roj camp. Upon their arrival to Belgium, the women were handed over to the jurisdiction of the Belgian court services and were convicted of participating in the activities of a terrorist group. Furthermore, on June 21, 2022, Belgium repatriated six women and 16 children from al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria. Upon their arrival to Belgium, the women were handed over to the jurisdiction of the Belgian court services and were convicted of participating in the activities of a terrorist group. (Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center](#), [France 24](#), [BBC News](#))

## **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](#)—launched attacks at Brussels' Zaventem airport, killing [16 people](#). An hour later, another suicide bomber—identified as Khalid el-Bakraoui—struck the city's metro system, killing [16 people](#) 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](#), [Guardian](#), [New York Times](#), [BBC News](#))

Also reportedly linked to the attacks was [Khalid Zerkani](#), 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](#), [New York Times](#))

On November 29, 2019, French investigators, in cooperation with Belgian police, released a 561-page indictment that concludes Belgian national, Oussama Atar—alias Abu Ahmed, was responsible for planning a series of attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016. The Paris incidents include the Stade de France and Bataclan theatre attacks in November 2015 where over 130 people were killed. The attacks in Belgium include one failed attack in Verviers in January 2015, one thwarted attack on a Thalys train in August 2015, and the March 2016 attack in Brussels. Atar, along with his cousin Khalid el-Bakraoui, set up an ISIS cell in Belgium in 2014, and it is suspected that he later relocated to Syria to plan attacks across the Middle East. It is alleged Atar was a close associate of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, then the spokesman of ISIS. Atar was later given authority to plan attacks across Europe. According to the indictment, Atar has since been killed in Syria. On February 5, 2020, it was reported that prosecutors in Belgium sought to bring Atar's seven accomplices to the country's highest court for their role in the 2016 Brussels attacks. One suspect, Salah Abdeslam, is already in French jail due to his role in the Paris 2015 attack that killed 131 people. Abdeslam has already been sentenced to 20 years in prison in Belgium for injuring three officers in a shootout before escaping and later being captured in France. (Sources: [Brussels Times](#), [Financial](#)

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[Times](#), [The National](#), [BBC News](#))

On May 1, 2021, a Belgian court announced that 10 suspects would stand trial for the 2016 Brussels terror attacks. However, one of the defendants, Oussama Atar, was presumably killed in Syria and would be tried in absentia. Prosecutors had previously requested that eight of the defendants face the Criminal Court of Assizes—a court where the most serious crimes are tried—on charges of assassinations and attempted assassinations in a terrorism context, and for membership of a terror. On September 12, 2022, Salah Abdeslam and eight other suspected members of ISIS appeared at a Brussels court where they faced charges for their connection to the March 2016 Brussels bombings. Abdeslam refused to take the stand as he claimed the glass-enclosed cubicles used in the trial prevent the defendants from being able to effectively speak with their lawyers. On December 5, 2022, the trial of the 2016 Brussels terror attacks commenced at a Brussels court. (Sources: [Deutsch Welle](#), [Agence France Presse](#), [Barron's](#), [Euro News](#), [National](#))

On July 25, 2023, a Brussels court convicted Abdeslam, Mohamed Abrini, Oussama Atar, Osama Krayem, Ali El Haddad Asufi, and Bilal El Makhroukhi of complicity in the March 2016 Brussels bombings. Two men, a Tunisian and a Rwandan, were cleared of murder but were convicted of taking part in terrorist activities, along with the other six. Brothers Smail and Ibrahim Farisi were cleared of all charges. The sentencing phase of the trial is expected to begin in September 2023. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Reuters](#), [Politico](#))

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.

- **October 16, 2023:** A 45-year-old Tunisian national, identified as Abdeslam Al Guilani, shoots three Swedish soccer fans in Brussels, killing two of them. He claims credit in a video posted online in which he identifies himself as a member of ISIS and says the Quran was “a red line for which he is ready to sacrifice himself.” The following day, police track the suspect to a café in Belgium’s Schaerbeek neighborhood, where they shoot and kill him. According to Belgian officials, Al Guilani specifically targeted Swedish supporters who were in Brussels to attend a Red Devils soccer match. Immediately after the attack, Belgium raises its threat level to four before lowering it to three after Al Guilani’s death. Associated Press, [BBC News](#), [Reuters](#)
- **November 11, 2022:** A knife-wielding man shouts “Allahu Akbar” the Arabic phrase for “God is great” before stabbing two police officers near Brussels North station. One officer was fatally stabbed and the other was injured before the assailant was shot at by another officer from a different patrol. The assailant was taken to the hospital. According to officials, the suspect, Yassine M., had been in jail between 2013 and 2019 for non-terror offences and was on a violent extremist watch list. Sources: [Sky News](#), [BBC News](#)
- **September 28, 2022:** Belgian police launch anti-terror raids targeting suspected far-right extremists in Antwerp and Ghent. According to authorities, the raid was conducted following an investigation of “the preparation of a terrorist attack and the violation of the legislation on weapons.” One suspect was killed following an exchange of fire, and according to Belgian broadcaster VRT, the man was reportedly a gold and silver trader who collected weapons and military items. Source: [Associated Press](#)
- **July 21, 2022:** The Belgian parliament ratifies a treaty that allows Iranian nationals convicted of terrorism in Belgium to be extradited to Iran to serve their sentence. Belgian nationals convicted in Iran would also be extradited to Belgium to complete their sentence. Accordingly, each country can issue amnesty for the captives once they are extradited. Sources: [Middle Eastern Monitor](#), [New York Times](#)
- **June 30, 2022:** A Belgian court imposes a three-year suspended sentence on Abid Aberkane for his role in sheltering the sole surviving member attacker of the November 2015 Paris attacks. The ruling came a day after a French court sentenced Salah Abdeslam, the surviving assailant, to life imprisonment. Abdeslam had stayed with Aberkane in Brussels. Source: [France 24](#)
- **June 21, 2022:** Belgium repatriates six women and 16 children from Al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria. Upon their arrival to Belgium, the women were handed over to the jurisdiction of the Belgian court services and were convicted of participating in the activities of a terrorist group. Source: [France 24](#)
- **July 17, 2021:** Belgium repatriates six mothers and 10 Belgian children of ISIS fighters from al-Roj camp in Syria. Upon their return to Belgium, the six mothers are arrested and charged, while the children are taken under the care of youth protection services. Source: [i24 news](#)
- **May 19, 2021:** Belgian police launch a search for Jurgen Conings, a soldier with suspected far-right views, who went on the run after violently threatening several prominent state and public figures. Among those who Conings threatened was top Belgian virologist Marc Van Ranst. According to Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne, Conings is an “acute threat” as he was able to access an array of heavy weapons and had taken guns and missile launchers from his barracks. On June 19, Belgian authorities discover Conings’ body in a park in Dilserbos, where he died from a self-inflicted gunshot from a weapon he stole from an armory. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#), [Vice News](#)
- **May 1, 2021 - December 5, 2022:** In May, a Belgian court announces that 10 suspects will stand trial for the 2016 Brussels terror attacks.



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Among the defendants is Salah Abdeslam, a French citizen who was also involved in the November 2015 Paris attacks. On September 12, Salah Abdeslam and eight other suspected members of ISIS appeared at a Brussels court where they faced charges for their connection to the March 2016 Brussels bombings. Abdeslam refuses to take the stand as he claims the glass-enclosed cubicles used in the trial prevent the defendants from being able to effectively speak with their lawyers. On December 5, the trial officially commenced. If convicted, nine of the men will be sentenced to life imprisonment, and the other faces a 10-year sentence. The trial is expected to last until June 2023. Sources: [Deutsch Welle](#), [Deutsch Welle](#), [Agence France Presse](#), [Barron's](#), [Euro News](#)

- **February 4, 2021:** An Antwerp court convicts Assadollah Assadi, an Iranian diplomat, to 20 years in prison for an attempted 2018 bombing in Paris.  
Assadi, who was attached to the Iranian diplomatic mission in Austria, previously claimed diplomatic immunity from prosecution. However, investigators discovered Assadi supplied explosives for a planned attack on a rally organized by exiled Iranian opposition activists in Paris. Assadi, who was arrested in Germany in July 2018, is the first Iranian to be sentenced for terrorism in the European Union since Iran's 1979 revolution. Source: [Voice of America](#)
- **October 31, 2020:** Two underage people suspected of plotting a potential terror attack are arrested in Liège.  
According to media sources, the two suspects, who were placed in a youth protection center, had recorded a video of allegiance to ISIS and were suspected of planning a stabbing attack against police officers. Source: [Guardian](#)
- **February 2, 2020:** A woman wielding a knife goes on a stabbing rampage in Ghent.  
The attacker wounds two people before being shot at and apprehended by police. The attack happened about one hour after a knife attack in London, which London officials labeled as terror motivated. The motive behind the Ghent attack is still currently under investigation. Source: [Euro Weekly News](#)
- **January 21, 2020:** Brussels' correctional court sentences Soufian Defauwe to five years in prison in absentia on charges of participating in terror-related activities.  
Defauwe allegedly sent threatening messages about "shredded bodies" to a former education minister. His current whereabouts have been unknown since he left for Syria in 2014. Source: [Brussels Times](#)
- **November 29, 2019:** French investigators, in cooperation with Belgian police, release a 561-page indictment that concludes Belgian national, Oussama Atar—alias Abu Ahmed, was responsible for planning a series of attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016.  
The Paris incidents include the Stade de France and Bataclan theatre attacks in November 2015 where over 130 people were killed. The attacks in Belgium include one failed attack in Verviers in January 2015, one thwarted attack on a Thalys train in August 2015, and the March 2016 attack in Brussels. Atar, along with his cousin Khalid el-Bakraoui, set up an ISIS cell in Belgium in 2014, and it is suspected that he later relocated to Syria to plan attacks across the Middle East. It is alleged Atar was a close associate of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, then the spokesman of ISIS. Atar was later given authority to plan attacks across Europe. According to the indictment, Atar has since been killed in Syria. Sources: [Brussels Times](#), [Financial Times](#)
- **November 29, 2019:** Turkey's Interior Ministry repatriates two foreign fighters, Fatima B. and Rahma B. to Belgium.  
The women, who are sisters, went to join ISIS in Syria in 2013 and 2014 before fleeing a detention camp and escaping to Turkey. The two Belgian nationals were immediately jailed in Antwerp upon their arrival to Belgium. The two women face a five-year prison sentence. Sources: [Anadolu Agency](#), [Brussels Times](#)
- **June 24, 2019:** Belgian police arrest and charge a man with planning a terrorist attack against the U.S. embassy in Brussels.  
Source: [Reuters](#)
- **June 20, 2019:** Belgian police arrest two members of the PKK who are accused of recruiting and training Kurdish terrorist fighters.  
Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
- **April 19, 2019:** Belgian prosecutors confirm the arrest of a suspect in connection with the Paris terror attacks in November 2015.  
The man is accused of supplying weapons to those who carried out the attacks. Source: [Politico](#)
- **April 15, 2019:** Belgian police arrest a man known as Jimmy K. who is charged with participating in the activities of a terrorist group.  
Security forces do not find any attack plans, but elements of their probe indicate that he has been radicalized and had contacts with radicalized people. Source: [Defense Post](#)
- **April 8, 2019:** The Iraqi judiciary releases a courtroom confession of a Belgian ISIS fighter sentenced to death in which he admits to the use of chemical weapons and chlorine gas by the jihadist group.  
Bilal Abdul-Aziz al-Marshouhi faces death by hanging after being convicted by an Iraqi court of belonging to ISIS and fighting against Iraqi forces in Mosul. Source: [Kurdistan 24](#)
- **March 11, 2019:** Turkey's foreign ministry summons Belgium's ambassador in Ankara after a Belgian court blocks the prosecution of some 30 people with alleged links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).  
Source: [Reuters](#)
- **March 7, 2019:** A French-Algerian man and his accomplice are found guilty of shooting four people in the Jewish Museum of Brussels in May 2014.  
Both face a sentence of life in prison. Source: [Wall Street Journal](#)
- The Brussels Appeals Court rules that members of the PKK cannot be charged with terrorism despite Belgium and the EU recognizing the group as a terrorist organization.  
The appeals court rules that the counterterrorism laws cannot be imposed on the suspects since they are not waging a war on Belgium, but Turkey. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
- **February 23, 2019:** The Belgian Aliens Litigation Council (CCE) rules in favor of expelling Malika El Aroud—known as the "black widow" to Morocco—concluding that she would not be subjected to torture in her country of Morocco.

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She is the widow of a Taliban jihadi who posed as a television journalist to assassinate the Afghan political and military leader Ahmad Shah Massoud. The Belgian Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) rejected El Aroud's request for asylum as the Belgian government deemed her "too dangerous" and unworthy of international protection because she has not expressed "remorse" for her actions.

Source: [Morocco World News](#)

- **January 21, 2019:** Two Belgian nationals are arrested at the Port of Dover, U.K. on suspicion of terrorism offenses. No further details are provided regarding their offenses. Source: [Daily Express](#)
- **January 8, 2019:** The Liège Appeal Court sentences Nouredine Hamecha, who participated in the activities of a terrorist group, to 17 years in prison and strip him of his Belgian nationality. Hamecha had been arrested in early summer of 2016. He confessed to being an ISIS sympathizer and to trying to reach Syria on three occasions. Source: [The Brussels Times](#)
- **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](#), [New York Times](#)
- **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. 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](#), [New York Times](#), [Associated Press](#), [France24](#)
- **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](#), [Guardian](#)
- **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](#), [Reuters](#)
- **October 5, 2016:** A knife-wielding assailant stabs two policemen in Brussels in a suspected terrorist incident. Source: [BBC News](#)
- **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](#), [Telegraph](#), [Independent](#), [Wall Street Journal](#)
- **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](#), [Guardian](#), [New York Times](#), [Guardian](#), [CNN](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#)
- **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 Mostefaï was reportedly radicalized by a Belgian imam at a mosque in the French suburb of Luce. Sources: [New York Times](#), [Telegraph](#), [Telegraph](#)
- **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](#), [New York Times](#), [Los Angeles Times](#)
- **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](#)

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- **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](#), [BBC News](#)
- **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](#), [France24](#)
- **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](#)
- Belgian authorities discover that support cells of the Algerian GIA (Armed Islamic Group) are operating in Belgium. Source: [Egmont](#)
- 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. Source: [Egmont](#)
- - : Belgium suffers attacks from the European terrorist group the Communist Combatant Cells (CCC). Source: [Egmont](#)

## 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](#), [Le Soir](#), [La Libre](#), [Fox News](#), [New York Times](#), [BBC News](#), [Politico](#), [Economist](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [U.S. State Department](#))

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](#), [Newsweek](#), [Washington Post](#))

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 over-burdened court system that prevents individuals from engaging in plea agreements, and levies "relatively light sentences" on individuals convicted for terrorism-related offenses. (Sources: [Egmont](#), [Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), [BuzzFeed](#), [U.S. State Department](#))

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



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continue around high-target areas, including nuclear power stations and synagogues. (Sources: [Kingdom of Belgium](#), [Politico](#), [Agence France-Presse](#))

### *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 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](#), [Egmont](#), [Council of Europe](#))

Belgium believes that the fight against terrorism must not be allowed to infringe human rights, fundamental freedoms or international humanitarian law. Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website

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](#), [Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#))

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](#))

### *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 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. 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](#), [Le Soir](#), [U.S. Department of State 2015](#))

### *Legislative Efforts*

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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 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](#), [New York Times](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [Daily Sabah](#))

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](#))

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

### *Prisoner-Exchange Treaty with Iran*

On July 21, 2022, the Belgian parliament ratified a treaty that would allow Iranian nationals convicted of terrorism in Belgium to be extradited to Iran to serve their sentence. Belgian nationals convicted in Iran would also be extradited to Belgium to complete their sentence. Accordingly, each country can issue amnesty for the captives once they are extradited. The treaty originated in late February when the Iranian authorities detained Olivier Vandecasteele, a Belgian aid worker, on charges of espionage. Although Vandecasteele’s arrest was not made public, on March 11, Belgium signed the prisoner-exchange treaty with Iran that was then ratified in July 2022. The treaty also allows each party to grant amnesty when their nationals are extradited back to their home country. According to critics, Iran pushed for the treaty to secure the return of Assadollah Assadi, an Iranian diplomat who was convicted to 20 years in prison for orchestrating a plot to bomb a 2018 meeting of Iranian opposition leaders in France. If Assadi is allowed to return to Iran, critics claim he will likely be released rather than serving out the remainder of his sentence. (Sources: [Middle Eastern Monitor](#), [New York Times](#))

### *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](#), [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.” 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

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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](#), [Montreal Gazette](#), [United Nations](#))

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 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](#))

In December 2019, it was reported by Belgium's federal prosecutor's office that the number of new cases of terrorist activity in Belgium fell to 90, in comparison to 155 in 2018. The figure has not been that low since ISIS came onto the scene in 2013. According to federal prosecutor Frederic Van Leeuw, the terrorist threat comes not from structured terrorism, but rather from lone wolf actors seeking to commit attacks in Belgium and elsewhere. (Source: [Brussels Times](#))

### ***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. 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: [Reuters](#), [Expatica](#), [New York Times](#), [CNN](#))

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](#), [Globe and Mail](#))

## **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](#))

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.” (Source: [Egmont](#))

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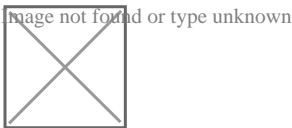
### *Sanctions*

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](#))

However, designations enacted by the Belgian government are not always observed by the Belgian Court of Cassation—which represents the opinion of the judiciary and is an independent body from the executive branch. On January 30, 2020, the Belgian Court of Cassation confirmed a ruling by the Brussels Court of Appeals that the Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK) should not be classified as a terrorist organization. Although the Belgian government considers the PKK to be a terrorist organization, the January 2020 ruling claimed that EU anti-terrorism legislation cannot be applied towards the PKK as it is involved in a non-international armed conflict or civil war and is thus allowed to use legitimate military force. The PKK is an internationally designated terrorist organization that has been in conflict with the Turkish government for decades. Although it is uncertain if the ruling will create diplomatic altercations with Turkey, the Belgian government depends on stable relations with Ankara to track Belgian nationals who joined ISIS in Syria and continue to remain in the region. (Sources: [Brussels Times](#), [Brussels Times](#))

### *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.



Source: [La Defense](#), May 2020

### *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. According to the Belgian Air Force, Operation Desert Falcon was completed on December 26, 2017, after 18 months. (Sources: [La Defense](#), [New York Times](#), [U.S. State Department](#), [Aviation 24](#))

### *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. As of 2020, Belgium maintains over 100 soldiers in Afghanistan to provide intelligence tasks in Kabul as well as training and security zone support near the Masar-E-Sharif base. (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](#))

### *Belgian Forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*



## ***Belgium: Extremism and Terrorism***

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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). 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. In 2020, Belgium continues to support EUTM with 15 soldiers who provide training to the Malian armed forces. As of June 2020, Belgium continues to participate in the U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Around five soldiers are headquartered at intelligence services in Bamako, over a dozen intelligence specialists are stationed in Gao, and around 55 soldiers are part of a platoon within a German unit. (Sources: [La Defense](#), [PressCenter.org](#))

### **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](#), [EPRS](#))

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](#))