



Policy Brief

The (Counter)-Terrorism Situation in Belgium

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The (counter)- terrorism situation in Belgium¹

This policy brief concerning the (Counter)-Terrorism situation in Belgium has been drafted in conformity with the differentiation of terrorist phenomena introduced in the Europol European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TESAT).

1. General overview

In 2015, Belgium made headlines after it turned out the Brussels municipality of Molenbeek was the centre and base of operations for the attacks that struck Paris on the night of November 13, 2015. The search for the terrorists who got away and the remaining network lead up to the attacks on Brussels on March 22, 2016. In 2017, the Belgian parliament presented its report of the inquiry into the circumstances that incited the attacks. The Belgian government adopted two measures for the prevention of violent radicalism and terrorism, one of them being the comprehensive action plan to combat radicalisation.²

With the establishment of the 'Caliphate' in Syria, we witnessed a resurgence of violent extremism, which as a result of refugee flows, would also have serious implications in Europe. This was confirmed after the attack on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. A real threat would also manifest itself on Belgian territory in early 2015 after a large-scale anti-terrorist operation, with the events in Verviers as the specific focus.

The situation during the period 2015-2017 involved the height of jihadist extremism in the West. The current climate cannot be compared to the situation back then. However, several incidents and arrests continue to show that the threat posed by this jihadist extremism is still present. There were still sporadic jihadist attacks in the West in 2022.

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From the 15 completed, foiled and failed attacks in 2021, Belgium reported one attack. Consisting of a failed right-wing terrorist attack. There continues to be low numbers of completed, foiled and failed right-wing terrorist attacks. After the publication of the EU Terrorism Situation & Trend Report, one attack of a potential violent extremist took place in Schaerbeek, Brussels. A police officer was fatally stabbed in a terror attack carried out by an individual known by the government as an radicalised individual.³

Within the European Union Belgium has reported the highest number of convictions for terrorist offences in 2021 of which a large majority led to guilty verdicts.⁴

Member state	Jihadist Terrorism	Right-wing Terrorism	Left-wing and Anarchist Terrorism	Ethnonationalist and Separatist Terrorism	Other	Not Specified	TOTAL
Belgium	18	3	6	0	0	5	32

Table 1: Arrests in 2021 per Member State and per affiliation ⁵

Member state	2019	2020	2021
Belgium	91	52	107

Table 2: Number of convictions and acquittals for terrorist offences in 2019,2020 and 2021 ⁶

2. Jihadist terrorism

Today, the so-called global jihad with departing individuals, however, is less present. Although Islamic State and al-Qaeda remain committed within their propaganda and affiliated groups to their expansive objectives and networks, their regional agenda continues to gain importance. Alongside this, there is a need to remain attentive to the phenomenon of inspired terrorism where structures and patterns are less clearly identifiable. Today, the Sahel appears to be the epicentre of the global terrorism phenomenon. The recent resurgence of al-Qaeda and IS in the Middle East and North Africa is an additional indication that they (and their affiliates) are far from being eradicated as a threat. In addition, the resurgence of al-Qaeda and other groups in Taliban- and Haqqani-controlled Afghanistan raises fears that the country may return to its pre-9/11 days as an unparalleled safe haven for global terrorist groups.⁷

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Similar to previous years, the vast majority (340) of the convictions and acquittals in 2021 for all terrorist offences concerned jihadist terrorism. A significant amount of the offences related to jihadist terrorism continued to be linked to terrorist groups that are, or were, active in Syria, such as IS, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (former Jabhat al-Nusra and Jabhat Fath al-Sham), the Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement, and Junud al-Sham. In August 2021, the Court of First Instance of Brussels in Belgium convicted a Belgian national to four years of imprisonment and a fine for participation in the activities of a terrorist group, for self-training and for attempting to receive training. The defendant endorsed IS ideology and was in contact with multiple IS supporters and terrorist convicts. He also distributed IS propaganda material on social media and provided support, including financial, to the terrorist organisation. According to the investigations, the defendant was preparing a bomb attack against a Belgian prison where a relative was detained.⁸

In November 2022, a terrorist attack took place in Brussels. A man armed with a knife attacked a police patrol, fatally stabbing an officer. The suspect had earlier in the day gone to a police station, saying he would attack police, after which he was taken to a hospital for psychiatric evaluation but later released.⁹

In March 2023, Belgian police arrested a total of eight people being suspected of preparing a terrorist attack in Belgium. The arrests were a result of two investigation linked to each other.¹⁰

In May, the Belgian police again arrested seven suspects for planning a terrorist attack. The seven people were suspected of supporting the Islamic State group and plotting a "terrorist attack". Almost all of the suspects were ethnic Chechens and belonged to a group of strong supporters of IS.¹¹

3. Ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorism

Ethno-nationalist and separatist extremism is highly dependent on international relations and events. Political shifts in the source country can be used by violent extremist groups and individuals to fuel extremist narratives and, in addition, can incite supporters to use violent means to pursue their political objectives. This can have a major impact on public safety.

Iran

In February 2021, the Court of First Instance of Antwerp in Belgium convicted three men and a woman of participation in the activities of a terrorist organisation and attempted murder by an attempted terrorist attack. Through these acts they intended to kill participants, with terrorist intent, at a rally organised by the exiled Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK/National Council of Resistance of Iran, CNRI) in the French town of Villepinte in June 2018.

Turkey

All PKK-related cases in Belgium resulted in acquittals based on a ruling of the Court of Cassation from January 2020 referring to the non-applicability of provisions on terrorist offences to acts of armed forces in an armed conflict that is subject to international humanitarian law. In contrast, cases in other Member States concluded with convictions for terrorist offences. In the EU, national PKK organisations are coordinated by the Kurdish umbrella organisation in Europe, the European Kurdish Democratic Societies Congress (KCDK-E), which is based in Belgium.

Moreover, the Turkish presidential elections in 2023 had the potential to add more oil to the fire. Security services have therefore been taking into account that both during and after the elections, the number of protests from the Kurdish community in Belgium could increase. In this regard, particular attention should be paid to the possible presence of Turkish-nationalist counter-demonstrators, possibly including supporters of the Grey Wolves.

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Ukraine

The impact of this war made itself felt in Belgium primarily through an influx of Ukrainian refugees seeking housing in our country. Then there is the polarising aspect of the war and its impact on our society. These go beyond the division into 'Russia' versus 'Ukraine' camps. As with any conflict, we have to be attentive to recuperation by extremist groups that want to exploit the situation for their own agenda.¹⁴ At the beginning of the war there were regular reports of cases of discrimination and/or vandalism against Russian or Ukrainian residents in Belgium. The occurrence of these incidents decreased over the course of the war. The number of protest actions against the war was also rather limited.

4. Left-wing and anarchist terrorism

In recent years, it has been very quiet around the leftist movement, however, this has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. During violent demonstrations against the corona's policies, leftist individuals and groups allegedly took part. In 2022, a whole series of actions took place in Belgium. From previous and upcoming events, it can be concluded that the actions of left-wing supporters often take place in the same locations.

Several left-wing groups are active in Belgium; they regularly organise demonstrations or other activities. Coderouge/Coderood is a known collective within Belgium of concerned citizens who are using civil disobedience to end the fossil fuel era.

The first major action of Code Red targeted TotalEnergies. Actions against oil giant Total took place across the country on 8 and 9 October 2022. It was notable that supporters could register in advance for information sessions or training sessions to prepare for the mass action of civil disobedience.¹⁵

In 2021, there were six arrests related to left-wing and anarchist terrorism.¹⁶

5. Right-wing terrorism

In particular cases, right-wing groups have even posed as saviours in crisis situations. Right-wing extremists used the heavy floods in parts of Belgium in 2021 to present themselves as the rescuers, carrying out activities such as the collection of groceries to help the affected citizens in the area. The aim of those actions was to generate new supporters and at the same time to highlight the shortcomings and delays in governmental assistance. COVID-19 was the most important propaganda topic for right-wing extremists in 2021. There was a clear consensus throughout all forms of right-wing extremism, to oppose the measures put in place by Member States in connection with COVID-19, such as lockdowns and social distancing measures. There was also strong opposition to the introduction of vaccine passports to participate in society, mandatory mask wearing and vaccinations or tracking apps were perceived as a government attempt to monitor citizens' lives.

The right-wing extremist scene also tried to exploit the crisis and the subsequent discontent of large sections of the population, for example by trying to influence or recruit those demonstrating peacefully against COVID-19 measures. However, their efforts were largely assessed as unsuccessful.

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Right-wing extremist propaganda has heavily touched upon immigration, attributing increases in crime to migrant populations or blaming them for burdening societies in the EU and criticising EU migration policies. In that context, the Great Replacement theory is propagated regularly.

Anti-Semitism is a recurring theme within the right-wing extremist scene and is integrated in almost all of its ideologies and sub-currents. An increase in anti-Semitic propaganda was observed in 2021.

On 28th September 2022, members of the Special Units raided several locations in Belgium. The searches took place as part of a judicial investigation into arms law violations and possible preparations for a terrorist attack. During the search of the president of a shooting club, Yannick Verdyck, a shootout with police ensued in which he lost his life. More than 100 firearms were found in his home, of which only 30 were licensed.¹⁷

There was one failed right-wing terrorist attack reported in Belgium in which homemade explosives was the weapon of choice. In May 2021, a 46-year-old member of the military expressed intentions to commit an attack on a well-known virologist in Belgium. The suspect was known to the intelligence service for his right-wing extremist ideas and links to persons involved in right-wing extremist groups. With the intention to carry out the attack, he had stolen military equipment, including firearms, from a Belgian military base. The suspect committed suicide and his body was found in a forest, after a month-long search by authorities from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

6. Counter-terrorism policing in Belgium

Another cornerstone of the Belgian response to the terrorist attacks is the implementation of 'Plan R', the Action Plan Radicalism, the current counter-terrorism strategy 'StrategyTER', aims to tackle extremism in a preventive, proactive, and repressive way. A network is in place in Belgium to early detect signs of extremism and terrorism. Problematic cases are then provided with a personalized trajectory to reduce risks and, when possible, prepare for reintegration into society. The Local Task Forces (LTF) and Local Integral Security Cells (LIVC-R) are the nerve centre within this process.¹⁸

A multidisciplinary approach is needed, focusing on prevention, early detection, reintegration, exchange of information, accurate prioritization and coordination of which services are best placed to take the most appropriate measures. These measures can be proactive, preventive or repressive, or aimed at social reintegration. Putting more effort on a culture of trust and cooperation between the various professional disciplines is primordial. In practice, this multidisciplinary approach translates into platforms for information exchange. These adhere to the vision of an individualized approach from the philosophy of risk management.¹⁹

International police cooperation and information sharing is crucial in the fight against terrorism. Many of the issues are in fact cross-border. Across the spectrum of terrorism, extremism and radicalism, law enforcement cooperation is crucial in preventing large-scale attacks and threats.

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