

State of Terror

The History and Influence of the Belgian ISIS Contingent

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Pieter Van Ostaeyen studied Medieval History with a specialisation in the history of the Crusades (KULeuven 1999) and Arabic and Islamic Studies, focusing on the history of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi and the Assassins (KULeuven 2003). Van Ostaeyen has been analysing the conflict in Syria since the outset in 2011. In 2012 he began reporting on foreign fighters and extremist

groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa and so-called Islamic State (ISIS). Since 1 September 2016, he is a PhD applicant at the University of Leuven researching the ideology of ISIS as presented in its English language magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*.

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This paper provides an insight into how the Belgian Jihadi scene and recruitment evolved since the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011. We will look into the recruitment hubs and provide a brief demographical background of recruits. After an introduction to the various networks in Belgium that led to the biggest Western European per-capita foreign fighter contingent, we will zoom in on the various groups in which the Belgian foreign fighters were involved and how these groups eventually were responsible for organising the biggest terrorist attacks in North-Western Europe since World War II: the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and the March 2016 Brussels attacks. Subsequently, we will look into the evolution of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) as an internationally focused terrorist organisation and how Western European foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) played a highly important role in the internationalisation of ISIS terror.

Recruitment in Belgium

Jihadi recruitment in Belgium for the war in Syria was mainly organised by three networks of Belgian-based individuals: Sharia4Belgium, Resto du Tawheed and the Zerkani network. The first two cooperated closely and were modelled after Anjem Choudary's Islam4UK. The latter was a network of what this author describes as a network of gangster jihadis.

Sharia4Belgium was a group, mostly active in Antwerp and the city of Vilvoorde, where its leader Fouad Belkacem actively preached "jihad" in the streets and in public places. Furthermore, they had a very prominent presence on the internet and social media. The group was able to attract young people from a variety of backgrounds, some of whom with a track record of minor crimes, some highly educated. Its sister network, Resto du Tawheed, was led by convert to Islam Jean-Louis Denis, nicknamed *Le Soumis* ("the humble one"), and was mostly active around Brussels North train station. The Zerkani network at last was active in and around the Brussels community of Molenbeek.

In October 2012, Sharia4Belgium disbanded, briefly after its leader Fouad Belkacem was arrested for a variety of hate crimes. Belkacem was eventually sentenced to a prolonged prison sentence. Soon after his arrest, the first high-ranking group members left for Syria to join the earliest jihadi networks operating in the country. One of the first individuals who left Belgium to join the ranks of jihadi networks in Syria was Houssein el-Ouassaki, originating from the city of Vilvoorde. At the time of his entry into Syria via the Turkish border, el-Ouassaki did not have any connections with local jihadi groups and hardly spoke Arabic. He was determined to join a group of "mujahidin", so he approached the first Syrians he encountered and asked to bring him to the "mujahidin".¹ The Syrians drove el-Ouassaki to a camp of the Free Syrian Army, but when he saw some of them smoking, he refused to get out of the car and told his escorts that

¹ The description of the development of the Belgian networks in Syria is based on Pieter Van Ostaeyen and Guy Van Vlierden, *The Role of Belgian Fighters in the Jihadification of the Syrian War – From Plotting Early in 2011 to the Paris and Brussels Attacks*, European Foundation for Democracy, 2017, available at www.euro-peandemocracy.eu/2017/02/the-role-of-belgian-fighters-in-the-jihadification-of-the-syrian-war-from-plotting-early-in-2011-to-the-paris-and-brussels-attacks.

he wanted to join the real “mujahidin”. In the end, the Syrians dropped el-Ouassaki off at the camp of Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin (“mujahidin consultative council”), a group led by the Syrian Abu Athir al-Absi. It is believed that Houssein was one of the first Western foreign fighters to join the ranks of the group.



Houssein el-Ouassaki – source: Facebook

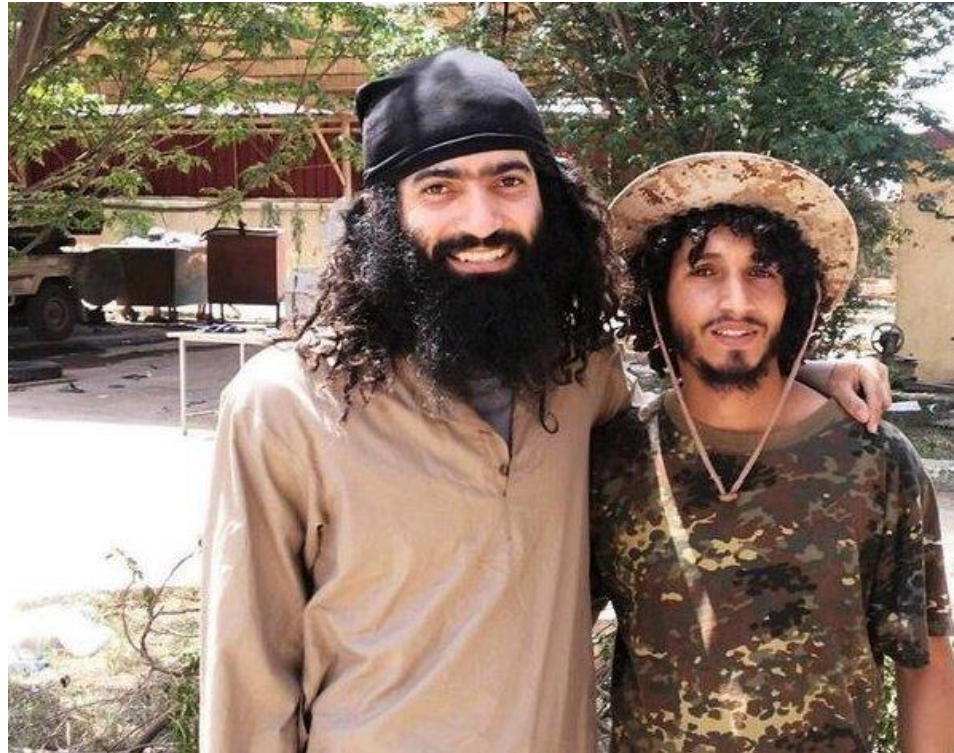
As soon as he was installed, he started reaching out to his friends from Sharia4Belgium using Facebook and other social media. El-Ouassaki was highly active on social media and persuaded a number of individuals from Antwerp and Vilvoorde to join the ranks of Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin. He finished by establishing an impressive network of Facebook contacts throughout Western Europe; one member after the other left Belgium, France and the Netherlands to travel to Syria. As the camp of al-Absi became overcrowded with Western fighters, el-Ouassaki was named the military commander of the *muhajirin* or foreign fighters in the ranks of Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin. The years 2012 to 2014 were the period of what can be called a Five Star Jihad: al-Absi’s Syrian men were housed in a place that they referred to as “the palace”; the Western fighters in a villa nearby the village of Kafr Hamra, just north of Aleppo.

In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq, who in June 2014, would be proclaimed caliph of what would henceforth be known as the Islamic State,² travelled through northern Syria in a bid to recruit the highest number of foreign fighters possible for his group. He met Abu Athir al-Absi and persuaded him to join his project. In the presence of at least three of the Belgian fighters, Abu Athir and most of his group pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Thus, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) was created. A group that closely cooperated with al-Absi, Katibat al-Muhajirin (“emigrants’ brigade”), led by Umar al-Shishani, also joined the ISIS project. Both al-Absi and al-Shishani ascended in the ranks of ISIS: al-Absi became the governor of Aleppo province, while al-Shishani made it to the rank of overall military commander of the group. However, as al-Baghdadi’s aim was to unify the ranks of all groups in Syria and Iraq, he quickly entered into a conflict with Jabhat al-Nusra (“support front”), al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch. This resulted in a split in the Belgian ranks, with the majority joining ISIS, while a significant group refused to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi and remained loyal to Jabhat al-Nusra. Soon after, the rivalry between the two groups escalated into an open war, when jihadi groups started fighting each other for dominance in Syria.

Another group that was consulted by al-Baghdadi during his trip throughout Syria was Katibat al-Battar al-Libiyya (“cutting [sword] Libyan brigade”), a brigade consisting mainly of fighters from Libyan origin. After joining ISIS, however, Katibat al-Battar

² Henceforth the acronym ISIS is used to refer to all reiterations of the organisation.

evolved into an elite unit within ISIS. Another function of this group was to serve as a recruitment pool for ISIS fighters who would later be responsible for the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and the March 2016 Brussels bombings. An increasing number of Belgian fighters – nearly all of them former members of Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin – joined the ranks of Katibat al-Battar. They included the Paris attacker Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who came to notoriety in January 2015, when a brutal plot for the abduction and videotaped beheading of Belgian policemen was foiled in the town of Verviers.



Abu Athir al-Absi and French fighter Abu Abdullah Guitone – source: Twitter



Umar al-Shishani – source: Twitter

The Belgian Networks

By mid-2016, according to official numbers, about 450 Belgian individuals, including around 130 women and children, eventually ended up travelling to Syria.³ As mentioned above, Sharia4Belgium was the first group that actively started recruiting Belgians for the Syrian “jihad”. At one time, Jaak Raes, head of the Belgian State Security, called Sharia4Belgium the main catalyst for the recruitment of young Belgians. However, Sharia4Belgium was largely ignored by the media and government in the first years of the conflict; it simply was not *bon ton* to admit that Belgium was such an important contributor to the jihadi presence in the country. One government official is reported to have referred to them as “clowns in white gowns we should ignore.”⁴ The assumption was that once they effectively left Belgium, they no longer posed a problem; they would eventually be killed anyway. At one point, a Belgian official told this author to stop exaggerating and spreading lies about the Belgian contingent of foreign terrorist fighters.

When the new government, led by the liberal Charles Michel, was installed in 2014, however, the official numbers rose to the exact count as we had collected at a certain point.⁵ In total, Sharia4Belgium was able to recruit at least 101 individuals, although that count might likely be conservative. Because most of Sharia4Belgium were actively convincing friends, family members, neighbours and colleagues to join them in Syria, we will probably never be able to conclusively assess the exact influence of this network.



Fouad Belkacem – source: www.rtbf.be

A sister network of Sharia4Belgium was Resto du Tawheed of Jean-Louis Denis. Resto du Tawheed operated in the vicinity of the Brussels North train station and pretended to provide charity, in the form of free meals, to destitute Muslims. In reality, Denis was named as a possible successor of Fouad Belkacem, leader of Sharia4Belgium, when the latter was incarcerated in late 2012.⁶ Denis came under suspicion, when two underage pupils from the same school in Schaarbeek left for Syria and joined the jihadi networks.

³ België telt officieel 457 Syriëstrijders, Knack, 12 July 2016, available at www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/belgie-telt-officieel-457-syriestrijders/article-normal-728055.html.

⁴ 'Vorige regeringen noemden Sharia4Belgium clowns met lange baarden', Knack, 14 April 2016, available at www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/vorige-regeringen-noemden-sharia4belgium-clowns-met-lange-baarden/article-normal-691759.html.

⁵ Database of Belgian Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq maintained, Guy Van Vlierden and Pieter Van Ostaeven.

⁶ Jean-Louis Denis, de Sharia4Belgium: «ce n'est pas moi qui recrute, c'est Dieu», SudInfo, 16 April 2013, available at www.sudinfo.be/art/704109/article/actualite/belgique/2013-04-16/jean-louis-denis-de-sharia4belgium-ce-n-est-pas-moi-qui-recrute-c-est-dieu.

Denis was convicted in 2013 for actively recruiting for the Syrian “jihad” and was sentenced to five years in jail. He was released in December 2018 after serving his full sentence and declared that the prison was “an environment where people were psychologically tortured and destroyed. It only strengthens their persuasion. This will have counter-effective consequences.”⁷ Prior to his imprisonment, Denis was involved in the recruitment of at least 63 individuals.



Jean-Louis Denis– source: www.vrt.be

A third network would become the most prominent of all, after it got involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks, that of Khalid Zerkani. The Zerkani network can easily be regarded as a network of gangster jihadis. In no other network, the so-called crime-terrorism nexus was so evident. Zerkani’s men operated in Molenbeek and near the historical centre of Brussels, mainly pick-pocketing tourists. Zerkani provided up to EUR 6 000 in cash for those in his network who would be willing to join ISIS in Syria or Iraq. A prime example of a gangster jihadi was Ibrahim el-Bakraoui who committed one of the suicide attacks at Brussels airport in March 2016.

In 2010 Ibrahim el-Bakraoui tried to rob an exchange office in Brussels in broad daylight. When police intervened, a shootout and high-speed pursuit through the streets of Brussels ensued. In the exchange of gunfire, el-Bakraoui used a Kalashnikov assault rifle; one police officer was seriously injured. When the mayor of Brussels was asked about the incident, he downsized it to “un fait divers” (“a miscellaneous news item”).⁸ As soon as el-Bakraoui was released from prison, he tried to leave for Syria but was arrested in the summer of 2015 in the city of Gaziantep near the Turkish-Syrian border. He was extradited from Turkey, but not to Belgium. Instead, he left for the Netherlands and, subsequently, took a train back to Brussels, where he went underground for a few months until the attacks in Brussels. In total, in the Brussels Capital region, the Zerkani network counted at least 85 individuals.

⁷ Moslimprediker Denis haalt fel uit na vrijlating: “In de gevangenis worden moslims psychologisch gefolterd”, Het Laatste Nieuws, 8 December 2018, available at www.hln.be/nieuws/binnenland/gevangenis-sen/moslimprediker-denis-haalt-fel-uit-na-vrijlating-in-de-gevangenis-worden-moslims-psychologisch-gefolterd~a16f65b1.

⁸ 'El Bakraoui werd behandeld als fait divers', Knack, 23 March 2016, available at www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/el-bakraoui-werd-behandeld-als-fait-divers/article-normal-682789.html.



Khalid Zerkani aka "Papa Noël" – source: www.nieuwsblad.be

Of the roughly 450 Belgians that left or tried to leave for Syria or Iraq, the majority left from Brussels, a grand total of 207 individuals. Second on the list was the city of Antwerp, once the hotbed of Sharia4Belgium, with at least 115 people participating in the Syrian-Iraqi war. As Sharia4Belgium was extending its operating base to the south, they started preaching in the cities of Mechelen (a presumed / rumoured total of 17) and Vilvoorde (32 individuals). Strangely, an overwhelming majority of recruits (almost exclusively of Moroccan descent) for the ISIS "jihad" stemmed from that north-south axis Antwerp-Brussels, whereas we saw the departure of some individuals from the eastern province of Limburg (mostly of Chechen origin) and some scarce cases in the provinces of Eastern and Western Flanders. By contrast, almost nobody left from the southern region of Wallonia. This is a phenomenon that has hardly been studied in academia to date and would deserve more attention from researchers.

The Belgian Foreign Fighter Contingent after the fall of the ISIS Caliphate

A few months after the fall of ISIS's last territorial stronghold in Syria, the Syrian border town of Baghuz, the situation of a significant number of Belgian ISIS fighters continues to be unknown. A lot of them might have been killed in the siege of al-Raqqa and the battles for Hajin and Baghuz. A significant number of women and children are held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Some of them have been able to get back to Belgium, although they are part of a small minority. At the time of writing, only six Belgian

children have been repatriated from Syria.⁹ The overall Belgian stance, especially popular opinion, towards foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their women and children, is that we do not want them back. Actually, this position is in line with the most common opinion throughout Europe. The majority of Belgium's neighbours do not apply an active policy of repatriation. At this point, we know of one fighter, Tarik Jadaaoun, who was captured after the fall of the city of Mosul, Iraq. As a proven member of ISIS – he appeared in multiple ISIS video productions – he was sentenced to death by hanging by an Iraqi court. Two Belgian ISIS members have been extradited by the SDF to Iraq and also have been sentenced to death.

Most worrying, however, is that we have lost track of at least 150 Belgian FTFs. Nobody seems to know whether they were killed during the last phases of the military struggle against ISIS, or they escaped with their compatriots, living to fight another day. It is clear that, up to this point, Belgium is facing the threat posed by a variety of its ISIS recruits. Some have returned and have been incarcerated, but as we mentioned above, like Jean-Louis Denis, at some point they will return to society. The question is whether they will be deradicalised and reintegrate or whether they, as Denis said, will come back from prison more convinced than ever. Others, the ones who are simply missing, might be the most problematic: what happened to them, where are they – still in Syria or Iraq, or have they already returned to Europe, preparing for new attacks on European soil?

Another issue that needs to be solved are the women and children in Syrian camps. They have been held there for months in dire circumstances, and some observers already fear that, if left unchecked, the situation may lead to generating the next generation of jihadi terrorists there.

The “caliphate” may have fallen, but ISIS has not. Up to today, ISIS remains active in Syria and Iraq and is expanding its operations throughout the Middle East but also in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, South-East Asia and even Central Africa, where recently a Central African Province was declared. It leaves us with little doubt that the international war to combat terrorism has not ended. We will be engaged in combatting the ISIS idea for years to come, if not decades.

Conclusion

Before we were confronted with the multiple attacks on European soil, the jihadi threat in Belgium and Western Europe in general was largely underestimated. Groups like Islam4UK in the UK, Sharia4Belgium in Belgium, Sharia4Holland in the Netherlands, Lies! and Millatu Ibrahim in Germany, were able to develop largely unchecked.

As soon as the opportunity arose, with the increasing “jihadification” of the war in Syria and ISIS's expansion across the Iraqi border, roughly a year before they proclaimed their caliphate, thousands of men and women left Europe and joined the emerging “jihad”. That number only increased after the ISIS caliphate was proclaimed and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was instituted as caliph Ibrahim and appeared on video for the first time, calling upon all Muslims to join his project.

Recruitment happened within the abovementioned networks but also on the internet. Never before was social media so extensively used by jihadi groups, not only for

⁹ Gerepatrieerde IS-kinderen aangekomen in België, De Standaard, 14 June 2019, available at www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20190614_04460133.

spreading their propaganda and ideology but also for active recruiting. When ISIS declared its “caliphate”, the attraction (and, thus, the pressure to leave) became even greater, as many believed it was their individual obligation (*fard ‘ayn*) to join ISIS.¹⁰

After multiple attacks in Europe, governments started clamping down on jihadi movements, hundreds were incarcerated; those who returned from fighting were subject to investigation and received prison sentences of several years. Governments realised that they needed better cooperation on security and intelligence. In Belgium in particular, deradicalisation officials were recruited, and closer cooperation on a local level between social services, the security authorities and civil society was instituted. However, the threat of ISIS and like-minded groups such as al-Qaeda has not died down, as the ideology persists and still attracts new recruits. The military defeat of ISIS has been framed in the group’s ideology as a test of their resilience from God. ISIS supporters are convinced that they eventually will rule the world.

An issue that has recently attracted considerable attention from researchers around the world is the so-called crime-terrorism nexus. Questions remain why ISIS in particular received so many recruits with a criminal background. In the case of the Zerkani network, these individuals became prominent members of ISIS and played crucial roles in attacks throughout Europe. One can assume that they were attracted by the promise of legitimate use of violence in ISIS, an organisation that aimed to provide justification for an abundance of their crimes based on Islam’s primary sources. Another aspect that might have been attractive for some with a criminal background was the promise of a new life under the “caliphate”, where equality and brotherhood reigned supreme. The caliphate bore the promise that, if they shed blood on the battlefield, all previous sins would be erased and they would be granted entrance to Paradise.

To this day, ISIS remains active in Syria and Iraq with daily assassinations or guerilla style attacks. Furthermore, several smaller ISIS cells are active around the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region with an increasing number of attacks in the Sahel, mainly around the Lake Chad Bassin and the border between Niger and Mali. Recently, we witnessed the atrocious attacks on Easter Sunday throughout Sri Lanka. Also in areas as remote as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Philippines, we are witnessing an increase of hit and run attacks. ISIS may have lost its physical caliphate, but that does not temper the organisation’s aspirations. In his latest video recording, released in late April 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stated that ISIS remained resilient and continued to receive worldwide support from disgruntled Muslims. It is safe to assume that, as in the case of al-Qaeda, at one point ISIS might rise to the forefront again and that the War on Terror is far from being over yet.

The counter terrorism measures that have come into effect since 2015, such as restrictions on public activities for jihadis, the removal of content and the greater scrutiny of online communication, certainly have forced terrorist networks to adapt. However, history teaches us that these networks are resilient and adapt easily.

¹⁰ Prior to the declaration of the caliphate, the justification for members of Sharia4Belgium and similar groups to remain in Europe, which they considered *dar al-kufr* (“land of unbelief”), had been that there was no country with a truly Islamic government (*dar al-Islam*, “abode of Islam”) to which they could emigrate.