

# FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

Quarterly Report: Belgium vol. 2

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# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

## TOWARDS MECHANISM-BASED RESEARCH ON THE SOCIAL CRIME-TERROR NEXUS

Recently, GLOBSEC published the report “Pathways to Jihad”, which was based on a thematic analysis of 310 cases, including 20 Belgian nationals.<sup>3</sup> The focus on pathways rather than composing a “general profile” is an important step forward. There is no such thing as a “general profile” of “the” (European) terrorist; however, some notable similarities can be distinguished and attempts can be made to unravel the mechanisms that bring about these similarities. In other words, we should look for particular pathways to terrorism. We should keep in mind that, ultimately, only a small number of individuals from a larger group of criminals with similar characteristics proceeds to terrorist offences.<sup>4</sup> Focusing on a profile stems from a variable-based approach, which is found to be empiristic, a-theoretical<sup>5</sup> and unsuitable if one is interested in the root causes of the crime-terror nexus.

The first data analysis and subsequent pattern recognition allowed Rekawek and colleagues<sup>6</sup> to identify the following themes of key importance to the issue of the pathways of European jihadists:

1. Dissatisfaction and outrage as the source of recruitment into global jihad.
2. Radicalism or “thuggish” nihilism as an antechamber into global jihad.
3. Previous criminal involvement as a springboard into global jihad.
4. Prison as a key but understudied and misunderstood recruitment hub for European jihadists.
5. “Glocal” nature of jihadism.
6. Role of the family in the process of radicalisation.
7. The ongoing inflammatory character of certain places of worship as hubs of recruitment into global jihad.
8. European jihadism functioning as a conveyor belt sending fighters towards conflict zones in the broader MENA region.

In criminological theory, the focus on mechanisms has already been established<sup>7</sup> and has its roots in a broader mechanism-based approach in the social sciences<sup>8</sup>. As stated by Mario Bunge: “The hallmark of modern science is the search for mechanisms behind facts, rather than the mindless search for data and statistical correlations among them.”<sup>9</sup> The crime-terror nexus is, besides an empirical finding, in our opinion, an important theoretical issue. However, crime-related and terrorism-related research have simultaneously developed as more or less stand-alone research traditions, rather than communicated and collaborated with each other, and empirical research including criminological theories in terrorism-related research is rather scarce.<sup>10</sup> This is remarkable, as one could argue that terrorism is essentially a form of (organised) crime.<sup>11</sup> Nowadays, criminological theories find their way in terrorism-related research.<sup>12</sup> To obtain a full understanding of the phenomenon, we should not only seek explanations in (predominant) micro- and meso-level factors of individuals but also consider the broader contextual environment in which these factors emerge.<sup>13</sup> With a mechanism-

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3 See: Kacper Rekawek, Viktor Szucs, Martina Babikova, and Katslaryna Lozka, “The input: Pathways to jihad. A thematic analysis of 310 cases.” 1-28. 2019. Accessed 4 April 2019. <https://www.globsec.org/news/pathways-of-radicalization-of-european-jihadis>.

4 Edwin Bakker. “Jihadi terrorists in Europe. Their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined the jihad: An exploratory study,” 1-74. The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael, 2006.

5 Lieven Pauwels, Paul Ponsaers, and Robert Svensson, “An analytical perspective on the study of crime at multiple levels,” 199-215, in *Social disorganisation, offending, fear and victimisation. Findings from Belgian studies on the urban context of crime*, eds. Lieven Pauwels, Wim Hardyns and Maarten Van de Velde. The Hague: Bju Legal Publishers, 2010.

6 Kacper Rekawek, et al., “The input: Pathways to jihad. A thematic analysis of 310 cases,” 9.

7 See, for example: Gerben J. N. Bruinsma and Lieven J. R. Pauwels, “The added value of the criminology of place to the research agenda of environmental criminology: Core propositions for unexplained mechanisms,” in *Unraveling the crime-place connection: New directions in theory and policy*, eds. David Weisburd and John Eck, 67-95. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018; Lieven Pauwels, Paul Ponsaers and Robert Svensson, “An analytical perspective on the study of crime at multiple levels.”

8 See, for example: Mario Bunge, “Mechanism and explanation,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 27, no. 4, 410-465 (1997).

9 Mario Bunge, “Chasing reality: Strive over realism,” 119. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.

10 Joshua D. Freilich and Garry LaFree, “Criminological theory and terrorism: introduction to the special issue,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 1, 1-8 (2015); Marieke Liem and Edwin Bakker, “De toegevoegde waarde van criminologie in terrorismeonderzoek,” *Tijdschrift voor Criminologie* 61, no. 1, 91-102 (2019).

11 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Module 1: Definitions of Organized Crime. Similarities and differences between organized crime and other forms of crime.” Accessed March 17, 2019. <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-1/key-issues/similarities-and-differences.html>

12 Garry LaFree and Joshua D. Freilich, “The handbook of the criminology of terrorism,” 1-611. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017; see, for example: Vanja Ljujic, Jan W. van Prooijen and Frank Weerman. “Beyond the crime-terror nexus: socio-economic status, violent crimes and terrorism,” *Journal of Criminological Research Policy and Practice* 3, no. 3, 158-172 (2017).

13 Stiene Ravn, Rik Coolsaet and Tom Sauer, “Rethinking radicalization: Addressing the lack of a contextual perspective in the dominant narratives on radicalization,” in *Radicalisation. A*

based approach, scholars are able to respond to recent calls to move towards a more comprehensive narrative on terrorism by including the relevance of contextual factors.

Besides this shift in approach and level of analysis, the theoretical insights relating to the crime-terror nexus have also shifted recently. The contemporary new or social crime-terror nexus is juxtaposed to previous approaches regarding the crime-terror nexus, known as the “institutional crime-terror nexus”<sup>14</sup> and the “organisational crime-terror nexus”<sup>15</sup>. In contrast to these previous nexuses, the social crime-terror nexus approaches the intertwining of both phenomena from an individual (micro) and social (macro) perspective, rather than an organisational or meso-perspective. This new perspective also takes into account contextual factors, such as the characteristics of the shared recruitment pool of both proposed criminals and terrorists. In this nexus, the “point of convergence” between crime and terrorism—to speak in terms of Makarenko—is not on the organisational level, but on the level of the individual and one’s social network(s) and, as a consequence, unintended synergy and overlap between organisations are created and maintained.<sup>16</sup>

As will be described in this second quarterly report, based on preliminary results, we find evidence for the existence of a social crime-terror nexus. This nexus is mainly based on individual and contextual social factors, and (criminogenic) social networks.

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marginal phenomenon or a mirror to society?, eds. Noel Clycq, Christiane Timmerman, Dirk Vanheule, Rut Van Caudenberg and Stiene Ravn. 2018. Accessed April 22, 2019. [http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2019/02/Radicalisation-Ravn\\_Coolsaet\\_Sauer.pdf?type=pdf](http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2019/02/Radicalisation-Ravn_Coolsaet_Sauer.pdf?type=pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Tamara Makarenko, “The crime-terror continuum: Tracing the interplay between transnational organised crime and terrorism,” *Global Crime* 6, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>15</sup> Letizia Paoli, “The paradoxes of organized crime,” *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 37, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>16</sup> Peter Neumann, Rajan Basra, Fanny Lutz, and Michaël Fernandez-Bertier, The crime-terror nexus in Belgium and Luxembourg. 2018. Accessed March 15, 2018. [https://crimeterornexus.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Crime-Terror-Nexus-BelgiumLuxembourg\\_English.pdf](https://crimeterornexus.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Crime-Terror-Nexus-BelgiumLuxembourg_English.pdf)

# THE CASE OF BELGIUM

In the current subset of the database, 25 Belgian individuals are included<sup>17</sup>, compared to only 5 from the first quarterly report. Based on this modest sample, we are able to point out some noteworthy preliminary findings and we will validate these findings with prior (empirical) research in the Belgian context. As stated in the previous quarterly report, we will, due to data constraints, not solely focus on individuals arrested in 2015. In the following sections, a brief overview is provided thematically for the most important findings in the Belgian subset.

## CURRENT STATUS

All of the 25 individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences in this national subset are Salafi-jihadists. The current status of these individuals is as follows: 11 of the 25 individuals are dead, either due to a suicide attack (n=5) or killed during a police raid or in a conflict zone abroad (n=6). In total, 9 individuals were arrested, 5 of them in Belgium, and 4 abroad (in Iraq, Morocco, Syria, and Turkey). The remaining 5 individuals are still fugitives, and most of them have already been convicted in absentia in Belgium. For the arrested and convicted individuals, the sentences vary between 5 and 20 years. Most of the relatively short sentences have been given in absentia; these convicts are in reality not (yet) in prison. The

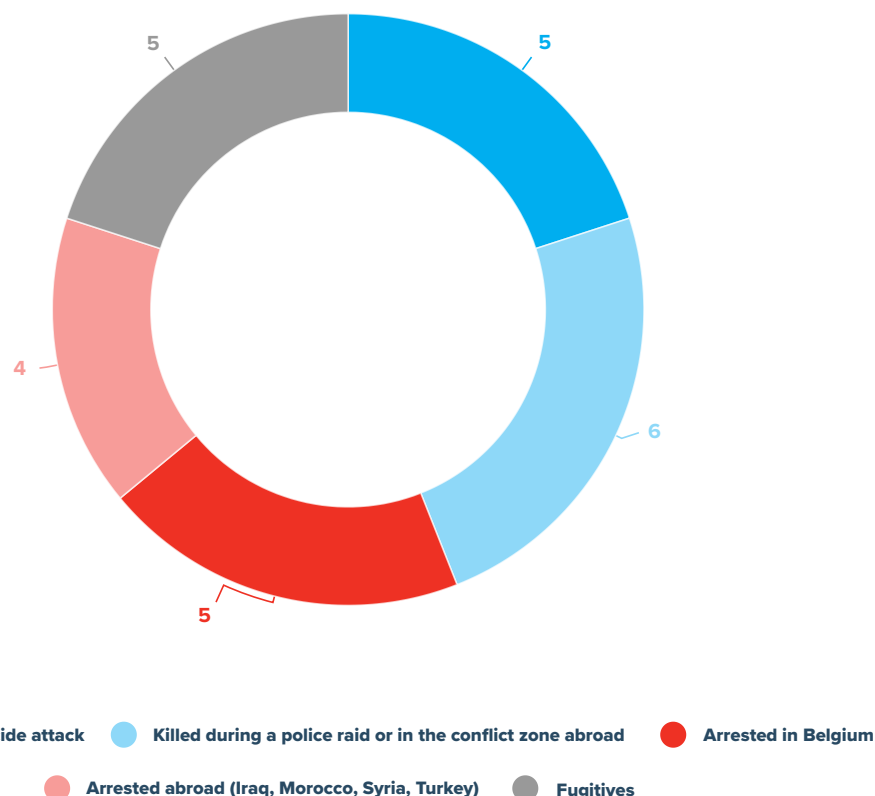
individuals now in prison will serve their sentences until 2021 (n=1), 2027 (n=1), 2031 (n=2) or 2035 (n=1).

## SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

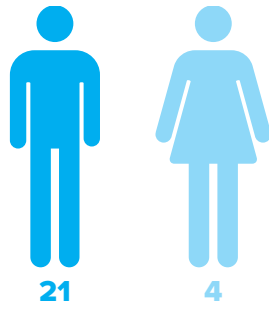
### Sex and age

Of the 25 individuals in the current national subset, 21 are male and 4 are female. Determining the age at the time of arrest is not always as simple as it seems because some individuals are still fugitive and/or convicted in absentia, and others were neither arrested nor convicted but were killed or killed themselves in a suicide attack. In order to maintain a clear baseline, we calculated the age at the time of arrest, conviction (in absentia) or the date the individual died (the first date applicable is used).

The average age of the 25 individuals is 28.6. The youngest individual was 20 years old and the oldest was 56. It should be mentioned that the oldest individual in our national subset was a woman, whose age, because of the low number of women in our subset, skews the average age of the female jihadists. The average age of female jihadists is 34.3, compared to 27.8 for the male jihadists.



<sup>17</sup> The authors would like to thank Jelle De Kock and Jonas Dieussart, master's degree students in Criminological Sciences (Ghent University), for their efforts in the data collection.



**AVERAGE AGE**  
**FEMALE: 34,3**  
**MALE: 27,8**

**Nationality/origins**

Of the 25 cases in our national subset, 23 individuals hold Belgian citizenship with 4 of them having dual citizenship. Of the individuals with dual citizenship, 3 hold both Belgian and Moroccan citizenship and 1 holds both Belgian and Turkish citizenship. Of the 2 remaining cases, 1 individual is a Moroccan citizen, however, he spent most of his life in Belgium, and 1 had dual citizenship (Belgian-Moroccan), but recently Belgium’s court decided to strip him of his Belgian citizenship.<sup>18</sup> Of the Belgian citizens with single citizenship (n=19), at least 13 individuals have a migration background; 11 of them are of Moroccan descent, 1 of Turkish descent and 1 of Algerian descent.

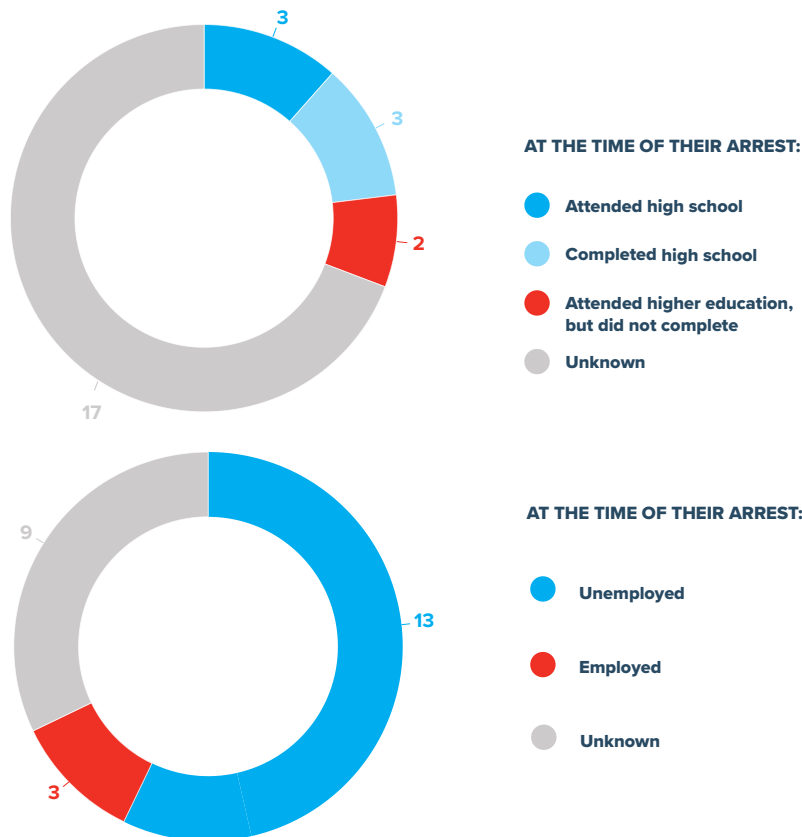
The effects of the migration factor cannot be analysed, as data on the generation of migrants are currently not available at the individual level. In addition, based on our sample, we are unable to explain the disproportionate share of individuals of Moroccan descent, compared to individuals from another foreign origin, but scholars have addressed

this specific research question recently.<sup>19</sup>

Although we found that networks mainly develop locally (see below), we also note that there are strong international links, mainly with French jihadists. In particular, the Brussels-based, French-speaking Zerkani network maintained social ties to French jihadists. In this context, the free movement of persons—as proposed by the Schengen Agreement—is widely used. We will further elaborate on this issue in the Social Network section.

**Socio-economic characteristics**

Regarding the level of education and the occupation of the individuals at the time of arrest, data for a large proportion of individuals are missing. Of the total, 6 individuals attended high school and 3 completed high school; 2 individuals attended higher education, but neither completed a degree. Data on 17 individuals are missing. Of the 25 cases, 13 individuals (52%) were unemployed at the time of their arrest, 3 of whom were students; 3 individuals were employed, either as a cook or waiter in a restaurant or snack bar. Data on 9 individuals are missing.



<sup>18</sup> BBC, Fouad Belkacem: Belgian Islamist leader loses citizenship. Accessed April 14, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45951138>  
<sup>19</sup> Paige V. Pascarelli, "Identities 'Betwixt and between': Analyzing Belgian representation in 'homegrown' extremism," Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression 10, no. 3, 225-248 (2018). doi: 10.1080/19434472.2017.1374988

**Table 1.** Descriptive socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the sample (n=25)

Characteristic	Count	Percentage	Mean	Range
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	21	84%		
Female	4	16%		
<b>Age</b>			28.6	20-56
<b>Citizenship</b>				
Belgian citizenship	19	76%		
Dual citizenship	4	16%		
<i>Belgian-Moroccan</i>	3	12%		
<i>Belgian-Turkish</i>	1	4%		
Non-Belgian citizenship	2	8%		
<i>Moroccan</i>	2	8%		
<b>Migration background</b>				
Yes	19	76%		
<i>Algerian</i>	1	4%		
<i>Moroccan</i>	16	64%		
<i>Turkish</i>	2	8%		
No	6	24%		
<b>Education</b>				
Some high school	3	12%		
Completed high school	3	12%		
Attended higher education, did not complete a degree	2	8%		
Missing	17	68%		
<b>Occupation</b>				
Employed	3	12%		
<i>Cook</i>	2	8%		
<i>Waiter</i>	1	4%		
Unemployed	13	52%		
<i>Student</i>	3	12%		
Missing	9	36%		

An overview of descriptive statistics of the aforementioned socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the sample of Belgian convicts for terrorism-related offences is given in Table 1.

### Socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics from other sources

Looking at socio-demographic data regarding Belgian jihadists from other data sources, some descriptive statistics can be mentioned. It must be noted that the population differs by data source, so general conclusions cannot be drawn.

Belgium maintains a Royal Decree (of 30 May 2016) establishing the list of persons and entities referred to in Articles 3 and 5 of the Royal Decree of 28

December 2006 on specific restrictive measures directed against certain persons and entities with a view to combating terrorist financing. Of the 279 individuals (added to this list between June 1, 2016, and March 27, 2019), 220 (78.85%) are men and 59 (21.15%) are women. The oldest individual was born in 1946 and the youngest in 2000. More than half of these individuals (143, i.e., 51.25%) was born between 1990 and 2000<sup>20</sup>

Another data source from official sources is the dataset maintained by the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA, i.e., Belgium's federal counterterrorism fusion centre). Looking at the profile of foreign terrorist fighters based on CUTA data, we see quite similar proportions: "80% are young

20 Federale Overheidsdienst Financiën, Geconsolideerde nationale lijst van personen en entiteiten waarvan de tegoeden en economische middelen worden bevroren in het kader van de strijd tegen de financiering van het terrorisme. Accessed April 27, 2019. <https://financien.belgium.be/sites/default/files/20190426%20-%20Nationale%20lijst.xlsx>

men with a typical age range between 20 and 30”.<sup>21</sup> However, according to this data source, the average foreign terrorist fighter seems to be slightly younger than the average of the Belgian jihadists.

Van Ostaeyen and Van Vlierden retain their own “Belgian Foreign Fighters Database” with a broader scope than the aforementioned official sources.<sup>22</sup> According to them, there are 716 individuals related to Belgium and the current Syria-Iraq conflict. In it, 81.6% are men and 18.4% are women. The analysis of a subset of this database with information about citizenship (n=505) shows that most of the individuals are, logically, citizens of Belgium (76.6%), followed by Morocco (6.5%), Russia (5.3%), France (4.2%), Algeria (2.4%), Italy (1.4%), and the Netherlands (1.2%). The figure for a number of other countries is less than 1%. Of the 387 individuals with Belgian citizenship, 320 (82.7%) are known to have a foreign background. Of the 387, most are of Moroccan descent (62.5%), which means that three-quarters of the Belgian citizens with a foreign background have roots in Morocco. These relative proportions are slightly higher than in our current national subset.

Other, non-systematic studies of Belgian jihadists come from illustrative (and sometimes anecdotal) descriptions of (a part of the) population. After the conviction of the terror cell from Verviers by the Brussels correctional court in July 2016, Court President Pierre Hendrickx noted in his verdict that all but one of the convicted individuals had criminal records for drugs, theft, or robbery. None of them had completed high school nor had a job when they left

for Syria. Additionally, except for two individuals, no one had solid religious baggage or was a practising Muslim.<sup>23</sup>

Bakker and De Bont found that the male-female ratio for Belgian jihadists (n=211) was, respectively, 84% and 16%, and the average age of Belgian jihadists, measured at the time of departure, was 23.8 years (n=85). They found that 50% of the Belgian jihadists have parents born in Morocco or were born there themselves, and 5% have parents born in Turkey or were born there themselves (n=54). Regarding socio-economic background, the researchers found, notwithstanding the remarkably reduced sample size, that almost half of the Belgian jihadists had a lower-class origin and the other half a middle-class origin; only 6% had an upper-class origin (n=15). Of 34 Belgian jihadists, 27% were employed, 32% were unemployed and 41% were students.

Van San scrutinised the phenomenon of Belgian and Dutch converts with an ethnographic research strategy. She found that the converts included in the study (n=8) were all under the age of 30, came from lower- or lower middle-class socio-economic backgrounds and had a low or medium level of education.<sup>24</sup> Their conversion was often a means to escape from their former, problematic, lifestyles. Most of them are supposed to have had a problematic childhood and adolescence: from using drugs and alcohol to prostitution or petty crime.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 1. Map of the hometowns of the 25 individuals in the Belgium subset

21 Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, “From the kingdom to the caliphate and back: Returnees in Belgium,” 19, in Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them? Assessing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands (Egmont paper 101), eds. Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet (2018), Accessed February 08, 2018. [http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/02/egmont\\_papers.101\\_online\\_v1-3.pdf?type=pdf](http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/02/egmont_papers.101_online_v1-3.pdf?type=pdf)

22 Pieter Van Ostaeyen and Guy Van Vlierden, “Citizenship and ancestry of Belgian foreign fighters,” 2, in ICCT Policy Brief, May 2018. Accessed April 15, 2019. <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/ICCT-Van-Ostaeyen-Van-Vlierden-Belgian-Foreign-Fighters-June2018.pdf>

23 Rik Coolsaet, “Deradicaliseringsbeleid en de IS-generatie,” Politiejournaal, September 2016, 14-19 (2016).

24 Marion Van San, “Lost souls searching for answers? Belgian and Dutch converts joining Islamic State,” Perspectives on Terrorism 9, no. 5, 47-56 (2015).

25 *ibid.* 24

## SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION

*“Perhaps, ironically, the reason ISIS proved more successful was in large measure because it was less global and more local”<sup>26</sup>*

Mapping out the 25 cases, we see the very presence of the Antwerp-Brussels axis referred to, based on prior research. Furthermore, we can observe 2 cases in or near Kortrijk (in the south-west of Belgium), 1 case in Maaseik, in north-east Belgium, and 2 cases in Verviers in the east of Belgium. On the Antwerp-Brussels axis, we find in the most northern part 4 cases in Antwerp or one of its districts, 1 case in Boom, 1 case in Mechelen, and 14 cases in Brussels (mostly Laken or Sint-Jans-Molenbeek). While the Brussels-Antwerp axis may be a predictable centre of gravity, its actual share in the Belgian figures is disproportionately high. Figure 1 clearly indicates this axis when plotting the hometown of the 25 cases on a map. Compared to other studies, similar Belgian regions are concerned.<sup>27</sup> Notably, the same two cities have a significant share of (conventional) organised crime groups<sup>28</sup>, the first indication for a crime-terror nexus on an ecological level.

We see that the geographical clusters overlap with the emerging social networks around specific influential and “charismatic” leader figures: the mainly Dutch-speaking cluster around **BEL 21** tend to cluster in and around Antwerp, and the mainly French-speaking cluster around **BEL 19** and **BEL 55** tend to cluster in and around Brussels. The cluster around the recently released<sup>29</sup> **BEL 54** (Resto du Tawhid) creates a more or less in-between social cluster and bridges the gap between both of the aforementioned networks. Although **BEL 54**'s cell in the end looked more like a chapter of the Zerkani network than part of Sharia4Belgium, this cell left behind a significant number of jihadists who were influenced by both networks.<sup>30</sup> As Van Ostaeyen stated: “The trial of [BEL 54] and his recruits made clear that there was not mere spillover between these groups”.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, the geographically seeming stand-alone clusters appear to have ties to these larger clusters. Two individuals from the southwest of Belgium operated under the flag of Sharia4Kortrijk, a revealing reference to the Antwerp-based terrorist organisation Sharia4Belgium, affiliated with the British organisation Sharia4UK. In particular, 1 individual from the northeast of Belgium holds ties with Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain (GICM), Sharia4Belgium, and

Jabhat al-Nusra. The terrorist cell from the Verviers region in the west of Belgium has direct links to **BEL 1** - 1 of these 2 individuals from this cell in the Belgian subset, **BEL 12**, was even called the “new Abaaoud” for his substantive role within the ISIS-network.

Although we cannot test it empirically due to data constraints, it can be assumed based on the criminological theory that certain social-structural variables provide a breeding ground for recruitment in these areas. For example, the unemployment rate in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek is significantly higher than the general unemployment rate in Belgium. For the general working-age population (15-65 years) the unemployment rates were 27.2% in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek and 7.9% in Belgium in 2016. The youth (15-24 years) unemployment rates were even higher, with 37.8% in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek and 20.1% in Belgium<sup>32</sup>. The finding that deprived ecological units, mediated by several social mechanisms, have a detrimental effect on concentrations of crime is well-established within contemporary criminology, retrieved from (elaborations of) social disorganisation theories. This is mainly caused by the mechanism of (or perception of) relative deprivation. Future research should look further into the contextual influence of this mechanism on involvement in terrorism.

## SOCIAL NETWORKS

First, family bonds tend to play an important role in our modest sample. Two families are predominantly present. The first family revolves around two couples of brothers (nephews of each other). Additionally, a cousin and uncle of the brothers would also be found to be involved in terrorism, although they are currently not in our sample. The second family in our dataset is centred on the so-called “Mother of Jihad” and these family ties are more direct than those of the first family. She supposedly radicalised her children and sent 3 of her sons to Syria. Besides this, though not all of them are in our current dataset, there is evidence that **BEL 19**'s brother and sister are involved in terrorism (financing) too. This second family is also affiliated with **BEL 55**. At his trial, **BEL 55** was described as a “cynical guru” and his network could also rely on a “female passionara” in the person of **BEL 19**.<sup>33</sup> Also related to family bonds, we find evidence, in accordance with previous research<sup>34</sup>, for married couples who went abroad together or joined each other later on. Finally, in one case, a jihadist from Maaseik (eastern Belgium) married the sister of an important lieutenant from Sharia4Belgium's leader

26 Glenn E. Robinson, “The four waves of global jihad, 1979-2017,” Middle East Policy XXIV, no. 3, 77 (2017).

27 Guy Van Vlierden, “Molenbeek and beyond. The Brussels-Antwerp axis as hotbed of Belgian jihad,” in Jihadist hotbeds. Understanding local radicalization processes, ed. Arturo Varvelli, 49-61. Accessed April 15, 2019. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/jihadist-hotbeds-understanding-local-radicalization-processes-15418>; Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, “From the kingdom to the caliphate and back: Returnees in Belgium.”

28 Peter Neumann et al., The crime-terror nexus in Belgium and Luxembourg.

29 De Standaard, Moslimprediker Jean-Louis Denis komt zaterdagochtend vrij. Accessed April 19, 2019. [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20181207\\_04015706](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20181207_04015706) [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20181207\\_04015706](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20181207_04015706)

30 Van Vlierden, Guy, The Zerkani network: Belgium's most dangerous jihadist group. Accessed April 19, 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-thezerkani-network-belgiums-most-dangerous-jihadist-group/>

31 Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “Belgian radical networks and the road to the Brussels attacks,” CTC Sentinel 9, no. 6, 8 (2016).

32 Brussels Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse, Kerncijfers per gemeente. Sint-Jans-Molenbeek. Accessed April 16, 2019. [http://bisa.brussels/bestanden/publicaties/bru19/bisa\\_kc\\_St-Jans-Molenbeek.pdf](http://bisa.brussels/bestanden/publicaties/bru19/bisa_kc_St-Jans-Molenbeek.pdf); Federale Overheidsdienst Werkgelegenheid, Arbeid en Sociale Overleg, Statistieken. Indicatoren van de Europese Werkgelegenheidsstrategie. Accessed April 16, 2019. <http://www.werk.belgie.be/moduleDefault.aspx?id=23764>

33 Guy Van Vlierden, “Van Syriëstrijder tot kamikaze. Hoe België in de greep kwam van IS-terreur,” in Globalisering, eds. Arjen Schmidt, Timo Kansil, Paul Ponsaers and Willy Bruggeman, 135-156. Oud-Turnhout: Gompel&Svacina, 2018.

34 Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch jihadist foreign fighters (2012-2015): Characteristics, motivations, and roles in the war in Syria and Iraq,” Small Wars & Insurgencies 27, no.5, 844 (2016).



**BEL 21** (from Antwerp), bridging the gap between old-time jihadism and contemporary jihadism (see below).

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Second, friendship ties are also well-represented. A number of individuals in our sample grew up together and were old friends. These friendship links are also present among individuals from the French national sample and that has created some (unintended) organisational overlap.

Third, in addition to these contemporary social relations, there are some remarkable historical ties in the Belgian dataset. In particular, there are several (individual) historical ties to Al Qaeda. Starting with the aforementioned bridged gap between old-time and contemporary jihadists, an individual from Maaseik—the current brother-in-law of **BEL 21**'s lieutenant—was convicted in 2006 for membership of the GICM, which was the first indication in Belgium of a Moroccan terrorist network, composed of Afghanistan veterans. Besides, **BEL 55** is himself supposed to be an Al Qaeda veteran<sup>36</sup> and **BEL 19** is a very good friend of Belgium's most notorious Muslim extremist in the first decade of this century (affiliated with Al Qaeda).

These social networks indicate the existence of a so-called Social Crime-Terror Nexus in which networks and individuals are often interconnected by chance and not intentionally, where synergy is welcomed because of the win-win situation, which maximises their mutual interests.<sup>37</sup>

## RADICALISATION

In our current sample, six different modes of radicalization are represented. Because multiple radicalisation modes are possible per individual, the number of radicalisation modes exceeds the number of individuals.<sup>38</sup> After all, the radicalisation process is an interplay between an individual and his/her environment and is determined by the way in which the individual perceives and responds to (challenges in) his/her environment. In the dataset, 10 individuals were radicalised through a friend, family members, or other acquaintances already part of a jihadist network. So, most of the individuals in our sample were radicalised because of so-called “chain migration” or “peer recruitment”.<sup>39</sup> Further 8 individuals were radicalised through active recruitment by a radicalising agent (or “top-down recruitment”). Of the 25 Belgian jihadists, 5 were radicalised in prison or prison played an accumulating role on their radicalisation process. An additional 4 individuals sought exposure and one was radicalised through chance exposure. From our sample, 4 individuals were radicalised online.

Despite the global nature of jihadi movements since the September 2001 terrorist attacks, recruitment and radicalisation appear to develop mainly locally. In our current dataset, radicalisation appears to develop mainly offline. However, online platforms are certainly used to maintain communication with each other and to send/receive propaganda messages. As in general communications, these information or messaging technologies facilitate and globalise (jihadist) communication.

In the Belgian context, as mentioned above, this phenomenon even relies on the efforts of a few influential individuals affiliated to larger networks, each with their own approach (“Street Dawa” in the case of Sharia4Belgium and recruitment into a petty-crime environment in the case of the Zerkani network). The outreach strategy of these individuals is represented in our sample too. According to the head of the Belgian State Security Service (VSSE), Sharia4Belgium can be considered the main incubator of departures.<sup>40</sup> In the previous section, we already considered the role of both **BEL 21** and **BEL 55**. However, special attention needs to be given to **BEL 19** (“Mother of Jihad”), whom a Belgium court declared was “imbued with Jihadist ideology and contaminated everyone and everything around her.”<sup>41</sup> Besides her role in recruitment for the Zerkani network (her three sons, among others), she travelled to Syria herself several times and acted as a “cooking mother” for the fighters. In addition, she had a logistic function and took care of the transport of goods and money to members of the network.<sup>42</sup>

35 Guy Van Vlierden, IS fighters from the Belgian town of Maaseik: A rare connection between actual networks and old school terrorists. 2015. Accessed April 22, 2019. <https://emmejihad.wordpress.com/2015/01/04/is-fighters-from-the-belgian-town-of-maaseik-a-rare-connection-between-actual-networks-and-old-school-terrorists/>

36 Guy Van Vlierden, “Paris attack ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud,” CTC Sentinel 8, no. 11, 30-33 (2015).

37 Peter Neumann et al., The crime-terror nexus in Belgium and Luxembourg.

38 For example, 1 individual was (either) radicalised by a friend or family member, through a chance exposure, or in prison.

39 Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch jihadist foreign fighters (2012-2015): Characteristics, motivations, and roles in the war in Syria and Iraq,” 848.

40 Jaak Raes, Lessons learned from Verviers and European co-operation in the field of Counter-Terrorism (audio recording). 2015. Accessed April 20, 2019. <http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/symposium/symposium-2015>

41 Jessica Heijmans, “Wie is Fatima Aberkan, de ‘moeder van de jihad’?” Metro (2016). Accessed April 20, 2019. <https://www.metronieuws.nl/nieuws/buitenland/2016/08/wie-is-fatima-berkan-de-moeder-van-de-jihad>

42 Paul Ponsaers, Jihadi's in België, 1-252. Antwerpen: Maklu, 2017.

## FOREIGN FIGHTING

Among the total of 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters, including about 5,000 Europeans<sup>43</sup>, the share of Belgians is disproportionately large. As stated by Renard and Coolsaet, this current foreign fighter phenomenon is without precedent for Europe in general and for Belgium in particular. Previous experiences of Belgians joining a terrorist organisation abroad are scarce, and returning foreign fighters are evidently even scarcer.<sup>44</sup>

Of the 25 individuals in our national subset, 20 (80%) have certainly had experience as foreign terrorist fighters in Syria, most of them under the flag of ISIS. The 5 fugitives are all thought to be still in Syria. Of the remaining 15 individuals, 6 are in prison (in Belgium or abroad) and 9 are dead. Of these 9 dead individuals, 3 of them killed themselves in a suicide attack (one in Belgium, one in France, and one in Iraq). The other 6 individuals were killed in Syria (n=5) or in a police raid in France (n=1).

According to the latest official statistics, at the end of 2017, 146 individuals were still thought to be active in combat zones in Syria (i.e., almost 30% of the total of 498 Belgian foreign terrorist fighters). More than 140 (28%) foreign terrorist fighters are presumed to have been killed abroad. Both relative proportions are slightly higher than the relative proportions in our sample (20% each). According to Van Ostaeyen and Van Vlierden, 595 of their 716 individuals related to Belgium and the Syria-Iraq conflict (i.e., 83.6%) reached the conflict zone. Of them, 152 (25.5%) returned to Belgium and 165 (27.7%) are presumed to be dead.<sup>45</sup>

## PRISONS

The role of prisons in the radicalisation process should not be underestimated, nor should it be overestimated. For 5 individuals in our dataset,

prison seems like it was the springboard for their radicalisation and it depended mainly on the efforts of individuals with direct social ties with the imprisoned radicals. For example, **BEL 6** likely radicalised his nephews **BEL 3** and **BEL 5** while they were in prison. Notable, **BEL 6** himself was imprisoned in the notorious Abu Ghraib and Bucca prisons in Iraq between 2005 and 2012, both of which developed a reputation as “jihadi universities”.<sup>46</sup>

The 2 other individuals who were radicalised in prison, were imprisoned together with other well-known jihadists. One of them was certainly already radicalised before he went to prison. For the other individual, the moment of radicalisation is not that clear, but shortly after his release from prison, he left for Syria.

## CRIMINAL HISTORY

Of the 25 individuals in the Belgian subset, 12 (48%) with convictions for terrorism-related offences had a known record of previous arrest(s). Prior research indicates that studies based on official (police) sources and which cover full populations (rather than samples) generally lead to significantly higher proportions of individual criminal histories than (smaller) studies based on open sources.<sup>47</sup> This is an important limitation of this study, but nevertheless, at the same time, this is an important observation regarding the (currently hidden) criminal histories of the individuals included in this sample; the slightest indication is perhaps the top of the iceberg. Therefore, taking into account that a large portion of an individual’s criminal activities remains below the radar (also known as the “dark number” in criminological literature), dissecting the crime-terror nexus will always depend on the value of the sources used. For now, we relied mainly on open-source data. These data have known constraints, however, as mentioned before, police-registered crime data have shortcomings too.

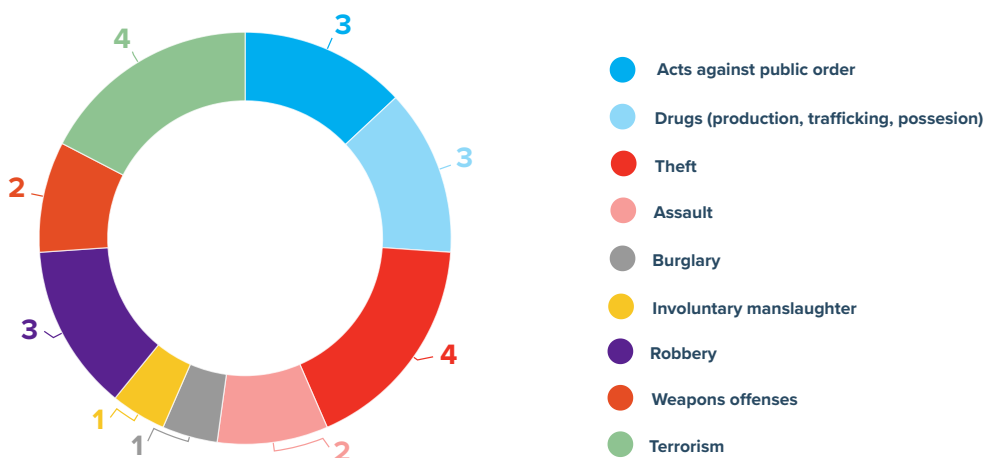


Figure 2. Known prior criminal offences of the individuals under study (n=23)

43 Glenn E. Robinson, “The four waves of global jihad, 1979-2017.”

44 Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, “From the kingdom to the caliphate and back: Returnees in Belgium.”

45 Pieter Van Ostaeyen and Guy Van Vlierden, “Citizenship and ancestry of Belgian foreign fighters,” 3.

46 Joshua Eaton, “U.S. Military now says ISIS leader was held in notorious Abu Ghraib prison,” The Intercept (2016). Accessed April 22, 2019. [https://theintercept.com/2016/08/25/u-s-](https://theintercept.com/2016/08/25/u-s-military-now-says-isis-leader-was-held-in-notorious-abu-ghraib-prison/)

[military-now-says-isis-leader-was-held-in-notorious-abu-ghraib-prison/](https://theintercept.com/2016/08/25/u-s-military-now-says-isis-leader-was-held-in-notorious-abu-ghraib-prison/)

47 Anton Weenink, De Syriëgangers. 30. 2019. Accessed April 22, 2019. <https://www.politie.nl/binaries/content/assets/politie/politie-2019-rapport-de-syriëgangers.pdf>

There is major incongruence between the number of convictions, the number of independent crimes, and the number of individuals. The reason for this is that for a few convictions, the type of committed crime or the charge is unknown. In addition, most of the previously convicted individuals have multiple prior convictions. The crime types are classified in accordance with the UNODC classification system.<sup>48</sup> Of the 23 committed crimes prior to the terrorism-related arrest in (or around) 2015, 43.5% of the known previously committed crimes can be classified as “petty crime”<sup>49</sup>, and 56.5% of the known previously committed crimes can be classified as “severe crime”<sup>50</sup> (n=23). The distribution of individual crime types is displayed in Figure 2.

Of these 12 individuals with a registered criminal history, 9 (i.e., 75%) are from the Brussels region. Although the vast majority of individuals in the Belgian subset are from the Brussels region (56%), this share is disproportionately high. However, this finding is in line with previous research that clearly indicates that it is mainly the Brussels-based Zerkani network that fuelled the attention paid to the intertwining of both phenomena: “[h]e actively encouraged his recruits in all kinds of petty crime to raise money for the jihad. They may have fuelled the intertwining of ordinary crime and Islamic extremism, now considered the main characteristic of the Molenbeek scene that played a central role in the ... terrorist attacks”.<sup>51</sup> Thefts, often pickpocketing, were the main source of income for the Zerkani network.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, a French jihadist appears to play a central role in financing and providing material assistance to the Zerkani network. This man would gather “ghanima” (i.e., spoils of war) to finance the departure of foreign fighters and the conflict in Syria.<sup>53</sup> BEL 55’s nickname was “Papa Noël”, referring to Santa Claus. Lastly, for at least 2 individuals, it is known that family members, conscious or otherwise<sup>54</sup>, transferred money to Syria.<sup>55</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Finally, our preliminary conclusion would be, that when the conclusions we draw (also in general) are based on just the tip of an iceberg, we should approach these conclusions with the greatest caution and keep in mind we base our findings only on the proverbial “known-knowns.” As with crime, the pathway to terrorism is a complex aetiological process with interaction effects between individual and (socio-) ecological factors. Prior crime is not a “cause” of terrorism at all but can be an indicator for the finding that the same or similar mechanisms are at

work that bring about the outcome.

Future research should, therefore, primarily focus on the collection of comprehensive and reliable data. This requires a thorough (and time-consuming) inventory and analysis of criminal records and detention files, but it will reveal insights that cannot be revealed in any other way. As a consequence, this is a necessary step in reconstructing the mechanisms or pathways towards terrorism. Only in this way will we be able to draw meaningful and reliable conclusions to advance our theoretical insights and provide a solid basis for prevention policies.

48 See: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, International classification of crime for statistical purposes (ICCS). 2015. Accessed December 10, 2018. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/crime/ICCS/ICCS\\_English\\_2016\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/crime/ICCS/ICCS_English_2016_web.pdf)

49 In our sample, in accordance with Rekawek et al. (2019), (1) acts against public order, (2) drugs (production, trafficking, possession), and (3) theft are considered as “petty crime”.

50 In our sample, in accordance with Rekawek et al. (2019), (1) assault, (2) burglary, (3) involuntary manslaughter, (4) terrorism, (5) robbery, and (6) weapons offences are considered as “severe crime”.

51 Guy Van Vlierden, “Molenbeek and beyond. The Brussels-Antwerp axis as hotbed of Belgian jihad,” 54.

52 Paul Ponsaers, *Jihadi’s in België*.

53 Ibid. 52, p. 152.

54 Guy Van Vlierden, “How unsuspecting mothers funded the Islamic State’s terror machine,” *European Eye on Radicalization*, 2019. Accessed April 24, 2019. <https://eeradicalization.com/how-unsuspecting-mothers-funded-the-islamic-states-terror-machine/>

55 See: Guy Van Vlierden, “Belgische moeder stort 65.000 euro in oorlogskas IS,” *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 2019. Accessed April 15, 2019. <https://www.hln.be/nieuws/buitenland/belgische-moeder-stort-65-000-euro-in-oorlogskas-is?afb687ff>; Siebe De Vooqt, “Broer van Syriëstrijder staat terecht: “Hij stelde voor om iemand kapot te maken op de Markt van Brugge,” *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 2017. Accessed April 15, 2019. <https://www.hln.be/nieuws/binnenland/broer-van-syriestrijder-staat-terecht-hij-stelde-voor-om-iemand-kapot-te-maken-op-de-markt-van-brugge?a31defce/>

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