



The Crime-Terror Nexus in Belgium and Luxembourg

- The objective of this working paper is to present an overview of links between crime and terrorism (the crime-terror nexus) in Belgium and Luxembourg, highlight potential risks, and make a series of recommendations for how such risks can be mitigated.
 - It is part of a Europe-wide survey that will produce similar papers for all 28 member states of the European Union. In doing so, the aim is to generate a more holistic understanding of threats from crime and terrorism, and promote new and innovative ways of tackling them.
 - Though illicit activities are notoriously difficult to measure, the presence of links between crime and terrorism can be seen in two areas:
 1. Among Belgian jihadists, who have leveraged their **criminal skills** and connections for the purposes of terrorism, and actively encouraged crime for the sake of jihad;
 2. In **Belgian prisons**, where there is a cohort of radicalised individuals that are scheduled for release over the coming years.
 - Our recommendations include action on prisons, terrorist financing, information sharing, and collaboration between security agencies as well as between government and non-government actors.
 - However, the wider problem seems to be social in nature – that is, the existence of geographical areas and demographic pools of people which are cut off from mainstream society and, therefore, become easy prey for both criminal gangs and jihadist recruiters. In addition to technical and administrative measures, therefore, we recommend that there should be a wider, social and political effort to re-engage with the “forgotten parts” of Belgian society.
-

1 Introduction

In the aftermath of recent terrorist attacks, Belgium has faced sharp criticism over its counter-terrorist response. The Parliamentary Investigation Committee on Terrorism, which was set up after the March 2016 Brussels attacks, highlighted a long list of deficiencies in the Belgian security architecture, including a lack of capacity and resources, ineffective procedures and regulations, limited international cooperation, and the absence of an integrated approach.¹

One of main criticisms was the insufficient exchange of relevant information between the judicial, security and intelligence services as well as the police. This is particularly relevant in the case of Belgium because so many of the individuals who have become involved in jihadist terrorism had been known to police as “ordinary” criminals. Indeed, there are few countries in Europe where the phenomenon of terrorists with criminal backgrounds is as well-established as in Belgium.

The objective of this paper is to present an overview of links between crime and terrorism in Belgium and Luxembourg, highlight potential risks, and make a series of recommendations for how such risks can be mitigated. It is part of a Europe-wide survey that will produce similar papers for all 28 member states of the European Union. In doing so, the aim is to generate a more holistic understanding of threats from crime and terrorism, and promote new and innovative ways of tackling them.

The paper’s empirical basis is a survey of open sources, including relevant government and inter-governmental reports, academic research, court documents, newspaper articles, as well as interviews with practitioners and subject matter experts. The research took place between December 2017 and February 2018, and was carried out by a team of Belgian and British researchers.²

Though illicit activities are notoriously difficult to measure and quantify, the presence of links between crime and terrorism can be seen in two areas:

¹ Third intermediary report of the Parliamentary Investigation Committee on Terrorism, p.66.

² The principal authors of this paper are Peter R. Neumann and Rajan Basra, with Fanny Lutz and Michaël Fernandez-Bertier as co-authors. We are grateful to all interviewees, whether named or anonymous.

1. Among Belgian jihadists, who have leveraged their **criminal skills** and connections for the purposes of terrorism, and actively encouraged crime for the sake of jihad;
2. In **Belgian prisons**, where there is a cohort of radicalised individuals that are scheduled for release over the coming years.

While both of these areas require specific actions, and Belgian authorities have recognised and taken positive steps in relation to some of these concerns, the wider problem seems to be social in nature – that is, the existence of geographical areas and demographic pools of people which are cut off from mainstream society and, therefore, become easy prey for both criminal gangs and jihadist recruiters. In addition to technical and administrative measures, therefore, we recommend that there should be a wider, social and political effort to re-engage with the “forgotten parts” of Belgian society.

The paper starts with overviews of organised crime and terrorism in Belgium and Luxembourg. In the second part, we explore the two areas in which potential links have emerged: among Belgian jihadists, whose criminal pasts have enabled terrorist operations, and in Belgian prisons. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for policymakers, security agencies, and society as a whole.

Box 1: What is the Crime-Terror Nexus?

The concept of the crime-terror nexus emerged in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of globalisation. Amidst shifting geopolitics and the birth of the information age, analysts noticed that terrorist and insurgent groups were increasingly adapting criminal modus operandi to further their aims.

Since then, scholars have identified *three types of crime-terror nexus: institutional, organisational, and social.*

Institutional

One of the pioneers was Tamara Makarenko.³ On her “crime-terror continuum”, she identified three types of institutional linkages between criminal and terrorist groups:

- At one end, criminal and terrorist groups engaged in *co-operation*, either in limited, transaction-based alliances, or in more sophisticated coalitions.
- Nearing the middle, *convergence* indicated when groups adapted skills belonging to the other, resulting in “hybrid criminal-terrorist groups”.
- At the other end was *transformation*, in which a group had completely transformed into the other by way of a shift in motivation.

Among the most prominent examples have been the Taliban, which have at times depended on Afghanistan’s heroin production; the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces’ (FARC) involvement in their country’s narcotics industry; and the smuggling of petrol and counterfeit goods by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Organisational

Writing at the same time as Makarenko, Letizia Paoli focused on the structural and organisational similarities between youth gangs and terrorist groups, which she categorised as “clannish” organisations:⁴

- They were involved in illegal activity, including violence;
- They required members’ “absolute commitment”;
- They offered *emotional benefits*, such as status, “brotherhood”, identity, and belonging.

continues...

3 Tamara Makarenko, “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism”, *Global Crime*, Vol 6, No 1, 2004, pp.129-145.

4 Letizia Paoli, “The Paradoxes of Organized Crime”, *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, Vol 37, No 1, 2002, pp.51-97.

In Paoli's view, drawing sharp distinctions between actors based on their stated aims – criminal versus political – could be misleading, because the distinctions might be blurred and “goals [could] change”.

As an example, she cited white supremacist gangs in the United States, which recruited their membership according to ideological principles and professed to have a political programme but were heavily involved in “ordinary” crime.

Social

In a recent study of jihadist recruitment in Europe, Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann highlighted not the convergence of criminals and terrorists as groups or organisations but of their social networks, environments, or milieus.⁵ Rather than formalised collaboration or even transformation, they found that criminal and terrorist groups recruited from sociologically similar pools of people, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps.

This “new” crime-terror nexus had four facets:

- It affected processes of *radicalisation*, because involvement in terrorism could offer redemption and legitimise crime.
- It highlighted the *role of prisons* as environments for radicalisation and networking among criminals and extremists.
- It emphasised the *development of skills and experiences* that could be useful for terrorists, particularly access to weapons, forged documents, and the familiarity with violence.
- It facilitated the *financing* of terrorism, especially through petty crime.

Despite differences in approach and perspective, the *three types of nexus – institutional, organisational, and social* – are not mutually exclusive. Taken together, they provide the analytical framework of the Crime Terror Nexus Project.

⁵ Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, “Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol 10, No 6, 2016, pp.25-40.

2 Organised crime

Belgium has a significant presence of organised crime, which is defined as a group of two or more people that are continuously involved in crime for financial benefit.⁶ This section provides an overview of organised crime in Belgium and Luxembourg, focusing on the groups involved, as well as their activities and locations. It shows that, mainly because of its location at the intersection of multiple trafficking routes, Belgium has come to play a major role as a hub for illicit trafficking.

Groups

There are no reliable estimates of the number of crime groups operating in Belgium or Luxembourg. The Belgian Minister of the Interior and Security recently stated that 251 criminal organisations, totalling 2,718 members, were under investigation.⁷ It is likely, however, that there are more crime groups in existence. Additionally, while crime groups and gangs do not entirely overlap, there are an estimated 30 gangs operating in Brussels in 2017,⁸ with around 358 members.⁹

The *organisational structures* vary. Historically, crime groups in Belgium have been hierarchical, top-down, and heavily centralised. Since 2010, this seems to have changed, with groups now more mobile, international, and able to use technology to communicate, collaborate, and exploit new opportunities.¹⁰ Presently, 43 per cent of groups under investigation are characterised by a “networked” structure; 21 per cent have a strict hierarchy; and 18 per cent of groups have no recognisable structure at all.¹¹

Crime groups are *ethnically diverse* and *multinational* in their composition. Most groups (66 per cent) consist of a mixture of Belgians and non-Belgians, while a minority (22 per cent) are homogenous.¹² A 2017 federal police report has shown 86 different nationalities as involved in organised crime.¹³ Previous investigations have shown these to include Albanian, Turkish, and Italian mafia groups, as well as South American

6 This definition is in line with article 324bis of the Belgian Penal Code.

7 Statement of the Minister of Security and the Interior before the Federal Parliament, *Compte rendu analytique, commission de l'intérieur, des affaires générales et de la fonction publique, CRABV 54 COM 790*, 20 December 2017, pp.1-2 (the “Statement of the Minister of Security and the Interior of 20 December 2017”).

8 There is no commonly accepted definition of urban gangs in Belgium, and no corresponding criminal offence. Statement of the Minister of Security and the Interior to the Federal Parliament in *Questions et réponses écrites*, Ch., sess. 2017-2018, 21 November 2017, QRVA 54 136, p.119 (the “Statement of the Minister of Security and the Interior of 21 November 2017”).

9 Statement of the Minister of Security and the Interior of 20 December 2017, pp.1-2; “Bandes urbaines: 358 délinquants fichés”, *La Province*, 18 October 2017.

10 CTIF-CFI, *Annual Report 2016*, p.14; Criminal Policy Service 2010 Report, p.7.

11 Report of the judicial Federal Police on organised crime in Belgium, June 2017 (unpublished).

12 Statement of the Minister of Security and the Interior of 21 November 2017, p.119.

13 *Ibid.*

cartels.¹⁴ Chinese triads and Russian mafias are also established in Belgium, though recent years have seen reduced activity.¹⁵ In response, Belgian federal police have prioritised tackling Albanian, Turkish, and criminal biker groups.¹⁶

Activities

Reflecting the situation throughout Europe, Belgian crime groups often engage in multiple criminal activities rather than specialising in a single activity.¹⁷ These include – amongst other crimes – the trafficking of drugs, firearms, people, and the laundering of money.

Drug trafficking is the main activity for crime groups in Belgium.¹⁸

The country is one of the most important producers and distributors of synthetic drugs (such as MDMA and amphetamines)¹⁹ and cannabis²⁰ in Europe, as well as new psychoactive substances (NPS).²¹ Cannabis plantations and synthetic drugs laboratories are mainly concentrated at the border with the Netherlands, occasionally with common production chains.²² Belgium is also one of the three main entry points for cocaine into Europe – alongside Spain and the Netherlands – and it appears to be the most smuggled drug in the country.²³

Belgium is considered as a hub for international *firearms trafficking*, due to its location, the wide range of transport options, and the existing technical expertise in the field of weapons.²⁴ The historical reputation of Belgium in the manufacturing, handling, repairing, reactivating, and exporting of weapons (including military-grade firearms) makes the country appealing on the illicit market.²⁵ Firearms mainly end up in the illegal market through cross-border smuggling,²⁶ as well as through theft, illicit production or reactivation of legally-acquired deactivated firearms, and “darkening”, that is, when a legitimate firearm is falsely reported as lost or stolen in order to be re-sold in the illicit market. The trade is typically a *closed market* that can only be penetrated with the right criminal connections, and most transactions are face-to-face,²⁷ though the internet has – to some extent – challenged this.²⁸

14 Ibid.

15 Report of the judicial Federal Police on organised crime in Belgium, June 2017 (unpublished).

16 Statement of the Minister of Security and the Interior to the Federal Parliament in *Questions et réponses écrites*, Ch., sess. 2017-2018, 15 November 2017, QRVA 54 135, pp.261-262 (the “Statement of the Minister of Security and the Interior of 15 November 2017”).

17 Federal Police, *National Plan for Security 2016-2019*, p.22.

18 For statistics, see FPF/DGR/DRI/BIPOL, *Statistiques policières de criminalité, Année 2000 – Semestre 1-2017, 2017*, p.8.

19 Europol, *European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2017 (SOCTA)*, p.39.

20 Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, “De Belgische illegale vuurwapenmarkt in beeld”, p.51. Statement of the Minister of the Interior and of Security, quoted in “Voici le bilan du plan canal”, *La Libre*, 13 November 2017.

21 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), *Country Drug Report 2017: Belgium*, p.16.

22 EMCDDA, *Country Drug Report 2017: Belgium*, p.16.

23 In 2015, the following quantities of drugs were seized on the Belgian soil: 17,847 kg of cocaine, 7,045 kg of cannabis resin, 764 kg of herbal cannabis, 121 kg of heroin, 69 kg of amphetamines, 9kg of MDMA and 4 kg of methamphetamines. EMCDDA, *Country report 2017: Belgium*, p.16. p.37.

24 Federal Police, *Statistiques policières de criminalité 2015*, p.18.

25 Nils Duquet, “Firearms acquisition and the terrorism-criminality nexus”, in Thomas Renard (ed.), *Counterterrorism in Belgium: key challenges and policy options*, Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations, October 2016, pp.54-55.

26 Frequently from the Western Balkans (and originate from the former Yugoslavia conflict). Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, “De Belgische illegale vuurwapenmarkt in beeld”, p.65.

27 Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, “De Belgische illegale vuurwapenmarkt in beeld”, Flemish Peace Institute, 23 June 2017, p.60.

28 Federal Police, *National Plan for Security 2016-2019*, p.65.

Money laundering is central to criminal operations, and has changed in recent years.²⁹ It has typically been relatively small scale (so-called “self-laundering”)³⁰, though there has been an increase in cases involving structured money laundering schemes and third-party launderers.³¹ The change is a result of the growing professionalisation, whereby money laundering is offered as a service by those who were not directly involved in the original criminal activity.³² Luxembourg is also considered a hub for money laundering, as shown by the 2017 Basel Anti-Money Laundering Index.³³

The underlying offences vary. In terms of *volume of referrals* by the Belgian Financial Intelligence Unit (CTIF-CFI) for prosecution, they include fraud, terrorism financing, and drug trafficking, among others.³⁴ In terms of the *amount* of money laundered, the main offences are tax fraud, organised crime, human trafficking, and general fraud.³⁵ Yet investigations and prosecutions of complex money laundering cases are often impaired by the absence of a coordinated, national strategy and by the lack of judicial resources in Belgium.³⁶

Belgium mainly serves as a destination country for *human trafficking*, whether for sexual or economic exploitation (including men destined for the hotel, restaurant and building sectors).³⁷ Most victims are reported to have come from Romania, Morocco, Nigeria, Hungary, and Bulgaria, although Belgian victims also exist.³⁸ The traffickers position themselves at key locations – across various countries – that serve as transit points for their victims, ensuring they reach their final destination. Belgium can also serve as a transit country for destinations like the United Kingdom.³⁹ Routes often originate in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and go via the Balkans, the Greek islands or Hungary, and onwards to Brussels.⁴⁰

Locations

Due to its geographic location in the centre of Europe, its small size – which makes it possible to cross the country in less than two hours – and the port in Antwerp,⁴¹ Belgium is often considered as a hub for organised and transnational crime. Its importance has led to crime groups attempting to infiltrate customs, docks, and police, in order to control the logistics of organised crime.⁴²

29 FATF, *Anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures – Belgium, Fourth Round Mutual Evaluation Report*, April 2015, p.27 (the “2015 FATF Report on Belgium”).

30 In other words, where the defendant in a money laundering case is also the author of the underlying crime. 2015 FATF Report on Belgium, p.13

31 Ibid.

32 CTIF-CFI, *Annual Report 2016*, p.15.

33 For more, see Il Fatto Quotidiano’s “United Mafias of Europe project”, available at: <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/longform/mafia-and-organized-crime-in-europe/map/luxembourg/>; and Basel Institute of Governance, *Basel AML Index 2017*, August 2017.

34 Interview with the CTIF-CFI, 20 December 2017.

35 CTIF-CFI, *Annual Report 2016*, pp.61-62.

36 Including training, financial resources and material resources. 2015 FATF Report on Belgium, pp.9 and 14.

37 GRETA 2017 Report, p.7.

38 Ibid; see also CTIF-CFI, *Annual Report 2016*, p.16.

39 GRETA, *Rapport concernant la mise en oeuvre de la Convention du Conseil de l’Europe sur la lutte contre la traite des êtres humains par la Belgique*, 2nd round of evaluations, 16 November 2017, p.7 (the “GRETA 2017 Report”); Interview with the magistrate attached to the Federal Prosecution Office in charge of human trafficking, 11 January 2018.

40 Interview with magistrates attached to the Federal Prosecution Office in charge of human trafficking, 11 January 2018.

41 Both in terms of the gross weight of goods handled and in terms of the volume of containers handled in the ports.

42 Eurostat, *Maritime ports freight and passenger statistics*, January 2017; Port of Antwerp, *2017 Facts and figures*, p.10.

42 Unpublished report presented by the judicial director of the Antwerp police on 7 September 2017 (“La mafia de la cocaïne infiltre le tout Anvers”, *La Libre*, 9 September 2017).

Unsurprisingly, organised crime groups are most active in population centres and areas of concentrated wealth, in districts of Brussels (37 per cent of groups) and Antwerp (35 per cent), as well as East Flanders (15 per cent) and Limburg (12 per cent). They are also present, to a lesser extent, in the cities of Liège (9 per cent), Mons (6 per cent) and Charleroi (5 per cent).⁴³

Most crime groups active are cross-border in nature: 70 per cent of identified criminal organisations are active transnationally, not only in neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands and France, but also further afield such as Spain and Nigeria.⁴⁴ In total, the activities of Belgian crime groups cross over into 77 different countries, according to the Belgian authorities.⁴⁵ If anything, this figure illustrates the extent to which Belgium has come to be at the intersection of illicit trafficking and global crime across the globe.

43 Report of the judicial Federal Police on organised crime in Belgium, June 2017 (unpublished).

44 Statement of the Minister of Security and the Interior of 21 November 2017, p.119.

45 Report of the judicial Federal Police on organised crime in Belgium, June 2017 (unpublished).

3 Terrorism

Belgium has a long history of terrorism and terrorist attacks.⁴⁶ The country witnessed attacks on its soil from anarchist terrorism in the late 19th century, through to Middle Eastern and left-wing terrorism in the 1980s.⁴⁷ In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the country was home to jihadist networks from Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, and Chechnya.⁴⁸ In recent years, Belgium has been associated with Islamic State terrorism, resulting in a major attack on Brussels airport and the metro station Maalbeek in March 2016, which has led to sharp criticism of the country's counterterrorism and policing response.

Despite a recent decision to downgrade the terrorist threat level, the potential for jihadist attacks remains a serious concern. Not only has Belgium experienced high levels of domestic radicalisation and foreign fighter recruitment, many of these activities have occurred at the intersection between extremist and criminal milieus. This section provides an overview of jihadist terrorism in Belgium and highlights two facets of the crime-terror nexus which are particularly relevant and problematic: (1) the utilisation of criminal skills by jihadists, and (2) the nexus between criminal and jihadist milieus in Belgian prisons.

Attacks, Plots, and Foreign Fighters

Over the past five years, several jihadist attacks have either been planned or taken place in Belgium, or used the country as a key operational base. This is reflected in the high number of individuals (297) which have been convicted for jihadist related offences in Belgian courts during this period.⁴⁹

The types of attacks and attempted attacks have ranged from rudimentary stabbings to coordinated explosions:

- *May 2014*: Mehdi Nemmouche, a 29-year-old French-Algerian citizen who had travelled to Syria, attacked the Jewish museum in Brussels, killing three people. The attack was the first by a “returnee” foreign fighter from Syria in Europe.
- *January 2015*: a police raid on an Islamic State cell in Verviers resulted in a shootout during which two jihadists were killed. Kalashnikovs, explosives, and police uniforms were found in the cell's apartment.

⁴⁶ We define terrorism as symbolic acts of politically motivated violence. See Peter R. Neumann and M.L.R. Smith, *The Strategy of Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2008), p.8.

⁴⁷ Thomas Renard (ed.), *Counterterrorism in Belgium: key challenges and policy options*, Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations, October 2016, p.4.

⁴⁸ Interview with magistrates attached to the Federal Prosecution office in charge of terrorism, 11 January 2018.

⁴⁹ Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TESAT) 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; and 2017*.

- *November 2015*: A group of Islamic State terrorists used Brussels as their base for a series of coordinated attacks in Paris, which killed 130 people and injured over 400.
- *March 2016*: multiple explosions at Brussels Airport and at Maalbeek metro station in Brussels killed 32 people and left over 340 injured. To date, this has been the deadliest attack in Belgium's history.
- *August 2015*: Ayoub El Khazzani, a Belgian-Moroccan man, opened fire in the Amsterdam-Paris Thalys train before his gun jammed and he was subdued by passengers. There were no fatalities in the attack.
- *August 2016*: A 33-year-old Algerian man attacked two police officers with a machete outside of a police station in Charleroi. He was shot dead on the scene.
- *October 2016*: Hicham Diop, a 43-year-old Belgian army veteran, attacked three police officers with a machete in Schaerbeek, Brussels, before being arrested.
- *June 2017*: Oussama Zariouh, a 36-year-old Moroccan national, exploded an improvised explosive device (IED) in Brussels Central Station, causing no casualties.
- *August 2017*: Haashi Ayaanle, a 30-year-old Somali, armed with a knife and a replica gun, stabbed soldiers near Brussels Grand Place, before being shot dead.

The most significant (and sophisticated) of these attacks involved so-called foreign fighters who had travelled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadist groups, especially Islamic State. Belgium has been greatly affected by this mobilisation,⁵⁰ with a minimum of 413 Belgian citizens or residents having left the country.⁵¹ (In per capita terms, this is one of the highest rates in Europe.)⁵² Nearly half of them mobilised through just two networks: the Sharia4Belgium network, which was modelled on the British jihadist group Al-Muhajiroun and facilitated the travel of at least 101 individuals;⁵³ and the Brussels-based "Zerkani network", which mobilised at least 85 (see Box 2).⁵⁴

By late-2017, Belgian authorities estimated that one third of the fighters had been killed, another third remained in the region, and slightly less than a third (125) had returned to the country.⁵⁵ There have been six known foreign fighters from Luxembourg.

50 For an overview, see Jean-Charles Brisard and Kevin Jackson, "The Islamic State's external operations and the French-Belgian Nexus", *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 9, Issue 11, November-December 2016, pp.8-15.

51 CUTA figures, cited in Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, "From the Kingdom to the Caliphate and Back: Returnees in Belgium", in Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet (eds.), *Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back, and how should we deal with them?*, Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations, February 2018, p.19.

52 Ibid.

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

54 Ibid.

55 Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, *From the Kingdom to the Caliphate and Back: Returnees in Belgium*, pp.19-20; Interview with magistrates attached to the Federal Prosecution office in charge of terrorism, 11 January 2018.

Box 2: The Zerkani Network

One of the most infamous examples of the crime-terror nexus in Belgium centres on Khalid Zerkani. Born in Morocco in 1973, he moved to Belgium as an adult and made money as a small-time criminal. After becoming radicalised, he used his charisma and network to recruit young men, mostly from the Molenbeek neighbourhood, as jihadists. The “Zerkani network” became a crucial foreign fighter recruitment pipeline, responsible for mobilising over 85 individuals to Syria and Iraq.⁵⁶ This was part of a wider network – including the Paris, Brussels, and Verviers cells – that accounts for the majority of jihadist terrorism in Belgium.⁵⁷

Zerkani encouraged his recruits to commit thefts and robberies, which he justified in Islamic terms, though it was clear that many of the young men attracted to his group had limited knowledge of their religion.⁵⁸ As a witness in his trial testified, Zerkani told his recruits that “to steal from the infidels is permitted by Allah”.⁵⁹ The proceeds were then redistributed among the group and used to fund their travel to Syria – along with fake documents and contacts that could smuggle them across the Turkey-Syria border⁶⁰ – leading to Zerkani’s nickname of *Papa Noël* (Father Christmas).⁶¹ It remains unknown whether all of his recruits were previous criminals, or whether some engaged in crime *for the first time* under his tutelage.

Zerkani was arrested in 2014 and convicted for recruiting jihadists in 2016. His most infamous protégé was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a key coordinator of the network that organised the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016. More than any other example, the structures that Zerkani created illustrate the merging of criminal and terrorist milieus that took place in Belgium and help explain why this small country has produced more than 400 jihadist foreign fighters in just a few years.

56 Pieter Van Ostaeyen, *From Grozny to Raqqa with Stopover Brussels – the ‘Eastern Contingent’ of Belgian Foreign Terrorist Fighters*, Bellingcat, 29 August 2017.

57 For more, see Guy Van Vlierden, Jon Lewis, and Don Rassler, *Beyond the Caliphate: Islamic State Activity Outside the Group’s Defined Wilayat – Belgium*, Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), 2018, pp.6-7.

58 Patrick J. McDonnell, “Papa Noel” – the militant recruiter in Brussels who groomed young men for violence”, *Los Angeles Times*, 28 March 2016.

59 Andrew Higgins and Kimiko De Freytas-Tamura, “A Brussels Mentor Who Taught ‘Gangster Islam’ to the Young and Angry”, *New York Times*, 11 April 2016.

60 Verdict in first Zerkani trial, “Jugement, Tribunal de première instance Francophone de Bruxelles,” July 29, 2015, pp.44-65, cited in Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attacks”, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 9, Issue 6, 2016, p.9.

61 Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Paris Attacks”, p.9.

The Skills Nexus

The prevalence of criminals-turned-jihadists in Belgium is clear. According to a federal prosecutor, approximately half of the Belgian-based individuals who have been arrested for jihadist-related offences had criminal records prior to departure.⁶² This has been confirmed by the Minister of the Interior, who has repeatedly acknowledged the high rate of criminal backgrounds, whether for petty crimes or involvement in organised crime.⁶³

The impact of jihadists with criminal pasts has been most clearly felt in the case of the Paris-Brussels network, where eleven of the 15 attackers had previously been convicted for “ordinary” crimes. Like in other plots, their criminal backgrounds provided them with skills and experiences that were useful in planning and carrying out terrorist attacks, which otherwise might not have occurred or been less deadly.

One of the most significant “skills” is *access to firearms*. This market is typically considered the reserve of experienced criminals,⁶⁴ where trust between sellers and buyers is essential, highlighting the importance of terrorists having connections with the broader criminal underworld.⁶⁵ While arms dealers may have disincentives to collaborating with extremists – such as the greater attention from counterterrorism authorities, and the threat of more thorough investigations with greater custodial sentences⁶⁶ – they may not be aware of their customers’ intentions. For this very reason, Islamic State has encouraged would-be attackers to conceal their true intentions when purchasing weapons.⁶⁷

Firearms and, especially, Kalashnikovs have been used in a significant number of Belgian-based jihadist plots, including the 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels, the 2015 Thalys train attack, and among members of the Verviers cell. The Paris-Brussels network had a large number of firearms at their disposal, including three Serbian Zastava M70 AB2 assault rifles, a Zastava M70, a Bulgarian AKS47, and a Chinese Norinco 56-1.⁶⁸ Though it remains unclear exactly how they were sourced, Islamic State itself has claimed that they had been acquired by Ibrahim and Khalid El Bakraoui,⁶⁹ who had both been convicted for weapons offences prior to their radicalisation⁷⁰ and – in the case of Ibrahim – used an assault weapon during a 2010 robbery.⁷¹

Belgian-based jihadists also appear to have exploited criminal connections to acquire *fake documentation*. The Paris and Brussels network – including Salah Abdeslam, Khalid El Bakraoui, Najim Laachraoui and

62 “Un djihadiste belge sur deux a un passé de délinquant”, *La Libre*, 14 August 2015.

63 “Voici le bilan du plan canal”, *La Libre*, 13 November 2017; Report of the Parliamentary Investigation Committee on Terrorism, “Quatrième rapport intermédiaire, sur le volet “radicalisme”, 23 October 2017, doc. no. 54-1752/009, p.167 (the “Fourth intermediary report of the Parliamentary Investigation Committee on Terrorism”).

64 “Des pistolets d’alarme transformés en armes: la tendance inquiétante chez les petits délinquants”, *La Libre*, 21 August 2017.

65 Nils Duquet, “Firearms acquisition and the terrorism-criminality nexus”, p.57.

66 Interview with officials from the Belgian Financial Intelligence Unit (CTIF-CFI), 20 December 2017; “Les attentats ont fait grimper le prix de la Kalachnikov”, 10 August 2017.

67 AlHayat Media Center, *Dar al Islam*, Issue 6, 2015, p.33.

68 For an overview of their weapons, see Nils Duquet, *Armed to Kill: An exploratory analysis of the guns used in public mass shootings in Europe*, Flemish Peace Institute, June 2016, pp.23-25.

69 AlHayat Media Center, *Dabiq*, Issue 14, 2016, pp.6-7.

70 “Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui: From Bank Robbers to Brussels Bombers”, *New York Times*, 24 March 2016.

71 *Ibid.*

Mohamed Bakkali – used the services of Djamal Eddine Ouali, a criminal who ran a forgery operation in the Saint-Gilles neighbourhood of Brussels. Belgian identity cards were available for €1,000, and passports for €1,500.⁷² The fake IDs were used in their attack planning to rent apartments that were used as logistical bases, safe houses, and bomb factories.

There is no evidence that Ouali knew of their true intentions, or was even interested in them. Instead, it is likely that they simply appeared as “ordinary” criminals. As the Belgian investigator in charge of Ouali’s case stated: “[He] was a professional document falsifier whose main goal was to make as much money as possible”.⁷³

Meanwhile, the nature and extent of the *links between terrorism and drugs* remain vague. Analysis of radicalised individuals in Vilvoorde – a municipality near Brussels which has produced many foreign fighters – revealed their regular involvement in drug consumption and/or trafficking,⁷⁴ though the exact connections to extremism remain unknown. While drugs have been seized in police operations as part of “Canal Plan”⁷⁵ – which was created to tackle the overlap between terrorism and the drug trade – it continues to be unclear exactly how systematic and organised these overlaps have been.⁷⁶ At the very least, this aspect of the nexus remains under-researched.

The Prison Nexus

There are several, well-established factors behind prison radicalisation. Not only could an inmate be undergoing a “cognitive opening” – for example, due to a personal crisis related to their imprisonment – but there is also a need for new networks in the absence of family and friends, as well as physical protection in a sometimes hostile and violent environment.⁷⁷ Given that prisons are places in which criminal and extremist milieus are physically in their closest proximity, it is in this environment that linkages between crime and terror frequently emerge.⁷⁸

The authorities in Belgium have openly acknowledged that some of the country’s 10,000 prisoners have radicalised, although there are conflicting statistics about the extent of the problem. While state security services estimate the number to be around 450,⁷⁹ CelEx, a unit within the General Directorate of Prisons, has identified 230 affected individuals.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, the parliamentary commission which investigated the March 2016 Brussels

72 Interview with magistrates attached to the Federal Prosecution office in charge of terrorism, 11 January 2018.

73 Maïa de la Baume and Giulia Paravicini, “Inside the Brussels flat where terrorists scored fake IDs”, *Politico*, 31 March 2016.

74 *Ibid.*, p.175.

75 Third intermediary report of the Parliamentary Investigation Committee on Terrorism, p.102.

76 “In the first half of 2017, the judicial police seized 137 kg of herbal cannabis, 3 kg of cocaine, 5,488 cannabis plants and 0.9 kg of heroin”; Statement of the Minister of the Interior and of Security, quoted in “Voici le bilan du plan canal”, *La Libre*, 13 November 2017.

77 Fourth intermediary report of the Parliamentary Investigation Committee on Terrorism, pp.82 and 100.

78 Interview with CelEx, 22 February 2018.

79 Kurt Wertelaers and Guy Van Vlierden, “Verkrachters, gangsters, moordenaars. En in de cel warden ze jihadi”, *HLN*, 18 February 2017.

80 Interview with CelEx, 22 February 2018. It is important to note these 230 are from across the ideological spectrum, though are predominantly jihadist, and are categorised as follows: 48 inmates convicted or in pre-trial custody for terrorism offences; 36 inmates with links to terrorists, but not convicted for terrorism offences (e.g. weapons traffickers); 97 foreign fighters; 49 inmates not convicted for terrorism offences, but identified as radicalised; and 22 inmates separated in “DRadX” wings.

attacks reported that five per cent of the overall prison population are radicalised.⁸¹

While it is often difficult to determine when prison radicalisation takes place – the outcome is rarely clear-cut and absolute, and activities upon release from prison are often crucial – there are several recent examples in which prison seemed to have been a factor. Mehdi Nemmouche, who carried out the 2014 Jewish Museum attack in Brussels, was radicalised in a French prison, and left for Syria just three weeks after his release from prison in 2012. Abdelhamid Abaaoud had several prison stays, and travelled to Syria shortly after his last release in September 2012.⁸² Moreover, prison was cited in Islamic State propaganda as a key feature in the radicalisation of the El Bakraoui brothers.⁸³

Belgium has taken steps to prevent and mitigate this threat. As seen elsewhere in Europe, the most influential offenders (for example, “hate preachers” and charismatic recruiters) are separated from the general prison population by housing them in two “DRadX” wings in Ittre and Hasselt prisons, while the most dangerous individuals, such as Mehdi Nemmouche and Mohamed Abrini, are held in a maximum security prison in Bruges.⁸⁴ CelEx monitors attempts by jihadist prisoners to recruit other inmates – essentially operating as a prison intelligence service – as well as receiving daily updates on behavioural changes.⁸⁵ Radicalised individuals are also triaged to so-called “satellite” prisons, where staff have had greater training and monitoring is enhanced.⁸⁶

In the coming years, it is estimated that 50-60 extremist offenders will be released or could appeal for a probationary release.⁸⁷ Some of them have elected to serve their entire sentence in prison in an attempt to avoid post-release monitoring and restrictive probationary conditions.⁸⁸ If anything, this highlights that the situation in prisons will continue to remain a top priority for Belgian counter-terrorism officials.

81 “Rapport sur la Commission d’enquête sur les attentats du 22 mars: voici le dernier volet”, *RTBF*, 23 October 2017.

82 “Ce que les services belges savaient d’Abdelhamid Abaaoud”, *Le Monde*, 20 November 2015.

83 AlHayat Media Center, *Dabiq*, Issue 14, 2016, pp.6-7.

84 Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, *From the Kingdom to the Caliphate and Back: Returnees in Belgium*, p.31.

85 Interview with Paul Van Tigchelt, director of the Threat Assessment Coordination Body (CUTA), 25 January 2018.

86 Interview with CelEx, 22 February 2018.

87 *Ibid.*

88 *Ibid.*

4 Recommendations

This paper has examined potential links between crime and terrorism in Belgium and Luxembourg. While we have found no institutionalised, formalised links between organised crime and terrorism, there are areas of concern, especially when it comes to the merging of criminal and jihadist milieus – the so-called social nexus (see Box 1). One is the potential for individuals with criminal backgrounds to use their skills – be it in forging documents, procuring firearms, or raising money through criminal means – to facilitate terrorist attacks. Another is the potential for the radicalisation of criminal inmates within prisons.

To prevent such links from re-emerging or becoming further entrenched, we recommend the following actions and/or good practices:

1. Effective monitoring

We recommend that authorities continue to periodically review their statistics on organised crime and terrorism, and consciously monitor them for emerging linkages between the two phenomena. Some areas – such as the link between drugs and terrorism – may require further research.

2. Re-thinking radicalisation

Given the partial merging of terrorist and extremist milieus, core assumptions about radicalisation need to be reconsidered. The behaviour of jihadists with criminal pasts often contradicts the notion that extremism correlates with religious behaviour. Where needed, we recommend that authorities update their checklists, indicators, and training materials in order to reflect changing patterns and profiles.

3. Safer prisons

The authorities in Belgium have recognised the importance of prisons as potential incubators of links between crime and terrorism. We encourage them to move forward with implementing systematic efforts to make prisons safer from crime, terrorism, and any links between them. It is also important to have adequate post-release arrangements, which involve re-integration as well as monitoring.

4. Countering all streams of terrorist financing

Efforts to countering terrorist finance have excessively focused on the international financial system – with meagre results. As repeatedly mentioned by the mayor Molenbeek,⁸⁹ we recommend that authorities broaden their efforts at countering terrorist finance to include small-scale and petty crime, such as drug dealing, theft, robberies, and the trafficking in goods.

5. Information sharing

As the lines between terrorism and “ordinary” crime have become increasingly blurred, relevant agencies need to become more effective at sharing relevant information across departments and “disciplines”, as well as forming new “coalition” of individuals and institutions that may not be used to working with each other.

We recommend that governments continue to review existing channels and systems of information exchange, explore creating new partnerships (such as with local authorities, civil society, and the private sector), and make appropriate changes reflecting the new – and multi-dimensional – nature of the threat. As recommended by the Parliamentary Investigation Committee on Terrorism, the “need to share” should replace the “need to know”.⁹⁰

6. Addressing social conditions

While there is no inherent or automatic link between socio-economic conditions and involvement in terrorism, it seems clear that jihadist “delinquency” in Belgium has occurred in some of the same geographical areas and demographic pools from which “ordinary” delinquency has emerged as well.

In addition to technical and administrative measures, there needs to be a discussion about the extent to which state and civil society can re-engage with those areas and groups of people in order to prevent the root causes not just of extremist radicalisation but of all kinds of social ills, including crime.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Nikolaj Nielsen, “Molenbeek mayor opens new front on extremism”, EU Observer, 9 September 2016.

⁹⁰ Third intermediary report of the parliamentary investigation committee on terrorism, p.55.



Crime Terror Nexus

THE CRIME TERROR NEXUS

The Crime Terror Nexus is a project that investigates links between crime and terrorism, and identifies better ways to counter them.

Over the course of 18 months, we are documenting links between crime and terrorism across the European Union. Our findings are disseminated through reports, events, and workshops.

We are partnering with officials and local stakeholders to create new and innovative approaches that contribute to countering crime and making our countries safer.

The Crime Terror Nexus is a project of Panta Rhei Research Ltd. It is funded by PMI IMPACT, a global grant initiative of Philip Morris International that supports projects against illegal trade.

Panta Rhei Research Ltd. is fully independent in implementing the project and has editorial responsibility for all views and opinions expressed herein.

For more information, visit www.crimeterrornexus.com.

CONTACT DETAILS

For questions, queries and additional copies of this report, please contact Katie Rothman: katie@crimeterrornexus.com

Registered address: Panta Rhei Research Ltd.,
37a Great Percy Street, London WC1X 9RD, United Kingdom

© Panta Rhei Research Ltd. 2018

www.crimeterrornexus.com