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Brussels Attacks One Year On: More Still Needs to Be Done

Thomas Renard

Commentary, 13 March 2017

Belgium has accomplished much since last year's devastating terrorist attacks – the worst in its history. But the threats continue, and new security vulnerabilities are becoming apparent.

One year ago, Belgium was struck by the worst terrorist attack in its history, killing 32 civilians and injuring several hundreds.

The bombings followed another set of coordinated attacks a few months earlier, in Paris, partly prepared from Belgian homeland and relying on the same Franco-Belgian network.

Following these attacks, Belgium found itself subjected to a barrage of criticisms that focused on its allegedly weak security policies and complex institutional structure. Belgium-bashers had it that the country is a 'failed state' and a 'jihadi rear base', while its intelligence services are supposedly 'shitty tradecraft'.


These accusations were largely exaggerated. They were also rebuffed by more nuanced studies, and by many testimonies to the parliamentary investigation committee set up after the Brussels attacks.



Everyone agrees, however, that more needs to be done, and more efficiently, to cope with the challenges of terrorism and radicalisation – both described as 'unprecedented'.

A lot has been accomplished since the Brussels attacks, in fact. Of the 30 measures announced by the government in 2015 26 have been either implemented, or implementation is ongoing.

The legal counterterrorism framework has been broadened, while the financial and human resources available to security services have been bolstered. Beyond repressive measures, local prevention

(so-called Local Cells for Integral Security, LCIS), gathering regularly all key local stakeholders, such as the mayor, head of local police, prevention officers and social workers.

 Regional platforms and 'mobile teams' were also created to facilitate the exchange of good practices between municipalities, while multidisciplinary support centres were launched to help citizens confronted with radicalisation.

  All these initiatives are still recent, dating back a couple of years at most, and probably imperfect or incomplete, but they illustrate the fact that Belgium is actively working on these issues – and that de facto it is neither a failed state nor a failed counterterrorism actor.

Despite all these efforts, however, Belgium remains vulnerable. Understanding the key threats and challenges ahead is crucial to identify priority areas for policy development.

Three challenges appear particularly significant at this point, and for the coming months: the issue of returning foreign terrorist fighters; the problem of domestic radicalisation; and the potential legacy of a 'virtual caliphate'.

Intelligence services across Europe are extremely concerned about the return of foreign fighters still active in Syria and Iraq. According to [recent figures](#), there were still at least 160 Belgian fighters in the region, including women and children.

It is unclear how many of them will eventually return home, since a portion could fight to the death (110 Belgian fighters have died so far), while other true believers may decide to relocate to other jihadi theatres.

Although it is known that around 20 of these fighters are currently [negotiating](#) with the authorities the conditions of their return, the actual number of returnees could likely be higher, adding to the 120 foreign fighters that have already returned to Belgium since 2012.

Returnees raise two key questions for security services and authorities. What threat do they pose? And, subsequently, what to do with them? In terms of threat, it is evident that not every returnee will come back with the plan to conduct attacks in Belgium, and some may even truly seek some sort of rehabilitation within the society.

Yet, the experience from previous jihadi conflicts suggests that a hard core of fighters will seek to pursue violent activities in Belgium, similarly to the attackers of Paris and Brussels.

A [recent incident](#) in the centre of Brussels, where a returnee under watch from the intelligence services was arrested with two gas canisters in the back of his car, was a stark reminder of this threat. He was later released without charge.

Other returnees could also pursue propaganda, training or recruitment activities, capitalising on their fighting experience and the charisma that comes with it. This so-called '[veteran effect](#)' has been observed before, and could increase the problem of radicalisation, and possibly spark the next jihadi wave in Europe.

So far, the Belgian response has been a tailored one, with a specific risk evaluation for each foreign fighter, and the adoption of personalised measures via a special task force composed of intelligence services, police and judicial authorities, among others.

Yet, as more jihadis return, the more difficult it becomes for services that are already [under-resourced and overloaded](#). Many returnees have already been sentenced to jail, and more are likely to join them since authorities have become more suspicious of returnees, and the legal framework is now stricter.

Finally, in common with many other European states, Belgium is still undecided on several models of de-radicalisation and disengagement. Either way, it remains overall not very advanced on this front. The potential return of more foreign fighters calls for a rapid decision.

The second major challenge for Belgium and its neighbours is the increasing radicalisation of fringe elements in the population. This raises a general problem of social cohesion and, in some cases, a security threat when radicalised individuals become drawn to violence. Over the past year, home-grown terrorists in Europe have proved that they can be equally, if not more, effective than experienced fighters.

There are two parallel tracks of radicalisation in Belgium. The first takes a religious form, illustrated by a recent [report](#) from the intelligence services that highlights the rising influence of Salafism in Belgium.

Second, is a more [social form of radicalisation](#) among youngsters in certain neighbourhoods, such as Molenbeek, who adopt the codes of radical Islam as a form of identity rather than as a form of belief.

These two trends may possibly be linked at a certain level, but they remain very different phenomena, calling for different policies. As mentioned above, there have been numerous counter-radicalisation initiatives in the past few years and months. Yet, the current trend suggests that much more is still needed.

The third major challenge ahead comes from the dangers of an emerging 'virtual caliphate'. Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) may be losing territories in Syria and Iraq, but the idea of a successful and functioning jihadi project, attracting fighters from across the world, will survive the fall of the physical caliphate.

Images and videos from the 'lol jihad' era will be used to build a powerful and lasting narrative, for propaganda and recruitment ends. A new myth will be created, and returnees will play no small role in its dissemination.

The danger is that such a tool could further radicalisation and violent extremism. This requires countries such as Belgium to also focus their efforts on cyberspace, to monitor this narrative, and possibly to build effective counter-narratives.

Belgium distinguishes itself in this regard, as its Ministry of Interior is leading an EU-wide project on strategic communication against violent extremism called European Strategic Communications Network, [ESCN](#). Yet again, the means deployed here may not be sufficient to match the challenge ahead.

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Banner image: Heightened security at Brussels's central train station and empty streets in the wake of the March 2016 terrorist attacks. Courtesy of Romaine/Wikimedia.

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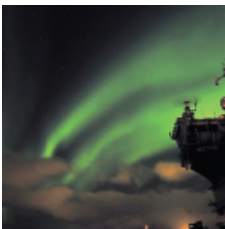
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