

The fall-out from the Brussels terrorist attacks

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On 22 March, Belgium got a brutal wake-up call. In a coordinated attack, two nail bombs exploded in the departure hall of the Brussels National Airport. A little over an hour later, a third bomb exploded inside a metro train passing through Maelbeek station. 32 civilians lost their lives, while more than 300 people were injured. The Islamic State (IS) network, which was responsible for the Paris attacks on 13 November 2015, claimed responsibility. The arrest of Salah Abdeslam, the sole survivor of the Paris attacks, on 18 March, seems to have made IS expedite the Brussels attacks following a claim from the Paris prosecutor that Abdeslam would cooperate with the French Justice Department over the Paris attacks.

Western Europe is now on high alert and could remain so for months, if not years, to come. If Europe is to withstand the future threat from radicalised individuals within its Muslim population, living at home or returning from conflict-zones like Syria and Iraq, the European Union and its members must dare to critically assess what has gone wrong. This will require analysing objectively the work carried out by security and intelligence forces nationally and transnationally, in order to properly determine where the weak spots were, along with re-evaluating integration policies in Europe which have, to a large extent, failed.

The Belgian IS network remains a significant threat

There is reason to believe that both the Paris and Brussels attacks were meticulously planned months ahead, even though the Belgian Prosecutor's Office claimed that the target for the second attack was the European football championship which will take place in France this June and July. Clearly, an attack on a national airport requires preparation; therefore, it is unlikely that the Zaventem attack was improvised at the last moment. Furthermore, in one of the safe houses used by Abdelhamid Abaaoud, detailed ground plans of Brussels airport were found, which might point to the fact the airport was indeed a target.

Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the most renowned Belgian foreign fighter, was the key link in the other attempted and foiled IS attacks in Europe. Abaaoud was the ground coordinator of the Paris attacks and had personal ties to all the attackers. He was in contact with the notorious French jihadist Mehdi Nemmouche a few months before he attacked the Brussels Jewish Museum in May 2014. He also coordinated the terror cell that was uprooted in Verviers in Belgium in mid-January 2015, as well as having probably ordered the men who attempted to attack a church in Villejuif, France, and planned to carry out an attack on board a Thalys train in August 2015. Abaaoud and a number of other assailants were affiliated to the Brussels-based recruiter Khalid Zerkani. It is precisely Zerkani's network that recruited people like Abaaoud and his friend Salah Abdeslam.

While Abaaoud is now deceased and Zerkani in prison, the network is far from destroyed. Indeed, this network is likely to be the most dangerous recruitment network in Belgium, far exceeding the activities of the now disbanded radical group, Sharia4Belgium. Back in 2012, Sharia4Belgium was the first group of radical Islamists involved in sending over some of its members to the war in Syria. At this point at least 80 individuals who are directly linked to the movement have, at some point, been active as a fighter in the Syrian war.

The *modus operandi* of the two is very different. While Sharia4Belgium engaged in public speeches, videos and social media activity, the Zerkani network is engaged in secretive recruiting. Zerkani drew in a lot of unemployed people from the Brussels Canal area. Many are hardened criminals, with little or no Islamic background. As for now, two trials have already targeted the network around Zerkani. The network has its roots back in the 2000s, sending some recruits to the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and even Somalia. Once engaged, their members have become foreign fighters in Syria, and many are able to return to Europe with ease, relying on their former contacts in criminal milieus. These former comrades are highly valuable assets, as they are able to assist their 'friends' in preparing new attacks on European soil. The group members know where to buy weapons and material needed for bomb-building, and the location of safe-houses. Of course there still is a strong link with Belgian fighters still active in Syria and Iraq; this is one of the key strengths of the network, having both active recruits in the Middle East as well as in Europe. These people are not necessarily former foreign fighters, and could be laying the ground for future attacks in their countries of origin, without the security and intelligence forces even noticing. As IS is currently experiencing a setback in its state-building capacities in Syria and Iraq, it seems the focus has already shifted to attacking and threatening Europe – something it was already preparing to do back in 2013.

What next?

Currently the terror-threat level in Belgium remains at level three out of four. This would seem to indicate that an important, yet unknown part of the network is still at large, and the Belgian government and its security officials still believe that new attacks could happen anytime, anywhere. While it is impossible to rule out another attack in Belgium or France, at the same time the threat for other European countries remains significant.

Western Europe is likely to witness more of such attacks in the upcoming months and years. The ultimate horror scenario would be coordinated attacks in several European capital cities at the same time. Such attacks would probably cause severe unrest in Europe, causing a full-scale clash of far-right extremists with Muslim communities from whatever denotation; far-right parties and movements are using these attacks to point out that Islam and Western culture cannot be reconciled. The Islamic State thrives on this kind of chaos and unrest as they seek to further divide Muslims from non-Muslims in Europe and thereby create a potential new fan base. There is reason enough to remain as vigilant as possible, especially since this threat is not likely to disappear anytime soon.

A key response for Europe in dealing with this growing threat lies in a number of measures to be taken. First of all, the EU needs more transparent intelligence-sharing between member states and neighbouring countries affected by the jihadist phenomenon. While the EU already shares intelligence with Turkey, the inclusion of countries such as Morocco and Tunisia could be crucial for tackling the terrorist threat. As we learned in Belgium, security and intelligence forces also need to step-up their cooperation and coordination at a national level. Secondly, Europe needs to look into its detention systems and facilities since it is long established that radicalisation often occurs when individuals are in prison. Thirdly – and this is the biggest challenge – it is crucial to re-evaluate our integration and assimilation policies. Member states should invest in education, housing, civil infrastructure and the like to foster the integration of Muslim communities living in urban *banlieues* in Brussels and Paris.

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