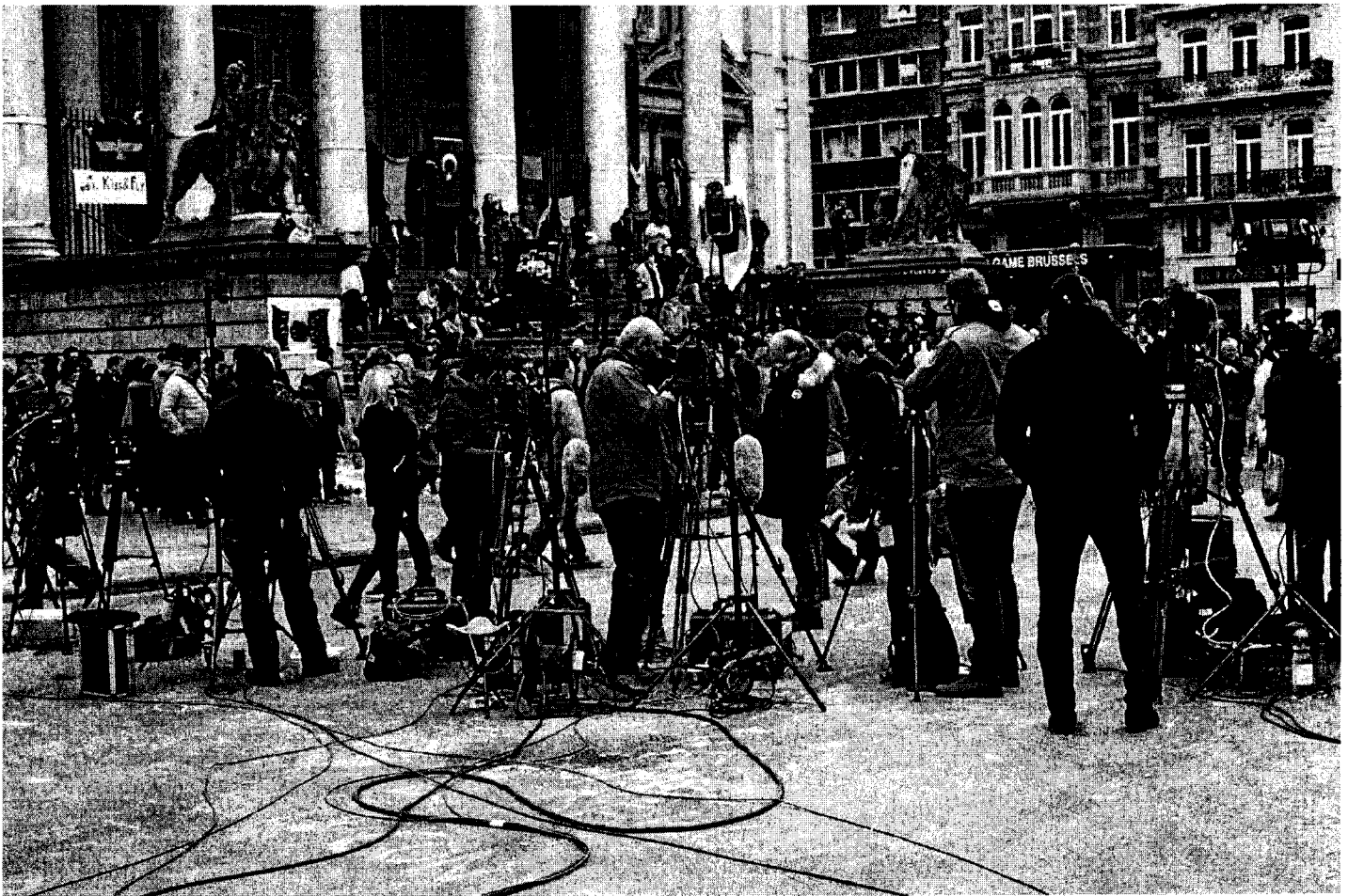




REASSESSING BELGIUM'S "FAILED" COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY



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Following the terrorist attacks in Paris (November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016), Belgium was subject to numerous criticisms. Belgium-bashing has now passed out of fashion, but it continues to shape the perception of the country's counterterrorism policies in some circles. Such biased perceptions fail to recognize the major developments that have taken place over the past few years, however. In spite of its small size and limited resources, Belgium is at the forefront of many initiatives against violent extremism.

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(Photo credit: Archives-bruxelles)

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Editor's Note: Belgium has earned a bad name in counterterrorism circles, with critics charging that its security services did too little too late when it came to disrupting the Islamic State and other groups on Belgian soil. The tragic terrorist attack in Brussels two years ago, however, marked a turning point. Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet of Egmont detail the significant steps Belgium has taken in recent years to improve its counterterrorism capacity.

Almost two years ago, Belgium was struck by the worst terrorist attack in its history. Two squads comprising a handful individuals detonated powerful home-made bombs in the Brussels metro and at the national airport, killing 32 and injuring hundreds. A few months earlier, the same cell was involved in preparing the coordinated Paris attacks, which were carried out in November 2015. These incidents gave Belgium bad press: The country was accused of being too lenient with its radicals and amateurish (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/us-officials-bash-shitty-belgian-security-forces>) in its counterterrorism approach. After all, it had the highest ratio of foreign terrorist fighters per capita in Europe. Many came from specific neighborhoods like Molenbeek, which gained a reputation for being a jihadi hotbed and no-go zone. Critics also highlighted the long-established jihadi scene in the country, which had already been involved in major international plots in the past, notably the 2004 Madrid bombings. Something must definitely be wrong in Belgium, these critics concluded.

Not all of the criticisms were unfounded. The final report of the parliamentary commission on the 22 March 2016 attacks (<http://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/showpage.cfm?section=/none&leftmenu=no&language=fr&cfm=/site/wwwcfm/flwb/flwbn.cfm?lang=F&legislat=54&dossierID=1752>) identified a number of shortcomings in the Belgian counterterrorism approach, in particular a lack of capacity, fragmentation of both the regulatory environment and the information flow, and an imbalance between prevention and repression. Yet there was nothing really exceptional in these findings, as failures of varying degrees are

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its position in recent months, now considering children below 10 years old as victims while treating those older on a case-by-case basis, it will remain a serious social challenge with potential security implications over the long term.

Today's concern comes less from the fact that Belgium's approach is still developing to address these remaining vulnerabilities than from the fear of seeing this progress abruptly stopped. The changing security context following the collapse of the Islamic State's caliphate is evident in the recent decision to lower the threat level in Belgium from 3 to 2 (on a scale of 4). This decision was based upon a series of indicators, such as the waning flow of foreign fighters from and to Belgium, the absence of new plots or attacks, the decrease of terrorism-related judicial investigations, or the limited impact of the Islamic State's propaganda in Belgium. There is, however, a real danger that political authorities misinterpret this signal as a green light to divest resources to other priorities and dismantle the recently adopted prevention-security arrangements.

Belgium has no silver bullet against radicalization and terrorism, but it is time to reassess where its policies stand. Much has been accomplished over the past few years. A number of good practices have emerged; they were learned the hard way, and could now possibly inspire similar measures elsewhere. At the same time, the Belgian approach remains in the making. It must still be consolidated and sustained over time, otherwise it will be yet another lost opportunity for both Belgium and its partners.


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