

Belgium and Counterterrorism Policy in the Jihadi Era

Many years before 9/11 some European countries, including Belgium, encountered a new variety of terrorism, jihadi terrorism. This study has for the first time reconstructed how Belgium reacted to the emergence of this new form of terrorism from its early signs in the 1980s until today. Jihadi terrorism went through different mutations. It started as an ‘Islam-nationalist’ movement in the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. It then acquired a global character, with al-Qaeda as the vanguard organisation of international jihadi terrorism. As a result of international and national efforts the organisation started to atomize and gave way to a decentralized, largely home-grown patchwork of jihadi groups, linked by ideology and opportunistic links. The Belgian counterterrorism policy has closely followed this development. The first related arrests occurred in 1986 and the latest culminated in the dismantling of an Iraq-related network in 2006.

Belgium is not a significant safe haven for terrorist groups, contrary to an often expressed opinion. Moreover, the study brings forth that due to this early encounter with jihadi terrorism the Belgian counterterrorism community was able to develop a genuine counterterrorism approach that evolves around three main characteristics.

Empathy is undoubtedly the first and foremost original trait of Belgium’s counterterrorist philosophy, implies that the clearly felt necessity to fully grasp what drove its militants in order to be able to adequately respond to the threat. The study quotes Superintendent Alain Grignard of the federal police: ‘Our approach has to be based on neurons, not hormones.’

Closely related to this, has been the constant emphasis on the need to address ‘root causes’. Very early on already, police and intelligence officers had become aware that religion was not of the essence. ‘Frustration, not religion, is the real reason why individuals radicalize into extremists’, is now a largely shared assessment within the Belgian counterterrorism community.

The third distinctive feature of the Belgian counterterrorism approach has been the extreme reluctance of eroding fundamental rights in the name of the fight against terrorism and the concern for accountability. ‘Democracy in danger needs more democracy, certainly not less,’ the study quotes Glenn Audenaert, the leading Belgian police official in charge of counterterrorism.

Notwithstanding its tight financial and human resources, the Belgian counterterrorism community has managed to develop a significant expertise, building upon its early encounter with jihadi terrorism. Belgium has thus succeeded in dismantling eight major networks and convicting more than 60 suspected terrorists.