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von gast

in Security Culture,  
Terrorismus

Kommentare ( 0 )

## Belgian Fighters In Syria and Iraq

By Pieter Van Ostaeyen

Part II of our [series](#) on ISIS

On Thursday January 15, only a week after the bloody attacks in Paris by the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibali, Belgium was on high alert. In a raid carried out by police and security forces in the small village of Verviers, two alleged terrorists were shot dead, a third suspect was arrested. The action was part of **a larger operation** carried out throughout the country to prevent imminent attacks by a group of Islamists, some of whom were directly tied to the war in Syria and Iraq. In the days that followed it became clear that the prevented attacks probably were aimed at a high ranking police official. The terror threat level was subsequently raised to level three, indicating that the threat of attacks was imminent. What makes Belgium such a hub for Jihadis?

It should be noted that well before Belgium was confronted with its huge amount of fighters engaged in the war in Syria (and later Iraq), the country already was a main supplier of Jihadist fighters. On September 10th, 2001, the suicide **attack on Ahmed Shah Massoud**, leader of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan was conducted by a Belgian Muslim. And even before 9/11 Belgians played a quite important role in international Jihad. Several Belgians were engaged in GICM (*Groupe Islamique Combattante Marocaine*) and GIA (*Groupe Islamique Armé*).

The Belgians involved all referred to the Belgian policy's inaptitude at integrating Muslims into our democratic society as one of the main reasons. These guys don't see us as being democratic; they rather see how Muslims are being oppressed in ways that violate what they consider to be their basic rights: This includes for example the fact that Belgium forbade the face-veil or *niqab* or that headscarves are forbidden in schools and in public service. Furthermore, from 2015 on, private Halal-slaughter will no longer be allowed, and so on... It is a message even confirmed by Sharia4Belgium's spokesman Fouad Belkacem. In a statement he recently published from prison, **he states**: "If I look back upon these days I think about the arrogance and the deep-rooted islamophobia of the Belgian State [...] The head-scarf ban in 2009 hit us like an atom bomb [...] For almost 50 years we saw humiliated Muslims beg for basic rights [...]."

It is estimated that **about 450 Belgians** were active in Syria at some point. At least 46 individuals were killed in battle (not all of them were identified) and it is estimated by government officials that around 100 people have returned from Syria. When we take a look at the group affiliations of the Belgian fighters, a first striking observation is that about 15 % of the ones who have been in Syria at some point have official ties with Sharia4Belgium.

It should be pointed out that most of the **Sharia4Belgium** members who went to Syria can be seen as what we might call the first wave of leavers. This first wave might be seen as those who left out of ideology, the ones who wanted to act against President al-Assad's war on the population, as they perceived it.

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In the first wave we also saw some adventurers, people who seem to have only left to experience war; most of these people returned utterly disillusioned. Yet, not all of them can be classified in this group: A lot of these early leavers were real die-hards, already fully radicalized who previously attempted to join Jihadist groups in Somalia, Yemen, or Chechnya. Most definitely the situation has changed: We are now confronted with what might be called the second wave; those who immediately want to join the “Islamic State” as it is called after ISIS re-established their version of the Islamic Caliphate.

Hence, the majority of the Belgians are fighting in the ranks of the “Islamic state”, a small minority, about ten of them, are affiliated with *Suqur as-Sham*. At least 13 fighters are still affiliated with *Jabhat an-Nusra*. We even know of one Belgian of Syrian origin who joined the Syrian Arab Army. Remarkable is that the majority of the Belgian fighters originates from Flanders and more precisely the north-south axis Antwerp, Vilvoorde, and Brussels. This could be explained by the fact that Sharia4Belgium was mostly active in these cities. It is these cities that can be seen as the hotspots of Belgian Jihadism. Currently **soldiers are patrolling the streets** of Brussels and Antwerp; the tone has been set by the foiled attacks. Belgium is afraid this was just the beginning.



Pieter has graduated as a Master of History from KU Leuven in 1999 (cum laude), where he specialized in the history of the crusades. Subsequently he studied Arabic and Islamic Studies at the same university and graduated in 2003 (maxima cum laude). Currently, Pieter works as a Business Analyst and Enterprise Architect in a government company. Since 2012, he actively tracks Jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq with a particular interest for foreign fighters.

 Tags: [al-Qaida](#), [belgium](#), [iraq](#), [islamic state](#), [jabhat an-nusra](#), [sharia4belgium](#), [suqur as-sham](#), [syria](#), [terrorism](#), [verviers](#)

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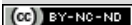
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