

Islamic Radicalization in Belgium

VINAYAK DALMIA

While the total number of Muslims in Belgium is estimated at less than a million, far less than countries like France and Germany, the country's sparse population (11 million) means Muslims comprise approximately 6 percent of the country's inhabitants.¹ Similar to France, Belgium does not record censuses on the basis of religion, leaving the exact figure a subject of speculation. In fact, the two countries share a great deal with regards to their Muslim populations: their history in the country, current realities, and attempted measures to mitigate the issues that arise from different cultures. A complicating factor is the preexisting divide in the country between the Dutch-speaking North (Flanders) and primarily French-speaking South (Wallonia).

Belgium's Muslim population traces its history in the country to the migration laws of the 1960s, where workers from North Africa were welcomed to bolster the country's labor needs. Bilateral agreements with Turkey and Morocco encouraged migration, and Muslims from these countries form the bulk of the Islamic population in Belgium even today.² Historically, the Flemish (Dutch heritage) political parties have been more conservative than the French- and German-speaking Walloons; the Flemish deride multiculturalism and host negative attitudes towards non-EU immigrants. One of the reasons for this can be that the workers recruited in the 1960s flocked to large industrial towns like Antwerp, most of which are in Flanders. Perceived problems in integration in Flanders led to the spread of slogans like "Turkish rats, roll your mats" being regularly chanted at the Flemish Bloc's (Vlaams Belang) rallies in the 1990s, a decade before large terror attacks like 9/11 occurred.³ Belgium's federal structure ensures that local parties have a greater say in governance and policies regarding Islam and immigrants, leading to differences in how Islam, Islamization, and radicalization are approached in different parts of the country.

Ironically, for a country that now has to contend with worrisome radicalization, Belgium was the first country in Europe to recognize Islam as an official religion in 1974. Between 9/11 and the advent of the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL), Belgium was spared the kind of terrorist attacks that struck other countries in Europe like the United Kingdom and Spain. However, larger issues of integration of Islamic immigrants with Belgian "values" have existed since the 1990s. As far back as 1989, the Belgian Royal Commission for Immigrants Policy released an integration strategy that was seen as a compromise between a purely

multicultural approach and the rigid assimilationist views held by right-wing Flemish parties. This strategy entailed the following:

1. Assimilation where public order makes it compulsory;
2. Promotion of the highest degree of fundamental social principles underpinning the culture of the host society, which correspond to modernity, emancipation, and pluralism in the sense given by modern Western states; and
3. Unequivocal respect for cultural diversity as a process of mutual enrichment in all other domains of social life.⁴

This strategy reflects the decades-old divide in the country between the Flemish and Walloons, with their interaction in Brussels often leading to disagreements and then compromises about these contentious issues. An estimated 300,000 Muslims live in Flanders, comprising ~5 percent of the region's population, similar to the proportion of Muslims in Wallonia (~5 percent), numbering approximately 175,000. However, the national capital of Brussels, a separate region altogether, hosts approximately 200,000–275,000 Muslims, comprising 20–25 percent of the city's population.⁵⁶ Additionally, close to 40 percent of all Belgian Muslims live in Brussels, making the city a crucial case study for integration, radicalization, and deradicalization.

Points that cause friction between the various groups in the country include an increasing Islamic population (right-wing groups claim Muslims in Brussels will form the majority group in two to three decades), Islamic values versus “Western” values, and the steady increase of radicalized individuals in the country. Within the country, Flemish groups often deride Wallonian parties for being too soft on Islam and immigration. In 2011, Belgium introduced a veil ban that made face-covering veils like the *niqab* and *burqa* illegal, which was challenged by two Muslim women on the grounds of respect for private life and freedom of religion. The ban was later upheld by the European Court of Human Rights.⁷ In state-run elementary schools in Brussels, the proportion of students opting for Christian instruction is estimated at 24 percent, while Muslim lessons have been opted for by approximately 51 percent of attending students. If one were to include faith-based elementary schools, children receiving Islamic education are close to 30 percent of that age group in Brussels.⁸

Terror attacks in Belgium since the inception of ISIL include a 2018 stabbing–shooting spree in Liège by a man radicalized in prison, an attempted Nice-style vehicular attack in 2017, and, most significantly, the Brussels airport/train station suicide bombings in March 2016 that killed 32 people. Belgium has favorable

conditions for extremists in many ways—an underfunded security establishment grappling with different agencies across levels and regions of government, a flourishing black arms market, and proximity to several other European capitals. Molenbeek, a primarily Muslim neighborhood in Brussels located 10 minutes from the city center, is now known as a “no-go zone” and considered a hotbed of extremism. The neighborhood’s infamy increased due to its links to the Paris 2015 and Brussels 2016 terrorists. While youth unemployment in the country is at a staggering 23.2 percent, that of Belgian youth born outside the EU is almost 45 percent. Molenbeek has an estimated overall unemployment rate of 30 percent, and youth unemployment of almost 40 percent.⁹ In 2017, the neighborhood housed 49 terror suspects per 100,000 people; the rest of Belgium had a ratio of 3 per 100,000.¹⁰ Five of the neighborhood’s 25 mosques and Quranic schools have been shut as of 2018 on the grounds of fostering militant versions of Islam.

Belgium also has the unfortunate distinction of being the point of origin for the most foreign ISIL fighters per capita in Western Europe, with an estimated 450 Belgians having traveled to the Middle East in 2015 and 2016, including women and children.¹¹ Of these, an estimated 207 were from Brussels alone, and about 115 from Antwerp. Almost none of the fighters were from Wallonia. While Belgium is reluctant to repatriate foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq, there are approximately 137 Belgian children in those two countries, most of whom were born there. About 115 returnees are thought to be alive in Belgium as of 2018.¹² Even the returnees imprisoned will be released starting in 2021, with unclear implications for the Belgian polity.

Groups like Sharia4Belgium, Resto du Tawheed, and the Zerkani network have contributed to jihadi radicalization in Belgium in recent years. The first two are considered similar to Islam4UK, and were active in Antwerp and Brussels North respectively, with the third the primary recruiter in Molenbeek.¹³ Sharia4Belgium’s founder is understood to have preached jihad in public, amplified by an expansive social media presence, even attracting individuals from higher socioeconomic strata in the city. The group relied on utilizing personal and familial connections in neighborhoods with ethnoreligious homogeneity, sometimes also quoting right-wing rhetoric prevalent in Flanders. Recruiters are believed to have been paid 2,000–10,000 USD, depending on the number and skill set of their recruits.¹⁴ Resto du Tawheed has operated in Brussels North train station, recruiting under the garb of free meals to destitute Muslims.¹⁵ The organization’s leader, Jean-Louis Denis was arrested and convicted in 2013 after two underage students traveled to Syria, but Denis was released in 2018. The Instrumental in recruiting the Paris 2015 and Brussels 2016 attackers, the Zerkani network in Molenbeek

has been described as an organization of gangster jihadis. The group is believed to have paid 6,000 Euros to those willing to join ISIL in Iraq and Syria.¹⁶

The Belgian government has undertaken various measures in the past and in recent years to mitigate the threat of Islamic radicalization. The Belgian penal code was revised in 2015 to expand the definition of terrorism, now including traveling to join a terrorist organization abroad.¹⁷ On the technology front, the country has banned the sale of anonymous prepaid SIM cards, which facilitate communication within extremist groups. There does not appear to be any mass surveillance program in place, with the legal system still requiring specific warrant-based surveillance.

ISIL fighters returning to Belgium are imprisoned for an average of five years, lesser sentences than meted out in countries like the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Even such light sentences exacerbate concerns over the issue of radicalization in prisons.¹⁸ No efforts have been made to isolate these imprisoned returnees from the prisons' "general population" in most cases, ensuring these fighters continue to radicalize others while in prison.¹⁹ While Muslims make up only 6 percent of the country's population, they are believed to comprise 20–30 percent of the prison population, reiterating the danger of not establishing and enforcing separate penitentiary arrangements for individuals identified as radicalized.²⁰ The case of Nizar Trabelsi is one example. An al-Qaeda operative, Trabelsi was involved in an attempt to drive an explosives-packed car into a NATO air base in 2003. He was noted for being extremely popular, teaching Arabic and passing around copies of the Quran, while proselytizing during social hours, throughout the subsequent 10 years he spent in a Belgian prison.²¹

Formed in 1996, the Executive of the Muslims of Belgium (EMB) is the official interlocutor between Belgian Muslims and local, regional, and federal governments. Among the organization's responsibilities are organizing Muslim education, presentation and training of imams, and officially recognizing local mosques. In recent years, the organization has taken control of Brussels' Grand Mosque, run by Saudi Arabia since 1969 on a 99-year lease. After the 2016 attacks, the mosque came under scrutiny for espousing Salafism, which resulted in the Belgian government transferring control to the EMB. The mosque's Egyptian imam, Abdelhadi Sewif, was denied an extension on his residence permit in 2017, which a court then reversed on the grounds of no substantial evidence.²² The Belgian State Secretary for Asylum and Migration had characterized him as "a danger to the national security of the country" for preaching an extremely conservative strain of Islam.²³ Belgian Interior Minister Jan Jambon justified the move, saying, "in this way we are tackling Salafist, violent extremist influences."²⁴ However, there appears to be no concerted push to identify and monitor other sources

of radicalization in local mosques (an estimated 400 in the country) and other community meeting points.²⁵

While the security establishment is undoubtedly keeping tabs on violent extremism, it is unclear if the EMB alone can meet a mandate of efficiently monitoring mosques and radicalizing messages in the social sphere. As the role of mosques in radicalization lessens, being replaced with informal settings in introverted communities (assisted a great deal by digital technology), a careful look at policies to mitigate Muslim alienation is necessary. Any new policies have to tackle the increasing appeal of extremist Islamic thought and a fast-growing Muslim youth demographic and balance those concerns against the resurgence of right-wing parties that continually grow more hostile toward Belgian Muslims. These policies will also need to be drafted keeping in mind the regional differences across the country, without making them ineffectual in an attempt to pander to different groups. With an increasing call for an Islam compatible with Belgian values, rifts between Belgium's Muslims and the rest of the country on a variety of issues may prove to be just as serious a problem as the violent Islamists one sees today.

Vinayak Dalmia

Mr. Dalmia is an entrepreneur and national security and foreign affairs thinker. He has studied economics at Cambridge and the University of California, Berkeley.

Notes

1. Pew-Templeton, "Belgium – Demographics," Global Religious Futures Project, Accessed 11 December 2019, <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/>.
2. Christiane Timmerman, Nadia Fadil, Idesbald Goddeeris, Noel Clycq, and Karim Ettourki, "Introduction," in *Moroccan Migration in Belgium: More than 50 Years of Settlement*, 9–20 (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2017), doi:10.2307/j.ctt21c4s72.3.
3. Sami Zemni, "The shaping of Islam and Islamophobia in Belgium," *Race & Class* 53, no. 1 (2011): 28–44, doi:10.1177/0306396811406781.
4. Tariq Modood, Anna Triandafyllidou, and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, "Multiculturalism, Citizenship and Islam in problematic encounters in Belgium," in *Multiculturalism, Muslims and Citizenship: A European Approach*, 23–37 (London: Routledge, 2006).
5. Thérèse De Raedt, "Muslims in Belgium: a case study of emerging identities," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2004): 9–30, doi:10.1080/1360200042000212160.
6. Corinne Torrekens, "Concentration of Muslim populations and structure of Muslim associations in Brussels," *Brussels Studies*, 2007, doi:10.4000/brussels.382.
7. James Crisp, "Belgian ban on Muslim full-face veil is legal, European Court of Human Rights rules," *The Telegraph*, 11 July 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/>.
8. Erasmus, "Belgium struggles to manage its burgeoning Islamic scene," *The Economist*, 14 July 2018, <https://www.economist.com/>.

9. Natalia Drozdiak, "Brussels District of Molenbeek Is Home to Some Suspects in Paris Attacks," *Wall Street Journal*, 17 November 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/>.
10. "Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," *Counter Extremism Project*, Accessed 14 December 2019, <https://www.counterextremism.com/>.
11. Valentina Pop, "Brussels Neighborhood Struggles to Break Ties to Terrorism," *Wall Street Journal*, 8 February 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/>.
12. Pop, "Brussels Neighborhood Struggles to Break Ties."
13. Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "The History and Influence of the Belgian ISIS Contingent," in The Hague: European Counter Terrorism Centre Advisory Network, Europol, 2019.
14. "Belgium: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," *Counter Extremism Project*, Accessed 14 December 2019, <https://www.counterextremism.com/>.
15. Van Ostaeyen, "The History and Influence of the Belgian ISIS Contingent."
16. Van Ostaeyen, "The History and Influence of the Belgian ISIS Contingent."
17. Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, *From the Kingdom to the Caliphate and back: Returnees in Belgium* (Belgium: Egmont, 2018), <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/>.
18. Renard and Coolsaet, *From the Kingdom to the Caliphate*.
19. Renard and Coolsaet, *From the Kingdom to the Caliphate*.
20. Steven Mufson, "How Belgian prisons became a breeding ground for Islamic extremism," *Washington Post*, 27 March 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.
21. Mufson, "How Belgian prisons became a breeding ground."
22. Michael Birnbaum, "Belgian court blocks order to deport imam of Belgium's largest mosque," *Washington Post*, 28 November 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.
23. Michael Birnbaum, and Souad Mekhennet, "The mosque is Belgium's biggest. Officials say it's a hotbed for extremism," *Washington Post*, 11 November 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.
24. Alissa De Carbonnel, "Belgium takes back Brussels' Grand Mosque from Saudi government," *Reuters*, 16 March 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/>.
25. "Muslim Executive drafts in women as teachers and preachers," *Brussels Times*, 21 August 2019, <https://www.brusselstimes.com/>.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JEMEEA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.