3. Molenbeek and Beyond. The Brussels-Antwerp Axis as Hotbed of Belgian Jihad

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At a European scale, the whole of tiny Belgium can easily be considered a hotbed of Islamic extremism. But as small as it is, concentrations do exist. About three-quarters of the Belgian foreign fighters active in the current Syrian-Iraqi conflict originate from Brussels, Antwerp and a number of towns in between. The major explanation seems to be the existence of two highly active recruitment networks, while the early success of the far right in Belgian politics may have fed the feeling of rejection that became a main motivation to leave for jihad.

According to the most recent figures, Belgium is still at the top of Western European countries in the per capita count of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. At its high-end estimate of 589 people who have at least tried to reach the battle zone, and of which an estimated 75% has joined the terrorist group Islamic State\(^1\), Belgium has 52.01 fighters per one million inhabitants now. It ranks tenth worldwide, surpassed only by Kosovo (160.34) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (87.92) on the European continent. By comparison, within the European Union, the United Kingdom comes second with 31.21 fighters per one million inhabitants, followed by Sweden (30.61),

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Austria (30.00) and France (28.20)\textsuperscript{2}. Furthermore, Belgium ranks fourth in the “foreign fighter score” that researchers Will McCants and Chris Meserole have recently introduced, combining the rate of radicalization within a country’s Sunni Muslim population with that country’s share in the number of foreign fighters globally. Only Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon get higher scores\textsuperscript{3}.

Belgian foreign fighters come from all over the country, as shown on map 1. It is based on official information\textsuperscript{4} and some additional data gathered by the author in cooperation with independent researcher Pieter Van Ostaeyen, resulting in a dataset of 469 Belgian foreign fighters for which the place of origin is known. Of a total of 589 Belgian municipalities, 87 had at least one fighter leave. The largest concentration however can be found in the cities of Brussels and Antwerp, and a number of towns in between. From that stretch 50 kilometers long, at least 355 fighters have left, about 75\% of the entire dataset. At first glance, the importance of the Brussels-Antwerp axis does not come as a surprise. These two cities are the biggest population centers in Belgium, while research has shown that on a European level more than 90\% of all foreign fighters originate from large metropolitan areas and their peripheral suburbs\textsuperscript{5}. Moreover, a logical correlation exists with the country’s main Muslim areas, of which Brussels and Antwerp also are the most important\textsuperscript{6}.


\textsuperscript{4}Overview of locations in Belgium from where foreign fighters had left as of 28 January, 2016. Communicated by the Ministry of the Interior responding to a parliamentary question and distributed to the Belgian press.


\textsuperscript{6}There are no official data about the number of Muslims in Belgium, let alone their distribution throughout the country. Therefore, all assumptions about numbers of Muslims are based on estimates from independent research: J. Hertogen, “Moslims in België van 6,3\% naar 6,5\% van de bevolking”, 8 October 2014, http://www.npdata.be/BuG/239-Moslims-2013/ (last retrieved 8 May 2016).
While the Brussels-Antwerp axis may thus be a predictable center of gravity, its actual share in the Belgian figures is disproportionately high. To illustrate that, we compared the Brussels-Antwerp axis with four other Belgian regions where similar factors are at play. First, we looked at the Liège-Verviers area. Liège is Belgium’s fifth largest city and both locations are in the top-ten of major Muslim towns. Second is a much less urbanized area, centered around the towns of Genk and Maaseik. Due to its past as a coal mining region, which attracted lots of immigrants from Morocco and Turkey, it is also home to an important part of the country’s Muslim community. Third is the area comprising Charleroi, Mons and Namur. These three top-ten Belgian cities also rank high in estimates of Belgium’s Muslim population, with Charleroi as Belgium’s fifth largest Muslim town. Finally, the comparison is made with Ghent and its surroundings, being Belgium’s third largest population center and its fourth Muslim town. Table 1 makes it sufficiently clear that none of these areas even come close to the Brussels-Antwerp axis, even when the numbers of foreign fighters are corrected for the size of their overall and Muslim populations.

When looking for an explanation for both the high Belgian numbers and the concentration on the Brussels-Antwerp axis, it is clear that the existence of two major networks of recruitment in those cities has played a crucial role. In Antwerp, there was Shariah4Belgium, a neo-Salafist group established in 2010. It was founded as an offshoot of the British al-Muhajiroun and Islam4UK movements, led by Omar Bakri Muhammad and Anjem Choudary. Initially, its main activities were “dawa” sessions in Belgian cities (trying to convert non-Muslims by preaching in public places) and protests against what they considered violations of Belgian Muslims’ rights. As these actions were highly overt and outspoken, Shariah4Belgium was not considered to be a dangerous organization with the potential of violent acts. That made the threshold to join particularly low. Many youngsters were attracted by its rebellious attitude, and its appeal was further increased by policy measures like a ban on wearing headscarves in Antwerp’s public schools.7

7 G. Van Vlierden, “How Belgium Became a Top Exporter of Jihad”, The Jamestown
## Table 1. Population numbers only include those municipalities from where foreign fighters have left

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Number of foreign fighters</th>
<th>Estimate of Muslim population</th>
<th>Foreign fighters per 10,000 Muslims</th>
<th>Number of inhabitants</th>
<th>Foreign fighters per 1 million inhabitants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brussels-Antwerp axis</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>378,167</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>2,044,352</td>
<td>173.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liège/Verviers area</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>48,515</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>398,990</td>
<td>80.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genk/Maaseik area</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>35,601</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>335,018</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charleroi/Mons/Namur area</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50,902</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>580,415</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghent area</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32,452</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>291,137</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Foundation - *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 13, issue 11, 29 May 2015, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43966&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=462a3da25136ea4e02b6a99f9e5fa442#.VyH4KirtlUl (last retrieved on 8 May 2016).

8 J. Hertogen (2014).

9 Although more recent data exist, for reasons of continuity we stick to the figures used by J. Hertogen (2014).


11 Including the municipalities of Dison, Esneux, Eupen, Herstal, Herve, Liège, Neuéport, Oupeye, Verviers and Welkenraedt.

12 Including the municipalities of Beringen, Bilzen, Dilsen-Stokkem, Genk, Hasselt, Heusden-Zolder, Hou ethnal-Helchteren, Kinrooi and Maaseik.

13 Including the municipalities of Aiseau-Presles, Charleroi, Farcennes, Gembloux, Jemeppe-sur-Sambre, La Louvière, Mons, Namur and Sambreville.

14 Including the municipalities of Deinze, Ghent and Zelzate.
Apart from its mentors in Britain, Shariah4Belgium developed strong ties with like-minded groups in other European countries – such as Millatu Ibrahim in Germany and Forsane Alizza in France, while in the Netherlands Shariah4Holland was founded as an offshoot of Shariah4Belgium itself[^15]. But there were no obvious ties to pre-existing jihadi networks, contributing to the impression that the movement was more of a nuisance than a real security risk. When authorities finally started to act against the group at the end of 2012 – culminating in the arrest of its leader, Fouad Belkacem – lots of its several hundreds of followers had already radicalized beyond a point of no return. And exactly at the time when it became impossible to continue overt activities, the Syrian war presented itself as an alternative. Altogether, at least 80 people have left for the Syrian jihad from within Shariah4Belgium, as we know by now[^16]. Shariah4Belgium has since disbanded, while at a trial in 2015 it was formally identified as a terrorist group[^17].

The main network recruiting in Brussels was of a totally different kind. Led by the 42 year old Moroccan Khalid Zerkani – thought to be a veteran of the Afghan-Pakistani terrorist camps of al-Qaeda – it had no website, no logo and even no name. Recruiting was done under the guise of offering youngsters sports activities, while further indoctrination happened in old-fashioned backrooms[^18]. According to the latest figures, this so-called Zerkani network has sent at least 59 people to Syria and Iraq[^19] – including Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Chakib Akrouh and Najim Laachraoui, three perpetrators of the recent ter-

[^16]: P. Van Ostaeyen (2016).
[^19]: P. Van Ostaeyen (2016).
terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels. In contrast to Shariah4Belgium, the Zerkani network included several people with a long history in jihadist circles – such as Abdelhouaid Aberkan, convicted in 2004 for his role in the assassination plot against the Afghan anti-Taliban commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. And while a criminal background seemed to be rare within Shariah4Belgium\textsuperscript{20}, it turned out to be the rule in Zerkani’s entourage. He actively encouraged his recruits in all kinds of petty crime to raise money for the jihad. That may have fueled the intertwining of ordinary crime and Islamic extremism, now considered a main characteristic of the Molenbeek scene that played a central role in the aforesaid terrorist attacks\textsuperscript{21}.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure1_Belgium.png}
\caption{Belgium}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{20} According to a well-informed security source speaking on condition of anonymity.
In between Antwerp and Brussels, the towns of Mechelen and Vilvoorde also stand out on the map of jihad. Mechelen (population: 82,602 of which 14.2% Muslim) is a somewhat dubious case, since its local authorities keep insisting that no foreign fighters left from there\(^{22}\). On social media however, traces of at least one were found and reliable sources within the city’s Muslim community assure that at least thirteen others exist\(^{23}\). A possible explanation may be that they had moved to a place with a more active jihadist scene prior to their departure for Syria, and are listed with that new residence in official statistics. Who is responsible for recruiting people from Mechelen is hard to establish without more details about who has left, but it is known that Shariah4Belgium has tried to get a foothold there. For Vilvoorde (population: 41,432 of which 16.2% Muslim), it is entirely clear who led recruitment there. Although the town is much closer to Brussels, it became a bastion of the Antwerp-based Shariah4Belgium under the impulse of Houssien Elouassaki. He was an early member with lots of charisma, and his fearless confrontations with the police helped him to establish his own local chapter of the group. In September 2012, Elouassaki was one of the first Shariah4Belgium members leaving for Syria – where he pioneered the integration of the Belgian fighters in a militia called Majlis Shura al-Mujaheddin. That was led by the late Abu Atheer al-Absei, a Syrian who subsequently became a heavyweight within Islamic State. The fact that Elouassaki was soon chosen as his deputy responsible for all European fighters within Majlis Shura al-Mujaheddin, contributed to the stature of Shariah4Belgium and has certainly helped the organization attract such a large amount of people willing to leave\(^{24}\).

It seems clear that the existence of these two recruitment networks – very different in their *modus operandi*, but equally efficient – has been the most decisive factor behind Belgium’s tremendous


\(^{23}\) P. Van Ostaeyen, personal communication with the author.

share in current foreign fighter figures. But of course, other factors may have been at play. It is tempting to seek an additional cause – at least for the concentration of the phenomenon in Belgium – in the socio-economic situation of the communities where most of the recruitment took place. 82% of the Belgian foreign fighters in the cited dataset indeed originate from municipalities with a per capita income below the Belgian average, while 35% lived in Belgium’s ten poorest towns\textsuperscript{25}. Those figures can be misleading, however. Up to 80% of Belgian foreign fighters have Moroccan roots\textsuperscript{26}, and there is still a strong correlation between low-income areas and the main concentrations in Belgium of people from Moroccan descent. This said, it is not clear what mattered most in terms of radicalization: being Moroccan or being poor.

While many of them may have been born and raised in impoverished neighborhoods, often those Moroccan-Belgian foreign fighters appear to come from exactly those families who did manage to improve their situation fairly well. Paris terrorist Abdelhamid Abaaoud for instance, was the grandson of a Moroccan who migrated to Belgium for work as a coal miner. But Abdelhamid’s father climbed the economic ladder by running a successful clothing store. He sent his oldest son to an elite school and groomed him to become his successor in the family business, thus providing a more than decent prospect for Abdelhamid’s future\textsuperscript{27}. We know the example of Shariah4Belgium member Saïd El Morabit, said to have worked in a leading position for an important insurance firm before he left and died in Syria\textsuperscript{28}. And when the Belgian police raided the home of two brothers recruited for the Syrian jihad by Shariah4Belgium in the Antwerp suburb of Kapellen, Soufiane and Adel Mezroui appeared

\textsuperscript{26} G. Van Vlierden, “Wie trekt ten oorlog voor Islam? Studie schetst gedetailleerd profiel van westerse moslims in jihad”, \textit{Het Laatste Nieuws}, 27 November 2014
to have lived in a villa of 2,500 square meters with an indoor pool, a sauna and a fitness room – recently bought by their father, trading in tropical woods and importing furniture from Morocco.

A much more important driver than socio-economic deprivation, seems to be the feeling of rejection – as non-indigenous citizens, as Muslims or as a combination of both. “I wanted to move, to escape. I was sick and tired of Belgium and I wanted to live in an Islamic environment”, Shariah4Belgium convert Michael “Younnes” Delefortrie told his interrogators after his return from a short stay on the Syrian front in January 2014. In a text that was published on Facebook by the already imprisoned Shariah4Belgium leader Fouad Belkacem, he cited the “arrogance and deeply rooted Islamophobia of the Belgian state” as the main motivation for establishing his organization. “For more than 50 years now, Muslims are humiliated and forced to beg for simple rights, such as places to pray and locations for ritual slaughter. Any Belgian Muslim with foreign roots is still considered an asylum seeker by public opinion, and even when he speaks both official languages fluently, he constantly risks being treated like his grandfather back in the seventies”, Belkacem wrote.

If that feeling of rejection has indeed been a major driver of radicalization, a hypothesis worth investigating is whether the early success of a far-right political party with an outspoken anti-migrant and anti-Islam platform has contributed to Belgium’s foreign fighter problem. In many other European countries such parties were a marginal political factor until much more recently. In Belgium, and especially in Dutch-speaking Flanders, the party that was initially known as Vlaams Blok and later rebranded to Vlaams Belang (VB) had its breakthrough 25 years ago. In the general election of 1991, it tripled its share of the vote and enlarged its presence in the federal parliament from three to seventeen seats – a moment

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30. Cited in court papers in the possession of the author.
32. Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken, “Belgische Verkiezingsuitslagen”, 24
still known as “Black Sunday” in the political history of Belgium. It reached a peak of almost 25% in regional elections in Flanders in 2004 – thus becoming the largest political party in half of the country – campaigning against immigrants and Islam. Examples of the slogans it used are “Fit in or leave”, “Our own people first” and “Freedom or Islam: dare to choose”. Its leader, Filip Dewinter, once openly stated that a Muslim girl wearing a headscarf cannot be considered Flemish, even if she was born in Flanders and speaks Dutch, using the metaphor: “A cat born in a fish-shop is still a cat and not a fish.”

Due to an agreement between all major political parties – known as the “cordon sanitaire” – VB has never found a coalition partner willing to govern with it. But even from within the opposition, it has had a profound impact on the attitude towards Islam and immigrants in Belgian society. If the unique position of Belgium regarding foreign fighters requires a search for differences with other European countries, this could be one: the existence of a generation of Muslims for whom the message that they are unwanted always has been omnipresent – spread on billboards throughout their city, splashed on leaflets pushed into their mailbox, and trumpeted on national television. That this far-right party only existed in Dutch-speaking Flanders fits with the much heavier presence of jihadists there than in the French speaking south. It could also explain...

33 C. Mudde, The ideology of the extreme right, Manchester/New York, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 89.
34 Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken (2008)
why *Shariah4Belgium* – of which the hometown Antwerp was also the major base of *VB* – seemed much more politically driven than the “old school” jihadist movement behind the Brussels Zerkani network. Again, it is a hypothesis, but the impression exists that the Belgian far right has in fact nurtured the monster of violent Islamism that it intended to fight.

### In Brussels, things are complicated

When we mention Brussels, we do mean a larger area than what is officially known as Belgium’s capital. The City of Brussels is only one of 19 municipalities forming the country’s largest population center, visibly not separated but ruled by 19 different mayors and city councils. Together, they are named the Brussels-Capital Region, an entity on the same level as Belgium’s main two parts: Dutch speaking Flanders and French speaking Wallonia. The Brussels-Capital Region has its own regional government, adding to an institutional tangle that often complicates good governance. In regard to foreign fighters, significant differences exist within Brussels, as Table 2 and Figure 2 show. Most come from the old industrial, impoverished and Muslim-rich northwestern part, with the now notorious Molenbeek-Saint-Jean on top.
Although more recent data exist, for reasons of continuity we stucked to the figures used by J. Hertogen (2014).

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Number of foreign fighters</th>
<th>Estimate of Muslim population</th>
<th>Foreign fighters per 10,000 Muslims</th>
<th>Number of inhabitants</th>
<th>Foreign fighters per 1 million inhabitants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Molenbeek-Saint-Jean</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>36,454</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>94,653</td>
<td>496.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>City of Brussels</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>50,261</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>168,576</td>
<td>278.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schaerbeek</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>48,453</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>130,587</td>
<td>237.4</td>
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<td>Anderlecht</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32,419</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>113,462</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saint-Josse-ten-Noode</td>
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<td>11,895</td>
<td>5.9</td>
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<td>Ixelles</td>
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<td>Evere</td>
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<td>6,205</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>37,364</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jette</td>
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<td>7,671</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>49,411</td>
<td>121.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest</td>
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<td>11,812</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>54,024</td>
<td>111.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berchem-Sainte-Agathe</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3,431</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>23,410</td>
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<td>Etterbeek</td>
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<td>5,495</td>
<td>5.5</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Uccle</td>
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<td>6.1</td>
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<td>Woluwe-Saint-Lambert</td>
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<td>5.8</td>
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<td>Auderghem</td>
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<td>948</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24,467</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

38 J. Hertogen (2014).
39 Although more recent data exist, for reasons of continuity we stucked to the figures used by J. Hertogen (2014).
Figure 2. Brussels' Area