American Counterterrorism
Targeting & Resilience Institute

Perspective

# Militant Jihadi and Right-Wing Extremism in the EU: A Belgian Law Enforcement Perspective

Antoine Andary & Amanda Garry

June, 2020

www.AmericanCTRI.org

The American Counterterrorism Targeting & Resilience Institute (ACTRI) is a cross-disciplinary, nonprofit research organization focused on the broad spectrum of transnational extreme-right and militant jihadi political violence. The Institute studies the relationship between the two, as well as the manner in which they emerge, spread, dominate, and influence countermeasures.

## Introduction

The threat of violent extremism and terrorism remains entrenched within European society, challenging its political, economic, and social agenda. Throughout history, Europe has witnessed its share of extremism and violence linked to nationalist movements, separatist movements, militant jihadism (MJ), far-right (FR) and right-wing extremism (RWE).[1] The graphs across represent the more recent extremism landscape in Europe, indicating that more efforts are needed to effectively contain the spread and appeal of Islamist and RWE groups.[2] Due to the nature of ongoing security threats, major European cities, such as Brussels, remain in a heightened state of alert.

MJ and RWE activities in Belgium have created an overarching need for law enforcement to intervene.[3] From the November 2015 Paris, France, attacks that killed 138 individuals and injured 413 to the March 2016 Brussels, Belgium, airport bombings that killed 35 individuals and injured 340, MJ activities have created new responsibilities and paradigms for the Belgian law enforcement, requiring innovative state law enforcement responses to rapidly changing conditions. Compounding the security issue are nationalist and FR movements all around Europe, and especially in Belgium. The Belgian Intelligence Service has reported that European FR groups are arming

### Individuals receiving counter-extremism support
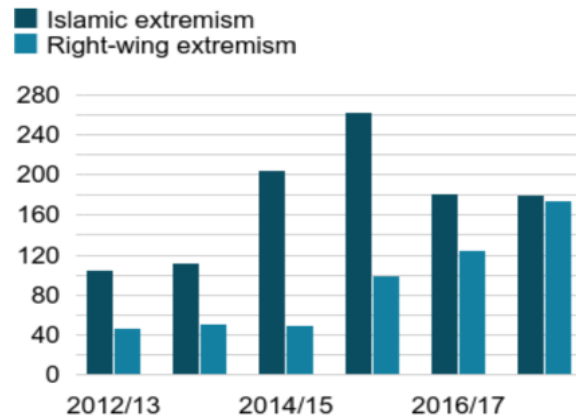


Source: Home Office — BBC
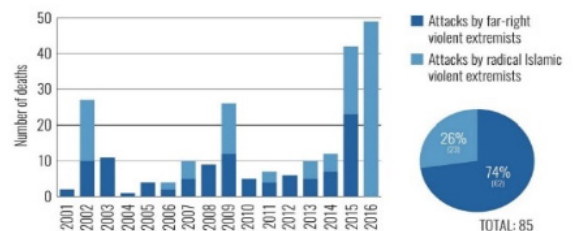


themselves, with some right-wing leaders calling for their militants to receive weapons training and acquire guns through both legal and illegal means.[4] Furthermore, Belgian extreme-right, or far-right, has surged in European and national elections, as in the case of the extreme-right Flemish separatist party Vlaams Belang that scored major gains in Belgium, triple elections back in May 2019.[5]

Extremism has evolved and taken on new forms in Belgium. According to *The Brussels Time*,[6] in a report published on the Belgian State Security Service (VSSE) website, Belgium's civilian intelligence arm, and its military counterpart, the

www.AmericanCTRI.org

Belgian General Information and Security Service (GISS), extremists are exploiting social media to spread disinformation, conspiracy theories, and polarize communities online and beyond. Intelligence services in Belgium have issued a warning of attempts by extreme right-wing groups to disseminate fake news in order to undermine the government and its medical advisers.[7] One such group includes the Knights of Flanders, who sow the seeds of mistrust of government or others they deem as adversaries. For instance, such groups have claimed that the COVID-19 was "deliberately"[8] manufactured in China, or in other countries, and that, "the Belgian government pretended to have no stocks of protective equipment to scare the population into accepting harsh new laws or, alternatively, to kill off the elderly."[9] COVID-19 has also been linked to immigration and refugees by such groups.[10] MJ groups are also exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic and daily unfolding events to undermine the credibility of the Belgian government, increase followers base, and substantiate their viewpoints.[11]

In response to the growing threat of extremist ideologies and the potential of terrorist attacks, the EU and its member states have intensified their counter violent extremism efforts. While MJ-related violence remains a priority, RWE is no longer a blind spot of counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts either.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, and subsequent rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) help to explain military and law enforcement overwhelming focus on the MJ form of political violence worldwide, hence reflecting disparities in focus with regards to RWE and violence. Yet, Europe has lived with militant jihadi terror since the mid-90s, when al-Qaeda carried out a series of bombings in France.[12] Even though there were less attacks by the Islamic State in Europe in 2018 compared to the year prior, the threat of MJ violence remains high, nevertheless, as also evidenced in the numbers of foiled plots in recent years.[13] In the ensuing sections, the authors discuss the manifestations of MJ and RWE in Belgium in particular and EU in general. A discussion on the law enforcement role in Belgium and the EU in general in curbing the appeal of MJ and RWE is presented as well. In considering the effectiveness of counterterrorism measures, one must also recognize the existing law enforcement limitations in countering both MJ and RWE.

### Militant Jihadi (MJ) and Right-Wing Extremism (RWE) Manifestations in Belgium

As noted by some security experts, the Islamic State (IS) became a potent threat in Europe partly because of the 2011 conflict in Syria and IS-built networks already initiated by al-Qaida, respectively.[14] Arguably, it is the recent conflict in Syria that has contributed to the

growth of Europe's jihadi networks.[15] The conflict in Syria has strengthened their ties to the global jihad movement through foreign fighter travelers, potentially also increasing the likelihood of future terrorist attacks in Europe.[16] Many Europeans traveled to Syria as foreign fighters, most of them eventually joining ISIS.[17] Mass mobilization and recruitment of European foreign fighters, IS strategic maneuvering rooted in relational, emotional, religious, and ideological factors, and the refugee crisis account for some of the variables that explain how and why the IS threat emerged in Europe.[18] Many European Muslims also became enraged by the Assad regime violence targeted towards the civilian population. The civil war in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State, "breathed new life into European jihadi networks, becoming a major recruitment pretext for many of them."[19] The recruitment of European foreign fighters to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, and over a relatively short time span, posed significant challenges for law enforcement and intelligence efforts in Europe. As a result, European security services faced increased potential jihadi terror threats to monitor.[20]

RWE and RWE extremist violence has elicited discussion among the EU member states at both political and law enforcement levels. The EU Framework Decision on Terrorism, as part of a new freedom, security, and justice directive on combating terrorism, has been recently adopted by the European Parliament,

which also applies to right-wing violent extremism and terrorism.[21] The threat of right-wing extremism and terrorism has become more evident in recent years, and given the nature of challenges to CT and P/CVE efforts posed by such forms of political violence,[22] there is an apparent push to advance measures within the EU framework that specifically and effectively respond to this type of threat as well. While MJ and RWE remain a threat to the communities in Belgium in general, the manifestations and the extent of such threats varies throughout the country. The figures and trends presented in the EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report7 Europol's TE-SAT indicate that violence motivated by RWE remains a problem in Europe, and specifically in its capital, Brussels.[23]

Both MJ and RWE narratives in Brussels are strategically presented to captivate the largest audiences possible by leveraging outreach and communication capabilities on social media. Brussels-based extremists linked to IS and political parties such as Vlaams Belang pursue the same goals, though with varying approaches and tactics. For instance, in recent years, such groups have poured significant financial resources into media and presence online. Specifically, significant funding streams are injected into communicating ads on social media, targeting all ages, especially those between the ages of 21 and 35.

Many strategies are also put in place to

manipulate Belgian social media users in order to communicate their statements and manipulate young people into political submission. Anti-immigrant, anti-multiculturalism, anti-religious diversity, and other messages are pushed to ignite impulses of doubt and hate among those who feel threatened by changing demographics and fear insecurity and uncertainty in the face of globalized economies. Their recruitment and proselytizing ambitions are no secret, as they are discussed explicitly, often relying on meme communication and comedy to normalize hate. The recent statistics indicates that 98% among the ages of 16 and 24 in Belgium use the internet regularly, with 80% of the same age group visiting social media on a daily basis. Two thirds of the same age group have reported using instant messaging to communicate.[24] By that measure alone, young people in Belgium are exposed to the publicity of Vlaams Belang, including other far-right political parties, on a daily basis. The Belgian government and European Parliament have pushed for more stringent regulations on extremist and violent rhetoric and have already enacted laws that make it a criminal offence for tech companies if they fail to remove videos showing abhorrent violent content.[25] Tech companies in return have pledged to better regulate violent extremist content online and review their algorithms to make sure they are not stoking users towards terrorism or extreme violence.

## Law Enforcement Responses in Countering MJ & RWE

Under the banner of strengthening collaboration among the governments, and in an effort to respond to the scrutiny posed by increased presence of violent extremist groups and violent extremist content on their platforms,[26] the Silicon Valley companies and their offices in Europe initiated the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism two years ago. With tech companies facing many hindrances to countering these groups online, law enforcement is also grappling to meet the growing concerns and demands from the public, including successfully enforcing counterterrorism laws. In addition, EU leaders and lobbyists have pushed for more data access on digital intelligence, criminal records, and airline passenger data, leading to the questioning of the utility of such policies by some: "When European governments like Belgium accommodated terrorist demands or failed to act systematically to confront terrorist actors, they either emboldened terror groups or exposed their citizens to preventable future terrorist violence."[27]

EU lobbyists are also portrayed as an obstacle to Belgian law enforcement and intelligence community in the way of accessing violent extremism related information and the decision-making process. Often financed directly from far-right political parties, or linked to their past activities, they lobby within the

European commission and parliament bodies to push ideas and influence policy decisions. While enticements on the part of the lobbyists to influence political and policy outcomes are not new to the Brussel's scene, as lobbyists operating in Brussels for almost as long as the European institutions themselves, the interests of corporate lobbyists often align with the possible political majorities, such as those of Vlaams Belang. Both officially registered and non-registered lobbyists keep the whole European body, and especially the law enforcement, in the shadow as they operate within the institutions, making it largely unnoticed not only by the public but also difficult for law enforcement to keep track of, and respond to.[28]

While the EU has a database of lobbying organizations, where lobbyists have to register if they wish to meet high ranking commission civil servants or commissioners, the database is based on a self-reporting system, which also raises concerns over the validity of data submitted.[29] As also noted by Frans Timmermans, a former EU commissioner, "the institutions needed to work together to win back the trust of our citizens. Citizens have the right to know who tries to influence EU law making process.[30]

### Discussion & Conclusions

Local, national, and international jihadi networks continue to prove adept at channeling frustrations over grievances, real or perceived - especially among the young Muslim constituencies in Europe - towards violent means and options. Despite significant resource investments by European governments to reduce violent extremist activity,[31] there also has been an increase in terrorist plots in recent years. One must also acknowledge the weakening of jihadi networks in recent years, however, which could be linked to effective counterterrorism efforts. On the RWE spectrum, as some authors have also noted, "the presence of some 25 million Muslims in the 28 countries of the European Union is currently sparking debate, controversy, fear and even hatred."[32]

Right wing extremist and far right groups in Europe remain in the margins. They are largely non-violent and without much sway in national politics and demonstrated agency in building a larger follower base. However, such groups exude normative impact, characterized by their ability to shape political and social discourse. They often fall prey to powerful political influences and interest groups, including European lobbyists who continue to influence RWE and far-right agendas. Such groups also share and support ideas (e.g. government distrust) that are also backed by a considerable number of European citizens, interest groups, and peaceful organizations. They also portray themselves as legitimate servants of the changing sociopolitical order, which stands in stark contrast to MJ

driven agenda that does not necessarily enjoy such a widespread support among its target base. Perhaps herein lies the potential danger of such groups. Equally important, compared to MJ, RWE and FR extremists operate more openly, and their existence is linked to mainstream political parties. However, such a symbiotic relationship may also represent a point of fragility for such groups, especially if their activities and ideologies remain linked to constantly shifting political agendas and government policies.

Radicalization leading to violent extremism and terrorism remains a matter of concern for all the EU member states. The European law enforcement community is working to address violent extremism and radicalization by using police innovations and setting up a structure of formal and informal communication and networks. The European Agenda on Security,[33] the EU Internet Forum, and initiatives by the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) and other EU Commission mechanisms have proven particularly effective in aiding member states to counter radicalization both offline and online.[34] Beyond structural and legal barriers in dealing with MJ and RWE threats, law enforcement in Belgium continue to face gaps in information sharing and internal coordination, with recent trend suggesting a promising resolve to break down institutional barriers and strengthen coordination with neighboring member states.[35]

## Antoine Andary

Antoine is a Communication, Conflict, Security and Crime Analyst, Researcher and Associate Member at the International Association for Political Science Students (IAPSS) for the SRC Conflict, Security & Crime Committee. Formerly, he served as Communication, Representative Ambassador & Recruiter at Amnesty International. Antoine holds a master's degree in Political Communication & International Affairs and bachelor's in Communication Sciences. He also holds certificates in Terrorism and Counterterrorism from Georgetown University, Counter-Intelligence Awareness and Reporting from U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies from Harvard University, and Advanced Anti-Corruption and Prevention of Corruption from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). At ACTRI, Antoine researches crime-terror nexus in the context of both militant jihadi and right-wing violent extremist and terrorist groups in the EU.

## Amanda Garry

Amanda has previous experience in counterterrorism research and intelligence analysis. Amanda graduated from Nichols College in 2018 and 2019 with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and Master of Science in Counterterrorism degree, respectively. She has explored roles in criminal justice including security, fraud, and risk mitigation. Her interests include examining terrorist recruitment, radicalization, and rehabilitation, and she strives to counter terrorism on a global scale with primary research, actionable recommendations, and consistent program evaluation. At ACTRI, Amanda researches both far-right and militant jihadi radicalization, recruitment, rehabilitation, communication platforms, and technology. She also looks at structural, psychological, and social processes associated with domestic terrorism and targeted violence in the Unities States.

# Endnotes

1        The authors define militant jihadism (MJ) as activities and acts of violence with discernible political or ideological motive, such as those carried out by Islamist, militant jihadi groups of ISIS, al Qaeda, Boko Haram, al Shabaab, etc. The authors define far-right (FR) parties as parties that promote authoritarianism, populism, nativism, etc., and that draw heavily on the rhetoric of right-wing extremists (RWE) and RWE organizations (e.g. anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, etc.), though not necessarily promoting violence. Right wing violent extremism, driven by right-wing and far-right rhetoric, is defined as acts of violence that are ethnically or racially motivated, such as white supremacist violent extremist attacks, anti-government violent extremist attacks, etc.

2        Individuals Receiving Counter-Extremism Support. (2017). BBC Europe, Statistics. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world/europe

3        Terrorism. Global Terrorism Database GTD. (2019, November). Hannah, Ritchie, Joe, Hasell, Cameron, Appel, Max, Roser. Retrieved from https://ourworldindata.org/terrorism

4        Intelligence services accuse extreme right and Russians of spreading disinformation. (2020, April). Alan Hope. Retrieved from https://www.brusselstimes.com/brussels/118604/lockdown-brussels-residents-afraid-to-use-public-transport/

5        Belgium's Black Sunday. (2019, 12/01). Brzozowski, Alexandra. Retrieved from https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019

6        Intelligence services accuse extreme right and Russians of spreading disinformation. (2020, April). Alan Hope. Retrieved from https://www.brusselstimes.com/brussels/118604/lockdown-brussels-residents-afraid-to-use-public-transport/

7        Ibid.

8        Ibid.

9        Ibid.

10       Ibid.

11       American Counterterrorism Targeting and Resilience Institute (ACTRI) interview correspondence with a Belgium federal law enforcement official, Liege, Skype Call, July 1, 2020.

12       Military interventions, jihadi networks, and terrorist entrepreneurs: How the Islamic State terror wave rose so high in Europe. (2019, March). Petter Nesser. Retrieved from https://ctc.usma.edu/military-interventions-jihadi-networks-terrorist-entrepreneurs-islamic-state-terror-wave-rose-high-europe/

13       Ibid.

14       Ibid.

15       Ibid.

16       Europe's "new" jihad: Homegrown, leaderless, virtual. (2017, July). Thomas Renard. Retrieved from http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2017/07/89.spb_.amended.pdf?type=pdf

17       Challenges posed by returning Foreign Fighters. (2020, March). Adam Hoffman and Marta Furlan. Retrieved from https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Challenges%20Posed%20by%20Returning%20Foreign%20Fighters.pdf

18       10 Reason western women seek jihad and join terror groups. (2019). Anne Speckhard and Ardian Shajkovci. Retrieved from  https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/10-reasons-western-women-seek-jihad-and-join-terror-groups/

19       Military interventions, jihadi networks, and terrorist entrepreneurs: How the Islamic State terror wave rose so high in Europe

20       Ibid.

21       Right-wing violent extremism and terrorism in the European Union. (2019, 30 August, Brussels). Council of the European Union. Retrieved from the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator

22       The authors are referring to the difficulties in ascertaining the threat level posed by right wing individuals and extremist groups and the lack of clarity between hate speech and free speech.

23       Europol's TE-SAT show. (2017, March). EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report7. Retrieved from http:// europol.europa.eu

24      Social Media in Belgium. (2019, March 19). Marie-Helene, DiBenedetto. Retrieved from http:// moon-dustagency.com/knowledge-center

25      Terrorist content online. (2019, 04 - 17). Estefania Narrillos. Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190410IPR37571/terrorist-content-online-should-be-removed-within-one-hour-says-ep

26      Tech giants team up to fight extremism following cries that they allow terrorism. (2017, Mon 26). Sam, Levin. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jun/26/google-facebook-counter-terrorism-online-extremism

27      European responses to terror. (2016). Counter Extremism Project. Retrieved from https://www.counter-extremism.com/content/european-responses-terror

28      American Counterterrorism Targeting and Resilience Institute (ACTRI) interview correspondence with a Belgium federal law enforcement official, Liege, Skype Call, July 1, 2020.

29      Retrieved from the European Commission Transparency Register. (2020).

30      Daily News. (2016, 28 September). Frans Timmermans. Retrieved from the European Commission https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEX_16_3217

31      Europe has not won the war on terror. (2019, 4/19). Petter Nesser. Retrieved from https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-hasnt-won-the-war-on-terror/

32      32 Muslims in Europe: The Construction of a Problem. (2016, June). Bichara, Khader. Retrieved from https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/muslims-in-europe-the-construction-of-a-problem

33      European agenda on security. See, for example, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/e-library/documents/basic-documents/docs/eu_agenda_on_security_en.pdf

34      Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2019, April).  Migration and Home Affairs. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en

35      American Counterterrorism Targeting and Resilience Institute (ACTRI) interview correspondence with a Belgium federal law enforcement official, Liege, Skype Call, July 1, 2020.