My Journey Through Brussels' Terrorist Safe Haven

by Matthew Levitt **(/experts/matthew-levitt)**

Mar 27, 2016

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Matthew Levitt (/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.

Articles & Testimony

Police and prevention officers in the Islamist hotbed of Molenbeek are eager to step up their counterradicalization efforts, but they are running short on resources and time.

The office of the mayor of Molenbeek municipality sits alongside a picturesque, typically European cobblestone square. Across the square, within plain view of the municipal government, sits the family home of Salah Abdeslam, the Islamic State terrorist who was finally captured two weeks ago after evading authorities since the November Paris attacks. Nothing separates the two buildings, but they are a world apart.

This is the bifurcated Brussels I saw when, coincidentally, I was in Belgium a few days before the terrorist attacks that killed 31 people and wounded hundreds. I was there to meet with senior counterterrorism, intelligence and law enforcement officials, as well as with local officials in the troubled municipality of Molenbeek, the subsection of Brussels where Abdeslam grew up and which even Molenbeek's mayor, Françoise Schepmans, describes as "a breeding ground for violence."

The harsh fact is that a terrorist safe haven exists in the heart of the capital of the European Union, and no one quite knows what to do about it. During the course of my day I first rode a few quick stops on the Brussels metro from my hotel in the EU district to Molenbeek, where I met the mayor at her office together with police chiefs, members of the local police department's "counter-radicalization cell," and civilian "prevention officers" who had just concluded their weekly status-check on the local government's counter-radicalization and social integration efforts. Their goal seems Sisyphean: reintegrating returning foreign terrorist fighters back into society and preventing still more disenfranchised Muslim youth from looking to the Islamic State for purpose and belonging.

The problem: Molenbeek is like another world, another culture, festering in the heart of the West. In Brussels only eight of 114 Imams speak any of the local languages. The majority Muslim municipality of about 100,000 people is the second poorest in the country, with the second youngest population, high unemployment and crime rates, and a nearly 10% annual population turnover that makes it a highly transient community. By some accounts, nearly a

third of Molenbeek residents are unemployed.

Unsurprisingly, Molenbeek has become an almost ideal recruiting ground for the Islamic State, and Belgium has the highest number per capita of Western foreign fighters who have traveled to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (and, more recently, Libya). And the majority of these came from Brussels, and Molenbeek in particular, according to Interior Minister Jan Jambon. The local municipality has been described as one of a few Islamic State "hotbeds of recruitment" around the world. In the words of Belgian Prime Minster Charles Michel, "Almost every time, there is a link to Molenbeek." This week's bombings were no exception.

Recruiters offer a sense of family to people from broken homes; of belonging to people who feel disenfranchised from society; of empowerment to people who feel discriminated against; and of a higher calling and purpose to people who feel adrift. Recruiters pitch small groups of friends and family together: "You don't really belong here. You are not wanted here. You can't live here. You can't get a job here." Only then comes the religious extremist part: "Clearly, you should not be living among the infidels." What Islamic State offers them, in a nutshell, is a fast track from zero to hero.

Mix in a gangster culture and you have a combustible combination. In ghettoized neighborhoods like Molenbeek, today's criminals are tomorrow's terrorists, and the radicalization process is in hyperdrive. As a result, "these guys are not stereotypical Islamists. They gamble, drink, do drugs. They are lady killers, wear Armani, fashionable haircuts. And they live off crime," according to an article published by Pro Publica. Time and again, it turns out the local police were aware of suspects like Abdeslam, but only as small-time thieves. "We knew of several Paris-related suspects before," a police officer told me as I sat down with the mayor, "but not for terrorism reasons, just petty crime and small incidents."

The mayor quickly chimed in, determined to be clear I understood there was no way to know these crooks had suddenly become terrorists, adding "there was no suspicion of radicalization." But there is one other common thread that runs through all these cases: "The people who leave [for Syria and Iraq] today are all attracted to violence," Schepmans said. Dutch officials echo this sentiment, noting in a recent study that "everyone who has travelled since 2014 to the area under [the Islamic State's] control will have seen the propaganda images of atrocities against 'non-believers'." They know what they are getting into.

And while there is a component of religious extremism, Belgian officials stress, it is only skin deep. The suspects appear to be mainly criminals who are attracted to something that gives them identity and a sense of empowerment. They are radicalized to the idea of the Islamic state far more than to Islam. "Salafism [a radical Islamist ideology] is mainstream in Belgium," was a refrain I heard from several of the officials I met. "Not all Salafists are terrorists," they stressed, "but all our terrorists were targeted for recruitment by Salafists in these neighborhood extremist networks."

When I met with the mayor of Molenbeek, she was equally blunt in describing the area as a victim of lack of government attention and investment. There is also confusion at the government level about how to handle the problem. Municipal authorities stressed that actual counterterrorism is the job of the Federal Police, who maintain a consolidated list of some 670 terrorist suspects, including people who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq (and, more recently, Libya), returning foreign fighters, and individuals who seem inclined to become foreign terrorist fighters. A separate federal list focuses on priority criminal cases (due to the increasingly common links between the two, authorities plan to merge the two lists). According to local officials, the municipality has documented at least 85 cases of people who have been radicalized to terrorism, some of whom have left to join the Islamic State in Syria and others who have returned. According to EUROPOL, the European Union police organization, 5,000 terrorist suspects radicalized in Europe have travelled to Syria and Iraq, some of whom have since returned to Europe.

Following the Brussels bombings, authorities are laser-focused not only on finding all the perpetrators and their accomplices, but mapping out the network of Islamic State terrorists on the ground in Belgium. That will be no small task, but even that kind of counterterrorism success will only go so far towards reestablishing a sense of security in Belgium in particular and Europe more generally. Hardening targets, implementing greater border security measures, and enhancing intelligence collection and information sharing are critical and still subpar, but these tools will only help us contend with yesterday's threat; they won't help us get ahead of tomorrow's.

The good news is that Belgian authorities have now realized the need to build a prevention program. And to be fair, that realization came not last week but 15 months ago, when Belgian authorities raided a residence in Verviers a week after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. The raids thwarted "major terrorist attacks" in Belgium and led to the intensification of "Plan R" -- the government's national counter-radicalization plan. The plan predated the Verviers raid, on paper, but it has now led to tangible changes. A Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) serves as a fusion center between federal-level national security agencies and local police departments. Nearly 18,000 police officers have been trained to spot potential radicalization identifiers under the Community Policing to Prevent Radicalization (COPRA) initiative. And the Federal Police have instituted a "grasping approach" to radicalization cases in which police are instructed to "follow up and don't let go" until there is no longer any threat the person in question is being radicalized to violence.

In the months before the Brussels bombings, local officials also developed "Plan Molenbeek" to address what they described to me as "the need for proper institutions to address the unique issues facing the municipality." They remain desperately understaffed, but they have already trained 700 community field workers (including teachers and social workers) to spot signs of radicalization and partner with prevention officers to develop a customized intervention for each case. They meet with counterparts in other municipalities facing similar issues to share lessons learned. This is especially important, one official told me, since "we are all learning by doing."

Still, since the November Paris attacks, tracking cases of people on the road to radicalization has only gotten harder. "Paris was a game-changer," a local police officer in Molenbeek told me. "Since then it's been like a tsunami of information flowing in from all our partners, including concerned members of the community, federal agencies, and our own civilian prevention officers." Those prevention officers play a critical role as civilian employees of the municipality focused solely on integrating people into society, but they are severely understaffed. The local police also have a counter-radicalization cell, but they too lack resources. Even with a staffing boost after the November Paris attacks, the cell numbers only eight officers. "Most of the people we come across are youngsters, unemployed, and often involved in criminal activities," prevention officers told me. "We try to integrate people we see into society, that's the most important thing now, ideally." A police officer chimed in, "And we prosecute, as necessary."

Last week, as Belgian and French police officers prepared to raid a suspected Islamic State safe-house, I was sitting with a senior Belgian counterterrorism official at his downtown headquarters. As we discussed the Islamic State threat to Europe in general, and Belgium in particular -- about five miles from the site of the raid, but a world apart -- the disconnect between the scale of the threat and the preparedness of the response became starkly clear. The manhunt for Abdeslam focused the attention of Belgian counterterrorism officials. Another terrorist was killed in a shootout at the raid that day, an Algerian whose body was found next to a rifle, ammunition, a book on Salafism, and an Islamic State flag.

But police found clues pointing to Abdeslam, including his fingerprints. Three days later, police finally captured Abdeslam, who was being sheltered by family members in Molenbeek, the Brussels municipality where he grew up, not far from the family home. "We got him," an official excitedly tweeted.

In truth the job has just begun. But after meeting with officials in Molenbeek, I allowed myself to feel just a touch of optimism: the police and prevention officers I met in Molenbeek were among the most impressive I've met anywhere.

"We are discovering on a daily basis new ways to work in the prevention space," one of them commented as our meeting came to a close. The problem: What they need is in short supply: more resources and more time.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. ❖

Politico

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)