

Citizenship and Ancestry of Belgian Foreign Fighters

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Belgium is a notorious source of foreign fighters in the current Syrian-Iraqi conflict. It has the highest per capita number of Western Europe, and has already contributed substantially to the terrorist threat that some of the returning fighters pose. Belgian authorities have been straightforward from early on in admitting the scale of this phenomenon, but still they do not offer much detail about who exactly is hiding behind the figures. Aiming at a better insight, the authors of this policy brief maintain an independent database, which they use here to investigate the backgrounds of Belgium's foreign fighters. While most of them are Belgian citizens, almost half are linked to Morocco, and rather surprisingly Russia comes second in foreign backgrounds. A comparison between the Moroccan and the Eastern contingent (all former Soviet Union and Eastern European states) reveals significant differences – in terms of recruitment for instance – that may be important for the prevention and the detection of radicalism. The main finding however is that too little is known about this Eastern contingent. This is likely also the case in other European countries, partly due to its covert way of operating. But it also highlights the risk in every country of focusing too much on the most dominant groups in terms of radicalization, potentially neglecting others that may be hidden in other diaspora communities.

Introduction: the Belgian Foreign Fighter Database

According to the latest official figures, 498 people have left from Belgium for the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq or have tried to do so since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Approximately 413 arrived, of whom 125 have since returned to Belgium, while 146 presumably died in the conflict zones. Not included in these official figures are 133 individuals considered by authorities as potential foreign terrorist fighters,¹ and an estimated 137 children younger than twelve present in the conflict zone, of which three quarters were born there from at least one Belgian parent.²

Since 2013, the authors of this policy brief have maintained an independent inventory of individuals related to the phenomenon of Belgian foreign fighters in the current Syrian-Iraqi conflict.³ At the time of writing, in April 2018, their Belgian Foreign Fighter Database (BFFD) contained a total number of 716 individuals meeting all of the following criteria:

1. Being of Belgian origin, having lived officially in Belgium, or clearly having been recruited by an entity operating from Belgium;
2. Having tried to reach the Syrian-Iraqi conflict zone since 2011 or being suspected of plans to do so according to official documents and/or court proceedings;
3. Intending to join a local group fighting in Syria or Iraq, be it as a fighter or in any other role – including family members who may have been forced to travel to the conflict zone.

Figure 1 provides an at-a-glance overview of key figures drawn from the Belgian Foreign Fighter Database. At 716, our numbers of Belgian foreign fighters are significantly higher than the official count of 498. As the authors do not aim to compete with the official figures, possible reasons for our higher number should be discussed. Little difference can lie in the somewhat broader scope of the BFFD. While it includes information about individuals with all kind of affiliations (such as pro-regime fighters both in Syria and Iraq), 98% of all the records are Sunni jihadists. In contrast to the official figures, the BFFD does not exclude children under the age of twelve, although our database's scope is limited to children who departed from Belgium. That being said, however, out of the total number of 716 people, the BFFD currently contains at least 665 adults (548 male and 117 female), while only 37 children are listed younger than twelve in April 2018.

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¹ These are individuals who have not yet tried to leave but are suspected of intentions to do so – a category similar to what in France is called 'vœlétés de départ'. In Belgium, the official list of foreign terrorist fighters managed by the Coordination Unit for the Threat Analysis (CUTA) includes five categories: presumed in Syria or Iraq (cat 1); presumed en route (cat 2); presumed returned (cat 3); presumed failed attempt to enter Syria or Iraq (cat 4); and potential candidates to travel (cat 5)

² T. Renard and R. Coolsaet, "From the Kingdom to the Caliphate and Back: Returnees in Belgium", in T. Renard and R. Coolsaet, *Returnees: who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them? Assessing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands*, Egmont Paper 101, Brussels: Egmont Institute, February 2018, pp. 19-20, http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/02/egmont.papers.101_online_v1-3.pdf

³ It is only for reasons of brevity that we use the term 'foreign fighters' while including women, children and men who haven't reached the conflict zone. It is on purpose however that we don't call them 'foreign terrorist fighters', since we explicitly want to include individuals joining groups not designated as terrorist organizations.

A more important explanation for the discrepancy is likely the way in which the information is gathered. The BFFD is mainly based on open sources, such as social media, where people often cannot fully be identified. The BFFD also includes these anonymous records – often individuals only known by their ‘kunya’, or Arabic pseudonym. That may cause some double counting, but the authors also believe that some of these anonymous records more often than not represent actual people who are not included in the official figures just because they could not be identified. So, the true number likely is somewhere in between.

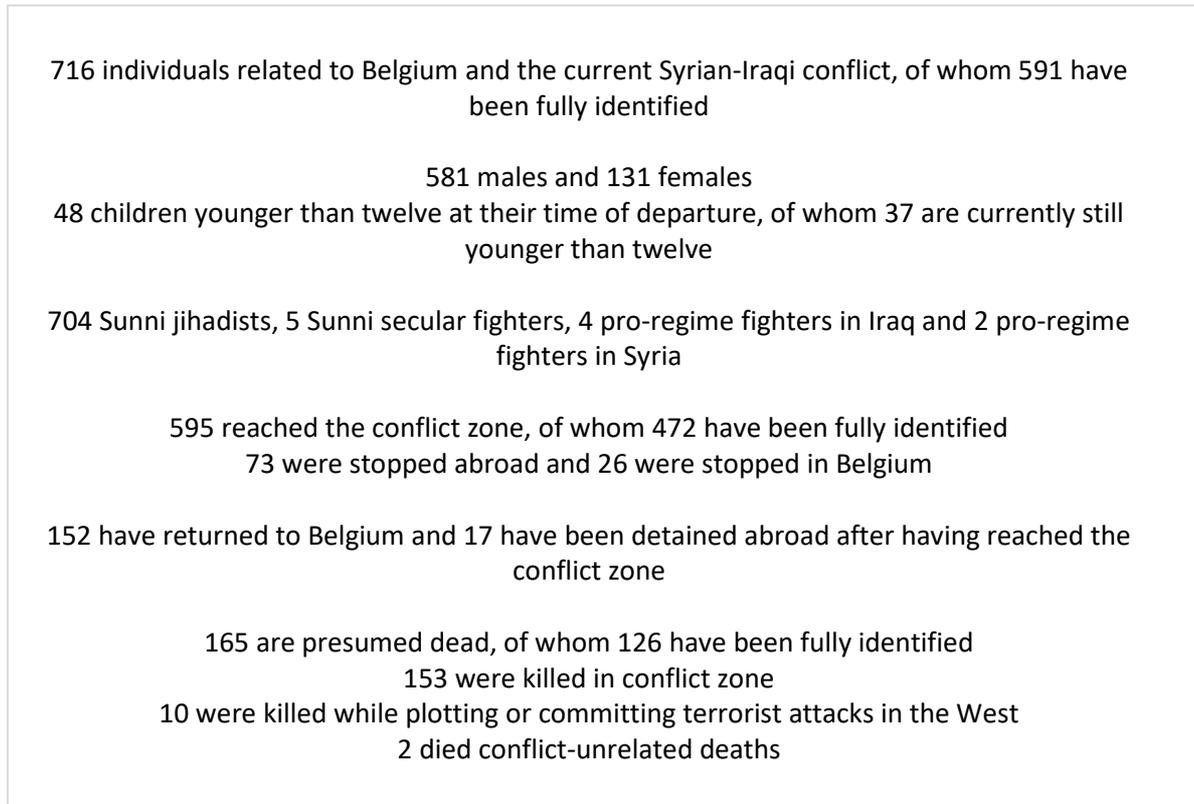


Figure 1: The Belgian Foreign Fighter

Moreover, all lists of foreign fighters are partly based on suspicions and allegations. And while our inventory – in contrast to the official one – has no legal consequences, we may accept the evidence more easily. Finally, a major benefit of the BFFD numbers for our analysis of the Belgian foreign fighter phenomenon, is that our dataset contains additional information that the publicly available official figures lack. The latter would therefore not allow us to explore the details we are interested in. With all this said, it should be clear however that relative figures have much more importance in what follows than absolute numbers.

Fifteen nationalities, with Belgians on top

For our analysis on citizenship and ancestry, we limited our dataset to individuals with Sunni jihadist affiliations and a clear departure status – which means that they at least have tried to reach the conflict zone. This is arguably the most relevant group since currently much of the attention for the foreign fighter phenomenon is focused on the terrorist threat that jihadist returnees may pose.⁴ This subset consists of 683 individuals,

⁴ For a contextualized assessment of that threat, see A. Reed, J. Pohl and M. Jegerings, “The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon”, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism –

of whom 560 are fully identified. Of these individuals, 584 managed to reach the conflict zone (85.5%), 73 were stopped abroad (10.7%), and 26 were stopped in Belgium (3.8%).

Having information about citizenship for 505 of these 683 individuals, we can list 15 different nationalities (Figure 2). Belgium is quite logically the best represented with 387 individuals or 76.6% of these 505, followed by Morocco (6.5%), Russia (5.3%), France (4.2%), Algeria (2.4%), Italy (1.4%) and the Netherlands (1.2%). Tunisia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Egypt, Luxembourg, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Syria all count less than 1%. It is important to mention however, that dual citizenships are not taken into account. An individual living in Belgium with both the Belgian and Moroccan citizenship is only counted as a Belgian.⁵

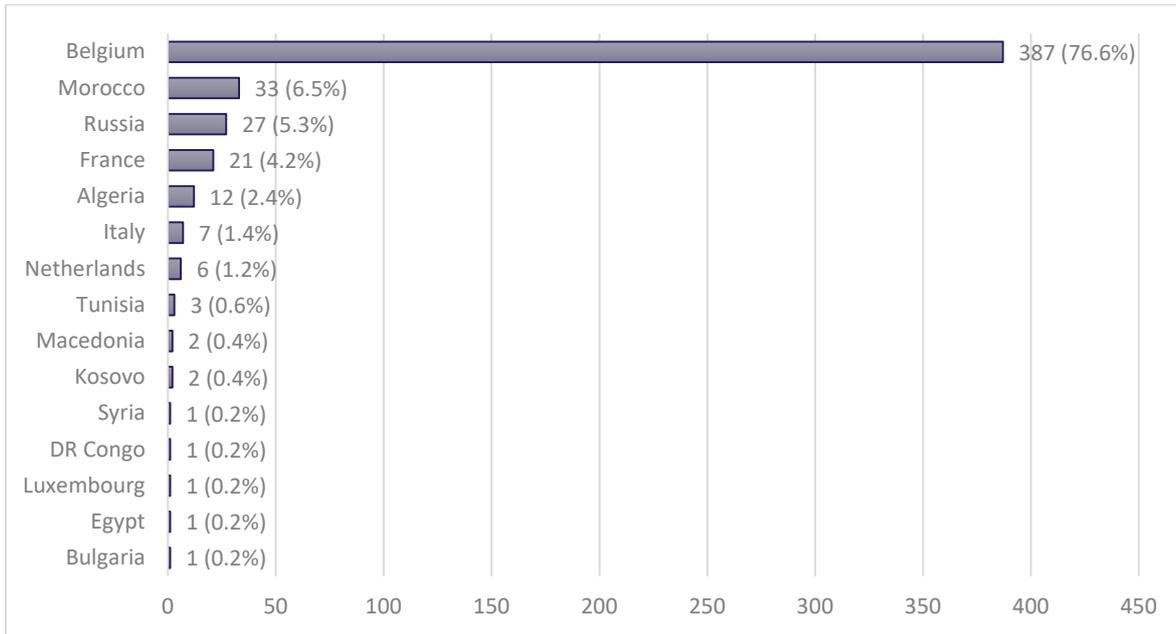


Figure 2: Nationalities of 505 Sunni Jihadists who traveled to Syria or Iraq or tried to do so, and whose citizenship is known

Of these 387 Belgian citizens, 320 are known to have some kind of foreign background – as immigrants, descendants of immigrants, children stemming from a mixed marriage or adoptees. Such a foreign ancestry is more common with men (85.3%) than with women (72.7%). Of the Belgian citizens, 62.5% have roots in Morocco, while Russia comes second with 3.9%. Turkey is third with 2.6%, followed by Algeria (1.8%), Rwanda (1.8%), Burundi (1.6%), the Democratic Republic of Congo (1.6%), Syria (1.3%), Tunisia (1.3%) and France (1.0%). Italy, Laos, Macedonia, Spain, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, the former Yugoslavia, Haiti, India, the Ivory Coast, Lebanon, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan and the Philippines all represent less than 1%.

The Hague 8, no. 1 (2017), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ICCT-Reed-Pohl-The-Four-Dimensions-of-the-Foreign-Fighters-Threat-June-2017.pdf>

⁵ Citizens of several countries, such as Morocco, retain their original citizenship when they obtain another one – and this applies to their descendants too. Procedures to refrain from the original citizenship are often hard, so it can be assumed that most of the Belgians with roots in those countries have dual citizenship. But because the Belgian authorities only register them as Belgian citizens, exact figures are not available.

Almost half of Belgian foreign fighters have Moroccan backgrounds

Looking at our entire dataset of 683 individuals, at least 462 individuals or 67.6% have foreign links by citizenship or ancestry (Figure 3).⁶ The total number of countries involved is 37.⁷ Combining citizenship and ancestry, at least 43% of all Sunni jihadists who at least have tried to leave from Belgium (N= 683) are linked with Morocco – four times more than the 9.8% fully autochthonous Belgians – and 6.6% with Russia. In this ranking, France comes third with 4.4%, followed by Algeria (3.7%), Syria and Tunisia (both 1.6%).

The Moroccan dominance is in accordance with the fact that people of Moroccan descent represent the largest group within Belgium’s Muslim population. They are also the most important component of Belgium’s foreign population overall, with 468,687 residents born as Moroccan citizens.⁸ It is unlikely, however, that demographics are the only explanation. Belgium’s second largest Muslim community – formed by people of Turkish descent – is half the size of the Moroccan, but it counts only ten individuals in our dataset. A recent paper looking specifically into this gap, refers to the way in which the Turkish state exerts control over the religious life in its diaspora, but also to a lesser feeling of discrimination and a higher level of social cohesion within the Belgian Turkish community as possible barriers against radicalization.⁹

It is important to note that the radicalization behind the foreign fighter phenomenon is not necessarily synonymous to religious extremism. A survey commissioned by the Flemish government, confirms that Belgian Moroccans have a higher sense of discrimination than Belgian Turks – with more Moroccans than Turks saying that they have experienced someone avoiding them by refusing to sit next to them on a bus, for instance (21% of Moroccans versus 12% of Turks); that they have experienced not being invited for a job interview while fitting the profile (66% of Moroccans versus 53% of Turks); and that their children sometimes are bullied at school (25% of Moroccans versus 18% of Turks).

On the other hand, the survey indicates that more Belgian Turks than Moroccans share the opinion that their religious rules always precede over Belgian law (23% of Moroccans versus 39% of Turks); that more Moroccans than Turks consider the Western way of living compatible with Islam (60% of Moroccans versus 36% of Turks); and that many more Turks than Moroccans dislike having a Jew as their neighbour (5% of Moroccans versus 25% of Turks). When asked if they can understand people resorting to violence in the name of any extremist group, 7% of the Belgian Moroccans answered in the affirmative, compared to only 4% of the Belgian Turks.¹⁰ So, it seems that the higher sense of exclusion isn’t necessarily pulling Belgian Moroccans that much towards radical religious views, but rather to a higher susceptibility for rebellion and violence.

⁶ For 154 individuals, we do not have any information of this kind. As some individuals have links to multiple countries, the total number of foreign links amounts to 500. As a consequence, the numbers given in the graphic about foreign background do not add up to 683 individuals.

⁷ Apart from those already mentioned, they include Albania, Cameroon, Guinea, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Sweden

⁸ According to official figures gathered by sociologist Jan Hertogen and published here: <http://www.npdata.be/BuG/282-Migratie-gewest/>

⁹ P. Pascarelli, “Identities ‘Betwixt and between’: analyzing Belgian representation in ‘homegrown’ extremism”, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 10 September 2017, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19434472.2017.1374988>

¹⁰ K. Stuyck, G. Doyen, Y. Feys, J. Noppe, A. Jacques and P. Buysschaert, “Survey Samenleven in Diversiteit 2017”, Vlaamse Overheid – Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur, Brussel, 2018, http://samenleven-in-diversiteit.be/sites/default/files/samenleven_in_diversiteit_2017_rapport.pdf

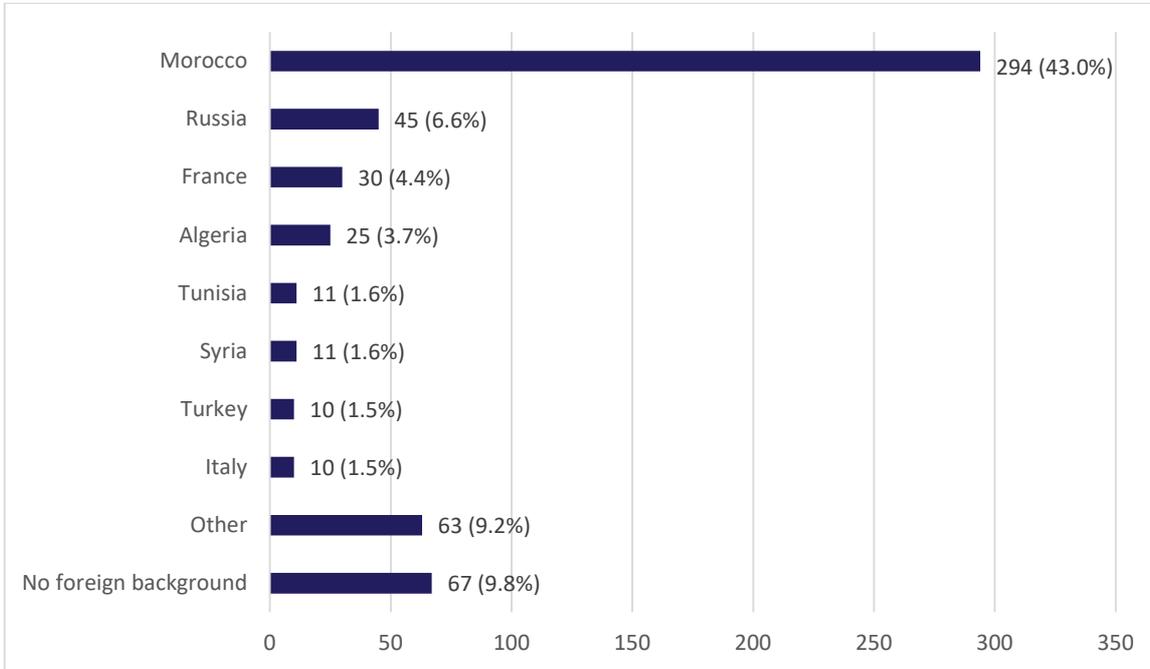


Figure 3: Foreign links by citizenship or ancestry of 683 Sunni Jihadist who traveled to Syria or Iraq or tried to do so

Much more surprising than the Moroccan dominance, is the second place of Russia in the rankings above. The Russian Federation only counts for 1% of Belgium's foreigner population¹¹ and Muslims are a minority in Russia.¹² The share of Muslims in the Russian diaspora may be higher as a consequence of the wars in the Caucasus. Still, it is surprising to see so many people with Russian links in the dataset, especially considering the larger communities of Belgians of Turkish, Algerian and Tunisian descent. While an estimated 17,000 Chechens live in Belgium,¹³ Belgium has 242,133 residents born as Turkish citizens, 51,449 as Algerians, and 39,617 as Tunisians.¹⁴ A question that might usefully be investigated is whether the conflict-driven nature of much of the immigration from Russia, or former Soviet states more broadly, has significantly raised the level of militancy within this diaspora.

Because the number of foreign fighters with links with Russia was striking, we decided to look slightly more broadly at what we termed the 'Eastern contingent' of foreign fighters in our sample. The selection criteria expanded to individuals hailing from Eastern European states and former Soviet republics, leading to a slightly larger sample of 56 individuals with the following links: 45 have some kind of roots in Russia (of whom at least 22 in Chechnya, 3 in Kalmykia, 2 in Ingushetia, 1 in Dagestan and 1 in Kabardino-Balkaria), 4 in Macedonia, 2 in Kosovo, 1 in Albania, 1 in Belarus, 1 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1 in Bulgaria and 1 in the former Yugoslavia. We will now compare this

¹¹ According to Hertogen's data, on a total of 3,075,455 Belgian residents born with foreign citizenship, only 30,667 originate from Russia: <http://www.npdata.be/BuG/282-Migratie-gewest/>

¹² Estimated at 10 to 15% in the latest edition of the CIA World Fact Book: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>

¹³ M. Vatchagaev, "Continuing Human Rights Abuses Force Chechens to Flee to Europe", Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume 10 – Issue 43, The Jamestown Foundation, 7 March 2013, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-human-rights-abuses-force-chechens-to-flee-to-europe-2/>

¹⁴ See Hertogen: <http://www.npdata.be/BuG/282-Migratie-gewest/>

Eastern contingent with the Moroccan contingent, who constitute the largest subgroup within our dataset by far, to see if interesting differences can be found.

Islamic State main destination for all

In terms of affiliation, little difference exists between the Moroccan and the Eastern contingent. Both mainly joined or tried to join Islamic State. In the entire dataset of Sunni jihadists who left or tried to leave, 74.2% of all individuals whose affiliation we know,¹⁵ went that way — for the Moroccans it is 70.2% and for the Easterners 93.1%. There is much more variation within the Moroccan contingent (10 different groups) compared to the Eastern (only 3 groups), but that may be a consequence of the rather limited sample of Easterners we have all relevant information on. Jabhat al-Nusra and its successors come second with 11.4% of the entire dataset and 13.2% of the Moroccans, but it is absent in the Eastern contingent. There, we only found two individuals in other groups than Islamic State: Ansar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa'l-Ansar, who are not represented elsewhere in our dataset.

It has to be noted that we only consider the last known affiliation here. Several foreign fighters have switched from one group to another, and for some the last known affiliation is a group that has ceased to exist. That is the case for instance with Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen, a militia that attracted at least 81 Belgian foreign fighters until it became a part of the Islamic State in 2013. At that time, many of its Belgian members switched to Jabhat al-Nusra.¹⁶ But for several others we do not know which side they chose, and as a consequence, Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen is still the third most important affiliation with 7.5% of the entire dataset and 11.0% of the Moroccan contingent.

As a side note, but a very relevant one, it is worth to mention that the affiliation is known for 77.6% of the Moroccans, but only for 51.8% of the Easterners – a first indication of the limited knowledge we have about the Eastern contingent. This lack of knowledge is even more relevant with regards to the recruitment networks behind the departure of foreign fighters: these are known for 60.2% of the Moroccans, but only for 19.6% of the Easterners. From what we know, it seems clear, however, that recruitment for the Eastern contingent has happened mostly separated from all the rest.

Separate networks of recruitment

For the entire dataset, we can identify three major networks of recruitment. Some 35.2% of all Sunni jihadists who at least have tried to leave Belgium for the Syrian-Iraqi conflict were connected to Shariah4Belgium, 25.8% to the Zerkani network, and 11.1% to the network of the Brussels convert Jean-Louis Denis.¹⁷ Because these networks were partly overlapping each other, an additional 8.7% can be contributed to the combination Zerkani/Denis and 2.4% to Denis/Shariah4Belgium.¹⁸ Altogether, these three networks represent 83.3% of our entire dataset.

¹⁵ All percentages about affiliation given here refer to the number of individuals whose affiliation we know in that subset

¹⁶ P. Van Ostaeyen and G. Van Vlierden, "The Role of Belgian Foreign Fighters in the Jihadification of the Syrian War – From Plotting Early in 2011 to the Paris and Brussels Attacks", European Foundation for Democracy, 2017, pp. 5-10, http://europeandemocracy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Belgian_fighters-DRAFT8-webversion.pdf

¹⁷ For an elaborate description of these networks see P. Van Ostaeyen, "Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attacks", CTC Sentinel, Volume 9 – Issue 6, West Point: The Combating Terrorism Center, June 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/belgian-radical-networks-and-the-road-to-the-brussels-attacks/>

¹⁸ For more details about this overlapping, see G. Van Vlierden, "The Zerkani Network: Belgium's Most Dangerous Jihadist Group", The Jamestown Foundation – Hot Issue, 12 April 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-the-zerkani-network-belgiums-most-dangerous-jihadist-group/>

Of the 239 recruits who were attracted by this trio of recruitment organizations, 65.3% belong to the Moroccan contingent, while only one of the 83 non-Moroccans belongs to the Eastern contingent. The most important network known behind the Eastern contingent consists for 100% of Eastern recruits. Named after its convicted leader, this ‘Chalil Man’ network is represented by eight individuals in our dataset: six Russian citizens – of whom three originating from Kalmykia, two from Chechnya and one from Ingushetia – and two Belgian citizens of Chechen descent. It is symptomatic for the lack of knowledge about the Eastern contingent, even within Belgian law enforcement – that the true identity of Chalil Man was still uncertain at the moment of his trial¹⁹ and the most important finding we are able to present about recruitment of the Eastern contingent may be that we don’t have clue for more than 80% of these individuals regarding how they decided to leave, and who potentially recruited them.

Moroccans concentrated, Easterners spread

Another difference between the Moroccan and the Eastern contingent is the place of residence where members lived before their departure – information that we were able to record for 99.3% of the Moroccans and 92.9% of the Easterners (Figure 4). Some 49.3% of all Moroccans with a known place of residence were living in the Brussels Capital Region and 27.1% in Antwerp – meaning that Belgium’s two largest cities represent three quarters of the total number. There are only five other locations with a share of 1% or more. The Eastern contingent is much more spread throughout the country, with 27 different locations representing 1% or more of these foreign fighters. On top is the coastal city of Ostend with 13.5%, where the Chalil Man network was based, followed by the Brussels Capital Region (9.6%) and Antwerp (7.7%).²⁰

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¹⁹ P. Van Ostaeyen and G. Van Vlierden, “From Grozny to Raqqa with Stopover Brussels – The ‘Eastern Contingent’ of Belgian Foreign Terrorist Fighters”, Bellingcat, 29 August 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2017/08/29/grozny-raqqah-stopover-brussels-eastern-contingent-belgian-foreign-terrorist-fighters/>

²⁰ Places of residence are given on the municipality level, except for Brussels. Belgium’s capital city is divided into 19 separate municipalities, but they are hardly to distinguish on the terrain. To assess the role of Brussels as one population center, it makes most sense to consider the entire Brussels Capital Region formed by these 19 municipalities. It should also be noted that four Belgian citizens within our dataset were legally residing in the United Kingdom’s city of Birmingham at the time of their departure.

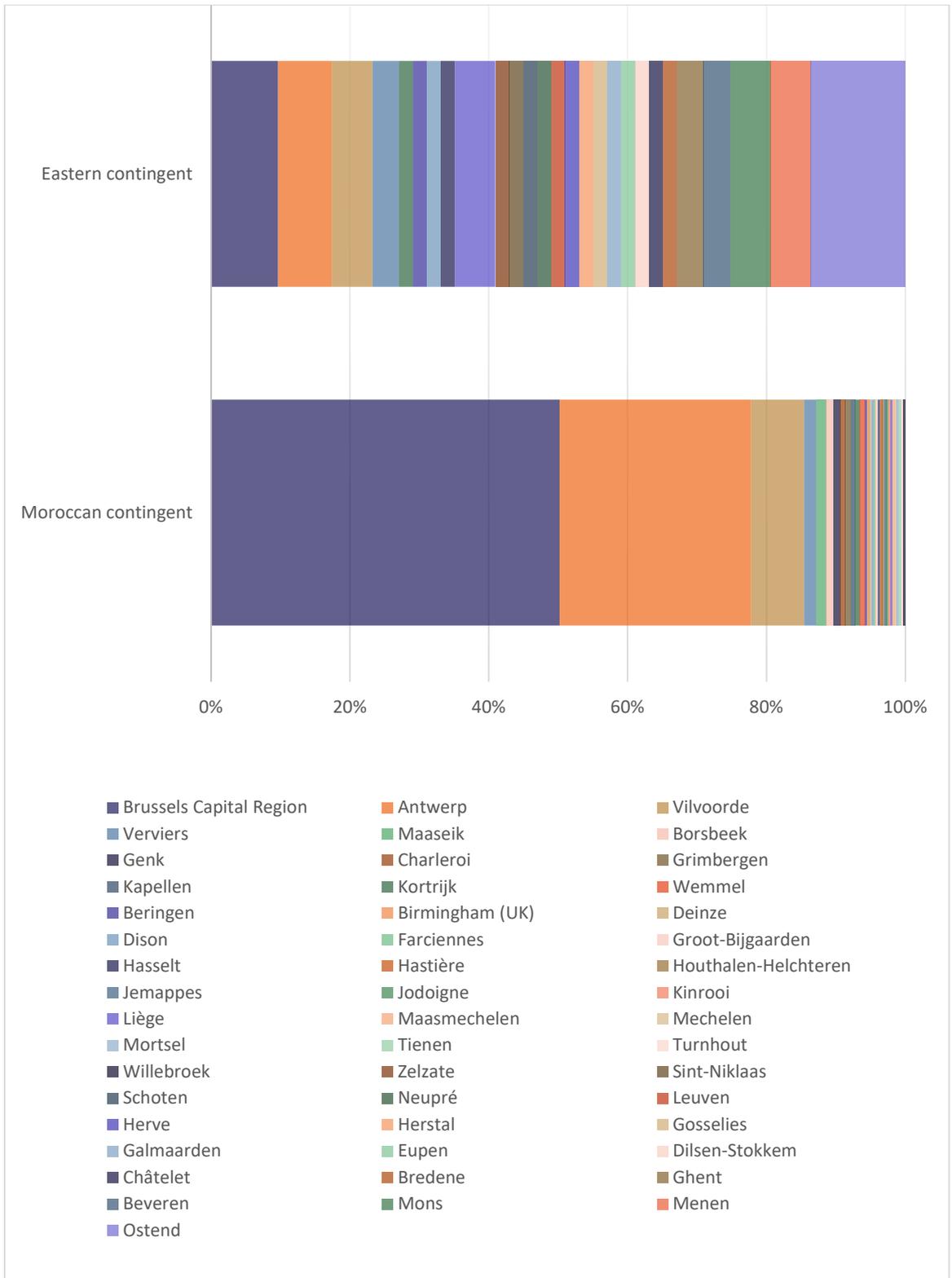


Figure 4: Geographical spread before departure of the Eastern versus the Moroccan contingent

High share of veterans in Eastern contingent

Looking at age, the Eastern contingent is significantly older than the rest. While the average for the entire dataset is 29 years old, for the Easterners it is 34.3. The Moroccan contingent, at 28.8, is close to the average, which is logical since they represent the largest part of the Belgian foreign fighters. It is worth mentioning that autochthonous Belgians are far younger than average at 22.1 years of age. The higher age within the Eastern contingent may be linked to a significant presence of people already involved in violent conflicts at home before their migration to Belgium. Our sample is too small to confirm this hypothesis, but we have indications about previous militancy for eight individuals – one in seven of all Eastern contingent members.

Some examples: Aslan Sigaouri (45), a Chechen-Russian citizen unofficially living in Belgium when he left for Syria to become a commander within Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa'l-Ansar, was put on a Russian list of 52 “most dangerous rebels in the North Caucasus, capable of launching an attack in any part of Russia” in 2011.²¹ Abdulla Ganishiv (38), a Russian citizen who left for Syria from Antwerp, reportedly served as a commander in the Caucasian Emirate in 2006 already, responsible for the Ingushetia-based militia ‘Siddik Jamaat’.²² And Mukhtarpasha Ismailov (46), a Chechen-Russian citizen who left the Belgian town of Verviers for Syria, was convicted at a terrorist trial in Dagestan in July 2002.²³ According to the local authorities, he was caught with a Kalashnikov rifle and detonators on his way for an attack.²⁴

Moroccan contingent responsible for most terrorist threats

When we look at the terrorist threat that Belgian foreign fighters pose, the dominance of the Moroccan contingent surpasses every previous ranking. Out of ten individuals listed in the BFFD who died while plotting or committing a terrorist attack in the West, nine were of Moroccan descent. Additionally, out of nine suicide attacks committed by Belgian foreign fighters in Syria or Iraq, six were carried out by individuals with roots in Morocco. Which means that 79% of all these 19 perpetrators had a Moroccan background.²⁵ This strong Moroccan representation is in accordance with the earlier finding that one third of all the suspects in Islamic State related terrorist incidents detected in Belgium had roots in Morocco.²⁶

The absence of the Eastern contingent in the limited set of terrorist cases cited above, does not mean that Belgian extremists with roots in those countries are less prone to commit an attack. Prior to the current Syrian-Iraqi conflict, the Chechen born Belgian citizen Lors Doukaev was convicted in Denmark for an attempted bombing in 2010,²⁷

²¹ M. Vatchagaev, “Hundreds of North Caucasians Have Joined the Ranks of Syria’s Rebels”, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume 10 – Issue 166, The Jamestown Foundation, 19 September 2013, <https://jamestown.org/program/hundreds-of-north-caucasians-have-joined-the-ranks-of-syrias-rebels/>

²² J. Baud, “Emirat du Caucase”, Globalterrorwatch, 20 October 2014, <http://www.globalterrorwatch.ch/index.php/emirat-du-caucase>

²³ N. Paton Walsh and D. Pallister, “Russia jails man who claimed to be UK spy”, The Guardian, 23 July 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jul/23/russia.internationalcrime>

²⁴ Y. Chubarov, “Н а е м н и к с А л ь б и о н а”, Izvestia, 16 November 2001, <https://iz.ru/news/254767>

²⁵ Of the 19 people mentioned, two died in relation to the January 2015 Verviers terrorist plot, four in relation to the November 2015 Paris attacks, one during a counter terrorist raid in March 2016 in the Brussels municipality of Forest, three in relation to the March 2016 Brussels attacks, eight while conducting suicide attacks in Iraq, and one doing so in Syria

²⁶ G. Van Vlierden, J. Lewis and D. Ressler, “Beyond the Caliphate: Islamic State Activity outside the Group’s Defined Wilayat – Belgium”, West Point: The Combating Terrorism Center, February 2018, p. 8, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/02/CTC-Beyond-the-Caliphate-Belgium.pdf>

²⁷ J. Archer and J. Vesterager, “Danish court finds Chechen guilty over bombing”, Reuters, 30 May 2011, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/denmark-bomber-verdict/danish-court-finds-chechen-guilty-over-bombing-idUKLDE74T1E120110530>

while at an Antwerp terrorist trial in 2012 which included charges about a planned attack, three of the defendants were Chechens. One of them was living in Belgium, a second in Germany and the third in Austria, which is indicative of the particularly strong transnational character of Eastern contingent networks.²⁸ The Austria-based Chechen defendant in the Antwerp case, Aslambek Idrisov, had prior links to Akhmed Chatayev, the suspected brain behind the June 2016 Istanbul airport attack.²⁹

Much more recently, a Belgian citizen of Bosnian-Serbian descent was arrested on suspicion of plotting a terrorist attack in the neighbouring Netherlands. He was previously convicted for the distribution of Islamic State propaganda.³⁰ And while his implication wasn't detailed, one of the Easterners within our dataset – a 29 year old Russian citizen living in the Brussels municipality of Schaerbeek – was named in the investigation into the March 2016 Brussels attacks. He had been in touch with the Moroccan-born perpetrator Najim Laachraoui, who was also suspected of being the bomb manufacturer for the November 2015 Paris attacks.³¹

Conclusions

With links to 37 different foreign countries, considerable variation exists within the Belgian foreign fighter population. But two backgrounds stand out. People with roots in Morocco are by far the most important component at 43% of the entire sample. This does not come as a surprise, since they also represent the largest group of Muslims in Belgium and might be particularly vulnerable for radicalization owing to a relatively high sense of discrimination. Quite surprisingly, however, people with links to Russia constitute the second largest group of foreign fighters with non-Belgian origins, surpassing several countries with a larger share in Belgium's Islamic population.

Comparing the Moroccan with the 'Eastern' contingent – extended to all former Soviet Union and Eastern European states – reveals important differences. While both have predominantly sought membership in the Islamic State, the recruitment for this organization happens separately. While Moroccans do team up with people of all kind of others origins, the Easterners seem to have their own, mostly isolated networks. Geographically, they are much more spread than their Moroccan counterparts, who are highly concentrated in Brussels and Antwerp.

The Eastern region's history with violent conflicts in the Caucasus and the Balkans may explain the high degree of militancy within its diaspora, but also the higher average age within its foreign fighters contingent. Indications do exist that a sizeable number are veterans of these past conflicts. And while a large share of the terrorist threat in Belgium originates from the Moroccan contingent, the danger of the Eastern contingent should not be neglected – as the recent stabbing attack in Paris by a French Islamic State supporter of Chechen descent illustrates,³² in addition to some older Belgian cases mentioned above.

²⁸ S. Reyntjens, "De NAVO, Joden of een trein – Terrorist van het Sint-Jansplein Hasan Hamdaoui veroordeeld voor plannen aanslag", *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 11 January 2014

²⁹ G. Van Vlierden, "Brein achter Istanbul had ook mannetje in ons land", *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 1 July 2016

³⁰ W. Hertogs, B. Vandael and G. Van Vlierden, "Belg repte van aanval voor IS op de Wallen", *Algemeen Dagblad*, 21 April 2018, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/belg-repte-van-aanval-voor-is-op-de-wallen-a18137ef/>

³¹ According to confidential law enforcement documents in the possession of the authors

³² A. Nossiter and R. Callimachi, "Paris Knife Attacker, Born in Chechnya, Was on Terrorism Watch List", *The New York Times*, 13 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/13/world/europe/paris-knife-attack-isis-chechnya.html>

One of our most important findings is the lack of knowledge about the Eastern contingent, and given the covert way of working, its true extent can still be underestimated. Meanwhile, much of the effort in the field of prevention and detection of Islamic radicalization in Belgium is focused on the ‘traditional’ Muslim population, consisting of people from North African and Turkish descent. As difficult as that already turns out to be, more attention should be paid to the Eastern contingent.

Likely, this also applies to other European countries. In Germany for instance, where the share of Chechen and other Russian Islamists is estimated at around 5%, the head of the domestic security agency BfV recently highlighted their battle experience, their “affinity for violence” and their hidden radicalization through personal contacts and traditional clan structures.³³ According to the Berlin-based expert Claudia Dantschke their danger in Germany might still be underestimated, and a look into some cases by the Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung revealed how the secrecy within the Russian Islamist networks makes it hard to prosecute.³⁴

More generally, policy makers and experts alike might forget to look at significant ‘second’ sources of risk once the main source in their country is identified. Especially when this second source is operating in a very isolated fashion, with networks that are hard to penetrate both for efforts aimed at prevention and those at the detection of radicalism. In other European countries a similar dynamic may be in play, for instance related to parts of the diaspora from East Africa. To put it simply, Arabic shouldn’t be the only language law enforcement officers, jihad researchers and prevention workers hasten to learn.

³³ DPA, “Warnung vor kampferprobten Nordkaukasus-Islamisten”, Zeit Online, 10 December 2017, <https://www.zeit.de/news/2017-12/10/terrorismus-warnung-vor-kampferprobten-nordkaukasus-islamisten-10150602>

³⁴ K. Brandt and C. Unger, “Essen, Berlin, Kaukasus: Das geheime Netz der Tschetschenen”, WAZ, 14 April 2018, <https://www.waz.de/politik/ein-blick-in-das-geheime-terror-netzwerk-der-tschetschenen-id21401016g.html>

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