



The Islamic State, Extremism, and the Spread of Transnational Terrorism¹

Dr. Matthew Levitt

Former-Wexler Fellow and Director, Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence,
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, distinguished members of the committee, it is an honor and privilege to appear before you today. This committee has held numerous hearings on the so-called Islamic State and the devastating impact of its barbarism on the Middle East. But coming on the heels of the Brussels bombings, and the group's demonstrated intent and capability to carry out terrorist attacks in the West, it is the spread of this transnational terrorism that I would like to address today.

Allow me to paint a picture: The office of the mayor of the Molenbeek municipality in Brussels 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 on March 18th 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

¹ Portions of this testimony first appeared as "The Islamic State's Lone Wolf Era is Over," *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/24/the-islamic-states-lone-wolf-era-is-over/> and as "My Journey through Brussels' Terrorist Safe Haven," *Politico*, March 27, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/03/brussels-attacks-terrorist-safe-haven-213768>. My thanks to both publications for allowing me to work through these ideas on their pages, and for providing formal permission allowing me to use portions of that material here.

which even Molenbeek's mayor, Francois Schepmans, describes as "a breeding ground for violence."²

Expansion of the Islamic State Terrorist Threat to the West

The Brussels bombings have made it plain that the scale of the threat posed by the Islamic State to the West is far larger than most Westerners had previously thought. That threat is no longer limited to the radicalization of the 5,000-6,000 European citizens who left the comfort and safety of their homes to fight alongside the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq and, more recently, Libya.³ Nor has it only expanded to include so-called “lone-wolf” plots — self-organized attacks carried out by homegrown radicals. The Brussels bombings have made it painfully clear that the Islamic State is determined to plan and direct attacks in the West that are far more sophisticated and lethal than such small-scale mayhem.

It would be understandable if the public expressed anxiety and dismay about this metastasized danger. But the West’s counterterrorism officials are not entitled to feel surprise. For anyone paying close enough attention, the Islamic State’s expanded capabilities have been evident for well over a year.

After the U.S.-led coalition began launching airstrikes against Islamic State targets in August 2014, the group’s spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, responded with a call for supporters to carry out lone-offender terrorist attacks targeting the West.

If you can kill a disbelieving American or European — especially the spiteful and filthy French — or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be.⁴

Since then, Islamic State supporters and sympathizers have tried to answer his call. The January 2015 attacks in Paris on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher grocery store caused some confusion because some operatives appeared to be tied to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), while others were inspired by the Islamic State. Looking back, however, it appears that these terrorist “frenemies” (the groups they respectively affiliated themselves with were fighting one another in a jihadi civil war back in Syria) were still part of the lone-offender phenomenon. They may have been inspired by groups based in the Middle East, but they were not directed by them.

² Robert-Jan Bartunek and Alastair Macdonald, “Guns, God and grievances - Belgium's Islamist 'airbase',” *Reuters*, November 16, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-belgium-guns-insight-idUSKCN0T504J20151116>

³ “State of play on implementation of the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12 February 2015, the JHA Council Conclusions of 20 November 2015, and the Conclusions of the European Council of 18 December 2015,” EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Council of the European Union, March 1, 2016, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2016/mar/eu-council-c-t-coordinator-report-6450-16.pdf>

⁴ “The Failed Crusade,” *Dabiq*, Issue 4, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-422.pdf>

Lost in the shuffle after the horror of those attacks was the critical turning point in Islamic State terrorism in Europe: the plots that were averted by raids in Verviers, Belgium, a week after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. These raids were a watershed moment for European counterterrorism officials, and Belgian authorities in particular, who were acting on information that the cell was plotting imminent and large-scale attacks in Belgium.⁵ Police discovered automatic firearms, precursors for the explosive triacetone triperoxide (TATP), a body camera, multiple cell phones, handheld radios, police uniforms, fraudulent identification documents, and a large quantity of cash during the raid.⁶ Information from European and Middle Eastern intelligence services indicated the raids thwarted “major terrorist attacks,” most likely in Belgium, though the investigation into the group’s activities spanned several European countries, including France, Greece, Spain, and the Netherlands.⁷ The leader of the plot, Belgian citizen Abdelhamid Abaaoud, directed the operation from a safe house in Athens, Greece, using a cell phone, while other group members operated in several other European countries, investigators determined. “Items recovered during searches of residences affiliated with the cell suggest the group’s plotting may have included the use of small arms, improvised explosive devices, and the impersonation of police officers,” according to an intelligence assessment by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.⁸

Authorities quickly began to appreciate that the threat facing Europe was no longer limited to lone offenders inspired by the group. It now included trained and experienced foreign terrorist fighters coordinating attacks, directed by the Islamic State, across multiple jurisdictions. In the aftermath of the Verviers raid 13 arrests were made in Belgium, two in France, and one arrest was made in Greece, linked to a safe house in Athens. According to the same DHS intelligence assessment, the members of the cell were able to communicate and travel unimpeded across borders to facilitate attack planning.⁹

Authorities quickly honed in on the ringleader of the Belgium plots, Abaaoud, also known as Abu Umar al-Baljiki. But despite a Europe-wide manhunt, Abaaoud managed to elude authorities, escaping from Belgium to Syria, and then back. He later bragged about his escape in an interview with *Dabiq*, the Islamic State’s propaganda magazine: “My name and picture were

⁵ James Kanter, “2 Suspects Killed in Gun battle in Belgian Antiterror Raid,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/world/europe/police-raid-belgium.html?_r=1

⁶ “Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

⁷ Paul Cruickshank, [Mariano Castillo](#) and [Catherine E. Shoichet](#) “Belgian operation thwarted 'major terrorist attacks,' kills 2 suspects,” January 15, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/15/world/belgium-anti-terror-operation/>; “Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

⁸ “Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

⁹ “Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

all over the news yet I was able to stay in their homeland, plan operations against them, and leave safely when doing so became necessary.”¹⁰

The threat to Europe slowly became clearer still. In April 2015, French authorities arrested an Islamic State operative who had called for medical assistance after accidentally shooting himself. In his apartment, authorities found weapons, ammunition, and notes on potential targets, including churches, which he had been told to do by someone inside Syria, according to Paris prosecutor François Molins.¹¹ A U.S. intelligence bulletin reported the Islamic State operative had links to Abaaoud and had previously expressed interest in traveling to Syria.¹²

By May 2015, U.S. law enforcement concluded that a sea change had decisively occurred in the nature of the Islamic State terrorist threat. While threats remain from Islamic State-inspired lone offenders, the U.S. intelligence assessment concluded that future Islamic State operations would resemble the elaborate disrupted Verviers plot.¹³

The plot disrupted by Belgian authorities in January 2015 is the first instance in which a large group of terrorists possibly operating under ISIL direction has been discovered and may indicate the group has developed the capability to launch more complex operations in the West. We differentiate the complex, centrally planned plotting in Belgium from other, more-simplistic attacks by ISIL-inspired or directed individuals, which could occur with little to no warning.

The multi-jurisdictional nature of that plot cemented for European and U.S. counterterrorism officials the importance of information sharing across national agencies, but implementing the necessary reforms would be slow in coming.

The pace of the Islamic State’s foreign-directed plots sped up in the summer of 2015. In mid-August, a man was arrested while attempting to carry out an attack on a concert in France. The man, who had only recently returned from a six-day trip to Syria, told police he was ordered to carry out the attack by a man fitting Abaaoud’s description. Later that month, off-duty U.S. servicemen managed to subdue a gunman attempting to carry out an attack on a Thalys train traveling from Amsterdam to Paris.

Luck ran out when terrorists struck Paris on Nov. 13, 2015. These multiple coordinated attacks marked a departure from past Islamic State plots in the level of training and degree of operational

¹⁰ “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone,” *Dabiq*, Issue 7,

<https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-722.pdf>

¹¹ “France police arrest man ‘planning to attack churches,’” *BBC*, April 22, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32409253>; Tony Todd, “‘Syrian accomplice’ told Paris suspect to attack churches,” *France 24*, April 23, 2015, <http://www.france24.com/en/20150422-paris-terror-IS-al-qaeda-church-attack-syrian-accomplice>

¹² “Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures Used in the 13 November 2015 Paris Attacks,” DHS, FBI, NCTC Joint Intelligence Bulletin, November 23, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FBI-NCTC-ParisAttacks.pdf>

¹³ “Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

security executed by the attackers. According to the U.S. intelligence bulletin, using an acronym for the Islamic State, the November Paris attacks “demonstrated a greater degree of coordination and use of multiple tactics, resulting in higher casualties than has been seen in any previous ISIL Western attack.”¹⁴ The tactics, techniques, and procedures used in the attacks were quickly identified by law enforcement as the type of attacks the West should be expecting from now on.

According to the latest EUROPOL counterterrorism report, the Paris attacks and subsequent investigations demonstrate a shift by the Islamic State toward “going global” in its terrorism campaign. The Islamic State has developed an “external action command,” EUROPOL notes, which “trained for special forces style attacks in the international environment.” The police organization’s warning for Europe was stark: “There is every reason to expect that [the Islamic State], [Islamic State-]inspired terrorists or another religiously inspired terrorist group will undertake a terrorist attack somewhere in Europe again, but particularly in France, intended to cause mass casualties amongst the civilian population.”¹⁵

If the evolution of the Islamic State threat to Europe was not yet perfectly clear after the Paris attacks, it has become so in the wake of the Brussels bombings. And yet, while Europe is now fully aware of the scope of the threat, it remains unprepared to cope with it. This includes both shortcomings in the counterterrorism capabilities of European states, as well as their efforts to integrate immigrant communities into the larger European societies in which they live.

The counterterrorism challenges were underscored by the inability of security services to find Salah Abdeslam for some four months after the November Paris attacks. More broadly, the latest report by the European Union’s counterterrorism coordinator revealed that not all member states have established electronic connections to Interpol at their border crossings.¹⁶ The report was uncharacteristically blunt, finding that “information sharing still does not reflect the threat.”¹⁷ In one glaring example, Europol’s Focal Point Travellers database has recorded only 2,786 verified foreign terrorist fighters despite “well-founded estimates that around 5,000 EU citizens have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIL and other extremist groups,” the report said. Worse still, more than 90 percent of the reports of verified foreign terrorist fighters came from just five member states.

¹⁴ “Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures Used in the 13 November 2015 Paris Attacks,” DHS, FBI, NCTC Joint Intelligence Bulletin, November 23, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FBI-NCTC-ParisAttacks.pdf>

¹⁵ “Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks,” Europol, January 18, 2016, https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/changes_in_modus_operandi_of_is_in_terrorist_attacks.pdf

¹⁶ “State of play on implementation of the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12 February 2015, the JHA Council Conclusions of 20 November 2015, and the Conclusions of the European Council of 18 December 2015,” EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Council of the European Union, March 1, 2016, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2016/mar/eu-council-c-t-coordinator-report-6450-16.pdf>

¹⁷ “State of play on implementation of the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12 February 2015, the JHA Council Conclusions of 20 November 2015, and the Conclusions of the European Council of 18 December 2015,” EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Council of the European Union, March 1, 2016, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2016/mar/eu-council-c-t-coordinator-report-6450-16.pdf>

But the social integration challenges are more daunting still. In Belgium in particular, governance is complicated by the extremely federal system of government, divided not only across local, regional, and federal levels of government, but also by geography, language, and culture. But across Europe, solving the long ignored problem of disenfranchised immigrant communities is going to take more time and money, both of which are in short supply.

And these two sets of challenges — counterterrorism and intelligence on the one hand, and social and economic integration on the other — are intricately interconnected. The economic factors are not a primary factor of radicalization, Belgian officials told me, but they are a powerful reinforcing factor feeding an identity crisis centered on lack of opportunity, broken families, psychological fragility, and cultural and religious tension. With an unemployment rate as high as 30 percent, it should not be surprising that the vast majority of Belgian recruits to the Islamic State are small-time criminals.¹⁸ One Molenbeek recruiter, who is now in jail, approached local youth in the neighborhood's ubiquitous storefront mosques and convinced them to donate some of the proceeds of their petty crime to fund the travel of foreign fighters to Syria.¹⁹

Today's petty criminals are now tomorrow's potential suicide bombers. And they will not be carrying out their attacks in faraway war zones but rather in the heart of the countries in which they grew up. The U.S. intelligence assessment written after the November Paris attacks presciently warned that "the involvement of a large number of operatives and group leaders based in multiple countries in future ISIL-linked plotting could create significant obstacles in the detection and disruption of preoperational activities."²⁰ That is certainly the case, but it is only half the problem. The still greater challenge European countries now face is contending with the European Islamic State terrorists being groomed today within their own borders.

Fast Track from Zero to Hero

The harsh fact is that communities ripe for radicalization exist across Europe—including in the heart of the capital of the European Union—and no one quite knows what to do about it. The day of my visit to Molenbeek 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.

¹⁸ Valentina Pop, "Islamic State Terror Cell Found Refuge in Brussels District," *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-terror-cell-found-refuge-in-brussels-district-1458694455>

¹⁹ Matthew Dalton, "Attacks Highlight Belgian Failure to Roll Up Extremist Network," *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/attacks-highlight-belgian-failure-to-roll-up-extremist-network-1458694796>

²⁰ "Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot," Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

The problem: Molenbeek is like another world, another culture, festering in the heart of the West. Only eight of 114 imams in Brussels 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.²¹

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.²² In the words of Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel, “Almost every time, there is a link to Molenbeek.” This week’s bombings were no exception.²³

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.²⁴ 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 that I understood there was no way to know these crooks had suddenly become terrorists, adding “there was no suspicion of radicalization.”

²¹ Valentina Pop, “Islamic State Terror Cell Found Refuge in Brussels District,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-terror-cell-found-refuge-in-brussels-district-1458694455>

²² “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq,” The Soufan Group, December 2015, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf

²³ Robert-Jan Bartunek and Alastair Macdonald, “Guns, God and grievances - Belgium's Islamist 'airbase',” *Reuters*, November 16, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-belgium-guns-insight-idUSKCN0T504J20151116>

²⁴ Sebastian Rotella, “Belgium’s Deadly Circles of Terror,” *ProPublica*, March 22, 2016, <https://www.propublica.org/article/belgiums-deadly-circles-of-terror>

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,” mayor 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’.”²⁵ 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.”

Syrian Civil War, Islamic State, and Radicalization in Hyper Drive

It is important to consider as context how the war in Syria transformed the nature of radicalization and recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters for the Islamic State (and, indeed, for other Islamist violent extremist groups). Initially, before the Islamic State existed, foreigners traveled to fight in Syria to defend fellow Sunni civilians and defend communities against persecution by the Assad regime. That was a much easier and faster radicalization process than had been the case under al-Qaeda. A person only had to be convinced to fight a defensive battle to protect Sunni civilians from the gas attacks, barrel bombings and starvation campaigns of the Assad regime, not an al-Qaeda-style offensive Jihad against the West.

As the conflict dragged on more people began to fight with the Jabhat al-Nusra’s and Ahrar al-Sham’s of the world because these more radical groups enjoyed greater financial support and therefore had access to more money and better weapons. Over time, many people who went to fight in Syria for altruistic reasons became increasingly radicalized by exposure to these more extreme groups. Some would later join the Islamic State.

The creation of the Islamic State and its so-called caliphate further fueled the pace of radicalization. For many vulnerable, at-risk Muslim men and women in Europe, the Islamic State provided the opportunity to be a part of building something exciting and important. They were being invited to get in on the early building stages of reestablishing a caliphate, just like the early followers of the Prophet Muhammad, making them part of something historic and bigger than themselves.

The Islamic State simplifies world conflicts into black and white “which allows someone the opportunity of being the ‘hero’ - an empowering narrative for a disenfranchised, disengaged

²⁵ “Life with ISIS: the Myth Unraveled,” *General Intelligence and Security Service*, Ministry of the interior and Kingdom Relations, January 18, 2016, <https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2016/01/15/publication-life-with-isis-the-myth-unravelled>

individual."²⁶ And while the Syrian civil war and then the founding of a so-called caliphate significantly sped up the pace of the radicalization process, there is today a powerful undercurrent that draws in at-risk youth having less to do with Islam or Assad but with providing “the thrill of being part of something bigger. It is a youth subculture ... and peer groups play a big role.”²⁷

After the Paris attacks in November, Belgian Police intercepted a phone call to Brussels from Syria and overheard a Belgian militant inquiring about his friend Bilal Hadfi, who had been a suicide bomber in Paris. The militant asked what his friends were saying about Bilal back in the “sector,” a reference to Molenbeek where many of the Paris attackers grew up. “Are they talking about him? Are they praising him? Are they saying he was a lion?” the militant asked. His particular interest in his peer’s opinion of Hadfi made one thing perfectly clear: for him and others like him the Islamic State was more about personal glory than anything else.

The Road Ahead

When I met with the mayor of Molenbeek, she was frank about the task ahead in getting a handle on radicalization in the municipality but 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.²⁸

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.

²⁶ Danica Kirka, “ISIS is luring normal Western women with troubling simplicity,” *Business Insider*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/young-women-are-joining-isis-for-more-than-marriage-2015-5>

²⁷ Jason Burke, “The story of a radicalisation: ‘I was not thinking my thoughts. I was not myself,’” *The Guardian*, November 26, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/26/radicalisation-islam-isis-maysa-not-thinking-my-thoughts-not-myself>

²⁸ Valentina Pop, “Islamic State Terror Cell Found Refuge in Brussels District,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-terror-cell-found-refuge-in-brussels-district-1458694455>

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 month, 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.²⁹

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. But as we now know, authorities barely questioned Abdeslam between the time of his arrest and the Brussels bombings. Moreover, Turkish authorities had warned Belgian and Dutch authorities about one of the Brussels bombers, who they had turned away at the border and were sending back to Europe as what they specifically described as a “foreign terrorist fighter.”

“We got him,” an official excitedly tweeted at the news of Abdeslam’s capture. 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.

²⁹ Greg Botelho, “Brussels shooting: ISIS flag, ammo found in raid tied to Paris attacks,” *CNN* March 16, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/16/europe/brussels-raid-paris-attack/>