

NOVEMBER 2023



**TERRORIST ATTACK IN BELGIUM IN
2023: NATIONAL SECURITY,
RESILIENCE AND THE ROLE OF THE
ARMY**

WRITTEN BY: CHRISTOS LOIZOU



WRITTEN BY

CHRISTOS LOIZOU

EDITED BY

CHIARA NASONTE

SUPERVISED BY

GINEVRA BERTAMINI

Introduction

Belgium has been a target of terrorist attacks in recent years. The country faced its largest terrorist attack in 2016 at Brussels Airport in Zaventem and at the Maelbeek/Maalbeek metro station. This incident prompted Belgium to revise its national security strategy, focusing on addressing threats related to terrorism and extremism.

This paper examines how the Belgian authorities dealt with the terrorist attack in Brussels on 16 October 2016 and assesses the implementation of the official plans and national security strategy. It will focus specifically on the form of Islamic terrorism and specifically on “lone wolf” attacks as this form of terrorism relates to the case study.

Initially, there is an overview of the country's national security strategy and other relevant official documents, with particular emphasis on resilience and counterterrorism. Afterward, the case study under consideration of the terrorist attack of 16 October, 2023 is briefly presented. Subsequently, an evaluation of the response of the competent Belgian institutions to this case study is made. Finally, specific conclusions are drawn about the role of the Armed Forces. To do so there is an overview of their mission as defined by official strategic documents and the role they played in times of crisis in the past, in order to assess the Belgian government's decision not to actively involve the army in countering the terrorist attack of 2023.

National Security Strategy of Belgium – Resilience and Counterterrorism

Initially we will examine how the threat of ‘terrorism’ and the concept of ‘resilience’ are approached in Belgium's official strategic documents. The National Security Strategy of Belgium gives significant importance to the concept of resilience and one of the vital interests defined in the official documents of Belgium is the security of citizens and the integrity of national territory, while a main threat defined is non-state actors linked to terrorism and extremism that use hybrid methods. (Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2022).

The concept of Resilience is understood as a coherent set of measures enabling society to continue to function by providing protection and response to incidents that threaten its vital interests and fundamental values, even when crises occur. of large scale directly threaten them or endanger them (Stratégie de Sécurité Nationale, 2021). This goal requires resilience on the part of the individual, of society, business and government. However, it emphasizes that a national approach can only be successful if it is part of European and international efforts in collaboration with EU, NATO and other institutions such as Interpol and Europol. At EU level, in Resilience against terrorism, these efforts include the counterterrorism program proposed in December 2020 to strengthen the EU's resilience to terrorist threats and the active participation of Belgium within the Network of decision-makers for prevention (Prevent Policy Makers Network) (Stratégie de Sécurité Nationale, 2021).

The National Security Strategy states that the domestic threat of Islamist terrorism mainly concerns individuals (Lone Actors) who become radicalized and choose to commit violent acts. Generally, they have no formal or structural ties to terrorist groups but are inspired by extremist or terrorist propaganda on the internet or social media (Stratégie de sécurité nationale, 2021).

In 2023, the Coordination Body for Threat Analysis (OCAD) which processes all relevant information and intelligence on terrorism, extremism and problematic radicalization, published the 'Strategic Note: Extremism and Terrorism' (Strategy T.E.R.) which succeeds 'The Plan R: The Action Plan Against Radicalism'. 'Strategy T.E.R' defines old and new platforms such as the National Task Force (NTF) in which the military General Service for Intelligence and Security (SGRS) participates, the Local Task Forces (LTF), the Local Integral Security Cells concerning radicalism, extremism and terrorism (LISCs-R), the Joint Intelligence Centre and Joint Decision Centre (JIC-JDC) and the Counterterrorism Forums (CT). According to the Strategy T.E.R the focus has shifted from a narrow approach to terrorism to a broader approach aimed at preventing violent extremism (PVE) and countering violent extremism (CVE) (Strategic Note: Extremism and Terrorism - Strategy T.E.R - 2023).

The Strategy T.E.R defines 'radicalization' as a dynamic process that starts with alienation from society and the political system, a growing intolerance towards an ideology one does not share and an increasing willingness to accept violence as a means of imposing one's own ideology on others. It also defines 'terrorism' as the use of violence against persons or material interests for ideological or political reasons with the aim of achieving one's objectives through terror, intimidation or threats. This also includes the radicalization process (Strategic Note Extremism and Terrorism - Strategy T.E.R - 2023).

In 2018, the National Crisis Center coordinated a large-scale risk assessment for Belgium for the period 2018-2023. According to the National Crisis Center, the risk of terrorist attacks against soft targets is judged for this period as possible with "average impact" on society, a level before "catastrophic impact" (National Crisis Center, 2018).

Finally, the Strategic Vision of the Belgian Armed Forces published by the Ministry of Defence in 2021, mentions that maintaining national military readiness and thus enabling societal resilience is the foundational mission defined by the defence policy. Thus, one of the missions of the armed forces is to support civil authorities when temporarily overwhelmed at times of crisis (Ministry of Defence of Belgium, 2021).

The Terrorist Attack in Brussels on 16 October, 2023

The terrorist attack that took place in Brussels on 16 October 2023 tested the effectiveness of Belgium's national security as well as the resilience of the state and society. Next to Square Sainctelette, at about 7:15 p.m, a man got off a scouter and holding an AR-15 military rifle, shot and killed two people and wounded another. The two victims were fans of the Swedish national football team and were in Brussels for the football match between Sweden's and Belgium's national teams scheduled to take place that day. The third person injured was a taxi driver (National Crisis Center, 2023).

The attacker was a 45-year-old Arabic-speaking Tunisian national named Abdesalem Lassoued. After the attack, he uploaded a video on social media in which he claimed responsibility for the attack and appeared to be inspired by the so-called Islamic state (Al Jazeera, 2023).

The following morning, approximately 13 hours after the attack, the police located the attacker, shot him and he died a short time later. An AR-15 military weapon and a bag of clothing were found in the bar and two handguns and a knife were found in the immediate vicinity of his accommodation (National Crisis Center, 2023).

According to official sources, a connection to the Quran burnings in Sweden was suspected because it was alluded to in one of the videos that the alleged perpetrator published before the attack and the announcements made clear that there was no evidence of a potential connection with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The terrorist attack does not appear to have been organized by a broad terrorist structure, so the lone wolf theory seems to come closest to reality (National Crisis Center, 2023).

He applied for asylum in Belgium in 2019 and he had stayed in the country illegally after his application was rejected in 2020. He had also lodged asylum applications in Italy, Norway and Sweden (The Guardian, 2023). He received an official letter in 2020 ordering him to leave the country, but the letter was never handed over because he wasn't home at the time of delivery (Politico, 2023).

The Response

Following the attack, Belgian authorities raised the threat level to level 4 (the highest level meaning Critical Threat) in Brussels and to level 3 in the rest of the country. After neutralizing the attacker, the threat level in Brussels was reduced to level 3.

The Crisis Center informed the public on a regular basis through social media platforms on the internet about the development of the situation and security measures while also providing advice to the public such as for example telephone numbers for emergency medical and psychological support. Most of the center's announcements were also published in English, which is particularly important since the target were people of non-Belgian nationality who did not speak the official languages of the country. Exactly three hours after the emergency began, the Crisis Center posted that due to heavy internet traffic, the website got overloaded and they were working on a solution. Less than 20 minutes later the technical issue seemed to be solved as the updates continued as normal.

The football fans stayed in the stadium area until 4:00 a.m. and then the evacuation of the stadium began with instructions for them to go home safely (Daily Mail, 2023).

Police patrols on the streets were increased as well as their presence in buildings of high importance (The Brussels Times, 2023c). The Interior Minister of Belgium stated that after consultation it was decided not to deploy soldiers in the streets (The Brussels Times, 2023b).

Several companies, organizations and embassies allowed their staff to work from home the next day (U.S Embassy in Belgium, 2023). Metro stations and airports continued to operate as normal (The Brussels Times, 2023a).

Evaluation of Measures

Undoubtedly there were problems both in preventing the attack and during crisis management. Four days after the attack, the Justice Minister of Belgium, Vincent Van Quickenborne resigned. He stated that it is an individual, monumental and unacceptable error with dramatic consequences, and assumed the political responsibility (Euronews, 2023). He also affirmed that he and his services had been searching for details to understand how Abdesalem Lassoued had disappeared off the map two years ago after being denied asylum and ordered by Belgian authorities to be deported to Tunisia (Euronews, 2023).

Press media reported that the police were aware of Lassoued living illegally in the country, there was some evidence of him that he might be a threat for the security of the state and there were suspicions about his involvement in illegal activities such as human trafficking. Moreover, in 2016 a foreign government informed Belgium that Lassoued had been radicalized (Politico, 2023). The Belgian authorities did not add his name the list for persons who are monitored regarding extremism and terrorism, probably due to lack of enough evidence (Politico, 2023).

Therefore, in the field of prevention a gap is observed at the level of intelligence processing and at the level of the political and judicial system, possibly due to bureaucracy, legislative vacancies and a lack of political will for the effective execution of immigration policy. Another factor that may have contributed to the failure to prevent the attack is the heavy workload and understaffing faced by judges, prosecutor's office and senior police officers (Euronews, 2023) (The Guardian, 2023).

As for the management of the crisis, the Crisis Center provided particularly useful information throughout the crisis, while the fact that the Center was also making announcements in English was particularly useful. The fact that a problem occurred due to increased traffic shows that there was no preparation for such a huge traffic, but the quick fix of the problem showed a good level of resilience. The evacuation of the Swedish fans from the football stadium despite the long wait ensured their journey home as safely as possible.

The fact that the operation of stations and airports continued normally with additional security measures showed that the societal resilience of the country did not collapse after a single attack. The closing of some stations in the first hours of the attack is considered reasonable (Le Monde, 2023). The development of remote working capabilities also contributed to the smooth functioning of the economy, which allowed organizations and companies to continue their work as normal the next day even though the threat level was at level 4. In this way Resilience was maintained in the country's economic activity sector which is a key objective of Belgium's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (European Parliament, 2022).

Moreover, the fact that the identification of the perpetrator was made following information provided by citizens, shows the progress that has been made in the participation of the whole society in dealing with a security crisis.

Furthermore, considering the connection of the terrorist attacks with the political developments in foreign countries and the warnings that the Belgian authorities seem to have received about Lassoued, the cooperation with the authorities of other states and with international organizations as foreseen in the Belgian strategic documents it is necessary and must be strengthened.

Conclusions on the Role of the Army

As mentioned above, the Belgian authorities decided not to mobilize army forces to patrol the streets after the attack (The Brussels Times, 2023b). Belgian Armed Forces personnel patrolled the country's streets for five years, from 2015 to 2020, as part of anti-terrorist measures and the Operation Vigilant Guardian (The Bulletin, 2020). Although the threat level was at level 2 when it was decided to withdraw the military from patrol duties, there was no need to mobilize armed forces personnel when the threat level was raised to level 4 after the 2023 terrorist attack.

This decision can be seen as positive since the deployment of soldiers for police duties distracts them from their main tasks. During the operation Vigilant Guardian, and especially in 2016 after the terrorist attacks in Brussels, the number of soldiers who undertook patrol and guard duties reached up to 1828 at some point (La Défense, 2023). This corresponds to 5.9% of the active personnel of the Belgian Armed Forces at that time, considering that the total number of active personnel amounted to approximately 33800 people (The Military Balance, 2016).

Army patrols on the streets of Belgium led to useful conclusions as they highlighted both positives and negatives.

On the positive side, from an operational point of view, army patrols gave the military the opportunity to undertake real operations with a degree of risk, forcing personnel to put into practice skills for which they have been trained. During the patrols, the soldiers neutralized terrorists who tried to carry out attacks with knives and suitcase bombs (Reuters, 2017a).

In addition, positive conclusions were also observed in the field of civil-military relations. Several people have reported in the period since the major terrorist attacks of 2016 that they feel safer when there were army patrols on the streets and that they saw it as a deterrent. Also, society and common people come closer to the army as it sees its mobilization every day and thus the members of the armed forces are not alienated and isolated in their camps.

On the negative side, from an operational point of view, army patrols limit the military's capabilities for overseas operations. Concerns have been expressed by Belgian Army and NATO officials at the time that member states may not be able to provide personnel for NATO, EU, or UN missions due to the deployment of large numbers of troops on domestic patrols. This also raises the issue of budget allocation. General Marc Thys, the commander of Belgium's land forces, also said in 2017 that the troops have less time for training (Reuters, 2017b).

In addition, the phenomenon of soldiers being specifically targeted was also observed, so the Belgian army changed tactics by moving more and changing routes so that soldiers are not an easy target for attacks during patrols (Reuters, 2017a). Here it is worth also noting that in 2022 there has been an attack with molotov cocktails on Belgian Army vehicles that were in facilities of the Belgian company OIP, a subsidiary of the Israeli company Elbit systems. As the attack is linked to the Israel-Palestinian conflict which has recently escalated, the issue of targeting specifically military targets by terrorist groups or radicalized persons is raised again (The Brussels Times, 2022).

On personnel matters, negative conclusions were made regarding the morale of the troops and their willingness to serve due to grueling schedules of the patrols (Reuters, 2027b) (The Bulletin, 2017). Moreover, some soldiers also reported experiencing family problems as they were away for a period (Reuters, 2017b), but this is something that is also seen in overseas deployments and is seen in most armies not only in times of crisis.

In 2017, Reuters reported that General Marc Thys said in an interview that he sees a lot of people who leave the defence forces because of the operation, without giving specific figures (Reuters, 2017b). Surveys contacted at the time, showed that 45% of soldiers wanted to quit and according to Boris Morenville, a representative of the main military union of Belgium, the army began to enforce a rule aimed at halting desertion in war time that obliges soldiers to serve out three years from the end of their two year training period (Reuters, 2017b).

In conclusion, the decision not to mobilise the army personnel for security measures after the terrorist attack of October 2023 in Brussels is judged as positive.

The rational use of the army in operations to deal with internal terrorist threats, which as mentioned above is a key threat to the country, is directly linked to the country's ability to ensure the safety of its citizens from external threats and territorial integrity, which are vital interests according to the National Security Strategy of Belgium.

A single "lone wolf" attack should not necessarily lead to the mobilisation of the armed forces, tire the army and distract it from its primary mission of defending the country from external military threats. Apparently, the lessons learnt from past army patrols led to the conclusion that army personnel should not be mobilized for a single incident. Clearly, and when it is judged that the internal threat is great and lasting, the army personnel must contribute as this is part of the mission of the armed forces as defined by the Ministry of Defence. However, the ability of the state apparatus to be able to eliminate an internal threat without reducing the defence against external threats is a necessary element of Resilience for a country.

Bibliography

Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) (2023). The Strategic Note Extremism and Terrorism (Strategy T.E.R.). https://ocad.belgium.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Strategic-Note-Extremism-and-Terrorisme_WEB.pdf

Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of Belgium (2022, February 4). A strategy to make Belgium more resilient. <https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy-areas/highlighted/strategy-make-belgium-more-resilient>

Hallak, I. (2022). Belgium's National Recovery and Resilience Plan. European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/698931/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)698931_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/698931/EPRS_BRI(2022)698931_EN.pdf)

International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) (2016). The Military Balance 2016.

La Défense (2023). Vigilant Guardian Missions History. <https://www.mil.be/fr/nos-missions/belgique-operation-vigilant-guardian/>

Le Monde (2023, October 2016). Two Swedes fatally shot in central Brussels in a terrorist attack. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/sweden/article/2023/10/16/two-swedes-fatally-shot-in-central-brussels_6179647_213.html

Ministry of Defence of Belgium (2021). Update of the Strategic Vision 2030: Recommendations. <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2021/06/200622-Strategic-Vision-2021-EN.pdf?type=pdf>
National Crisis Center (2018). Terrorisme en Extremisme. https://crisiscentrum.be/sites/default/files/documents/files/BNRA_TerrorismeExtremisme.pdf

Prime Minister of Belgium (2021), Stratégie de sécurité nationale. https://www.premier.be/sites/default/files/articles/NVS_Online_EN.pdf

The Guardian (2023, October 2022). Brussels football match gunman had escaped from Tunisian prison. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/22/brussels-football-match-gunman-had-escaped-from-tunisian-prison>

Bradshaw, L. (2017, October 2). Soldiers would 'rather serve in Afghanistan' than patrol Brussels. The Bulletin. <https://www.thebulletin.be/soldiers-would-rather-serve-afghanistan-patrol-brussels>

National Crisis Center (2023, October 16-17). Shooting in Brussels. <https://crisiscentrum.be/nl/newsroom/schietpartij-brussel>

Bradshaw, L. (2020, May 18). Soldiers to stop patrolling public places in September. The Bulletin. <https://www.thebulletin.be/soldiers-stop-patrolling-public-places-september>

Bibliography

The Brussels Times (2022, August 30). Two Belgian armoured vehicles targeted with Molotov cocktails. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/280102/two-belgian-armoured-vehicles-targeted-with-molotov-cocktails>

Reuters (2017a, August 29). Troops switch tactics on Belgium's streets to guard against attacks. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-attacks-belgium-military-idUSKCN1B90Q6>

Carbonnel, A., Bartunek R. (2017b, September 14). Reuters. Soldiers on Europe's streets dent NATO's defense edge. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-attacks-military-analysis/soldiers-on-europes-streets-dent-natos-defense-edge-idUSKCN1BP1CA>

Keegan, M., Willcocks, B., Browning, L. (2023, October 16). Sweden fans are locked in Brussels stadium until 4am with police protection after gunman 'specifically targeted Swedes' and shot two dead, with players refusing to play as huge manhunt begins. Daily Mail. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-12637539/Belgiums-Sweden-suspended-fans-shot-dead.html>

U.S Embassy in Belgium (2023, October 16). Security Alert: Threat level raised to level 4 in Brussels following fatal shooting. <https://be.usembassy.gov/security-alert-threat-level-raised-to-level-4-in-brussels-following-fatal-shooting/>

Al Jazeera (2023, October 17). Brussels shooting: Police shoot dead man suspected of killing two Swedes. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/17/two-swedes-killed-in-brussels-in-possible-terrorist-shooting>

The Brussels Times (2023a, October 17). Flights at Brussels Airport running normally despite terror attack. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/brussels/746695/flights-at-brussels-airport-running-normally-despite-terror-attack>

The Brussels Times (2023b, October 17). No deployment of soldiers in Brussels streets, says interior minister. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/746821/no-deployment-of-soldiers-in-brussels-streets-says-interior-minister>

The Brussels Times (2023c, October 17). Security tightened at commercial and cultural centers across Belgium. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/747418/security-tightened-at-commercial-and-cultural-centres-across-belgium>

Haeck, P., Camut, N. (2023, October 18). Belgian officials knew all about Brussels terror attack gunman — but were unable to stop him. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/belgian-officials-knew-all-about-brussels-terror-attack-gunman-but-were-unable-to-stop-him/>

Bibliography

Euronews (2023, October 21). Belgian minister quits after 'monumental error' let Tunisian gunman slip through extradition net. United Nations Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention, 18 September 1997. <https://geneva-s3.unoda.org/static-unoda-site/pages/templates/anti-personnel-landmines-convention/APLC%2BEnglish.pdf>