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Terrorism

Belgian 'city of jihadis' struggles with returning Syria fighters

Has the small town of Vilvoorde figured out how to reintegrate its Islamists?

The Big Read



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NOVEMBER 1, 2016 by: **Jim Brunsten**

One winter's day in 2014 in a small Belgian town, an apparition from Syria's war walked unannounced into Hans Bonte's office. Only recently released from prison, the returned fighter wove his way through the corridors of Vilvoorde's town hall in search of the mayor.

Still wearing his electronic security bracelet and arriving with no notice or permission, the 20-something man never threatened Mr Bonte. Instead, he blurted out his problem — local police and social services were making his life a misery — and his cunning solution.

“He told me ‘the day I don't have to wear my bracelet any more I will move to Brussels’,” says Mr Bonte, the mayor of Vilvoorde, a struggling industrial town just outside of the

Belgian capital. “He said, ‘You are controlling me too much, and I have all these problems here.’”

His plan remains on hold — the man ended up back in prison for other offences — but for Mr Bonte, the possibility that the former jihadi in Syria could go to Brussels and [fall off the radar \(http://next.ft.com/content/0399f4ee-605f-11e6-b38c-7b39cbb1138a\)](http://next.ft.com/content/0399f4ee-605f-11e6-b38c-7b39cbb1138a) was real. “The lack of control and organisation in the Brussels area remains an enormous problem, also for the security of the whole country,” the Vilvoorde mayor says.

Not long ago, the Flemish town’s biggest problem was factory closures. But since taking office three years ago, Mr Bonte’s top priority has become [counter-radicalisation \(http://next.ft.com/content/ec698aca-2745-11e6-8ba3-cdd781do2d89\)](http://next.ft.com/content/ec698aca-2745-11e6-8ba3-cdd781do2d89). About 30 people from this community of 40,000 left to [fight in Syria and Iraq; \(http://next.ft.com/content/98f2e504-f1d4-11e5-9f20-c3a047354386\)](http://next.ft.com/content/98f2e504-f1d4-11e5-9f20-c3a047354386) some of them even used to play football with Mr Bonte’s son.

His strategy for stemming the flow has shown clear signs of success and has won praise as a creative model of how to effectively marshal the mayor’s powers, which include oversight of local police.

But he is still worried about the challenges illustrated by that visit to his office from a man whose return and release had initially blindsided his staff. Still coping with the gaps of authority across its fragmented country, Belgium — the [hub for terror attacks \(https://www.ft.com/topics/themes/Belgium_terrorism\)](https://www.ft.com/topics/themes/Belgium_terrorism) in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March this year that claimed more than 150 lives — is now confronting a new challenge: blowback from the next phase of Syria’s war.



Vilvoorde mayor Hans Bonte: 'The lack of control and organisation in the Brussels area remains an enormous problem ... for the security of the whole country' © AFP

Europe's steady export of fighters to Syria and Iraq has gone into reverse. Top counterterrorism officials are warning that losses suffered by Isis on the battlefield will only accelerate the flow of returnees to places like Vilvoorde. With this in mind, European security officials say they are watching the Iraqi advance on the [Isis-held city of Mosul \(http://next.ft.com/content/e484acfc-9772-11e6-a80e-bcd69f323a8b\)](http://next.ft.com/content/e484acfc-9772-11e6-a80e-bcd69f323a8b) with trepidation. The Islamist group has an interest in proving its potency by encouraging its followers to commit [attacks where they live \(http://next.ft.com/content/342ca532-f275-11e5-aff5-19b4e253664a\)](http://next.ft.com/content/342ca532-f275-11e5-aff5-19b4e253664a).

“As soon as the war in Syria is finished, there will inevitably be a lot of frustrated, disappointed and wounded people that will want to return,” Koen Geens, [Belgium's justice minister \(http://next.ft.com/content/65c89c22-f1cb-11e5-aff5-19b4e253664a\)](http://next.ft.com/content/65c89c22-f1cb-11e5-aff5-19b4e253664a), told the Financial Times. “That will be a new problem to deal with. It is one with which we are not familiar, and one we will have to prepare for well.”

‘The city of jihadis’

Just across the road from Mr Bonte's office is a school that saw nearly a dozen current and former students make the journey to Syria. In 2012, when departures from the town began, the Campus De Brug was a school in crisis, with high pupil turnover, low morale and

inflows of dropouts from nearby Brussels. Many of those who headed for the Middle Eastern conflict zone were seen as troublemakers who had already been expelled or had left.



Vulnerable people in Vilvoorde forged links with Fouad Belkacem, former leader of the now-banned organisation Sharia4Belgium © AFP

Far more striking for the vocational school and its then newly appointed headmaster, Dennis Holbrechts, were the cases of the two pupils who were still studying there when they left for Syria. One was a shy boy who had never caused any problems, while the other was one of the most dedicated students, “a very clever boy” who was only three months away from graduating with a qualification in electro-mechanical engineering.

Most of the town’s 28 departees left for the conflict zone in 2012-13. “From that moment on,” says Mr Bonte, “we were seen as the city of jihadis.”

A former industrial powerhouse that developed along the canal connecting Brussels to the port city of Antwerp, Vilvoorde has suffered tough economic times as Belgium’s manufacturing sector buckled in the face of global competition. A particularly tough blow came with the [closure of a Renault factory \(http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/articles/working-conditions/the-closure-of-renault-vilvoorde\)](http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/articles/working-conditions/the-closure-of-renault-vilvoorde) in 1997 with the loss of more than 3,000 jobs. The town was also a focal point for the wave of Moroccan immigration into Belgium that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s.



The approach of Mr Bonte’s team has been to painstakingly build trust — improving ties with local mosques, schools, sports clubs and the Muslim community, which makes up 10 per cent of the town’s population.

The aim has been to create an environment where the town’s residents, including family members of at-risk youths, feel they can come forward if they are concerned that someone is being radicalised, without fear that the authorities will respond in a heavy-handed way that would leave the person, or their family, stigmatised.

The town recruited a friend of several of the departees to act as a youth liaison officer to help defuse the climate of antagonism between young people and police. One of the first changes that resulted was a scaling back of house calls by police for people on radicalisation watch lists, with a greater role handed to social services.

Case workers were assigned to come up with individual approaches for each person seen to be at risk — a process done in collaboration with the person, their family and friends. The idea, according to Mr Bonte, is to find a “tailor-made answer” to address any specific factors that could be driving someone towards radical Islam — problems at school, for example. Recruiters work at “cutting off relationships”, he says. “We are trying to restore [them].”

There are clear signs the strategy has worked: departures in Vilvoorde slowed earlier than in many other places in Belgium. The last person who tried to leave was a teenage girl, in May 2014, who was intercepted before she reached Syria.



A street in Vilvoorde © Getty

The work of Mr Bonte's administration shares many similarities to successful strategies applied elsewhere — notably Mechelen, a Flemish city 18km from Vilvoorde that was targeted by Fouad Belkacem, one of Belgium's most notorious recruiters, but which never saw any of its citizens leave for Syria.

Beyond early intervention

Belgium endured a barrage of criticism for security lapses related to the [Paris \(http://next.ft.com/content/93d1c37a-8ba8-11e5-a549-b89a1dfede9b\)](http://next.ft.com/content/93d1c37a-8ba8-11e5-a549-b89a1dfede9b) and Brussels attacks. And while some of its local programmes against radicalisation have won praise, there is a recognition that they will not be enough as the threat evolves. According to Mr Geens, the country is facing two emerging problems: battle-hardened returnees and Isis's efforts to convince young people to commit attacks in their own countries.

This means that the distinction between stopping youth radicalisation, a task largely undertaken at local level in Belgium, and thwarting terrorist acts, something handled by national security forces, could be increasingly blurred.

This year, Belgium's federal government adopted a strategy aimed at making it harder for radicalised individuals to operate unseen in their communities. Known as the "Canal Plan", it beefed up the police presence along Brussels' old industrial artery, stepped up house-to-house checks and increased scrutiny of religious groups and other not-for-profit organisations.

One of its most striking findings was that, out of the more than 1,500 not-for-profit companies operating in Molenbeek, the district in the Belgian capital that was home to a number of the [Paris](http://next.ft.com/content/33a2d592-8dde-11e5-a549-b89a1dfede9b) and Brussels attackers, 46 of them have one or more administrators with links to "radicalisation and terrorism".



A copy of the Koran written in French and Arabic at Vilvoorde's An-Nasr mosque. Twenty-eight people left the town of 40,000 to fight in Syria and Iraq © Getty

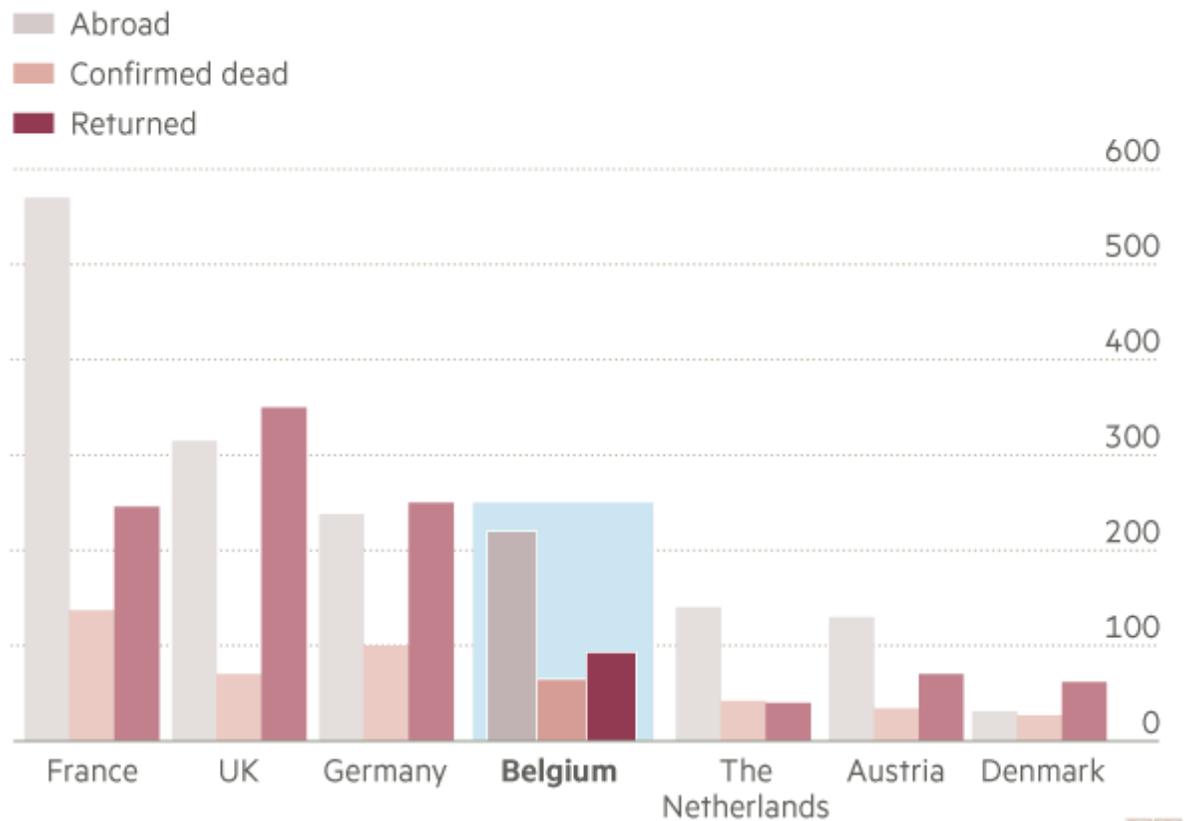
But debate is raging over the plan and whether it is really the best way to make use of limited funds and police time. One of its most vocal critics has been Sarah Turine, Molenbeek's deputy mayor responsible for youth and social cohesion, who describes the Canal Plan as "a total con" that risks backfiring by "stigmatising" and alienating the local community.

She says the sweeps are proving more effective at uncovering minor housing violations and benefit fraud than tackling extremism.

Perhaps more ominously given the challenges ahead, the Canal Plan is just one of a number of splits between different authorities in Belgium that are tackling radicalisation. There are also divisions over access to returnees and whether it should be in the community or in prison.

Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq

Selected EU countries



Source: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Apr 2016

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At present, it is policy in Belgium — and most of the EU — to prosecute and in many cases imprison returnees from Syria. Yet Belgium's prisons are a black box. Local teams dealing with radicalisation have no official access to prisoners while they are there, and receive little information from prison authorities when they are released. "The day they come out of prison, we do not know if they have been deradicalised," says Fatima Lamarti, Mr Bonte's deputy mayor responsible for social affairs. "It is what some describe as the time-bomb."

In other cases, local authorities are fighting to persuade federal security agencies to make more use of their on-the-ground knowledge — especially as inclusion on Belgium's radicalisation watchlist can have major implications for a person's day-to-day life.

One example cited by Ms Lamarti is that of a woman from Vilvoorde who worked at the nearby Brussels airport. She was sacked after her brother went to Syria, even though the town's anti-radicalisation team were, and remain, convinced that she had no jihadi sympathies. Other relatives of departees have not been allowed to travel to the US.

Beyond this, local officials say deradicalising returnees requires different strategies than the “early intervention” tactics they have developed to stop young people falling into the hands of recruiters in the first place.

Officials acknowledge that Europe lacks any coherent, systematic approach to reintegrating former fighters. Belgian authorities, like their counterparts in other countries, are fumbling their way towards a policy.

“It’s a serious issue,” Gilles de Kerchove, the EU’s counterterrorism co-ordinator, told the European Parliament in September.

“How will we handle not hundreds but thousands of fighters who will either want to go in another hotspot, and Libya is probably the most obvious one ... [but] also want to get back home?”

Recruiting threat: Fear of the ‘point of no return’

The first to leave Vilvoorde for Syria were two brothers who were well-known to the police, having built a long criminal record for drug dealing and theft. They left in late 2012 and soon pulled other members of their circle along with them. This first wave, some of whom became senior Isis commanders, managed to persuade a larger, younger group to follow them.

The instigator of those early departures was Fouad Belkacem, leader of the now-banned organisation Sharia4Belgium. “Belkacem came over from Antwerp, and he found some heavy guys in Vilvoorde,” says Hans Bonte, the town’s mayor. Young people in the town also forged links with Jean-Louis Denis, a jihadi recruiter in Brussels. Both he and Belkacem are now in prison.

The experiences of the mayor’s team in Vilvoorde paint a vivid picture of the intensity at which a young person can be caught in the web of Islamist ideology — usually through a toxic combination of alienation from society and peer pressure.

In one case, according to Mr Bonte, a boy’s parents, nervous that he might leave, asked the authorities to confiscate his identity card, a step that’s only possible for people under 18.

Days after his 18th birthday, he tried to leave the house at 5am. Intercepted by his mother, who had slept at the bottom of the stairs to try to stop him, he threatened to kill her unless she let him go. He got in a waiting car, was seen in Syria two days later and is now believed to be dead.

Mr Bonte mentions it “only to explain that there is a moment, there is a point of no return”.

While no one has left Vilvoorde for Syria or Iraq in two years, Mr Bonte says radicalisation remains a real threat. Local authorities have a list of more than 130 people believed to be radicalised or at risk of radicalisation. Some 39 people from the town are also on a list drawn up by an umbrella group of the Belgian security services.

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