

The security policies of France and Belgium in response to terrorist threats: a case study of the Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016) attacks¹

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyse the security policies of France and Belgium in response to terrorist threats, using the examples of the attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016). The author adopts the thesis that experiences related to terrorist attacks have significantly influenced the evolution of the security strategies of France and Belgium, led to the strengthening of preventive measures and international cooperation. The article is based on an analysis of the relevant literature, security strategy and case studies of the attacks. Research questions are focused on the causes and consequences of the attacks, the importance of radicalisation processes and the role of transnational cooperation in counterterrorism efforts. The analysis shows that historical conditions and the specific nature of terrorist organisations' activities

¹ The article is based on the bachelor's thesis entitled *The security policy of French-speaking countries in response to terrorist threats: A Case study of the Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016) attacks* defended at the War Studies Academy. The thesis was awarded in the 15th edition of the contest of the Head of the Internal Security Agency for the best doctoral, master's or bachelor's thesis on state security in the context of intelligence, terrorist and economic threats.

are significant for the development of terrorism in these countries, while coordinated actions at international level are essential for the implementation of an effective security policy.

Keywords

terrorism, security policy, France, Belgium, radicalisation, international cooperation

Introduction

Terrorism as one of the greatest threats of the 21st century affects not only the political situation in a country and its stability, but also the international order. The European Commission defines terrorism as (...) *a menace that does not recognise borders and affects countries and people irrespective of their geographical location*². It considers that the terrorist threats remain high and regards combating them as a shared European responsibility. The constant evolution of terrorist threats is a factor that has led to a widespread recognition of the need for states and international organisations to make changes to their security policies and strategies. The years 2015–2016 marked a turning point in this regard. At that time, France and Belgium suffered terrorist attacks that affected perceptions of the effectiveness of security policies, both within those countries and across the whole of Europe. This is evidenced by the responses and actions of, for example, Europol, which in January 2016 established the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC), and the European Commission, which on 24 July 2020 drew up a security strategy covering the years 2020–2025, with the (...) *protecting Europeans from terrorism and organised crime*³ as one of the pillars.

The research focuses on the nature of terrorist threats and the security policies of France and Belgium. The article will outline the key principles of security policies of France and Belgium against the backdrop

² *Counter-terrorism and radicalisation*, European Commission, 26 II 2026, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation_en [accessed: 30 III 2026].

³ *EU Security Union Strategy: connecting the dots in a new security ecosystem*, European Commission – Press release, Brussels, 24 VII 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1379, p. 2 [accessed: 12 VI 2026]

of the evolution of preventive measures and strategies resulting from regional and international factors, including both countries' membership of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and their experiences of terrorist attacks. In doing so, the author takes into account the course and consequences of terrorist attacks.

The most important research question is: what are the main factors shaping France's and Belgium's security policies in response to terrorist threats? In order to answer this question, the following specific problems have been formulated:

1. What factors and events have influenced the development of terrorist threats to France and Belgium?
2. What were the consequences of the terrorist attacks for the security policies of France and Belgium?
3. What are the key preventive measures and safety strategies of France and Belgium?
4. What does regional and international cooperation look like in relation to terrorist threats?

The article posits the hypothesis that the most important determinants of security policies of France and Belgium in the face of terrorist threats are:

- historical circumstances, together with experiences of terrorism in both countries,
- Islamist nature of terrorist organisations, taking into account their motivations and objectives,
- impact of radicalisation and migration on the development of terrorism,
- international cooperation on matters relating to preventive measures.

The analysis was carried out using research methods typical of the security sciences, such as the analysis and synthesis of the relevant literature, the comparative method, and case studies of selected terrorist attacks. The methods used enabled the identification of links between experiences related to terrorism and the shaping of security policies in those countries.

The article examines historical context of terrorism in France and Belgium, analyses the attacks in Paris and Brussels, as well as outlines preventive measures and international cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

The historical context of terrorism in France and Belgium

Terrorism is a multifaceted phenomenon that can take various forms. It can be influenced by the actor's purpose, ideology and values. It is worth noting that contemporary terrorist threats are closely linked to the process of radicalisation, which focuses on the adoption of extreme views and attitudes that may lead to the acceptance of violence as a means of achieving ideological goals.

The analysis of modern terrorist acts involves not only examining the events themselves, but also exploring the context in which security mechanisms have taken shape. The author analysed two events in France and Belgium that marked turning points in the history of terrorism. These were, respectively, a series of attacks in Paris in November 2015, as well as at Brussels Airport in Zaventem and on the underground in Brussels in March 2016. At the same time, she presented the chronology and evolution of terrorism in both countries.

In France, the origins of terrorism date back to the French Revolution and the Jacobin government in the 18th century⁴. First terrorist attacks were linked to the anarchist movements. In 19th century, an act of violence motivated in this way took place in Paris in 1893. A bomb went off in the Chamber of Deputies. The perpetrator was Auguste Vaillant, who supported the anarchist movement because he considered the French government's political and social system to be unjust. As reported in the press at the time, (...) *the bomb was thrown from one of the stands on the second floor (...) it exploded before it hit the ground, scattering (...) huge nails and pieces of zinc and lead*⁵. This attack triggered a wave of similar attacks in France.

In the 20th century, terrorism in France was closely linked to colonial conflicts. During the Algerian War, the National Liberation Front (French: Front de Libération Nationale, FLN) was established – the party which was *a continuation of the revolutionary body that directed the Algerian war*

⁴ The Jacobin government pursued its policy through intimidation and repression which were regarded as terror.

⁵ Quoted after: M. Nadaux, *La Troisième République. La «propagande par le fait»: les attentats anarchistes (1892-1894). Explosion d'une bombe à la Chambre des députés déposée par l'anarchiste Auguste Vaillant le 9 décembre 1893*, Le XIX^e siècle, <https://web.archive.org/web/20061125095024/http://www.19e.org/documents/troisiemerepublique/anarattentats/vaillant.htm> [accessed: 21 I 2025].

of *Independence against France (1954–62)*⁶. Its military wing – the National Liberation Army (French: Armée de Libération Nationale, ALN) – was also formed then. During the Battle of Algiers, ALN soldiers mainly targeted public buildings, industrial facilities, and places of leisure and entertainment⁷.

In the context of this war, it is also worth mentioning the French Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS), a far-right terrorist group whose actions were directed against the interim president Charles de Gaulle. The aim of the OAS was to halt the process of decolonisation, with particular emphasis on the Algerian question. When the president de Gaulle agreed to Algerian independence, General Raoul Salan of the French army deemed the president a traitor to the nation. The OAS, led by Salan, carried out a series of assassinations, including that of Charles de Gaulle. The attacks left around 12 000 people dead or injured⁸.

The next terrorist organisation in France was Action Directe (AD), which was characterised by ideologies such as communism, anarchism and Maoism, as well as fondness for the countries of the Global South. The organisation was most active between 1979 and 1986, when it carried out 80 attacks in France, mainly targeting prominent figures and state institutions, e.g. ministries⁹. Terrorists from AD attacked also in Belgium and Germany.

The origins of the Islamic terrorism in France date back to the 1990s. One example is the Armed Islamic Group (French: Groupe Islamique Armé, GIA), which carried out an attack on the Paris metro in 1995. The bomb explosion killed 8 people, left 25 seriously injured and 150 with minor injuries¹⁰.

⁶ *National Liberation Front*, Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Liberation-Front-political-party-Algeria> [accessed: 22 I 2025].

⁷ Ł. Macuga, *Wojna algierska, 1954–1962* (Eng. The Algerian war, 1954–1962), master's thesis, Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2004, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303636471_Wojna_algierska_1954_-1962 [accessed: 22 II 2025].

⁸ A. Kerherve, O.A.S., Gaullisme.fr, 30 VII 2011, <http://www.gaullisme.fr/2011/07/30/o-a-s/> [accessed: 11 VI 2026].

⁹ M. Kijewska, *Lewicowy terroryzm w Europie Zachodniej w drugiej połowie XX i na początku XXI wieku. Podstawowe informacje i kierunki rozwoju* (Eng. Leftist terrorism in Western Europe in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Basic information and directions of development), "Radzyński Rocznik Humanistyczny" 2018, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 206.

¹⁰ 27 lat temu doszło do zamachu bombowego w paryskim metrze (Eng. There was a bomb attack on the Paris Metro 27 years ago), iFrancja, 25 VII 2024, <https://www.ifrancja.fr/27-lat-temu-doszlo-do-zamachu-bombowego-w-paryskim-metrze/> [accessed: 23 I 2025].

The new wave of Islamic terrorism in France began in the early 21st century with a series of attacks organised by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS). Between 11 and 19 March 2012, three terrorist attacks took place in Toulouse and the surrounding area. They were carried out by the 23-year-old Mohamed Merah, who had links to Al-Qaeda and supported the Islamic fundamentalism. These events sparked a debate on radicalisation in Europe and drew attention to issues of security and social integration.

The history of terrorism in Belgium began later than in France. In 1983, a left-wing organisation known as Cellules Communistes Combattantes (CCC), ideologically similar to AD, was founded in Belgium. *Between 3 October 1984 and 16 December 1985, CCC claimed responsibility for 21 bomb attacks; these took place as part of three political and military campaigns*¹¹. A criminal organisation known as Les tueurs fous du Brabant wallon, which collaborated with CCC, was responsible for many acts of terror carried out at the same time in Belgium. In 1980s, CCC and AD established close ties with one another. In 1984, the Belgian organisation raided a quarry near Brussels. The explosives stolen from there were handed over to AD, who (...) *used them to build a bomb that was planted at the headquarters of the Western European Union*¹².

In Belgium, just as in France, terrorism in the 21st century is associated with Islamic connections. Al-Qaeda was successfully recruiting new members for over a decade, both in Belgium and in France. Those responsible for the recruitment were identified and sentenced in 2010 to prison in terms of between 3 to 8 years¹³. However, this did not stop the organisation from carrying out attacks, for example, with an anti-Semitic motive in 2014, when three people were killed in a shooting at the Jewish Museum in Brussels.

¹¹ B. Francq, *Les Cellules communistes combattantes: les deux figures d'une inversion*, "Sociologie du Travail" 1986, vol. 28, no. 4, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43149431?casa_token=uvu0DU MHhm8AAAAA%3AyTH0OxhPSaWldOexG8URrz6nNtuZbUTI7TZ9D-cgAn0hvmw0Z43g9lBtlOxUD2Fd2EggWffEMzdOeaYrtRtkSWMZS4nP0ao3SNdYXUPwB9a-zDSQ&seq=1, p. 459 [accessed: 24 I 2025].

¹² M. Kijewska, *Lewicowy terroryzm...*, p. 206.

¹³ *Koledzy z Al-Kaidy skazani w Belgii* (Eng. Colleagues from Al-Qaeda sentenced in Belgium), TVN24, 10 V 2010, <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/koledzy-z-al-kaidy-skazani-w-belgii-ra133541-ls3584645> [accessed: 25 I 2025]

Terrorism in France therefore has a longer history than in Belgium. France is drawing on this long-standing experience in its preventive measures and strategies relating to security and counter-terrorism. The author of the article believes that, due to the history and statistical data, which place France among the leading countries with the highest number of terrorist attacks¹⁴, terrorism has become an integral part of the country. Belgium has experienced fewer terrorist attacks in its history, but it has demonstrated effectiveness in detecting terrorists and carrying out preventive measures.

The significance of Paris and Brussels in the international politics

Paris and Brussels play a special role in the international arena as well as within European political and cultural system.

The capital of France is associated with republican values such as liberty, equality and fraternity. This is reflected in the French Revolution and the associated Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and the Treaty of Versailles. Paris is home to the headquarters of international institutions such as: the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In turn, Brussels serves as one of the most important decision-making centres, given that it is home to the headquarters of the EU and NATO. The linguistic diversity and the presence of numerous international organisations make the Belgian capital a place that lives up to the EU's motto – *United in diversity*¹⁵.

For years, both cities have been targets of particular strategic and symbolic importance to terrorist organisations. Terrorist attacks carried out in these locations were intended not only to cause material and human losses and to instil a sense of insecurity in the public, but also served as a sign of the rejection of European values by terrorist organisations. In addition,

¹⁴ See, e.g.: *Terrorism in EU: facts and figures*, The European Council and the Council of the European Union, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/terrorism-eu-facts-figures/> [accessed: 25 I 2025].

¹⁵ *EU motto*, European Union, 23 XII 2025, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/eu-motto_en [accessed: 18 III 2026].

the attacks in Paris and Brussels were intended to maximise media coverage and influence public opinion in Europe and around the world.

The course and causes of the attacks

The Islamic State is an organisation that regards Western countries as unfaithful and immoral in relation to its religion. One of ISIS's objectives is global religious expansion. In the case of attacks in Paris, they were also motivated by a desire for revenge for Operation Chammal¹⁶, which began on 19 September 2014. The Islamic State regarded this as an encroachment on its territory and activities, which contributed to a hostile attitude towards France. Furthermore, the organisation decided it was right to attack a site symbolic of personal freedom and the Western way of life, which is interpreted by Islam as consumerist¹⁷.

Paris (2015)

The first attack in Paris in 2015 was carried out on 7 January at the editorial offices of 'Charlie Hebdo' magazine. This satirical weekly magazine is known for publishing caricatures with political, cultural and religious themes. The last one turned out to be crucial to the case of the attack, as 'Charlie Hebdo' editorial team apublished many times caricatures of Muhammad and ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi, thereby antagonising followers of Islam. This is believed to be the reason for the attack¹⁸. Following numerous provocative actions by the editorial team, the 'Charlie Hebdo' headquarters was set on fire in November 2011.

The attack began with the surprise and intimidation of a female illustrator at the editorial office, who let the terrorists into the building,

¹⁶ Operation Chammal – the French contingent of international operation 'Inherent Resolve', involving 80 countries and 5 international organisations, the aim of which was to enable the Iraqi authorities to ensure their country's security independently. As part of the Chammal, France provided military support to Iraqi forces involved in the fight against ISIS. See: *Opération CHAMMAL*, Ministère des Armées, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/monde/grand-levant/operation-chammal> [accessed: 10 IV 2025].

¹⁷ V. Romania, S. Tozzo, *Terrorism as ritual process and cultural trauma: A performative analysis of ISIS's attacks in Europe*, "Italian Sociological Review" 2017, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 243. <https://doi.org/10.13136/isr.v7i2.177>.

¹⁸ Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi – founder and leader of a Sunni terrorist organisation, from 2014 until his death in 2019, the self-proclaimed caliph of Islamic State.

whereupon they opened the fire on the employees. During the shooting, she hid under her desk. According to her testimony, the gunfire lasted 5 minutes, and she heard the attackers say: 'We avenged the Prophet' and 'Allah Akbar'¹⁹. The attack left 12 people dead, including the newspaper's editor-in-chief, Stephane Charbonnier 'Charb', who had been blacklisted by Al-Qaeda since 2013. After the attack, the perpetrators attempted to flee, during which they fired at a police car. One of the police officers was killed, which added to the chaos and the scale of the threat. Following the collision, the terrorists abandoned their car, in which the police found documents that enabled them to identify the attackers. They were brothers who had been trained in Yemen by ISIS. Seven members of their family were arrested. Further attacks took place in the following days. During one of these, counter-terrorism officers killed the attackers.

Another series of coordinated attacks carried out by ISIS in Paris took place in November 2015. The key attack took place on 13 November at the Bataclan Theatre, where a concert by the rock band Eagles of Death Metal was being held. Those attending the concert were unaware of the explosion at the Stade de France stadium, where a match between French and German national teams was taking place. At 9.49 p.m., men armed with machine guns approached the theatre doors, shot the doorman and the people standing at the entrance, and entered the building. They took up positions at the back of the auditorium, from where they opened fire on the crowd. The officer who was the first to enter the building shot one of the attackers, who was armed with grenades, causing an explosion that killed a terrorist. The two remaining terrorists took around 20 hostages, who were rescued thanks to a police raid. As a result of the attack in the theatre, 90 people were killed, mostly young people. In total, 130 people were killed as a result of the attacks carried out that day²⁰.

The policemen found the phone of one of the perpetrators' in a rubbish bin. This led them to a hotel room where the men had been staying for

¹⁹ *Najpierw zabijali w redakcji, potem zastrzelili policjanta. Tak przebiegał zamach* (Eng. First they killed people in the newsroom, then they shot a police officer. That's how the attack unfolded), TVN24, 8 I 2015, <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/zamach-na-charlie-hebdo-tak-przebiegal-atak-ra504096-ls3289349> [accessed: 8 IV 2025].

²⁰ A. Chrisafis, 'It looked like a battlefield': the full story of what happened in the Bataclan, *The Guardian*, 20 XI 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/20/bataclan-witnesses-recount-horror-paris-attacks> [accessed: 10 IV 2025].

a week and where they found equipment and medical supplies used to make bombs.

Brussels (2016)

Salah Abdeslam, who had gone into hiding in Molenbeek district of Brussels, was believed to be the main coordinator of the attacks in France. Newspapers reported that (...) *'Molenbeek is a place where it is very easy to disappear'. This is where most of Brussels' dark corners are found – places the police rarely venture into, and where drug gangs and arms dealers rule. (...) It is no coincidence that Molenbeek has become the centre of European jihad*²¹. Following the attacks on 13 November 2015, terrorists were often given shelter in a neighbourhood inhabited mainly by people of North African origin and the Muslim faith. This was also the case with Abdeslam, whose presence contributed to the rise of radicalism in that area. Following his arrest, Abdeslam admitted during questioning that further terrorist attacks had been planned, this time in Belgium. Their aim was to demonstrate the ability of ISIS to carry out attacks despite suffering losses, and to confirm its readiness to continue operations in France and Belgium and across Europe.

Four days after Abdeslam's arrest, on 22 March 2016, there were two suicide terrorist attacks. The first took place at Zaventem Airport, where at around 7.45 a.m., three men arrived by taxi from Molenbeek district. A dozen or so minutes later, in the international departures hall (...) *one of the terrorists detonated the first bomb, which was in his suitcase, while queuing at the check-in counter no. 11. A few seconds later, a second explosion occurred at counter no. 2, and a second terrorist detonated a bomb hidden in his luggage*²². The third man, presumably because the airport evacuation had begun, did not detonate the bomb and fled. Security services located the bag containing the explosive. As a result of the explosions, 20 people were killed. Following the attack, terrorists were identified. Najim Laachraoui and Ibrahim El Bakraoui were killed. The third attacker Mohamed Abrini,

²¹ „Mózg” krwawych zamachów w Paryżu zatrzymany (Eng. ‘The mastermind’ behind the bloody attacks in Paris arrested), Newsweek Polska, 18 III 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160322133717/http://swiat.newsweek.pl/sprawca-krwawych-zamachow-w-paryzu-salah-abdeslam-zatrzymany,artykuly,382261,1.html> [accessed: 10 IV 2025].

²² Belgique – attentats à l'aéroport et dans le métro de Bruxelles, Association française des Victimes du Terrorisme, <https://www.afvt.org/belgique-attentats-a-laeroport-et-dans-le-metro-de-bruxelles/> [accessed: 10 IV 2025].

who was also linked to the attacks in 2015 in Paris, was arrested on 8 April 2016.

At around 9.11 a.m. on the same day, there were two explosions in the underground. According to the Belgian authorities, the perpetrator boarded a train at Molenbeek underground station. The explosion, which was probably triggered by a second bomber, occurred near the EU buildings during the morning rush hour²³. Twelve people died.

A total of 32 people were killed and around 320 were injured in the attacks on 22 March 2016. The following day, ISIS claimed responsibility for the terrorist attacks at the airport and the underground station. The investigation revealed that the same French-Belgian jihadist cell was behind the attacks in France and Belgium²⁴.

The most important social consequences of the attacks in Paris and Brussels

Research into the impact of terrorist attacks on society²⁵ clearly points to negative effects on the mental and physical health of citizens. On this basis, it can be assumed that terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016 had impact on the people of France and Belgium and increased the demand for psychological support. Researchers emphasise that countries at risk of terrorist attacks should establish and develop psychological support programmes, both in the form of crisis intervention and long-term post-traumatic therapy.

The French authorities, the public and the media all viewed the terrorist attack on 'Charlie Hebdo' not only as an attack on the editorial

²³ *Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures Used in the 22 March 2016 Brussels Attacks*, "Joint Intelligence Bulletin", 12 IV 2016, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FBI-NCTC-BrusselsAttacks.pdf>, p. 2 [accessed: 11 IV 2025].

²⁴ Ch. Gracieux, *Les attentats du 22 mars 2016 à Bruxelles*, Lumni Enseignement, 23 III 2016, <https://enseignants.lumni.fr/fiche-media/00000001857/les-attentats-du-22-mars-2016-a-bruxelles.html> [accessed: 11 IV 2025].

²⁵ P. Pirard et al., *Use of mental health supports by civilians exposed to the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris*, "BMC Health Services Research" 2020, vol. 20. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-020-05785-3>; R. Deschepper et al., *Association between feeling threatened by a terrorist attack and subjective health: a web survey a week after the attacks of 22 March 2016 in Belgium*, "European Journal of Psychotraumatology" 2018, vol. 9, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2018.1500821>.

team and the people working there, but also as an assault on values such as democracy, freedom of speech and peace. Shortly after the attack, a logo featuring the slogan *Je suis Charlie* (Eng. I am Charlie)²⁶ was created. It quickly went viral online and became a symbol of support and solidarity with the victims. Demonstrations and marches took place in many cities, including the March of the Republic (French: Marche Républicaine) in Paris, which was held to commemorate the victims of the attack and to express opposition to aggression and terrorism itself. *Almost all political, trade union and religious leaders, as well as heads of state and government from abroad*²⁷ (...) took part in the march.

There has also been a rise in racist and Islamophobic attitudes within society, a trend noted not only by the French and Belgian media²⁸. Parties that support a policy of closed borders for immigrants have gained popularity²⁹.

The security services and police forces in both France and Belgium received negative assessment. In Belgium, they were accused of slow response times, a lack of police control and initiative in neighbourhoods, such as Schaerbeek and Molenbeek, considered to be hotbeds of terrorism and radical influence in this country³⁰. In France, the parliamentary select committee tasked with investigating the attacks in 2015 published a report on the intelligence services. It described the attacks as an intelligence failure caused, among other things, by a lack of communication between

²⁶ The author of this visualisation is Joachim Roncin, who was the art director of the *Stylist* magazine at the time.

²⁷ J-B. Garat, *L'impressionnante liste des politiques présents à la marche à Paris*, Le Figaro, 10 I 2015, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2015/01/10/01002-20150110ARTFIG00160-l-impressionnante-liste-des-politiques-presentes-a-la-marche-republicaine-a-paris.php> [accessed: 9 IV 2025].

²⁸ C. Lafon, *Attentats de Paris: ces deux semaines qui ont changé la France*, Sud Ouest, 22 I 2015, <https://www.sudouest.fr/redaction/attentats-de-paris-ces-deux-semaines-qui-ont-change-la-france-8022926.php> [accessed: 12 IV 2025]; B. Jastrzębski, *Jastrzębski: Zamachy w Brukseli – to nie koniec świata* (Eng. The attacks in Brussels are not the end of the world), Respublica, 22 III 2016, <https://respublica.pl/teksty/jastrzebski-zamachy-w-brukseli-to-nie-koniec-swiata-56188.html>, [accessed: 12 IV 2025].

²⁹ A. Chrisafis, *Marine Le Pen's Front National makes political gains after Paris attacks*, The Guardian, 1 XII 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/01/marine-le-pen-front-national-political-gains-paris-attacks> [accessed: 12 VI 2026].

³⁰ Ibid.; M. Hallam, *Belgian shortcomings in focus*, DW, 30 III 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/the-shortcomings-of-belgiums-brussels-terror-investigations/a-19151338> [accessed: 12 VI 2026].

intelligence services³¹. The committee recommended a reorganisation modelled on the US National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) established in the USA following the attacks of 11 September 2001.

An overview of the main security institutions and services combating terrorism in France and Belgium

The experiences of 2015 and 2016 led to a reorganisation and efforts to strengthen national counter-terrorism capabilities in France and Belgium.

In France, the key institutions responsible for combating terrorism are:

- 1) The General Directorate for Internal Security (French: Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure, DGSI) – comprises, among other things, a thematic department dealing with various forms of terrorism, analysis department, targeted at regions and countries, as well as divisions focusing on the armed forces and counter-intelligence. Since 2018, the DGSI has served as the most important institution responsible for counter-terrorism prevention in France;
- 2) The Directorate General for External Security (French: Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure, DGSE) – French intelligence, which, in the context of terrorism, focuses on identifying terrorist groups, their organisational structures and recruitment channels, as well as on thwarting attacks planned abroad³²;
- 3) The Directorate General of National Police (French: Direction Generale de la Police Nationale, DGPN) – carries out essential tasks to maintain order and security throughout the country. Thanks to its powers, it prevents terrorist attacks;

³¹ A. Kacprzak, *Komisja śledcza francuskiego parlamentu: Wywiad poniósł porażkę, nie zapobiegł atakom. Należy utworzyć agencję do walki z terroryzmem* (Eng. French parliamentary inquiry committee: The intelligence services failed – they did not prevent the attacks. An agency to combat terrorism should be established), wPolityce, 5 VII 2016, <https://wpolityce.pl/swiat/299492-komisja-sledcza-francuskiego-parlamentu-wywiad-poniosl-porazke-nie-zapobieg-l-atak-om-nalez-y-utworzyc-agencje-do-walki-z-terroryzmem?strona=1> [accessed: 12 IV 2025].

³² *Nos missions*, Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure, <https://www.dgse.gouv.fr/fr/nous-connaître/nos-missions> [accessed: 30 IV 2025].

- 4) The National Anti-terror Prosecutor's Office (French: Le parquet national anti-terroriste, PNAT) – it is not a special service, but since 2019 it has played a key role in the fight against terrorism. It was established to improve response capacity to terrorist attacks.

In Belgium, the following bodies are responsible for counter-terrorism:

- 1) The State Security Service (Dutch: Veiligheid van de Staat, VSSE) – the Belgian civil intelligence and security service. It was established in 1830 and is the oldest intelligence service in the world³³. It is responsible for intelligence, investigation and security check. The VSSE can be compared to the French DGSi;
- 2) The Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (Dutch: Orgaan voor de Coördinatie en de Analyse van de Dreiging, OCAD; French: Organe de Coordination pour l'Analyse de la Menace, OCAM), whose remit includes, among other things, creating a database used by the police, intelligence and judicial authorities, implementing the *Strategy for combating extremism and terrorism* (French: La Stratégie Extrémisme et Terrorisme, T.E.R.)³⁴ and international cooperation in the fight against terrorism;
- 3) The Federal Police – combat crime, maintain public order and ensure security at national level;
- 4) The General Intelligence and Security Service (Dutch: Algemene Dienst Inlichting en Veiligheid, ADIV; French: Service Général du Renseignement et de la Sécurité, SGRS) – monitors information and activities originating from abroad that may pose a threat to Belgium's security³⁵.

In the context of the issue under discussion, both countries have a structure that combines intelligence, police, judicial and analytical activities. Thanks to such a well-developed organisation, it is possible to identify and respond to threats quickly. The clear similarities help to maintain international security. Relations between France and Belgium regarding preventive measures are based on the structural integration of services and cooperation on intelligence matters.

³³ *Qui sommes-nous?*, Veiligheid van de Staat, <https://www.vsse.be/fr/qui-sommes-nous/historique> [accessed: 1 V 2025].

³⁴ *La Stratégie Extrémisme et Terrorisme (Stratégie T.E.R.)*, OCAM, <https://ocam.belgium.be/la-strategie-extremisme-et-terrorisme-strategie-t-e-r/> [accessed: 12 IV 2025].

³⁵ *Nos missions*, SGRS, <https://www.sgrs.be/nous-connaître/nos-missions/> [accessed: 1 V 2025].

Preventive strategies regarding radicalisation

The growth and strengthening of radical movements increase the likelihood of terrorist acts. To counter these trends, France and Belgium have focused on social, educational and digital prevention.

In France, following the attacks in 2015 and 2016, measures under the Plan Vigipirate³⁶ were expanded and the Sentinelle military operation was launched, involving the deployment of soldiers in public spaces to protect key facilities and support police operations. French authorities have also expanded the powers of counter-terrorism agencies, stepped up surveillance of individuals suspected of extremism, and introduced measures to counter radicalisation, including in schools, prisons and online. On 30 October 2017, French government introduced the Act on strengthening internal security and the fight against terrorism³⁷. At the same time, work was underway on an action plan to combat radicalism and terrorism (abbreviated to PART), which was announced in 2018. PART identifies five main themes around which 60 measures to refocus preventive policy are centred:

- 1) strengthening society's resilience to radicalisation,
- 2) expanding the network for detecting and preventing radicalisation,
- 3) better understanding and preparing for developments in radicalisation,
- 4) professionalising local stakeholders and assessing employed practices,
- 5) tailoring measures to counter radicalisation³⁸.

In 2026, a new crime prevention strategy for the period 2026–2030 was published (*Stratégie nationale de prévention de la délinquance 2026–2030: Prévenir pour protéger*, SNPD), which sets out three main areas of action:

- 1) adapting responses to new forms of crime, namely by strengthening initiatives in the areas of awareness-raising, training

³⁶ The Plan Vigipirate is the French government's system for the prevention of terrorism, security and response. See: *The Plan Vigipirate*, République Française, <https://www.campusfrance.org/en/security> [accessed: 26 V 2026].

³⁷ LOI n° 2017-1510 du 30 octobre 2017 renforçant la sécurité intérieure et la lutte contre le terrorisme, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000035932811> [accessed: 10 VI 2026].

³⁸ *Prévenir Pour Protéger». Plan national de prévention de la radicalisation*, <https://www.cipdr.gouv.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/DP2018-02-23-CIPDR-Radicalisation-V5.pdf>, p. 5 [accessed: 10 VI 2026].

- and support, while consolidating the proactive capabilities of stakeholders;
- 2) ensuring the continuity of preventive measures from childhood to adulthood, namely by supporting parenting, developing psychosocial skills, better identifying situations of risk, and promoting youth engagement in order to prevent crime;
 - 3) better coordination and support for stakeholders by strengthening local governance and establishing a digital prevention academy to compile resources, disseminate best practices and train specialists³⁹.

France has also a regional programme for the prevention of violent radicalisation⁴⁰, which involves providing support to people who have been radicalised or are at risk of radicalisation, and preventing the risk of such people becoming violent. The programme was established in 2014, but in 2018 it was updated by Les groupes d'évaluation départementaux, which are responsible for analysing the risks associated with radicalisation and coordinating the programme.

In Belgium, the key strategy for combating radicalisation was the so-called Plan R⁴¹, which was replaced by the T.E.R. Strategy⁴² on 8 September 2021. Educational institutions such as GO! Education of Flemish Community (GO! – onderwijs van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap) and the Royal Athenaeum Antwerp have also become involved in the fight against radicalisation. These organisations worked out together the prevention pyramid of Johan Declerck (Figure 1). This is a training programme for various institutions, which has been adopted not only by the Belgian government, but also by the European Commission.

³⁹ *Stratégie nationale de prévention de la délinquance 2026–2030: Prévenir pour protéger*, CIPDR, 24 VI 2026, <https://www.cipdr.gouv.fr/strategie-nationale-de-prevention-de-la-delinquance-2026-2030-prevenir-pour-protger/> [accessed: 12 V 2026].

⁴⁰ *Dispositif territorial de prévention de la radicalisation violente*, Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure, 14 VI 2021, <https://www.dgsi.interieur.gouv.fr/dispositif-territorial-de-prevention-de-radicalisation-violente> [accessed: 11 VI 2026].

⁴¹ See: *Le Plan R. Le Plan d'Action Radicalisme*, https://ocam.belgium.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/brochure_radicalisme_fr.pdf [accessed: 10 VI 2026].

⁴² *La Stratégie Extrémisme et Terrorisme (Stratégie T.E.R.)...*

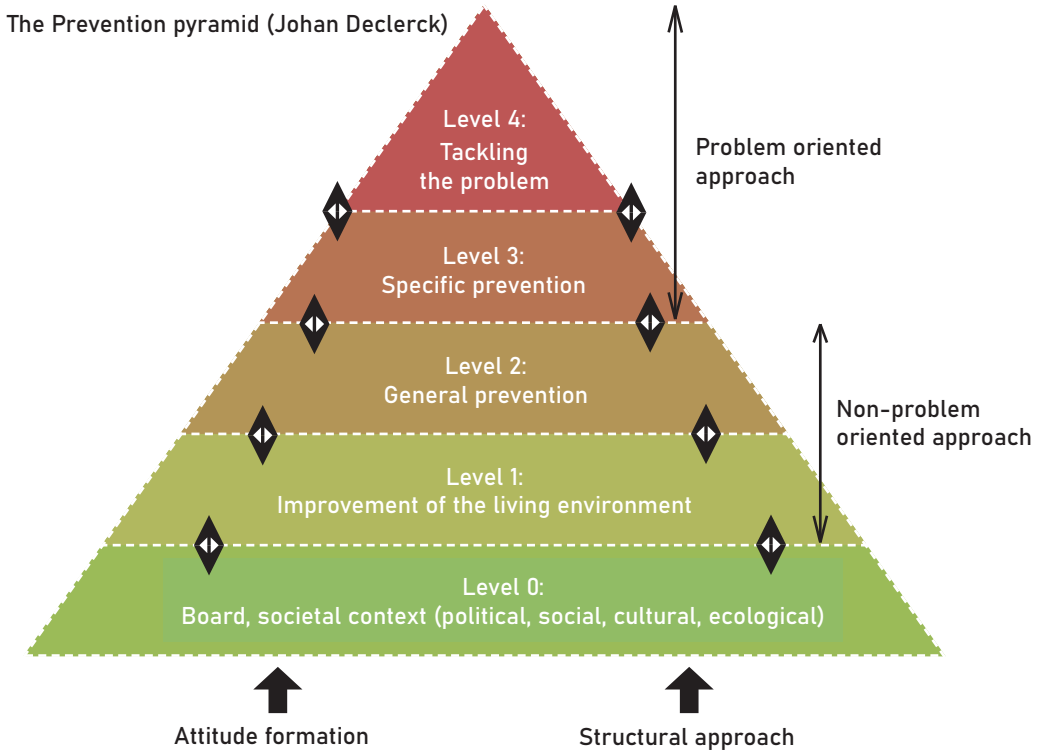


Figure 1. The Prevention pyramid of Johan Declerck.

Source: own elaboration based on: *The Prevention Pyramid*, European Commission, 2 VII 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/prevention-pyramid_en [accessed: 4 V 2025 r.]. Changes were made to the graphic design (editor's note).

The pyramid (...) is an instrument that can be used to orient and achieve insights into how to optimise one's policy for the prevention of radicalisation⁴³. It was divided into five levels, the first three of which are described as non-problem-oriented:

- level 0 – social environment,
- level 1 – living conditions and ways of improving them,
- level 2 – general prevention,
- level 3 – specific prevention,
- level 4 – tackling the problem.

⁴³ *The Prevention Pyramid*, European Commission, 2 VII 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/prevention-pyramid_en [accessed: 4 V 2025 r.].

The pyramid of Declerck was created in 2001, but following the attacks in 2015 and 2016, the authors updated it. At that time, some circles felt that the focus should be on level 4 (a problem-oriented approach)⁴⁴. The project is being implemented across Europe.

In line with the T.E.R. Strategy, the Local Task Forces (French: Les Taskforces locales, TFL) and the Local Integral Security Cells dealing with issues relating to radicalism, extremism and terrorism began to be formed in Belgium⁴⁵. TFL connect the police, security and intelligence services, the migration office and the prosecutor's office. Their work focuses on operational level (collecting information, monitoring and assessing risks) as well as strategic level (ensuring strategic consistency between TFL members).

International cooperation in the fight against terrorism

Following the experiences with attacks, France and Belgium have concluded that effectively combating this threat involves not only securing the country, but also extending efforts beyond its borders. They have therefore stepped up their cooperation on intelligence and operational matters, and have extended this to the global level.

The Prime Minister of Belgium, Charles Michel and the Prime Minister of France, Manuel Valls met in Brussels on 1 February 2016⁴⁶. Due to the cooperation between the Belgian authorities and their partners in Germany, France and Luxembourg, a terrorist attack in France planned for 1 July 2018 was foiled⁴⁷.

The European Union has created institutions that focus on the security of European countries. The ECTC⁴⁸, established by Europol, is responsible for exchanging information, data and adapting operational support

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 1.

⁴⁵ *La Strategie Extremisme et Terrorisme (Strategie T.E.R.)...*

⁴⁶ *France, Belgium to step up counter-terrorism cooperation in wake of Paris attacks*, France 24, 2 II 2016, <https://www.france24.com/en/20160202-france-belgium-step-counter-terrorism-cooperation-paris-attacks> [accessed: 10 V 2025].

⁴⁷ EUROJUST, *The ARGO Case – Diplomatic immunity in a cross-border terrorism case*, <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/sites/default/files/assets/argo-case-28-06-2024-pdf-v2.pdf>, p. 3. [accessed: 10 V 2025],

⁴⁸ *European Counter Terrorism Centre – ECTC*, Europol, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/about-europol/european-counter-terrorism-centre-ectc> [accessed: 10 V 2025].

for police, intelligence and special services of Member States, and also analyses the broad context of terrorist threats in order to identify new directions of investigation. This cooperation allows for quick response and action against terrorism.

Since 2006, Europol has been publishing annual reports on the situation and trends in the field of terrorism in the EU⁴⁹.

The European Union introduced also the systems supporting counter-terrorism and the control of external and internal borders:

- 1) Schengen Information System (SIS) – assists border and migration services in protecting and controlling the EU's internal borders⁵⁰;
- 2) The European Criminal Records Information Exchange System (ECRIS) – a decentralised IT system based on national criminal records databases⁵¹;
- 3) Passenger Name Record (PNR) – a system that stores the personal data of air passengers⁵²;
- 4) Entry-Exit System (EES) – a system introduced on 10 April 2026, enabling the recording of every instance in which citizens of non-EU countries cross the external borders of the 29 European countries while entering the EU for a short stay⁵³.

The UN began its counter-terrorism activities in the 1990s. At that time, the Security Council imposed sanctions on countries accused of supporting and having links to terrorism, such as Libya (1992) and Sudan (1996). In 1999, the Council adopted the Resolution 1269 in which it expressed concern at (...) *the increase in acts of international terrorism*

⁴⁹ See, e.g.: *EU Terrorism Situation & Trend Report (EU TE-SAT)*, Europol, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/tesat-report> [accessed: 11 VI 2026].

⁵⁰ Schengen Information System, European Commission, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/schengen-information-system_en [accessed: 10 V 2025].

⁵¹ *Council Decision 2009/316/JHA of 6 April 2009 on the establishment of the European Criminal Records Information System (ECRIS) in application of Article 11 of Framework Decision 2009/315/JHA; Directive (EU) 2019/884 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 amending Council Framework Decision 2009/315/JHA, as regards the exchange of information on third-country nationals and as regards the European Criminal Records Information System (ECRIS), and replacing Council Decision 2009/316/JHA.*

⁵² *Directive (EU) 2016/681 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the use of passenger name record (PNR) data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime.*

⁵³ *Entry-Exit System*, Straż Graniczna, 9 IV 2026, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/ees/entry-exit-system-pl/13677,System-wjazduwyjazd-EES.html> [accessed: 12 V 2026].

which endangers the lives and well-being of individuals worldwide as well as the peace and security of all States⁵⁴. The current UN document on terrorism is the *United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, which came into force on 8 September 2006, together with the attached Action Plan⁵⁵.

Within the UN, there is the Office of Counter-Terrorism⁵⁶ tasked with assisting the Member States in implementing strategy. The Office manages a total of 17 programmes and projects addressing various issues concerning terrorism, such as CBRN terrorism or the victims of terrorism. It organises events and conferences on combating acts of violence, e.g. the Week to Combat Terrorism, which is held every two years⁵⁷.

NATO, an organisation focused on military matters, also runs counter-terrorism programmes. NATO invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty⁵⁸ on collective defence of Member States only once, when the US suffered a terrorist attack by Al-Qaeda on 11 September 2001. NATO's counter-terrorism policy is based on three principles⁵⁹:

- 1) awareness – it involves consultations, the exchange of intelligence information, strategic analyses and situation assessments. In 2023, the position of Special Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism was created,
- 2) capabilities and preparedness – development and work on innovative technologies, which will be a response to terrorist threats in all forms,
- 3) engagement and cooperation between NATO Member States and international partners to strengthen global security, with an emphasis on counter-terrorism activities.

⁵⁴ Resolution 1269 (1999) / adopted by the Security Council at its 4053rd meeting, on 19 October 1999, S/RES/1269(1999), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/287509?v=pdf#files_p.1, [accessed: 10 VI 2026].

⁵⁵ *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, UN Action Counterterrorism, <https://www.unic.un.org.pl/terroryzm/strategia.php> [accessed: 10 V 2025].

⁵⁶ United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en> [accessed: 10 V 2025].

⁵⁷ The next edition of this event took place between 26 June and 2 July 2026. See: *2026 Counter-Terrorism Week*, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/2026-counter-terrorism-week> [accessed: 12 VI 2026].

⁵⁸ *The North Atlantic Treaty*, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1949/04/04/the-north-atlantic-treaty> [accessed: 12 VI 2026].

⁵⁹ *Countering terrorism*, NATO, 31 III 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/countering-terrorism> [accessed: 12 V 2026].

NATO also organised military operations, such as Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean Sea, which was a response to the attack of 11 September 2001 on the World Trade Center⁶⁰ or Sea Guardian, which replaced Active Endeavour in 2016 and focused on maritime security⁶¹.

NATO cooperates with the UN, the EU, the Global-Counter Terrorism Forum, Interpol and the OSCE (...) *to ensure that views and information are shared and that appropriate action can be taken more effectively in the fight against terrorism*⁶². Partnerships serve to facilitate the exchange of information, coordinate joint or separate operations, as well as align and harmonise legal standards relating to security.

Summary

The history of terrorism in France is longer than in Belgium. In the 21st century, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have influenced the nature of modern terrorism, which can be described as globalised, more radical in religious terms, and more difficult to predict.

The author focused on an analysis of the attacks on two European capital cities. Paris, as a city symbolising democratic values, and Brussels, as the centre of the EU, were deemed by terrorists to be the most suitable targets to launch an attack, given the opportunity they offered to demonstrate the negation of Western values. Attacks in France and Belgium have highlighted weaknesses in their security systems, with a particular focus on coordination and communication between services, as well as the scale of the problem of radicalisation in the EU countries. The socio-political consequences of these attacks had far-reaching effects. One of these was the strengthening of international cooperation in the context of countering terrorism and combating this phenomenon. Furthermore, European states focused on security, including the need to tighten anti-terrorism legislation, preventative measures, as well as the coordination of activities and expansion of the powers of specialist agencies. An

⁶⁰ *Operation Active Endeavour (2001–2016)*, NATO, [https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/operation-active-endeavour-2001-2016?selectedLocale=\[accessed: 12 V 2025\]](https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/operation-active-endeavour-2001-2016?selectedLocale=[accessed: 12 V 2025]).

⁶¹ *Operation Sea Guardian*, NATO, 26 V 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136233.htm? \[accessed: 10 V 2025\]](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136233.htm? [accessed: 10 V 2025]).

⁶² *Countering terrorism...*

international debate on the balance between security and freedom has also begun. On the other hand, the attacks have had an impact on society – in terms of e.g. political views – and have contributed to increased support for right-wing political parties in both countries.

The article confirms that the contemporary terrorism is strongly linked to processes of radicalisation and issues of social integration. Both France and Belgium, due to their location, colonial history and political significance in Europe, have become particularly vulnerable to the activities of Islamist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Experiences of these countries show that an effective fight against terrorism cannot rely solely on military and repressive measures, but also requires long-term social, educational and political initiatives aimed at countering radicalisation and strengthening social cohesion.

On the basis of the analysis carried out, the author identified the main determinants of the security policy of France and Belgium, which, according to the hypothesis, are:

- 1) terrorist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, which reject the values promoted by European capitals and focus their attention on France and Belgium partly because of colonial traditions,
- 2) Islamic radicalisation in France and Belgium,
- 3) close international cooperation as a necessity for maintaining national security.

The consequences of the attacks require swift political and legislative responses, as well as changes to the structure, communication and operational effectiveness of the services responsible for security.

Terrorist attacks described in the article have led to profound changes in the security of France and Belgium. Furthermore, they have mobilised the international community to take joint action on preventive measures in the fight against terrorism.

It should be emphasised that the global terrorism adapts to reality and evolves in response to challenges such as advancing technologies, socio-political issues, migration, etc. The security policies of France and Belgium (and others) should be flexible, cohesive and focused on shared values. These characteristics will depend on the approach taken by states to the fight against terrorism, which relies not only on the effectiveness of counter-terrorism services, but also on cooperation between state institutions, building public trust, mobilising social and educational institutions, countering radicalisation, and building the resilience of democratic states.

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