

THE ROLE OF BELGIAN FIGHTERS IN THE JIHADIFICATION OF THE SYRIAN WAR

FROM PLOTTING EARLY IN
2011 TO THE PARIS AND
BRUSSELS ATTACKS

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2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From early on in the Syrian–Iraqi conflict, foreign fighters from Belgium have played an important role. To begin with, there have been many of them: on a per capita basis, more fighters have come from Belgium than from any other Western European country. But beyond this, they have often ended up in the right place at the right time. Many of them joined a key militia in the genesis of the Islamic State (IS), and some were even present when IS was founded. Furthermore, many were under the command of later IS heavyweights, and several contributed to the transformation of IS into an international terrorist group. Finally, a few of them took part in the first major attacks by IS on Western soil—both in Paris and in Brussels. Based on exclusive witness accounts, court documents and the screening of social media accounts, we have reconstructed the path of the most important Belgians in the rise of this worldwide terrorist threat. We have even learned about a Belgian who is said to be one of the very first Western fighters in Syria and whose activities suggest that the jihadist movement—then still unified under the al-Qaeda banner—had already intended to hijack the Syrian uprising before it became a real war.

Keywords: *Belgium, Syria, Foreign Fighters, Islamic State, Jabhat an-Nusra, Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen, Shariah4Belgium, Zerkani network, online radicalisation*

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INTRODUCTION

When Houssien Elouassaki left his home town of Vilvoorde, he did not know where in Syria he would end up. It was early in September 2012 and very few Belgians had gone ahead of him. 'He didn't know anyone there', his older brother, Abdelouafi, boasted in a phone call to his girlfriend that was intercepted by the Belgian police. 'The only one who guided him was Allah'¹. A fellow fighter of Elouassaki, who is still in Syria now, provided us with more details in a lengthy email correspondence. According to him, Elouassaki did already have contacts in Syria, but he waited in vain on the Turkish side of the border for any sign of them.



Image 1: Houssien Elouassaki

After several days, if not weeks, he decided to trust in Allah and simply ran through the border control at Bab al-Hawa. In broken Arabic he asked a Syrian driver to take him to the fighters—the mujahidin. When the car halted, he only saw smoking Free Syrian Army rebels. 'No,' he told the driver, 'these are not the people I am looking for. Please take me to the real mujahideen.'

Thus Elouassaki ended up with Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM), a local Islamist militia implicated in the takeover of the border crossing in July 2012, which maintained its presence at the border from a house behind Bab al-Hawa hospital². MSM was established by Firas al-Absi, a Syrian veteran of the jihad. While fighting in Afghanistan in 2000–1, he

1 G. Van Vlierden, 'Profiles of Three Major Belgian Fighters in Syria and Their Paths to Jihad', *Militant Leadership Monitor* VI/7 (July 2015), pp. 8-10.

2 The exact location was given by former Belgian fighter Jejoen Bontinck during an interrogation, a transcript of which is in the possession of the authors.

reportedly met Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi, the later leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Long before that organisation was transformed into IS, it was also called Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen for a while. It is thought that al-Absi chose the same name for his Syrian militia to pay homage to az-Zarqawi³.

When Elouassaki arrived, Firas al-Absi had just been killed in one of the very first violent encounters between different factions of the resistance against the Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad. Command was then taken over by his younger brother Amr al-Absi—also known as Abu Atheer, the very same man who would later become the leader of IS in Syria⁴. After a while, he appointed his first Belgian fighter, Elouassaki, as the emir for all foreigners within MSM. According to Elouassaki's above-mentioned comrade, this was an act of gratitude for the stream of Belgians that he had attracted: 'All the Belgians followed him and after them a lot of Dutchmen too'. From our own research, we believe that at least 77 fighters from Belgium have been members of MSM at some point. The first were recruits of Shariah4Belgium, an Antwerp-based Salafist group that has sent at least 97 people to the Syrian jihad. At a later stage, individuals from the Brussels-based Zerkani Network also ended up under al-Absi's command. This was the case for two of Belgium's now most notorious terrorists: Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the field commander of the Paris attacks, also known as Abu Omar al-Belgiki; and Najim Laachraoui, the suspected bomb manufacturer in the same plot, who participated in the Brussels attacks using the alias Abu Idriss⁵.

MSM had its headquarters in Kafr Hamra, on the north-western outskirts of Aleppo, where it occupied two spacious residences that had reportedly been confiscated from wealthy people within the regime. The largest one was called 'the palace' and housed al-Absi and his Syrian fighters, while the foreigners were based in the slightly smaller 'villa' five minutes' drive away. Jejoen Bontinck, the Belgian fighter who became world-famous as a result of the journey that his father undertook to bring him back home, has provided Belgian investigators with detailed sketches of both homes and the training ground they used⁶. In those early days, MSM worked closely with two other Islamist groups active in the same area: Jabhat an-Nusra—the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda—and Katibat al-Muhajireen. The latter was led by the Chechen–Georgian native Tarkhan Batirashvili, better known by his

3 Brodie, The al-Absi Brothers - ISIS precursor in Aleppo. A Twitter tale from @DanieleRaineri, Storify.com, November 2014, accessed at <https://storify.com/AdamBrodie1/the-al-absi-brothers-isis-precursor-in-aleppo> on 4 January 2017.

4 E. Abdulhaq, 'ISIS Leaks: More About Al-Absi, Former ISIS Mastermind', Zaman Al Wasl, 18 April 2016, accessed at <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/15295.html> on 4 January 2017.

5 P. Van Ostaeyen, 'Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attacks', CTC Sentinel 9/6 (June 2016), accessed at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/belgian-radical-networks-and-the-road-to-the-brussels-attacks> on 4 January 2017.

6 Included in Belgian court documents and shown in Appendix 1.

nom de guerre Umar as-Shishani. He, too, would become a heavyweight within IS, climbing to the rank of overall military commander⁷. There are indications that al-Shishani also had Belgian fighters under his command in the early days, as Belgian court documents state that several recruits of the Brussels Zerkani Network had travelled in his direction⁸. We have not found solid proof of this, but confusion has possibly arisen because the foreign fighter chapter of MSM was also sometimes called Katibat al-Muhajireen. However, we know that this was the case by May 2013 at the latest, when as-Shishani's militia was just being integrated into the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), as the Zerkani recruit Ismail Iddoub told his mother in an intercepted phone call that he was fighting under Chechen command⁹.

Mutual cooperation between the Aleppo-based jihadist groups changed dramatically after the establishment of ISIS¹⁰. This move that can be considered a hostile takeover of al-Qaeda's Syrian branch Jabhat an-Nusra by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, al-Qaeda's then number one in Iraq. Al-Baghdadi wanted to expand his leadership by proclaiming an Islamic state that would represent al-Qaeda in both Iraq and Syria. According to an inside source quoted recently in a Foreign Policy report¹¹, it was in the presence of several Belgians that al-Baghdadi laid the framework for that aim. In April 2013 he visited the MSM headquarters in Kafr Hamra to discuss his plans with the leaders of local jihadist groups—including al-Absi's MSM and as-Shishani's Katibat al-Muhajireen—but behind the back of Jabhat an-Nusra itself. Some say that the strategy to proclaim a state did not come from al-Baghdadi himself, but from al-Absi¹². It was reportedly al-Absi who also painstakingly convinced al-Shishani to accept al-Baghdadi's command¹³. After an agreement was reached, al-Baghdadi asked every leader to bring in a few of their men to pledge an oath of allegiance directly to him. Al-Absi did not choose his most pious followers but the ones most trusted by him and most feared by all others. In this way he set the tone for what would soon become the trademark of this new group.

7 US Department of State, 'Wanted: Information that Brings to Justice Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili: up to \$5 Million Reward', RewardsforJustice.net, accessed at https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/tarkhan_batirashvili.html on 4 January 2017.

8 Stated in Belgian court documents in the possession of the authors.

9 Cited in Belgian court documents in the possession of the authors.

10 We only use the name ISIS for IS for describing the organisation during the period when the group itself was using this name.

11 H. Doornbos and J. Moussa, 'Present at the Creation: The Never-Told-Before Story of the Meeting that Led to the Creation of ISIS, as Explained by an Islamic State Insider', Foreign Policy, 16 August 2016, accessed at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/16/present-at-the-creation/> on 4 January 2017.

12 R. Mortada, 'Al-Qaeda Leaks II: Baghdadi Loses His Shadow', al-Akhbar, 14 January 2014, accessed at <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18219> on 4 January 2017. Al-Absi's brother Firas had been the first to add the word 'state' to the name of a jihadist group, when he initially founded MSM as 'Majlis Shura Dawlat al-Islam'.

13 K. Orton, 'Obituary: The Islamic State's Amr al-Absi (Abu Atheer al-Absi)', The Syrian Intifada, 10 March 2016, accessed at <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2016/03/10/obituary-the-islamic-states-amr-al-absi-abu-atheer/> on 4 January 2017.



Image 2: Nabil Azahaf, Magomed Saralapov and Zakaria Asbai

Al-Absi selected Nabil Azahaf, Zakaria Asbai and Magomed Saralapov, all three having been recruited by Shariah4Belgium and originating from Houssien Elouassaki's hometown of Vilvoorde¹⁴. According to the Belgian fighters apprehended and interrogated on their return, Azahaf and Asbai served as al-Absi's personal servants, driving him around and responding to his every wish. They also belonged to the first squad of abductors and executioners that al-Absi formed. 'In every town that was conquered by MSM, roadblocks were erected just to catch people for whom ransoms could be asked', stated former fighter Elias Taketlouné during interrogations after his return to Belgium. 'And when those ransoms weren't paid, the victims were decapitated.' Azahaf, Asbai and Saralapov all participated in these kinds of execution, Taketlouné noted, without concealing that his own late brother Tarik was also part of that cell and did the same¹⁵. According to Taketlouné, it is this practice of routinely abducting non-Sunni people, started by Firas al-Absi, which has led to the dreadful fate of Western hostages such as James Foley, the American reporter whose cruel death was one of the first videotaped atrocities of IS. Although it is unlikely that the Belgian squad was responsible for Foley's abduction in November 2012, it has been established that he was in the hands of al-Absi and that Belgian fighters served as warders for him at some point¹⁶.

14 In the Foreign Policy article these individuals were not identified by their full names. However, with some knowledge of the backgrounds of Belgian fighters, it is fairly easy to conclude that the 'Abu Sayyaf' mentioned is Azahaf, while 'Abu Zubair' is Asbai, and 'Abu Shishan al-Belgiki' is Saralapov.

15 Quoted in Belgian court documents in the possession of the authors.

16 G. Van Vlieden, 'Jejoen Bontinck's Interrogations About Foley and Cantlie: Some Details That Never Were Told', *Emmejjihad*, 24 September 2014, accessed at <https://emmejjihad.wordpress.com/2014/09/24/jejoen-bontincks-interrogations-about-foley-and-cantlie-some-details-that-never-were-told/> on 4 January 2017.

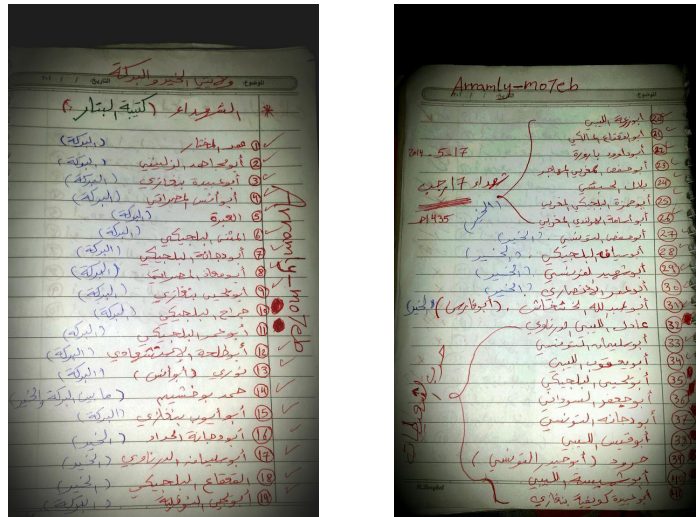


Image 3: List of Katibat al-Battar al-Libi

A few months after the death of Nabil Azahaf in May 2014, his name appeared on a list of fighters from the ranks of Katibat al-Battar al-Libi that had fallen¹⁷. This was one of the groups present when ISIS was founded at the April 2013 meeting in Kafr Hamra. At that time it consisted of Libyan fighters only, but after it became a part of ISIS, it is apparent that people from other countries joined. It is supposed that Katibat al-Battar was transformed into a sort of elite brigade within ISIS and also served as a recruitment pool for terrorists when IS started to plot its attacks in the West. A Belgian security source told us in December 2014 that there were several Belgians in Katibat al-Battar's ranks. One of them was the above-mentioned Paris attacker Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who would rise to notoriety just one month later when a brutal plot for the abduction and videotaped beheading of Belgian policemen was foiled in the town of Verviers. Another member of Katibat al-Battar in December 2014, according to our source, was Azzedine El Khadaabia, a fighter from Brussels also known as 'Abu Isleyrn al-Belgiki'. He has recently been named as part of yet another terrorist plot against Belgium and France. This plot was facilitated by the Frenchman Rachid Kassim, the same man who is suspected of being behind the behind the murder of a priest in the French town of Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray in June 2016¹⁸.

17 P. Van Ostaeyen, 'Katibat al-Battar and the Belgian Fighters in Syria', Pietervanostaeyen.com, 21 January 2015, accessed at <https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2015/01/21/katibat-al-battar-and-the-belgian-fighters-in-syria/> on 4 January 2017.

18 G. Van Vlieden, 'Uitgelekte boodschap spreekt over Belgische Syriëstrijder die aanslag gaat plegen', hln.be, 27 August 2016, accessed at <http://www.hln.be/hln/nl/33982/islamitische-Staat/article/detail/2840723/2016/08/27/Uitgelekte-boodschap-spreekt-over-Belgische-Syriëstrijder-die-aanslag-gaat-plegen.dhtml> on 4 January 2017.

Houssien Elouassaki, the very first Belgian fighter in the ranks of MSM, has remarkably enough never been a member of IS. He defected to Jabhat an-Nusra almost immediately after ISIS was founded. According to the fighter with whom we have talked—and who also changed sides to Jabhat an-Nusra at that time—their commander, Amr al-Absi, lied to his fighters about the developments that would lead to the ‘fitna’, the tumultuous divorce between the two terrorist groups¹⁹.

For quite a long time, he denied the existence of the freshly founded State, telling us that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi still obeyed the orders of al-Qaeda’s highest leader Ayman az-Zawahiri and would return to Iraq if az-Zawahiri asked him to do so. After two months, a letter from az-Zawahiri arrived in which it said that al-Baghdadi did indeed have to leave and that Jabhat an-Nusra would remain al-Qaeda’s only true Syrian wing. But al-Absi kept that letter hidden from us. We only learned about it after a former close friend of al-Absi, who had left MSM after the establishment of ISIS, visited us and showed us the letter. At that moment, we departed with a large group of fighters to Jabhat an-Nusra because we had sworn an oath to az-Zawahiri and a Muslim always has to keep his word.

According to the informant in the *Foreign Policy* report, who stayed with al-Absi himself, about 35 out of a total of roughly 90 Belgian and Dutch MSM fighters went to Jabhat an-Nusra at that time²⁰.

When Elouassaki was killed in August 2013, the rumour quickly spread that his death had been ordered by al-Absi and carried out by some of his former Belgian friends. This allegation is hard to verify. But while relations between those who joined ISIS and those who switched to Jabhat an-Nusra remained peaceful for several months after the split, they have ultimately become each other’s biggest enemies. In January 2014 the Belgian fighter Soufiane Nrhaïlat reported on his Facebook page that ISIS and Jabhat an-Nusra were still siding with each other in the city of Saraqib, while fights had erupted there between ISIS and Suqur as-Sham²¹. The latter is another militia that has attracted several Belgians because it was the organisation that had been joined by Bassam Ayachi, a Brussels sheikh with Syrian roots who had been known for more than a decade as Belgium’s main al-Qaeda recruiter²². However, by May 2014 the last bit of understanding between ISIS and Jabhat an-Nusra had disappeared, judging from the Facebook discussions between the very same Belgians who had once departed together. ‘You know very well that we would stop

19 P. Van Ostaeyen, ‘De man die loog over zijn eed van trouw: wie was IS-leider Amr al-Absi?’, Knack, 7 March 2016, accessed at <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/wereld/de-man-die-loog-over-zijn-ee-van-trouw-wie-was-is-leider-amr-al-absi/article-longread-674995.html> on 4 January 2017.

20 H. Doornbos and J. Moussa, ‘The Greatest Divorce in the Jihadi World’, *Foreign Policy*, 18 August 2016, accessed at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/18/the-greatest-divorce-in-the-jihadi-world/> on 4 January 2017.

21 Facebook communication retrieved by the authors.

22 Van Vlieden, ‘Profiles of Three Major Belgian Fighters in Syria’.

attacking you if you did the same', a Jabhat an-Nusra member from Antwerp told a former friend in the ranks of ISIS. 'But the oil fields of Deir ez-Zor seem much more important to you than our Muslim blood.' After an escalating exchange of reproaches and insults, the ISIS fighter from Vilvoorde concluded: 'I don't want to waste my time debating with you anymore. If I ever meet you again, I will blow your filthy head off with my Kalashnikov.'²³

It is likely that Houssien Elouassaki had hoped to join Jabhat an-Nusra right from the start, simply because it was part of al-Qaeda. The interrogations of Shariah4Belgium recruits, arrested on their return, clearly show that none of them was truly interested in the liberation of the Syrian people from a cruel dictatorship, but mainly wanted to fight for their own al-Qaeda-oriented beliefs. This was even admitted by Walid Lakdim, a fighter from Antwerp, who vehemently denied that he had ever touched a weapon in Syria. 'I went to Syria to help with the formation of an Islamic state', he declared in April 2013. 'The battle we wage is that of jihad.'²⁴ But at that time Jabhat an-Nusra was very restrictive in terms of allowing people to join. 'You needed tazkiyah²⁵, the clearance of one or two fighters who have already been accepted, before you could enter', according to Elouassaki's fellow fighter. Although there were a few Shariah4Belgium members who had already managed to join Jabhat an-Nusra, Elouassaki did not apparently find anyone willing to give him tazkiyah. We can only speculate on the reasons for this, but it is possible that his image as a not particularly religious young man, but rather as an adventurous fighter played a role. He hailed from a family of troublemakers - his younger brother Hakim had already made headlines at 16 years old, when 3 police officers ended up in hospital after trying to check his identity²⁶ - and within Shariah4Belgium he was better known for his violent resistance against the police during demonstrations than for his piety. While he did not mention Elouassaki, the Foreign Policy source Abu Ahmad spoke with disdain about the fighters he knew from Vilvoorde. 'Criminals and crazies who had no idea of religion and hardly had ever read the Quran', was how Ahmad described them²⁷. It is only speculation, but it is possible that the more serious Belgian jihadists, who had already joined Jabhat an-Nusra, simply did not dare to vouch for them.

23 Facebook communication retrieved by the authors.

24 Quoted in Belgian court documents in the possession of the authors.

25 The Arabic word 'tazkiya' is to be translated as 'purification, chastening; pronouncement of someones integrity or credibility; attestation of (a witness') honorable record (Islamic Law)' H. Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, p 441

26 G. Van Vlieden, 'Vilvoordse moslimstrijder kreeg granaatscherf in hoofd', Het Laatste Nieuws, 9 April 2013.

27 H. Doornbos and J. Moussa, 'Present at the Creation: The Never-Told-Before Story of the Meeting that Led to the Creation of ISIS, as Explained by an Islamic State Insider'



Image 4: Nabil Kasmi

The man who channelled a few of the first Belgian fighters to Jabhat an-Nusra was Nabil Kasmi from Antwerp. Also known as 'Abu Bakr', Belgian investigators consider him to have been one of the heavyweights behind the scenes of Shariah4Belgium from the very early days of the organisation. Kasmi certainly had very extensive contacts abroad. He was not only linked with several members who visited Shariah4Belgium's spiritual leader—if not its true founder—Anjem Choudary in London²⁸, but was also close to Choudary's own mentor, Omar Bakri Muhammad Fustuq. It was Omar Bakri—as he is usually called—who founded al-Muhajiroun, the precursor of Choudary's Islam4UK. Initially, the organisation was established in Saudi Arabia, where Bakri had arrived in 1979 as a Syrian member of the Muslim Brotherhood forced to flee the al-Assad regime. In 1986, he moved to the UK, where he was active for several years as a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir. When he fell out with the global leadership of that organisation in 1996, he re-launched his own al-Muhajiroun on British soil²⁹. Shortly after the 7 July 2005 bombings in London, when he was branded a major al-Qaeda recruiter in the British press, Bakri left for Lebanon and received notice from the British authorities that he would not be allowed to return³⁰. It was then that Choudary

28 According to Belgian court documents in the possession of the authors.

29 M. Abedin, 'Al-Muhajiroun in the UK: An Interview with Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed', *Spotlight on Terror* 2/5 (May 2005), accessed at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=290&no_cache=1#.V8V0PyOLTLZ on 4 January 2017.

30 BBC News, 'Cleric Bakri Barred from Britain', 12 August 2005, accessed at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4144792.stm on 4 January 2017.

took over. However Bakri clearly remained the most important man behind the scenes. ‘You should speak with Sheikh Omar’, Choudary’s deputy Abu Rahin Aziz once told a leader of Shariah4Belgium in an intercepted phone call. ‘I don’t want to be disrespectful of Sheikh Anjem, but Sheikh Omar has a better understanding and he always gives the best advice.’³¹



Image 5: Meeting between Nabil Kasmi and Omar Bakri

According to former Belgian fighter Jejoen Bontinck, Kasmi could call Bakri at any time. ‘I remember that we once discussed whether it is allowed to have intercourse using a condom’, Bontinck told his interrogators in December 2013. ‘Because we weren’t sure, Kasmi called Bakri. He did that often when questions arose. The answer, by the way, is that it isn’t allowed.’³² In November 2011, a picture appeared on Bakri’s public Facebook page, showing him with Kasmi. Belgian court documents state that ‘[s]ince Omar Bakri was under house arrest at that time in Lebanon, we assume that it was in that country where they met’.³³ Investigators have established that Kasmi was in Lebanon on at least two occasions after that meeting with Bakri: in January 2012, when he travelled via Turkey, and in April 2012, when he arrived from Egypt. There is little doubt that the ‘Abu Bakr al-Belgiki’ named in Lebanese court documents as a ‘student’ of Bakri, who assisted him in sending Western fighters to Syria, was Nabil Kasmi. Recruits identified by the Lebanese investigators include two men from the UK (‘Abu Abdullah al-Baritani al-Bengali and a Palestinian man with British nationality’) and one from Sweden (‘Abu Qudamah al-Suweidi, who has offered to support the mujahidin with a tiny plane made of pressed paper and equipped with a small engine, able to carry 4 kilograms of explosive materials’).³⁴

31 Quoted in Belgian court documents in the possession of the authors.

32 Quoted in Belgian court documents in the possession of the authors.

33 Quoted from Belgian court documents in the possession of the authors.

34 As-Safir, 10 October 2014, accessed at <http://assafir.com/Windows/PrintArticle.aspx?ChannelID=20&ArticleID=377287&ref=Toolbar> on 12 March 2015.

After Kasmi's final departure from Belgium on 20 August 2012, he managed to get at least five other members of Shariah4Belgium into the ranks of Jabhat an-Nusra: Brahim Bali, Yasmina Zamrouni, Azdine Tahiri, Ahmed Daoudi and Soufiane Mezroui. The first three had previously tried to join al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, but had been arrested there and sent back to Belgium. At the time of the split between Jabhat an-Nusra and ISIS, the Belgian members of Jabhat an-Nusra were led by Abu Sulayman al-Australi, according to Foreign Policy's informant, Abu Ahmad³⁵. This may be another indication of the overwhelming influence that the Lebanese Salafist scene had on the early foreign recruitment for Jabhat an-Nusra. Abu Sulayman al-Australi is an alias of the Egyptian-born Mostafa Mahamed, who was raised in Australia and became a well-known extremist cleric there before he departed for Syria in late 2012³⁶. In Sydney, Mahamed was a close associate of Houssam Sabbagh, a Lebanese citizen who lived in the Australian city from 1989 to 2005. Two years after he left, Sabbagh was arrested in Lebanon on suspicion of forming an al-Qaeda-funded militia³⁷. And although reports exist about some rivalry between Sabbagh and Bakri³⁸, the latter has at least once called upon all Lebanese Muslims to support Sabbagh³⁹, and in April 2015 both men were tried together by a military court in Lebanon⁴⁰.

It has to be stressed that Bakri was one of the first to call for jihad in Syria—the very first according to him, as stated in an interview with *The Daily Telegraph* in January 2012. 'For now, there is no al-Qaeda in Syria', he said. 'If Syrians keep asking for freedom, democracy—try take it, by all means, enjoy it, even bring in Madonna and Michael Jackson. But if you want to call us, say "Oh God, help us", and your Muslim brothers will come. We will send you lions.'⁴¹ By tracking his phone conversations, Belgian investigators discovered that Shariah4Belgium's Kasmi already had travelled to Syria for at least a short

35 Doornbos and Moussa, 'The Greatest Divorce'.

36 Mostafa Mahamed was Jabhat Fath as-Sham's director of foreign media relations until October 2016, when he publicly stated that he abandoned the group. See M. Schliebs, 'Top Australian terrorist quits jihadi group', *The Australian*, 19 October 2016, accessed at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/terror/top-aussie-terrorist-quits-jihadi-group/news-story/2b743e813284833fd6f08d37b33736eb> on 4 January 2017.

37 D. Welch, 'Abu Sulayman: The Rise of Australia's Most Senior Man in Al Qaeda', *ABC News*, 25 July 2016, accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-25/abu-sulayman-australias-most-senior-alqaeda-operative/7657744> on 4 January 2017.

38 M. al-Ali, 'Who is Sabbagh? A Look into the Life of the Sheikh and Fighter', *The Daily Star*, 15 January 2013, accessed at <http://www.lebanonwire.com/1301MLN/13011511DS.asp> on 4 January 2017.

39 H. Mouzahem, 'Extremist Preacher Denies Al-Qaeda's Presence in Lebanon', *Al-Monitor*, 2 August 2013, accessed at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/lebanese-salafist-denies-alqaeda-presence-in-lebanon.html> on 4 January 2017.

40 Y.R., 'Military Court Jails Daftardar 7 Years, Fustog 3 Years and Sabbagh 2 Years', *Naharnet*, 20 April 2015, accessed at <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/176207> on 4 January 2017.

41 R. Sherlock, 'Muslim Cleric Banned from Britain Claims Al Qaeda Poised to Launch Suicide Attacks in Syria', *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 January 2012, accessed at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9039437/Muslim-cleric-banned-from-Britain-claims-Al-Qaeda-poised-to-launch-suicide-attacks-in-Syria.html> on 4 January 2017.

while after his visit to Lebanon in April 2012. Moreover, two members of Jabhat an-Nusra with whom we have talked stated independently that Kasmi's first presence in the Syrian city of Homs dates back to 2011—'before the rebellion there had become an armed conflict', they stressed. 'Kasmi was literally one of the very first Western fighters in Syria.' A timing that seemingly points to a very early plot within the jihadist movement—then still unified under the al-Qaeda banner—to hijack the Syrian revolution from the very beginning. In all likelihood that plot was not meant to serve the interests of the Syrian population in its struggle against a cruel dictatorship, but was intended to use the conflict as a launch pad to revive the world wide jihad and stage new attacks against the West.

A Facebook account that belonged to Nabil Kasmi, but seemed to have been long abandoned when we retrieved it in August 2015, gives a highly intriguing insight into the kind of groups where support was sought for the jihadification of the Syrian war. Kasmi himself had only 12 friends on that account, but their subsequent connections led to an amazingly wide range of organisations. While it is not surprising that Kasmi was closely linked to the Lebanese Salafist scene (including a direct connection to the reformist Salafist cleric Hilal Turkomani⁴²), his multiple contacts with Hizb ut-Tahrir (mostly articulated by his direct link with the Pakistan-based 'Abu Hurairah'⁴³) were much more striking. And while the friends of his friends spanned a geographical area consisting of at least 40 countries, their affiliations varied from the Somali al-Qaeda ally al-Shabaab, via the Syrian Islamist resistance group Ahrar as-Sham, to the Turkish Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It goes without saying that being connected on Facebook with Kasmi or one of his friends does not mean that these individuals or organisations have ever been implicated in terrorism. But a strong impression exists that the Lebanon-based al-Qaeda cell to which Kasmi belonged had actively tried to build up as broad a network of potential supporters for its plans in Syria as possible.

It is far from clear which parts of that network are still loyal to al-Qaeda today, and which parts have switched their allegiance to IS. The most ironic part of Nabil Kasmi's story is that he finally chose the latter, according to our sources. But while the current tendency of the al-Qaeda followers in Syria is to focus merely on the Syrian conflict—as proven by the recent rebranding of Jabhat an-Nusra as Jabhat Fath as-Sham—it has to be stressed that al-Qaeda also relied on its networks in Belgium to use the conflict as a new stage for attacks in the West. In September 2014, the name of the 'Khorasan Group' surfaced in

42 Hilal Turkomani served as vice-president of the Lebanese Islamic Forum for Dialogue and Dawa, founded by the reformist Salafist sheikh Muhammad al-Khoder. See O. Abdel-Latif, 'Trends in Salafism', in M. Emerson, K. Kausch and R. Youngs (eds.), *Islamist Radicalisation—The Challenge for Euro-Mediterranean Relations* (Brussels/Madrid: Centre for European Policy Studies/FRIDE, 2009), 84–6.

43 We could not identify this alias, but it clearly belongs to an active and well-connected member of Hizb ut-Tahrir.

media reports as the section within Jabhat an-Nusra that was dedicated to such attacks⁴⁴. For quite some time, the mere existence of this entity was met with scepticism from several sides. However the series of arrests that occurred in Belgium and the Netherlands in August 2014 pointed to a terrorist plot against the seat of the EU institutions in Brussels—not one signed off by Islamic State adepts, but by European fighters in the ranks of Jabhat an-Nusra⁴⁵. The main suspect was Adil Uyarer, a Dutch citizen with Turkish roots, living in Brussels. At his trial in February 2016, Uyarer was sentenced to five years in jail for membership of a terrorist group. Although weapons and ammunition were discovered, no concrete plans for an attack were found⁴⁶. However Facebook communications collected by the authors show that it was his immediate entourage of Dutch and Belgian fighters within Jabhat an-Nusra that were targeted by the first US air strike against the so-called Khorasan Group near Aleppo on the 22 September 2014. Only time will tell as to how long al-Qaeda can stick to its current Syria-first strategy. But as Thomas Joscelyn, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, recently put it, 'their calculation could change overnight.'⁴⁷

44 See, for instance, A. Taylor, 'The Strange Story Behind the "Khorasan" Group's Name', The Washington Post, 25 September 2014, accessed at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/25/the-strange-story-behind-the-khorasan-groups-name/> on 4 January 2017.

45 G. Van Vlierden, 'Doelwit: het hart van Europa—Teruggekeerde Syriëstrijders planden aanslag op Berlaymontgebouw in Brussel', Het Laatste Nieuws, 22 September 2014.

46 C. van der Wal, 'België zet Haagse terrorist 5 jaar vast', Algemeen Dagblad, 26 January 2016.

47 B. Powell, 'As ISIS's Caliphate Crumbles, Jihadist Tactics Are Evolving', Newsweek, 11 October 2016, accessed at <http://europe.newsweek.com/beating-isis-caliphate-terrorism-jihadism-508559?rm=eu> on 4 January 2017.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

By reconstructing the paths taken by some of the early Belgian fighters, we have been able to highlight the most crucial moments in the jihadification of the Syrian war. We have seen how most of the individuals left Belgium with the aim of joining al-Qaeda, how only a few managed to do so immediately and how the majority ended up in a militia that is now considered to have been the keystone of IS. We have documented their role in the earliest atrocities and in the transformation of IS into an international terror group bent on committing attacks in the West. Finally, we have found indications of a very early jihadist plot to hijack the Syrian uprising—even before it was a real war. Further research will be necessary to confirm and document this early intention to use Syria as a launch pad to revive the international jihad. More precisely, we would recommend that researchers from other Western nations look out for signs that foreign fighters from their countries were also implicated in such a plot. Whereas the accession of Belgians to MSM seems to have happened rather coincidentally, there are also indications of the targeted recruitment of Western fighters by that group. According to the Italian journalist Daniele Raineri, this may have started as early as April 2012, judging by the presence of the Spanish fighter Abu Ya'qub al-Andalusi in its ranks then⁴⁸. Of course, it would be interesting to know which networks in Europe, if any, contributed to that effort.

On a policy level, it is difficult to draw lessons from these events without falling into the trap of rewriting the past with the help of hindsight. It is clear that a good deal of the radicalisation and recruitment that preceded these individual stories happened under the very eyes of the Belgian authorities. But it would be far too easy to claim that the current terrorist threat could have been avoided by better governance. The process of radicalisation happened far too quickly for the non-repressive approach to governance—which of course is always preferable. And while it was gradual, often starting with non-prosecutable acts, effective legal intervention would have required measures that contradict the very same values of freedom and pluralism that the West has to protect against all forms of extremism. Indeed, the exaggerated symbolism that is on the rise now in countries such as France—where the legitimate struggle against violent Islamism has led to anomalies such as a 'burkini' ban—will, we are afraid, prove to be very counterproductive. Antwerp's ban on headscarves in public schools, introduced in 2010, rapidly became the main recruitment

tool for Shariah4Belgium, rather than having the intended effect of being a weapon against extremism⁴⁹. And declaring that your country has a problem with the whole of Islam, as French President François Hollande has recently done,⁵⁰ is likely only to deepen the mutual distrust on which the rise of violent extremism is founded in the first place.

On the other hand, it is clear that the current terrorist threat does not allow for any nonchalance at all in cases where solid means of legal recourse do exist. In Belgium, counter-terrorism efforts were for a long time hampered by the lack of a sufficient legal framework. However, this is no longer the case. Recent additions to Belgium's very first terrorist law (introduced in 2003) make it illegal to incite, to recruit or to instruct people to carry out terrorist acts (2013) and also penalises travel abroad with the intent to commit terrorism (2015). According to the latest Europol figures, Belgium stands well ahead of other countries in the prosecution of jihadist terrorists. In 2015 its prosecutions represented about 60% of all people tried in the 12 member states for which data was available. And with only 4 acquittals out of a total of 120 court decisions, its outcomes were far below the average acquittal rate of 6%.⁵¹ However, figures provided to the Belgian Parliament by Justice Minister Koen Geens showed that only 5% of all terrorists convicted since 2014 were in jail as of July 2016.⁵² In part, this is because many of those brought to trial were convicted in absentia. But it is also due to lenient sentencing and—even worse—the shocking reality that certain parts of the Belgian judiciary are not yet convinced of the seriousness of the terrorist threat. Indeed, even when indications exist that a convict has committed beheadings in Syria, judges can be found who would let such a person walk free while awaiting appeal.⁵³ In our opinion, this amounts to a criminal neglect of the duty to protect society.

49 This was visible at that time already for the authors by watching several online forums, and it was explicitly mentioned by Shariah4Belgium founder Fouad Belkacem very recently: "The ban on headscarves shook up everything and forced us to a rebellion", he stated in an interview while still in prison. See A. Bulté, Humo sprak met Fouad Belkacem, Sharia4Belgium-leider en ronselaar van Syriëstrijders, Humo, 3 January 2017, pp. 17-23

50 E. Mandonnet, 'Hollande: "La femme voilée d'aujourd'hui sera la Marianne de demain"', L'Express, 11 October 2016, accessed at http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/hollande-la-femme-voilee-d-aujourd-hui-sera-la-marianne-de-demain_1839589.html on 4 January 2017.

51 Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2016 (The Hague, 2016), accessed at https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/europol_tesat_2016.pdf on 4 January 2017.

52 Belgium, Chamber of Representatives, Questions et réponses écrites, 23 September 2016, 177–8, accessed at <https://www.lachambre.be/QRVA/pdf/54/54K0089.pdf> on 4 January 2017.

53 G. Van Vlierden, 'Terrorist Who Admitted Beheading Set Free by Brussels Court', Emmejjihad, 9 May 2016, accessed at <https://emmejjihad.wordpress.com/2016/05/09/terrorist-who-admitted-beheading-set-free-by-brussels-court/> on 4 January 2017.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Prevention is better than cure. Early signs of radicalisation have to be addressed in cooperation with a wide range of actors. To this end, specific training must be provided to front-line practitioners (police officers, social workers, teachers etc.). Authorities also need to develop programmes aimed at including disaffected citizens in liberal–democratic society. The implementation of such programmes should utilise positive role models in civil society. It is crucial to select such role models carefully, for example, by empowering, not Islamist organisations, but liberal Muslims who will convey positive messages.

2. Radicalisation on the ground and online radicalisation feed one another. In this domain, too, civil society actors promoting a positive discourse and countering extremist propaganda are key. This requires the more proactive involvement of social media companies in policing their online communities to avoid the spread of extremist propaganda and to create safe spaces for citizens to communicate. Social media companies also should extend their efforts to support and work with civil society actors in this field.

3. In their relations with Islam, authorities should be careful to avoid measures that are merely symbolic and risk alienating even the moderate voices within Muslim communities. Policymakers should not give in to the emotional demands of non-Islamic citizens when these do not address genuine problems but are purely motivated by fear and distrust—even when such feelings may be understandable. Polarisation within Western societies is exactly what the violent jihadist movement is trying to create. It would be terribly unwise to give that movement what it wants by allowing opposing forms of extremism to exploit the current terrorist threat.

4. The current refugee influx represents a tremendous danger, both in terms of polarisation and a genuine terrorist threat. It is paramount that the authorities approach it in a very rational way. While the reality of terrorists entering Europe posing as asylum seekers has been proven to be true, the overwhelming majority of refugees have no bad intentions whatsoever and should not become the victims of a few with malicious aims. Tackling both the risk and the fear can only be achieved through the use of strict controls, for which much

more cooperation between European countries will be necessary. The EU and national governments should also empower trusted organisations to help refugees integrate in the host societies, while ensuring that Islamist groups cannot exploit their situation of need.

5. When confronted with individuals and organisations posing a clear and present terrorist danger, all available legal means should be used against them. Terrorism is the most despicable of all crimes, since its ultimate aim is the violent destruction of the freedom and democracy on which our societies are built. As a result, even the slightest indication of terrorist intent must be taken seriously. Every proven case has to be dealt with accordingly—meaning that there is no room for leniency and that the rule of law should be the only limit to the severity of the punishment.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Pieter Van Ostaeyen is a visiting fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy. Pieter studied Medieval History with a specialisation in the history of the Crusades (KULeuven 1999) and Arabic and Islamic Studies, focusing on the history of Salah ad-Din al-Ayyubi and the Assassins (KULeuven 2003). He has been analysing the conflict in Syria since the outset in 2011. In 2012 he began reporting on foreign fighters and extremist groups such as Jabhat an-Nusra, Ahrar as-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa and The Islamic State. In 2015 he published his first book 'From the Crusades to the Caliphate' ('Van Kruistochten tot Kalifaat') with Pelckmans.

Guy Van Vlierden works as journalist for Belgium's largest daily newspaper, 'Het Laatste Nieuws', and is specialized in radical Islam. He's also writing about that on his private blog 'Emmejihad' and contributed to specialized media such as 'Terrorism Monitor' and 'Militant Leadership Monitor' (The Jamestown Foundation) and 'CTC Sentinel' (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point).

APPENDIX 1: BELGIAN FIGHTERS IN NUMBERS

At the time of writing, our own estimate of the number of foreign fighters from Belgium in the current Syrian–Iraqi conflict stood at 557—of whom 506 had succeeded in reaching the war zone, while 33 had been caught abroad and 18 on Belgian soil. Of these, 104 Belgians have reportedly been killed—of whom at least 8 committed suicide attacks in Syria or Iraq—and an additional 9 have died after coming back to Europe to perpetrate terrorist acts.

The affiliations of individual fighters have evolved over time, but almost 70% of all the above-mentioned Belgians have at some point belonged to IS. Jabhat an-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, is the second largest group with 7.9% of Belgian fighters being members. Recently, this group has rebranded itself as Jabhat Fath as-Sham, indicating a split from al-Qaeda, but this formal separation is considered by many as a mere strategic choice. Suqur as-Sham comes third with 2.4% of Belgian fighters⁵⁴.

Belgian security services—who evidently have access to a wider range of sources, but also tend to limit their figures to fully identified cases—report a total of 457 people who have tried to reach the war zone, including 73 who have been stopped. Of those who have succeeded, 114 are said to have returned. An additional 157 people are suspected of intending to join an armed group in the Syrian–Iraqi conflict without yet having tried to leave. This brings the total number of Belgians involved to 614.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ While the stated figures are up to date, more about our estimates of the number of Belgian fighters can be found here: P. van Ostaeyen and G. Van Vlierden, 'Belgian Fighters in Syria and Iraq—An Important Review of Our Data', Pietervanostaeyen.com, 3 August 2016, accessed at <https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2016/08/03/belgian-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-an-important-review-of-our-data/> on 4 January 2017.

⁵⁵ K. Clerix, 'Databank met Syriëstrijders geeft haar geheimen prijs', Knack, 31 August 2016.

APPENDIX 2: SKETCHES OF THE LOCATIONS OCCUPIED BY MSM IN KAFR HAMRA EARLY IN 2013, AS DRAWN BY FORMER FIGHTER JEJOEN BONTINCK DURING INTERROGATIONS

Figure 1 shows the 'villa' used by the foreign fighters, Figure 2 shows the 'palace' where leader Amr al-Absi resided with his Syrian fighters and Figure 3 shows their training camp.

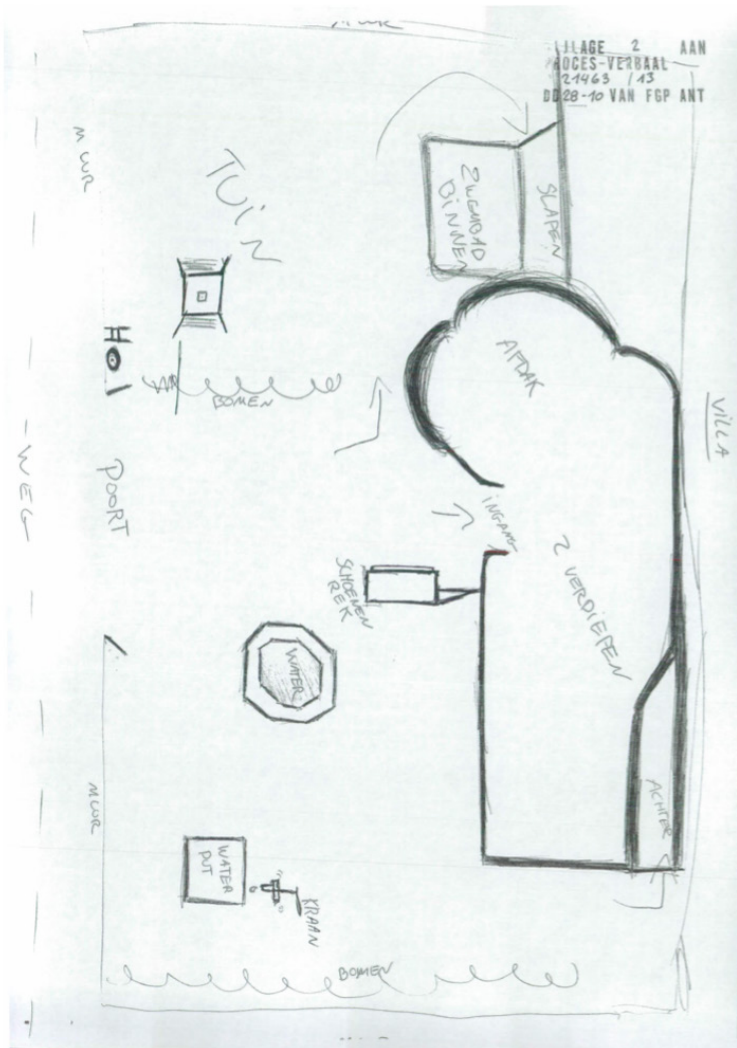


Figure 1

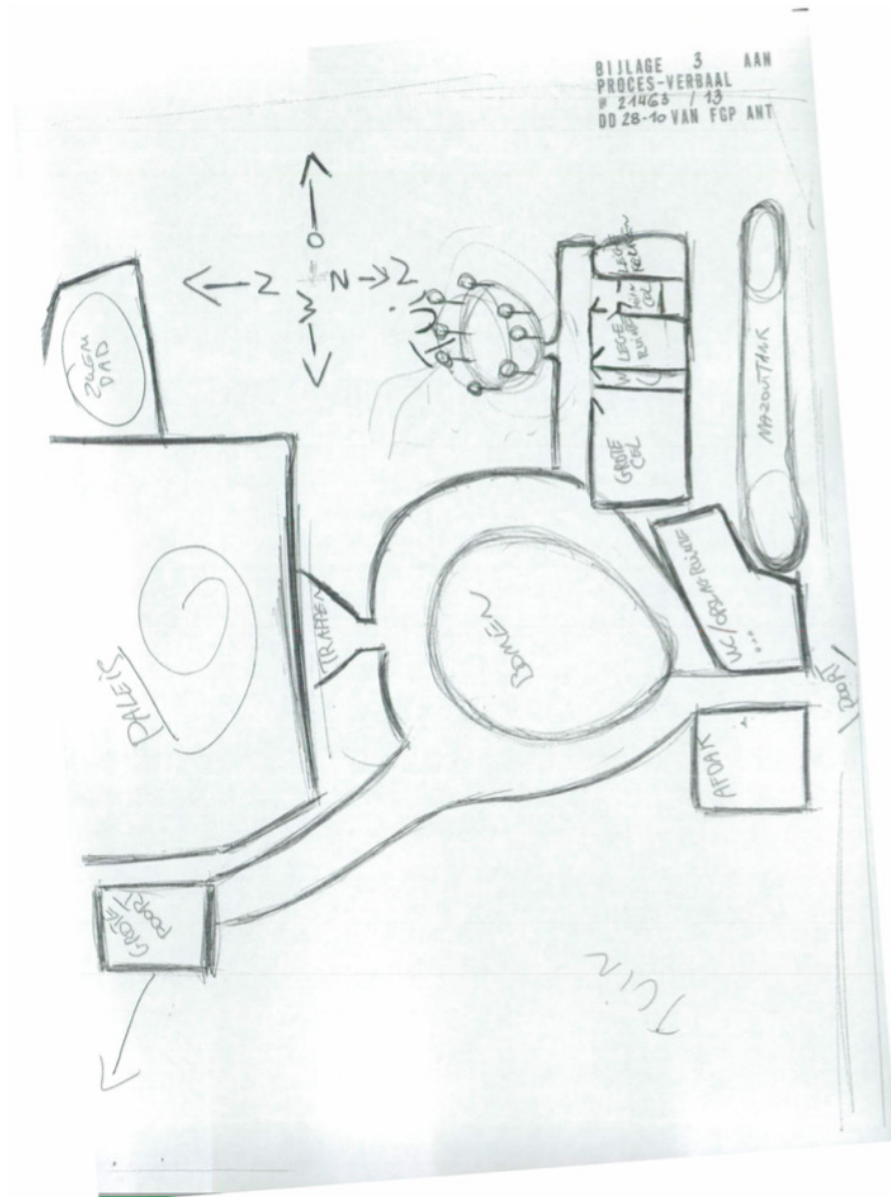


Figure 2



APPENDIX 3: IMAGE SOURCES

Image 1 - Houssien Elouassaki: still from in memoriam video published by Azeddine Kbir Bounekoub using the alias 'Abu Gastbijshaam' on 18 March 2014. Retrieved that same day at <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10203296372189077>

Image 2 - Nabil Azahaf: picture published by unidentified Facebook user with alias 'Abou Sam Sam' on 3 June 2014. Retrieved the following day from his account <https://www.facebook.com/abdel.karim.9883739>

Image 2 - Magomed Saralapov: picture published by Magomed Saralapov using the alias 'Abou Chichan' on 23 November 2014. Retrieved the following day from his account <https://www.facebook.com/abou.chichan>

Image 2 - Zakaria Asbai: picture retrieved from a judicial document in the possession of the authors, but also published by several media already. See for instance: <https://gosint.wordpress.com/2016/08/17/isis-3-belgian-citizens-at-the-creation-meeting/>

<http://mobile.sudinfo.be/1647274/article/2016-08-17/trois-belges-etaient-presents-lors-de-la-reunion-de-fondation-de-l-etat-islamique>

Image 3: List of Katibat al-Battar al-Libi: Twitter by a user known as Ramly as-Shuhada, October 14, 2014. https://twitter.com/Arramly_mo7eb/status/522111287258779648/photo/1

Image 4 - Nabil Kasmi: picture retrieved from a judicial document in the possession of the authors. If a picture is needed that has appeared in the open, we can suggest a screenshot from one of the Shariah4Belgium videos in which Nabil Kasmi appeared. Quality of those is rather low, however. Here is one still online — see screenshot to identify Kasmi: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SHGNu3XBBI>.

Image 5 - Nabil Kasmi & Omar Bakri: picture retrieved from a judicial document in the possession of the authors. According to that document, the picture was originally posted on a publicly visible Facebook account of Omar Bakri at <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=124750904303790&set=a.121770754601805.20309.100003066446212&type=3&theater>



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ISBN: 978-90-823826-6-2

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