

# Belgium must do more to prevent its citizens from joining Islamic State

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*Among European countries, Belgian citizens account for one of the largest per capita shares of foreign Islamic State fighters in Syria and Iraq. **Craig J. Willy** writes on Belgian immigration and labour market policies in light of the threat posed by terrorism. He argues that Belgium could be doing substantially more to promote equal opportunities in employment and education, which would help improve the integration of migrants into Belgian society.*



The European Union, with its common market and currency, is a testament to Europeans' ambition of making war materially impossible in their once-violent continent. The EU's buildings in Brussels are meant to symbolise these hopes for peace and prosperity. But today, in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, they, as well as various Jewish buildings, are guarded by Belgian soldiers armed with assault rifles and submachine guns. How did it come to this in the "Capital of Europe"?

Islamist terrorism is thankfully still relatively rare in Belgium, notwithstanding the murder of four people at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in May 2014 and the deaths of two would-be jihadis returning from Syria in the recent shootout in Verviers. But between 300 and 400 Belgian citizens are estimated to have gone to Syria to fight for Islamic State. Little Belgium apparently provides [more Islamic State fighters per capita](#) than any other Western European country. Half of them come from Brussels. For those returning to Belgium, NATO headquarters and the European institutions provide prestigious targets whose attack would easily produce international headlines.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Belgium has been one of the most unsuccessful European countries at economically integrating migrants from Islamic countries. According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI), Belgium is one of the [worst performing countries](#) in terms of integrating migrants. [Recent studies](#) suggest half of Turkish and Moroccan migrants live in poverty, while 30 per cent of migrant youth drop out of school without a degree. Belgium also has one of the worst gaps in [educational performance](#) between migrants and native children, with almost no improvement between the first and second generations.

## For migrants, the Belgian job market is often out of reach

This is a huge problem for migrants and their children trying to access the Belgian job market. As SGI's [Belgium report](#) notes: "The Brussels capital region suffers from chronic unemployment due to a mismatch between available jobs, which typically require highly qualified and bilingual workers, and available job seekers, who are largely (second or third-generation) immigrants with low education." Good English and/or Dutch, in addition to French, is often a must for good jobs in Belgium. Brussels has a [staggering unemployment](#) rate of 19.2 per cent, easily rising to double that among many immigrant neighbourhoods.

Certainly, not all of those opting to fight for Islamic State are poor and indeed there are many educated and famously rich ones. But many are indeed poor and, more generally, economic inequality between the Muslim and native Belgian communities may motivate a wider sense of injustice and alienation.

In addition, second generation children are liable to feel lost between the post-Christian/secular, individualistic, feminist and gay-friendly culture of Belgium and that of their Islamic, family-based, patriarchal and at times homophobic cultures of origin. As Montasser AlDe'emeh, a researcher at the University of Antwerp, [told the Washington Post](#) on Belgian jihadis: "The Islamic State is giving them what the Belgian government can't give them — identity, structure. They don't feel Moroccan or Belgian. They don't feel part of either society."

Cultural integration is made more difficult still because of the weakness of Belgian national identity, torn between French-speaking Walloons and Dutch-speaking Flemish people. Brussels, sitting uneasily between the two as a majority French-speaking city surrounded by the Flanders regions, is in fact a “majority-minority” area. Native Belgians have become [a small minority of about 30](#) per cent among Arab and Turkish Muslims, Congolese, European expats and other groups, often with little mixing.

The issue of inequality among most non-European immigrants and their descendants will grow more pressing as non-European-origin groups expand as a share of population in the coming decades on the back of continued immigration and low native fertility. Growing minority groups will likely become less satisfied with their relatively underprivileged position and use their increased numbers to pressure for political change.

### **Belgium could do more to foster equal opportunities in employment and education**

But it is also clear that Belgium can do better on integration because it is a low performer even by European standards. More should be done to ensure equality of opportunity in employment and education. The [country's SGI report notes](#) recent actions have been taken to address these inequalities: “There is the political will to help resident foreigners and second or third generation immigrants acquire Belgian citizenship, by providing adults with easy access to inexpensive or free training (including language, civic education and so on).”

But clearly these efforts are still inadequate, with the report stating that: “the education system is ill-adapted to non-native language students who are concentrated in urban areas, as well as in schools with a high proportion of non-native students (insufficient language training and native speaker mix). Labour market discrimination also remains high.”

Belgium is a relatively high performer in terms of social equality and well-being. This has been achieved through largely punitive taxes and social charges on labour, making up [an incredible 56 per cent of the cost of worker salaries](#) (take-home pay is only 44 per cent of what the employer pays), one of the highest rates in the world, and a high degree of labour security. This system has, perhaps surprisingly, proven compatible with a relatively high level of competitiveness, as Belgium is also one of the Eurozone's better economic performers. Nonetheless, Belgium's has clearly been a “two-tier” system benefiting “ins” (e.g. native Belgians) as against “outs” (migrants, young people in general).

In addition, Belgium's relatively egalitarian social system nonetheless could be improved in terms of equity, as the country's notoriously complex tax system has numerous loopholes benefiting multinational corporations and the wealthy.

### **Europe needs a “soul”**

Continued inequalities among growing minorities might feed ethnic resentments which have too often ended tragically in Europe and elsewhere. A small number of people from these communities, as well as a few native Belgian converts, might feel motivated to commit acts of senseless violence against these real and perceived injustices. This is despite the relatively high standards of living for almost everyone in the West, including underprivileged minorities.

But the spiritless promises of relative poverty in a materialist and ‘over-sexualised’ post-Christian culture – McDonald's, iPods and YouPorn – could be enough to turn a few energetic, frustrated and ambitious young men to find a short-lived meaning in religious struggle. Europe cannot be reduced to an economic area of movement and consumption; it also needs a “soul”, something that can easily be drawn from the continent's incredibly wealthy [cultural and spiritual heritage](#).

Fortunately, the terrorists have thus far been very few, but numerous enough to put at risk the lives of Jewish citizens of Brussels, European civil servants and all ordinary people, including the Muslim community. Enough for soldiers to

patrol the streets of Europe's would-be capital of peace. Addressing this challenge in the Twenty-First Century requires asking tough questions and taking sustained actions.

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## About the author

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