

**FROM CRIMINALS TO  
TERRORISTS AND BACK?**  
QUARTERLY REPORT 2018  
BELGIUM



# FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

## Quarterly Report: Belgium

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The most well-known ISIS terrorist atrocities in Europe, including the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels attacks, saw individuals who in the past had been involved in organized crime and illegal trade graduate into the ranks of the world's most successful terrorist organisation. **It is now widely assumed that Europe's terrorists are no longer radicals first and foremost but criminals who turned to political violence at some stage throughout their ordinary crime careers.** Thus, a threat emanating from the "crime-terror nexus" hangs over Europe. GLOBSEC, an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation which aims to shape the global debate on foreign and security policy, responded to this threat by developing a research and advocacy project aimed at addressing the "crime-terror nexus" in Europe. **Our project titled *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back?* will:**<sup>3</sup>

1. **collect, collate and analyse data on terrorism convicts from 11 EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK)** with the highest number of arrests for terrorism offences. We will investigate whether these individuals had prior criminal connections, and if so, whether a specific connection to illegal trade is a precursor to terrorism, and to what extent this trade funds terrorism. In short, we will check whether crime-terror nexus exists and how strong it truly is.
2. **disseminate project findings at high profile GLOBSEC Strategic Forums (GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum, TATRA Summit, Chateau Bela conferences) and other internationally acclaimed gatherings** which attract decision makers, experts, private sector and law enforcement representatives, while also incorporating their expert level feedback into our work.
3. **help shape and strengthen the European counter-terrorism efforts by providing tailor made solutions on combating crime-terror nexus and terrorist financing via education and awareness, and advocacy efforts involving decision makers and security stakeholders in the 11 targeted countries.** This line of activity directly links the project to the widely acclaimed work of the GLOBSEC Intelligence Reform Initiative (GIRI), led by Sec. Michael Chertoff, which is involved in developing and promoting more effective transatlantic counter-terrorism solutions.

## 1. Bottom Line

**As stated in GLOBSEC's *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back? Kick Off Report*<sup>4</sup> Belgium is a unique case for the study of the crime-terror nexus: it is a small country with a long history**

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<sup>3</sup> The project is funded under PMI IMPACT, a global grant initiative of Philip Morris International to support projects against illegal trade. GLOBSEC is fully independent in implementing the project and has editorial responsibility for all views and opinions expressed herein.

<sup>4</sup> See Kacper Rekawek et al., *From criminals to terrorists and back? Kick-off report*, GLOBSEC, 2017. Accessed December 12, 2017. <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Crime-Crime-Terror-Nexus-update.pdf>

of jihadist presence.<sup>5</sup> With 61 Jihadi arrests of Belgian inhabitants, 2015 was an important year for the country.<sup>6</sup> However, the number of Jihadi arrests increased in 2016 to 65, and was even higher in 2014, with 72 Jihadi arrests.<sup>7</sup> Convictions for terrorism increased from 116 in 2015 to 127 in 2016.<sup>8</sup>

Some methodological assumptions must be noted. In this early stage of the project, we rely on **open-source data**. These are important sources of information; however, as researchers, we should keep in mind the potentially unreliable character of these sources while collecting information, and the reader should keep this limitation in mind while interpreting the preliminary results. Recently, we applied for access to the criminal records of Belgian terrorists. These sources will enable us to objectify, verify and complete our information.

We have drawn up **five** codebooks in the context of the GLOBSEC project. With startling consistency, we find evidence for the existence of a crime-terror nexus. With the currently available information, we see that four out of our five studied individuals have been known or arrested for petty crime or organised crime. A number of these individuals meet the profile of a “gangster jihadi”.<sup>9</sup>

In the Kick-off Report, some fundamental questions about the crime-terror nexus were formulated.<sup>10</sup> Where some scholars focus mainly on the nexus between organized crime and terrorism (by e.g., Makarenko<sup>11</sup> and Makarenko & Mesquita<sup>12</sup>), this research project approaches the nexus from a broader perspective and explicates the foregoing question: “are criminals-turned-terrorists coming from organized crime groups or are they petty criminals?”.<sup>13</sup> The second relevant question aims to identify the type of nexus: is there an organizational convergence or is the nexus based on individual ties? In addition, the existence of “gangster

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<sup>5</sup> Edwin Bakker, *Jihadi terrorists in Europe, their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined the jihad: exploratory study*. Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, The Hague. December 2006. Accessed January 18, 2018. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20061200\\_cscp\\_csp\\_bakker.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20061200_cscp_csp_bakker.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Rekawek, *Kick-off report*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT)*, 2017. Accessed March 16, 2018. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/tesat2017.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Rekawek, *Kick-off report*, 9.

<sup>9</sup>To our full understanding, a “gangster jihadi” is defined as: “an individual who almost naturally drifts from the world of crime towards jihadism, sometimes as a form of redemption for his earlier sins. He, as the phenomenon is almost exclusively male, possesses links and skills which allow him to thrive in both, seemingly, divided worlds of crime and terrorism.” (Rekawek et al., 2017, p. 7).

<sup>10</sup> Rekawek, *Kick-off report*, 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Tamara Makarenko, “The crime-terror continuum: Tracing the interplay between transnational organised crime and terrorism,” *Global Crime* 6, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>12</sup> Tamara Makarenko and Michael Mesquita, “Categorising the crime-terror nexus in the European Union,” *Global Crime* 15, no. 3-4 (2014). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2014.931227>

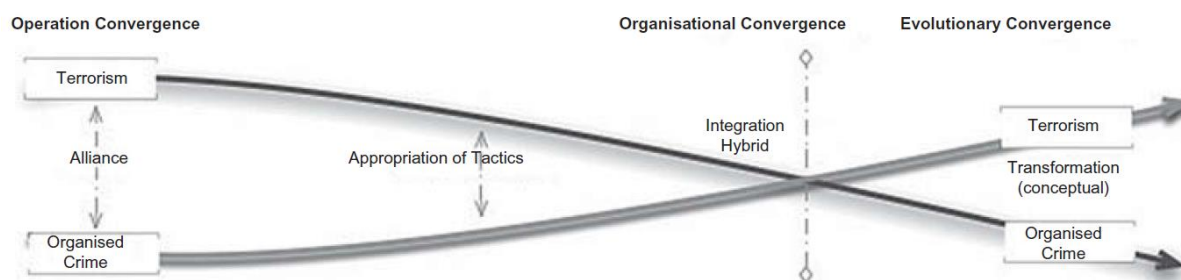
<sup>13</sup> Rekawek, *Kick-off report*, 24.

jihadi's”, and if so, to what extent, is a subject of the study. This phenomenon receives specific attention in the Belgian context.

In unravelling the crime-terror nexus, we note that some valuable contributions already have been made. In the following, we describe the characteristics of the crime-terror nexus generally, and more specifically for the case of Belgium.

### 1.1 The Crime-Terror nexus

The recent publication of the *Crime Terror Nexus* (hereinafter referred to as *CTN*)<sup>14</sup> clearly sets out the three types of crime-terror nexus: **institutional, organizational, and social**. The institutional crime-terror nexus goes back to Makarenko’s three institutional connections between criminal and terrorist groups,<sup>15</sup> described on the basis of her “crime-terror continuum”. Later, Makarenko and Mesquita refined this nexus model with respect to the initial terminology used.<sup>16</sup> The three institutional connections are: alliance, hybrid integration, and transformation (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Refined nexus model.<sup>17</sup>

The second type of nexus, the organizational crime-terror nexus, goes back to Paoli,<sup>18</sup> who based the typology on the structural and organizational similarities between delinquent juvenile groups and terrorist groups. As summarized by *CTN*, these similarities include:

- “They were involved in illegal activity, including violence;
- They required members’ ‘absolute commitment’;

<sup>14</sup>Crime Terror Nexus (CTN), *The crime-terror nexus in Belgium and Luxembourg*, 2018. Accessed March 15, 2018. [https://crimeterrornexus.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Crime-Terror-Nexus-BelgiumLuxembourg\\_English.pdf](https://crimeterrornexus.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Crime-Terror-Nexus-BelgiumLuxembourg_English.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Makarenko, “The crime-terror continuum”.

<sup>16</sup> Makarenko and Mesquita, “Categorising the crime-terror nexus in the European Union”.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 260.

<sup>18</sup> Letizia Paoli, “The paradoxes of organized crime,” *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 37, no. 1 (2002).

- They offered ‘emotional benefits’, such as status, ‘brotherhood’, identity, and belonging.”<sup>19</sup>

Nowadays, a third type of crime-terror nexus arises: the social one. Basra, Neumann and Brunner found that the nature and dynamics of the contemporary crime-terror nexus are different from the traditional nexuses.<sup>20</sup> To their understanding, “rather than being one or the other, criminal and terrorist groups have come to recruit from the same pool of people, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps that have consequences for how individuals radicalize and operate.”<sup>21</sup> They state that both terrorists and criminals are recruited from the same socio-economic-deprived geographic places. **With this thesis, they also put forward a possible explanation for why a relatively small country like Belgium could produce the bulk of European jihadist foreign fighters.** According to Basra and colleagues this depends mainly on the effort of individuals, using their criminal skills and a considerable amount of charisma to recruit (mainly) young men as jihadist foreign fighters.<sup>22</sup>

This new crime-terror nexus disproved a number of assumptions formerly assumed to be true. For example, the “profit aims versus ideological objectives”<sup>23</sup> dichotomy for respective criminal and terrorist groups is a misconception.<sup>24</sup> In this new nexus, fundamental-ideological considerations (if even present) do not seem to work as a buffer against involvement in crime. In addition, prior research findings show us that “terrorists are not poor and uneducated, but—rather—originate from middle and upper class milieus who are rarely, if ever, involved in ‘petty crime’”.<sup>25</sup> The latter observation is obviously connected with the aforementioned recruitment out of the socio-economic deprived places, resulting in another “typical” profile of terrorists and, hence, another type of crime-terror nexus.

In the third, “new” crime-terror nexus, four areas are distinguished in which is believed the convergence of criminal and terrorist groups has implications for the terrorist threat.<sup>26</sup> These areas are (1) radicalization and recruitment, (2) prisons, (3) skills transfers, and (4) the financing

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<sup>19</sup> CTN, *The crime terror nexus in Belgium and Luxembourg*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Rajan Basra, Peter R. Neumann and Claudia Brunner, *Criminal pasts, terrorist futures: European jihadists and the new crime-terror nexus*, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2016. Accessed January 11, 2018. <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Criminal-Pasts-Terrorist-Futures.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Basra, *Criminal pasts, terrorist futures*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> See also Santiago Ballina, “The crime–terror continuum revisited: a model for the study of hybrid criminal organisations,” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 6, no. 2 (2011). doi: 10.1080/18335330.2011.605200

<sup>25</sup> Basra, *Criminal pasts, terrorist futures*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

of attacks. In the next paragraph, we will explain the relevant aspects for the Belgian context in more detail.

## 1.2 The Belgian Crime-Terror nexus

According to Renard and Coolsaet, Belgium has the highest ratio of foreign terrorist fighters per capita in Europe.<sup>27</sup> In terms of Van Ostaeyen: “Belgium is at the epicentre of the Islamic State’s efforts to attack Europe”.<sup>28</sup> At the moment, The Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (i.e. Belgium’s federal counterterrorism fusion centre) listed 498 people as foreign terrorist fighter and, in addition, 113 “potential candidates” for jihad.<sup>29</sup> These foreign terrorist fighters have a typical profile: 80 percent are young men (between age 20 and 30) and approximately three quarters of them joined the Islamic State (ISIS).<sup>30</sup>

For now, we have too little information to test the aforementioned hypotheses properly. Nevertheless, some interesting preliminary findings can be drawn. As stated in the introductory part, our preliminary results provide evidence for the existence of the phenomenon of so-called “gangster jihad”. Namely, in the context of the refined nexus model of Makarenko and Mesquita, it seems that two out of our five cases underwent a conceptual transformation from organized crime to terrorism.<sup>31</sup> We do not have a clear view on potential alliances or organizational convergences within this nexus (see Figure 1).

Regarding the new crime-terror nexus, as described by Basra and colleagues,<sup>32</sup> we can draw some notable observations. Regarding radicalization and recruitment, we know, thanks to the work of Van Ostaeyen,<sup>33</sup> that there were three former recruiting networks active in Belgium: Sharia4Belgium, Resto du Tawhid, and the Zerkani network. In which the first and the latter together recruited nearly half of the foreign terrorist fighters.<sup>34</sup> We know that several of our five studied cases were recruited by or nearly associated with the Zerkani network. With regard to imprisonment, we currently do not have enough information. However, CTN describes the presence of “a cohort of radicalized individuals” in Belgian prisons, so we expect that the

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, “From the kingdom to the caliphate and back: Returnees in Belgium,” in *Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them? Assessing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands* (Egmont paper 101), eds. Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet (2018), Accessed February 08, 2018. [http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/02/egmont.papers.101\\_online\\_v1-3.pdf?type=pdf](http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/02/egmont.papers.101_online_v1-3.pdf?type=pdf)

Note that, according to Belgian authorities, a foreign terrorist fighter is a Belgian resident but does not necessarily have Belgian nationality (Renard & Coolsaet, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “Belgian radical networks and the road to the Brussels attacks,” *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 6 (2016): 7.

<sup>29</sup> Renard and Coolsaet, “From the kingdom tot he caliphate and back”.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Makarenko and Mesquita, “Categorising the crime-terror nexus in the European Union”.

<sup>32</sup> Basra, *Criminal pasts, terrorist futures*.

<sup>33</sup> e.g., Van Ostaeyen, “Belgian radical networks and the road to the Brussels attacks”.

<sup>34</sup> CTN, *The crime terror nexus in Belgium and Luxembourg*.

availability of additional data sources will provide valuable insight.<sup>35</sup> Regarding the transfer of skills, we know that “Belgian jihadists (...) have leveraged their criminal skills and connections for the purposes of terrorism, and actively encouraged crime for the sake of jihad”.<sup>36</sup> In our five cases, we noticed that four out of five individuals had former criminal experience, giving them certain skills and connections. One of the most sought-after “skills”—access to firearms—is held by some of the individuals in our dataset. Four out of the five individuals had proven access to firearms, as we can infer from the crimes they committed or as shown by photo material from an IS magazine. Lastly, regarding the financing of attacks, we currently cannot draw meaningful conclusions from our data. Most of the individuals were unemployed, however, they were not poor at all. This, together with their criminal pasts, does not make it implausible that they may have obtained their money from illegal activities.

Prior research found evidence of a Belgian-Moroccan-French Islamic State nexus.<sup>37</sup> These scholars conclude that a significant part of the terrorists out of their database could be linked to Morocco, and that their data also revealed **close cross-border coordination between terrorist networks in Belgium and France** that resulted in the 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks in Belgium and France.

## 2. What’s coming next?

As can be seen, we are currently in the start-up phase of our data collection. We aim to deliver as complete as possible the codebooks for the **61 known arrested terrorists in 2015**. However, we believe that studying the profiles of terrorists not arrested in 2015 can also contribute to studies on the crime-terror nexus.

**The challenges we are facing are twofold and interconnected.** The first challenge is that we currently rely on open-source data. Since these sources are mainly media outlets, the inherent constraint is that the information cannot always be separated from fiction (the problem of “fake news” in its original meaning).

The second challenge we are facing is the availability and accessibility of data from the Belgian government. More specifically, we applied for access to the criminal records of Belgian terrorists, as well as their detention files. Nevertheless, when this application is approved and the data conveniently consultable, this challenge will change to an opportunity: **we will deliver**

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Guy Van Vlierden, Jon Lewis and Don Rassler, *Beyond the caliphate: Islamic state activity outside the group’s defined wilayat*, Combating Terrorism Center, 2018. Accessed February 22, 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/02/CTC-Beyond-the-Caliphate-Belgium.pdf>

**the first (to our knowledge) empirical test of the crime-terror nexus in Belgium, with access to the relevant background and crime variables of the total population of Belgian terrorists, as defined by the project's framework.** More specifically, when our data collection grows, we will be able to test the aforementioned hypotheses systematically. As a result, our quarterly reports also systematically will evolve from a theoretically stemmed report to an empirically grounded report.

### 3. Thematic analysis of the variables

The most interesting preliminary conclusion at this time is that four out of five individuals in our studied cases (certainly) had a criminal past. In addition, we see several similarities across the different cases. We are aware of the very small number of cases and of the selection mechanisms at work regarding the individuals we studied at this time; however, considering the grateful work that already has been delivered in the Belgian context, the preliminary results are typical. All individuals under study are young males (between age 20 and 35), they all grew up in Belgium and, more specifically, they all lived in the Brussels Capital Region. Four out of the five individuals under study were born in the Brussels Capital Region and they are all of Moroccan descent. These preliminary observations corroborate the aforementioned hypotheses regarding the “typical” profile of foreign terrorist fighters,<sup>38</sup> the conceptual transformation of Makarenko and Mesquita,<sup>39</sup> the social crime-terror nexus,<sup>40</sup> and the (at least partial) existence of “gangster jihadis”.<sup>41</sup>

While looking into relevant open sources we noticed a strong connection between French and Belgian networks. Some of our studied individuals are associated with French family members and/or friends. The five individuals under study show several ties to French individuals active in jihadi circles. We find strong confirmation for the existence of a Belgian-Moroccan-French nexus.

In the following paragraphs, we strictly followed the requested structure of the thematic analysis.

#### 1.3 Prior crime

Four out of the five individuals were known for prior crime; their first known crimes were committed in the years 2003 and 2010 (2 cases), with data on one individual not specified

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<sup>38</sup> See Renard and Coolsaet, “From the kingdom to the caliphate and back”.

<sup>39</sup> Makarenko and Mesquita, “Categorising the crime-terror nexus in the European Union”.

<sup>40</sup> See Basra, *Criminal pasts, terrorist futures*.

<sup>41</sup> Rekawek, *Kick-off report*.



For the four individuals studied, we see a mix of violent crime and property crime. We currently do not have evidence for any form of illicit trade. For the more organized crime types, we know these were performed in a group.

*For how long, and right before 2015 arrest or earlier?*

All the individuals under study are relatively young and, hence, they committed their crime right before their arrest or death (note this includes not only the 2015 arrests). The individual who committed his first crime in 2003, was sentenced for another criminal offence in 2013. He therefore served two years in prison, before he – quite shortly after his release – was arrested on suspicion of terrorism offences. The other two individuals, both arrested for criminal offences in 2010, committed their terrorist acts not long after they were released from prison.

#### **1.4 Ideology / Conversion issue**

Conversion is not a valid phenomenon for the cases we studied, since all 5 individuals were Muslim. At least three of them radicalized towards jihadism-Salafism.

#### **1.5 Trends regarding exposure to the radicalizing ideology**

We do see some patterns related to “radicalization agents”. Four out of the five studied individuals do have family (brothers or nephews, all males) involved in terrorism, too. We also notice that some of the individuals we studied already know each other or other terrorists. Some of them grew up together. In addition, in our modest dataset we see the influence of a charismatic recruiter who uses his criminal skills, Khalid Zerkani. At this moment, we do not have enough information to confirm they were radicalized in prison. We do know, however, that one of them kept planning terror activities while in prison. For the other three individuals we do not know whether they radicalized in prison. The last individual never served time in prison.

#### **1.6 Foreign fighters**

*Do people arrested for terrorism in 2015 possess prior FF or FTF experience?*

Our studied individuals are all known for terrorism, either via arrests or participation in terrorist attacks in 2015. Two out of the five individuals had foreign fighting experience, and we continue to assess such possibility in relation to the other three. The two joined armed groups that were either affiliated with or folded into ISIS. None of the five had former military or security forces experience, and neither could be classified as a solo actor.

## 1.7 Convictions

Three out of the five studied individuals have been convicted of terrorism. One of them after he died because there was no official declaration of death available at the time his case was handled in court. Two out of the five individuals were never convicted for terrorism, as they committed suicide during a terrorist attack.

Regarding non-terrorism convictions, we can conclude that four of the individuals under study were also convicted of other criminal offences (other than terrorism). With each point below representing an individual, we can conclude that the first two were mainly convicted of non-organized crimes, and the latter two were obviously involved in organized crime.

- Assault, and other crimes.
- Aggravated theft (several times).
- Robbery attempt at a Western Union branch in central Brussels: the individual shot a police officer in the leg with a Kalashnikov.
- Carjacking, possession of Kalashnikov rifles, and (very likely) a bank robbery.

## 4. Conclusion & Recommendations

At this stage of our research, we mainly focus on the existing literature, aiming to derive hypotheses we can test during the growth of our data collection. For now, we can draw some notable observations from our modest dataset, since we—with startling consistency—seem to find evidence for the crime-terror nexus. We corroborate some earlier findings, such as the hypotheses regarding the “typical” profile of foreign terrorist fighters, the conceptual transformation mentioned by Makarenko and Mesquita,<sup>42</sup> the social crime-terror nexus of Basra and colleagues,<sup>43</sup> and the (at least partial) existence of “gangster jihadis”.<sup>44</sup> However, our data collection needs to grow and reliable sources need to be consulted, before drawing final conclusions on this topic.

We fully support the recommendations of *CTN*, which include: (1) more effective monitoring of the crime-terror nexus, (2) rejuvenation of the government’s thinking on radicalization, (3) implementation of systematic efforts to increase the safety and well-being of prisoners, (4) more robust countering of all streams of terrorist financing (also these coming from petty crime), (5) a more cross-departmental approach to counter-terrorism, and, last but not least, (6) focusing

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<sup>42</sup> Makarenko and Mesquita, “Categorising the crime-terror nexus in the European Union”.

<sup>43</sup> Basra, *Criminal pasts, terrorist futures*.

<sup>44</sup> Rekawek, *Kick-off report*.

more on the socio-economic aspect of the terrorist threat, since the crime-terror nexus seems to thrive in areas of economic deprivation.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> CTN, *The crime terror nexus in Belgium and Luxembourg*, 16-17.