

MINISTERIAL MEETING - PANEL #4.5 - BELGIUM

Madame la Présidente,
Mr Secretary General,
Distinguished colleagues,
Dear Guests/Members,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor and privilege for me to attend this meeting as a newly appointed Minister of the Interior. I especially wish to thank the President for having given me the opportunity, on such short notice, to address the members of this meeting.

I would like to use this occasion to demonstrate the importance I attach to an effective and efficient international police co-operation, in particular in the area of foreign terrorist fighters, which was described as one of the largest current security issues in the recent UN Security Council Resolution 2187.

Belgium quickly became aware of the rapidly increasing extent of the phenomenon following the conflict in Syria and the threat posed by this phenomenon. The shooting at the Jewish museum in Brussels has made this threat very tangible and reinforced our determination to fight this problem.

Since the second half of 2012, Belgium has therefore taken extensive internal measures to effectively tackle this security problem. In addition, Belgium has also taken the initiative to develop a common approach together with a number of Member States and nations outside the EU.

After all, foreign terrorist fighters pose a threat to the countries in which they are fighting, but also to the neighboring countries, their home countries and the transit countries. In short, this is a threat that concerns us all! It is therefore both necessary and our duty to work on a common solution, each within its legal framework and possibilities.

The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters is not new. They already existed in the past. The extent this phenomenon is presently taking, however, can't be compared to manifestations in the past, which makes that the phenomenon requires a totally different approach this time.

In the past, the approach could be limited to intelligence gathering and judicial measures with a necessary, but, let's face it, rather limited international co-operation. The current situation requires, however, an integrated deployment of all our resources to provide an integrated response to the threat.

For the moment, we already have a lot of possibilities and instruments to combat this outbreak of the foreign terrorist fighters: of course we can rely on our national services,

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on the Schengen co-operation and Europol within the EU and we have Interpol and the United Nations. It is up to us to maximise the potential of those possibilities.

An important part of the approach concerns the focus on the prevention of radicalization. We are expected to create a society in which everybody has a chance to a good life and a future. We have to raise our young people to become critical human beings and arm them intellectually to resist a simplistic, yet dangerous discourse. Deradicalization projects need to be set up. More specifically, we have to explore possibilities to reduce the abuse of the Internet and social media as a tool to spread hate and radicalization messages. In Belgium, we will also take measures to try to prevent radicalization in prisons.

Furthermore, we should help to put a stop to the conflicts, not only in Syria and Iraq, but to all conflicts foreign terrorist fighters seize to commit atrocious crimes. We shouldn't do this only and primarily for the sake of our internal security, but to provide safe and secure living conditions for the local people in a democratic society where individual rights and liberties are respected.

Of course there is also a necessity to include repressive measures in this integrated approach. We have to invest in destabilizing recruitment and financing networks. Further efforts are needed to reduce terrorist financing. We have to carry out investigations into crimes committed by foreign terrorist fighters and bring them to trial. We have to guard and monitor our borders to prevent foreign terrorist fighters from travelling unnoticed. In that regard, Belgium will be following closely the future development of an EU PNR system.

In Belgium, dozens of criminal investigations into foreign terrorist fighters are currently ongoing. The first defendants have already been convicted. A second trial is pending in Antwerp. 45 foreign terrorist fighters or recruiters and trainers are being tried. Other trials will follow.

Effective implementation of all these measures requires solid intelligence. Without any reliable intelligence on the activities of foreign terrorist fighters abroad and in our country, the authorities are nowhere and their actions are less effective. Exchanging information, making information available to partners, bilaterally and multilaterally, is therefore crucial.

Effective implementation also requires a solid legal framework. We recently adapted our national legislation to enable us to prosecute in a more effective way terrorism-related offences such as participation in a terrorist group, training and recruitment for terrorism. The recent evolutions challenge our legal framework when it comes to the prosecution of individual foreign terrorist fighters who are sometimes self-motivated and travel by themselves. Although we have already changed some aspects, the Belgian

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government is considering to further enhance our national legislation. For instance, expanding possibilities for judges to strip a person of his Belgian nationality as part of a sentence for terrorist activity in case that person has a double nationality. Other measures we are strongly considering are: denying returning foreign terrorist fighters access to Belgian soil and revoking the passport or any travel document when there are strong indications that a person will likely commit actions that are a danger for public security. Belgium is constantly evaluating the situation and is aware that the challenge we are facing today requires a constant monitoring in order to adapt our measures, including our “criminal justice” reply.

Interpol has to play an active part in the field of information processing and sharing. Interpol has to act in close collaboration with regional organisations such as Europol. The truth is that, as matters stand, we can't afford the luxury of carrying out identical activities at different levels.

I am delighted that Interpol, through the Fusion Task Force and the Foreign Terrorist Fighter programme, has set up a platform allowing Member States to exchange strategic and tactical information and make analyses available. I can only encourage Interpol to keep up its efforts in this direction.

In practice, I ask Interpol, together with the Member States and Europol, to make concrete risk indicators available to optimize the border control and monitoring of movements of foreign terrorist fighters as called for in the Security Council Resolution 2178.

To finish my address, I would like to encourage my colleagues, within their respective legal frameworks, to use the Interpol tools and resources, namely the Interpol Criminal Information System, the Stolen and Lost Travel Documents database, the notices and diffusions, to make all relevant information available!