

Sharia4Belgium trial: Belgian court jails members

11 February 2015 | [Europe](#)

A Belgian court has jailed the leader of a group that sent jihadists to Syria, in the largest-ever trial of its kind in the country.

The court in Antwerp found a total of 45 members of the Sharia4Belgium group guilty of terror-related offences.

The judge called the organisation "a terrorist group" and sentenced leader Fouad Belkacem to 12 years in prison.

The other 44 members were given sentences, some suspended, ranging between three and 15 years.

The group sent recruits to militant groups such as Islamic State (IS), prosecutors said.

Only seven of the accused were at the court for the ruling. Most others are said to still be in Syria, and some may already be dead.

One high-profile member, Jejoen Bontinck, got a suspended sentence of 40 months. He made headlines after his father travelled to Syria and **brought him home**, and later appeared in the trial as a prosecution witness.

Duncan Crawford, BBC News, Antwerp

Prosecutors said Fouad Belkacem brainwashed dozens of young men to fight with jihadi groups in Syria. The court heard evidence that he used lectures and social media to recruit and radicalise people.

Some of the witnesses accused him of indoctrinating them. Prosecutors also presented wiretaps and video images as evidence which, they argued, proved Sharia4Belgium members were involved in terror activities. Mr Belkacem denied the charges against him.

In an open letter to the press he said that he "never recruited, incited or sent" fighters to Syria. His lawyers argued that he did not buy anyone flights to Syria or introduce his followers to jihadists.

Officials say about 350 Belgians have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq, the **highest number per capita in Europe.**

They estimate that 10% of the Belgians who have gone to fight in Syria had links to Sharia4Belgium.

European security agencies fear that jihadists who return from those countries could mount attacks on domestic targets.

'Adolescent angst'

Belkacem, the ringleader of the now defunct Sharia4Belgium, smiled as the judge read out his ruling. He had denied the charges.

The judge said he was "responsible for the radicalisation of young men to prepare them for Salafist combat, which has at its core no place for democratic values".





The family of Jejoen Bontinck, now 20, said Jejoen was a victim of "grooming" by Sharia4Belgium, and denied he was a security threat.

Speaking earlier on Wednesday as they arrived at court, his father Dmitri Bontinck **told reporters**: "I didn't go and pick up my son in Syria, only to see him thrown in jail here."

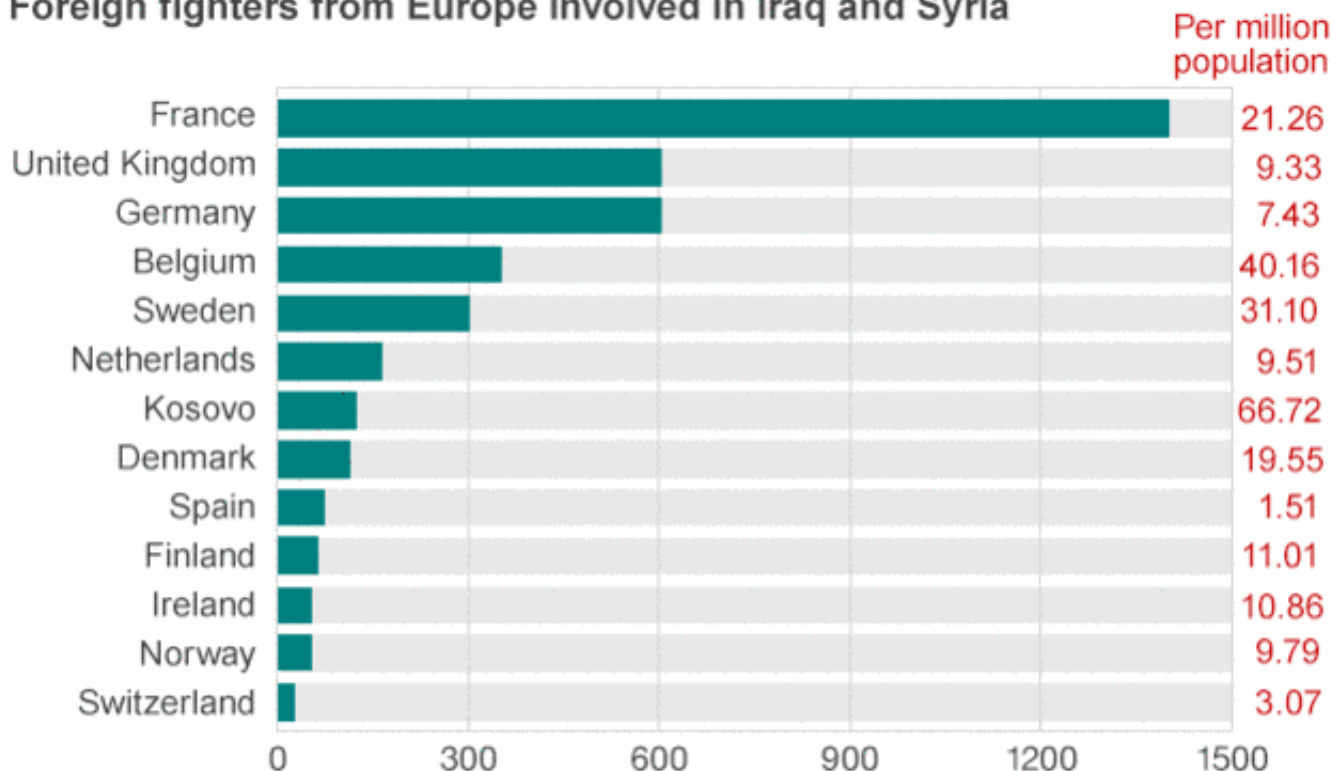
He has argued that the group attracted youngsters while they were going through moments of adolescent angst.

Five other members were at the court on Wednesday, while one was represented by his lawyer, **Belgian media** reported.

The others were tried in absentia. Most - like 21-year-old **Brian De Mulder** - are still believed to be fighting, or dead, in Syria.

However, the judge said that there was not sufficient evidence of any of the suspects being killed, so they could still be convicted, Dutch media reported.

Foreign fighters from Europe involved in Iraq and Syria



Source: ICSR, UK government, German Interior Ministry, Dutch Ministry of Justice, Swedish Security Service, BBC and press reports, Soufan Group

The trial, which has been held under tight security, started in September last year and followed a series of raids across the country.

Belgium deployed hundreds of troops last month to protect potential targets of terrorist attacks after a series of raids against suspected jihadists.

The eastern city of Verviers was the site of one of the raids, where a shootout left two suspects dead. Prosecutors said the group targeted had planned to kill police officers.

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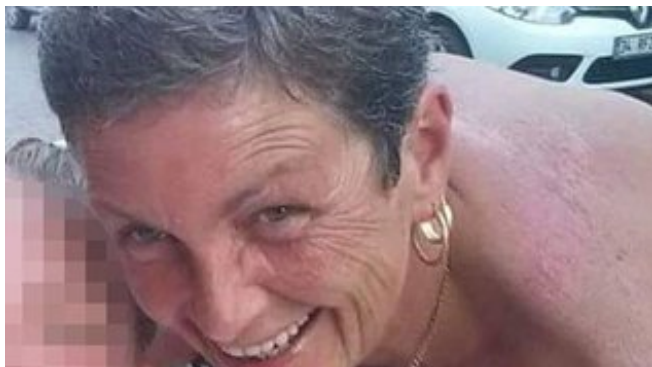
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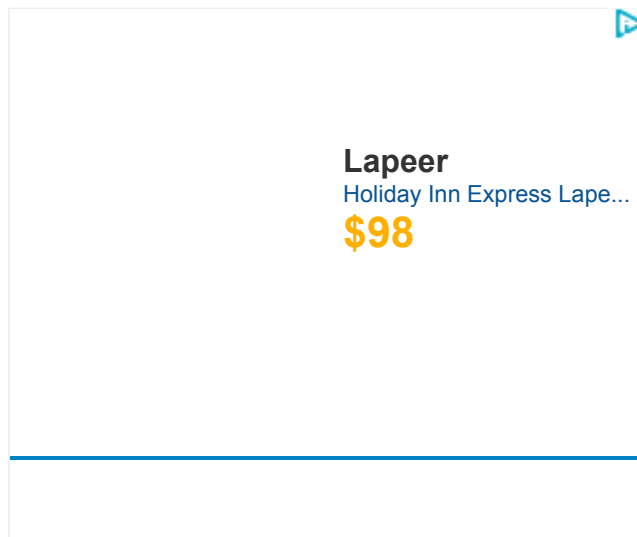
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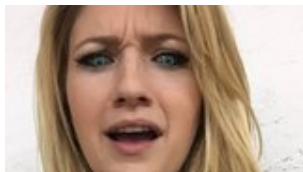
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