

Belgian authorities had “precise intelligence warnings” of Brussels bombings

By Stéphane Hugues and Alex Lantier
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The day after the mass bombings in Brussels that killed 34 people and wounded another 230, it emerged that Belgian authorities had specific forewarnings of the attack and had already last year identified the men who carried out the assault as Islamist terrorists.

The Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* reported Wednesday that Zaventem Airport and the Maelbeek metro station were known to be targets for planned terror attacks. It wrote, “The Belgian security services, as well as other Western intelligence agencies, had advance and precise intelligence warnings regarding the terrorist attacks in Belgium on Tuesday, *Ha'aretz* has learned. The security services knew, with a high degree of certainty, that attacks were planned in the very near future for the airport and, apparently, for the subway as well.”

The suspected attackers were well known to police authorities. Two of the suicide bombers, Khalid El Bakraoui, who attacked the metro station, and his brother Ibrahim El Bakraoui, who exploded a bomb at the airport, had been convicted of armed robbery and were known to have connections to the November 13 attacks in Paris carried out by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Both were identified post-mortem by their fingerprints.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said Ibrahim El Bakraoui had been detained in Turkey and identified as an Islamist fighter, then deported to the Netherlands last year.

“One of the perpetrators of the Brussels attack is a person whom we detained in June 2015 in [the southeastern province of] Gaziantep and deported... We informed the Brussels Embassy of the deportation process of the attacker with a note on July 14, 2015. However, the Belgians released the attacker despite his deportation,” Erdoğan said.

Erdoğan added that Belgian authorities were unable to establish any ties between El Bakraoui and terrorist activity despite the Turkish warnings, which were “ignored.”

Another bomber who blew himself up at the airport has still to be identified, and the third airport attacker, identified as Najim Laachraoui, remains on the run. Belgian authorities said they were looking for a man of Turkish origin, 22 years

old, driving an old, dark Audi A4 car.

These reports raise the most serious questions as to how and why Belgian and allied intelligence agencies allowed the Brussels bombings to occur. In the fifteenth year of the “war on terror” declared by Washington and its European allies after the September 11, 2001 bombings, intelligence agencies have at their disposal sophisticated spying techniques capable of tracking virtually all cell phone and Internet activity. Claims that the attack occurred because Belgian and allied intelligence agencies somehow failed to “connect the dots” are simply not believable.

Belgium has been on high alert. Large numbers of soldiers and police were deployed in Brussels when the city was placed on lockdown following the November 13 attacks in Paris, and again after last week’s capture of November 13 attacker Salah Abdeslam. Belgian forces had advance notice of the targets of an attack and the identity of the attackers. Nonetheless, the ISIS team was able to amass a large stock of bomb-making equipment undisturbed and plan, prepare and execute devastating and coordinated terror bombings.

During the first lockdown, in the aftermath of the Paris attacks, 16 people were arrested and 22 searches were made, which produced nothing. All the while, Abdeslam was living a few kilometers from his parents’ home.

Abdeslam’s capture in last week’s police raid apparently pushed the ISIS terrorists to put their plans into action. Ibrahim El Bakraoui’s laptop was found in a dustbin in the street. On it police found a recording of Bakraoui saying he was “acting in a rush” and “did not [know] what to do anymore,” as he was being “searched for everywhere and was no longer safe.” If “he stuck around” he was likely “to end up in a prison cell.”

Police located El Bakraoui’s apartment by speaking to the taxi driver who dropped off the attackers at Zaventem airport. He told police he picked them up from 4 rue Max Roos in the Schaerbeek area of Brussels. Police searched the apartment and found 15 kilos of explosives, 150 litres of acetone, 30 litres of hydrogen peroxide, detonators, a case full of nails and screws and other bomb-making materials.

There are as yet no calls for mass sackings in Belgian and European intelligence circles after this stunning breakdown of security. The reason is that powerful factions within the ruling elite and the state, far from being genuinely revolted by these attacks, view them as a political godsend, allowing them to press for policies on which there is broad agreement in ruling circles: stepped-up military intervention in the Middle East, police-state surveillance measures in Europe and incitement of anti-Muslim racism.

New York Times columnists Thomas Friedman and Roger Cohen published articles yesterday that in virtually identical terms argued for an escalation of the war in Syria, ostensibly to fight ISIS. Cohen declared that “the West’s ponderous wait-them-out approach to the murderous fanatics of the caliphate looks like capitulation,” while Friedman asked whether “Obama hasn’t gotten so obsessed with defending his hands-off approach to Syria that he underestimates both the dangers of his passivity and the opportunity for US power to tilt the region our way.”

European officials are holding a conference today to coordinate a broad expansion of police operations across Europe, while Marine Le Pen, the leader of France’s neo-fascist National Front, is calling for large-scale raids against Muslim neighborhoods in France. “We must immediately launch a vast police operation to invest all these districts that are outside our Republic,” she declared.

Under these conditions, it is increasingly clear that ISIS serves US and European imperialism not only as a proxy force fighting for regime-change in Syria, but also as an instrument to press for anti-democratic and unpopular policies at home.

The ISIS attacks in Paris last January and again in November, and in Brussels this week, were all carried out by the same terror network. This network is well known to French intelligence and to its US and European counterparts. All of these forces are linked to the original Al Qaeda network that emerged from the collaboration between the CIA and Saudi and Pakistani intelligence to mobilize Islamist fighters against the USSR and the Soviet-backed Afghan regime in the 1980s.

Khalid El Bakraoui rented, under an assumed identity, an apartment in the Belgian town of Charleroi for the authors of the November 13 attacks as a stop-over on their way to Paris. He also rented the apartment in the Forest area of Brussels, where on March 15 police first encountered Salah Abdeslam, and where Mohamed Belkaïd was killed in a gun battle that allowed Abdeslam to escape the initial police raid.

The French news site *Médiapart* reported that Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the organizer of the November 13 attacks, and Chérif Kouachi, one of the *Charlie Hebdo*

attackers, both knew Farid Melouk, a top figure in French Islamist circles. Melouk was a leading member of the Algerian Islamic Armed Group (GIA), a terror organization linked to Al Qaeda that fought the military junta during the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s.

Chérif Kouachi’s meeting with Melouk on April 11, 2010 was photographed, using telephoto lenses, by investigators of the French Anti-Terrorism Sub-Division (SDAT).

Arrested with other Al Qaida members in Belgium in 1998 for attempted murder, possession of arms and explosives and falsifying government documents, Melouk was in prison until 2004, when he was extradited to serve a second term in France until 2009. When released, he stayed in France, quietly establishing closer ties to ISIS. He managed to flee to Syria the day after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks.

Speaking to the Investigative Commission on Jihadist Networks of the French National Assembly last year, anti-terrorist investigating Judge Marc Trévidic declared, “The older ones are returning to activity. Farid Melouk, of whose presence in Syria I have now learned... I met him in 2000 when I was dealing with the first ‘Afghan’ network. He was at the head of a very big network that provided passage for jihadists... These older ones have a phenomenal number of contacts in Belgium and France.”

Such reports underscore that, over the course of decades, the jihadist networks have been investigated and mapped out in the greatest of detail by the European secret services, judiciary and police agencies.

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