

Scandal mounts over failure by Belgian police to halt Brussels attacks

By Alex Lantier
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Friday saw a series of stunning new revelations of inexplicable lapses of Belgian and allied security forces that helped terrorists evade detection prior to the March 22 Brussels attacks. After the constitution of an all-party parliamentary commission of inquiry Thursday night, a government crisis is emerging in Belgium, which hosts the headquarters of both the European Union and the NATO military alliance.

The new revelations involved both the individuals who carried out the Brussels bombings, which cost 31 lives and wounded 270, and Salah Abdeslam, who participated in the November 13 attacks in Paris and was captured by police only on March 18, four months after fleeing to Brussels.

According to a report by Gilbert Dupont in *Dernière Heure-Les Sports*, widely taken up in other francophone newspapers, Belgian police were aware of Abdeslam's location throughout. During four months when he was on the run, described by officials and the media internationally as Europe's "most wanted man" due to his role in the November 13 attacks, elements in the police forces knew precisely where he was hiding in the Brussels area.

Dupont writes, "Our sources indicate a policeman in Malines had already given, in a December 7 report for the anti-terror section of the federal judicial police in Brussels, the address of 79, rue des Quatre Vents in Molenbeek where Salah Abdeslam was found last Friday. The confidential report (called a RIR, Rapport Informatief Rapport, in official jargon) was not transmitted. It was blocked and stayed stuck for three months at the Malines police."

Belgium's police oversight committee (*Comité P*) is launching an investigation into the matter. It is unclear where exactly the report was blocked and how far up the chain of command it went, however, since Malines

police are denying that they blocked, or even saw, the report.

In another remarkable lapse, *Le Monde* revealed that Belgian police only interrogated Abdeslam for a total of two hours between his capture on March 18 and the March 22 attacks. Having reviewed the investigative transcripts, it wrote that he was interrogated twice, for one hour each time, on March 19, once by police and then once by an investigating magistrate.

The paper observed, "This seems quite short, given the value of the detainee. The interrogations, rather perfunctory and filled with inconsistencies, show that investigators may have missed an opportunity to obtain information which could have prevented the March 22 attacks."

Abdeslam's short interrogation was not the only missed opportunity to prevent the March 22 attacks. The El Bakraoui brothers, the suicide bombers on that day, were known to US intelligence and were on US no-fly lists. Turkish officials had identified Ibrahim El Bakraoui as an Islamist fighter to their Belgian counterparts, and Russian and Israeli intelligence told the Belgian government that attacks on Zaventem airport and the Brussels subway were imminent.

Initial accounts are emerging on the string of extraordinary lapses through which the Turkish warnings were allegedly overlooked in Brussels. Belgian liaison officers in Turkey did not check their email in a timely way to discover that Turkey had deported Ibrahim El Bakraoui to Europe on suspicion of terrorism in July 2015. Astonishingly, once they notified their superiors at the federal judicial police in Brussels, the superiors did not respond or attempt to track El Bakraoui.

Moreover, when a Belgian court cancelled Bakraoui's parole in August—the two brothers had been

convicted of armed robbery—there was no attempt to find him, even though he had been missing meetings with parole officers ever since May and had been deported by Turkey as a terrorist in July.

Such accounts underscore that official explanations for the Brussels bombings circulating in the European press are rubbish. The extent of official foreknowledge of the attacks and the key role of police and judicial misconduct in shielding the attackers makes clear that the failure to prevent the attacks cannot be attributed to a lack of intelligence sharing between different agencies and states.

The key element is that the El Bakraoui brothers, Abdeslam, and their accomplices were all part of a broad network working to recruit and send Islamist fighters from Europe to the Middle East, to fight in the imperialist proxy war for regime change in Syria. These networks were tolerated by police and security officials of the NATO countries, which saw them as an important policy tool.

Significantly, Turkish officials who spoke to the *Guardian* charged that European governments also used these networks to export European Islamists to the battlefields of Syria.

“We were suspicious that the reason they want these people to come is because they don’t want them in their own countries. I think they were so lazy and so unprepared and they kept postponing looking into this until it became chronic,” said a source described by the *Guardian* as a senior Turkish security official.

The close integration of these Islamist networks with security agencies of the NATO powers, including Belgium, underlies a whole spate of Islamist terror bombings. This ranges from last year’s terror shootings in Paris to the September 11, 2001 attacks, that flowed from the long collaboration between the CIA and the precursors of Al Qaeda to topple the Soviet-backed Afghan government in the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s.

While the public was kept in the dark about the ties between security agencies and the Islamist forces, governments exploited such attacks to press for unpopular, antidemocratic policies, from the bloody Middle East wars of the US “war on terror” to the current state of emergency in France. Precisely because such operations play a central role in US and European politics, the emerging political crisis in Belgium over

police responsibility for the attacks is provoking deep concern in imperialist circles internationally.

Yesterday, US Secretary of State John Kerry made a hastily scheduled stop in Brussels, on his return trip from talks on Syria with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, to cynically dismiss the investigations and criticisms of the Belgian state as “carping.”

“People are jumping to conclusions,” Kerry stated at the residence of the US ambassador in Belgium. “I don’t know what all the circumstances were, I don’t know if some events or evidence or opportunities were missed specifically. That will come over a period of time. But I think all this carping four days later is a little bit frantic and inappropriate.”

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