

After Paris attacks, Brussels placed on lockdown

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23 November 2015

The Brussels metropolitan area was on lockdown this weekend after Belgian authorities declared a security emergency in the night of Friday to Saturday. The government ordered subways and major public venues shut down and told residents to remain indoors, citing the danger of events like the November 13 attack by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) members in Paris.

Heavily armed police units launched a large-scale manhunt yesterday evening in several areas of Brussels, as authorities ordered residents to stay away from windows and hotel guests to remain indoors. Police imposed an information blackout during the attack, also instructing people in the area not to post information or updates about the situation in Brussels on social media.

Belgian federal prosecutors made a brief announcement well after midnight on the police operation, which Belgian Francophone Radio-Television (RTBF) reported had been in preparation for several days. It supposedly aimed to find Salah Abdeslam, an alleged member of the ISIS team that carried out the Paris attacks. However, despite police operations across Brussels, Abdeslam was not found. According to prosecutors, police did not find any arms or explosives, either.

It remains unclear what motivated the police operation and the lockdown of Brussels, or why such a supposedly carefully-prepared operation failed to find anything. RTBF reporters reported that official briefings were “tight-lipped.”

After the OCAM issued a new situation report yesterday, the Belgian government announced that it would keep all schools, universities and subways in Brussels closed today. Authorities confirmed that these shutdowns were being maintained even after last night’s police operation.

The emergency measures had been announced on

Saturday by Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel, citing non-specific warnings issued by the Belgian state’s Organ for Coordination of Threat Analysis (OCAM).

“This is the result of intelligence, which is relatively precise, about the risk of attack like which took place in Paris. We are talking about a threat involving the hypothesis where several individuals with weapons and explosives begin actions, maybe in several places at the same time,” he explained.

The OCAM warning led to the raising of the Belgian state’s threat level to four, the highest level. “Level four, as decided for Brussels, implies there is a ‘serious and imminent’ threat, as according to the law which organizes levels one to four in our country,” Michel said.

Belgian officials subsequently issued several contradictory statements about the character of the threat. On Saturday, *Le Soir* cited police reports that two terrorists were in Brussels, transporting a bomb like the ones detonated outside the Stade de France in Paris during the November 13 attacks.

At a Sunday press conference with the ministers of justice, defense, interior and foreign affairs, Michel again implied that a substantially larger terrorist operation was involved. “We fear an attack like that in Paris that could take place anywhere in the country, with several individuals launching attacks simultaneously in several locations,” he said. “The threat is considered to be serious and imminent, like yesterday.”

The Paris terror attacks have provoked a serious crisis for the unpopular and reactionary Michel government. While it is seeking to profit from the police hysteria unleashed after the Paris attacks and to burnish the MR-NVA’s law-and-order credentials, it is also under

increasing attack internationally after reports emerged that several ISIS attackers came to Paris from Belgium.

The Michel government is an unstable coalition between Michel's small, free-market francophone Reform Movement (MR) and various right-wing and far-right Flemish parties led by the Flemish-separatist New Flemish Alliance (NVA). Over the last year, it had been hit by repeated protest strikes amid mounting anger in the working class over its austerity policies. It also attracted criticisms due to its far-right sympathies.

Interior Minister Jan Jambon (NVA) provoked a scandal last year after reports emerged of his 2001 meeting with the Sint-Maartenfonds, an organization of veterans of the Belgian SS forces who fought for the Nazis against the USSR during World War II. Jambon gave an interview in *La Libre Belgique* downplaying the collaboration with Nazism in Belgium, declaring, "The people who collaborated with the Germans had their reasons." He called the collaboration an "error," because afterwards "the Flemish nationalist movement was isolated for decades."

In his address to the Belgian parliament on Thursday, Michel struck a bellicose tone against Islamist fighters returning to Europe from the Syrian war, declaring, "Jihadists who are coming back, they belong in the prisons."

At the same time, however, he felt compelled to answer escalating attacks from French officials, who have blamed Brussels for the stunning failure of French intelligence to detect the November 13 attackers (see: Paris terrorists operated "in plain sight"). They claimed that Belgian authorities did not warn them about the attackers living in Brussels' Molenbeek district—an area with around 100,000 inhabitants, a large immigrant community and high unemployment.

The increasingly hysterical tone in the French media is epitomized by the remark of Eric Zemmour, the radio commentator and far-right propagandist, who called for France to bomb Belgium: "Instead of bombing Raqqa [the capital of the IS-held area of Syria], France should bomb Molenbeek, where the commandos of Friday the 13th came from."

On Thursday, Michel declared, "I do not accept the criticisms that have been made of our security services," adding that the responsibility of French officials was at least as high as that of their Belgian counterparts.

The fighting between officials in Brussels and Paris underscores that the Paris attacks and the current police clampdowns across Europe are the product of NATO's backing of Islamist militias in a war for regime change against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Enjoying unofficial support from European authorities, they were able to recruit several thousand youth from across Europe to the war in Syria.

Philippe Moureaux, a former mayor of Molenbeek, gave an interview to *Le Soir* expressing regret for aiding the anti-Assad militias from which ISIS emerged. "When the first people left to go to Syria, we were almost encouraging them, because they were going to fight a monster. We did not understand the risks. We have not done enough for the youth and, again, I bear some responsibility for this," he said.

Now that these forces are returning to Europe, however, unpopular governments across Europe are seizing upon the attacks they are carrying out to launch draconian attacks on the democratic rights of the population. After French authorities imposed a three-month state of emergency suspending basic democratic rights and are moving to permanently write the state of emergency into the French constitution, the Belgian government has announced its own raft of security measures.

The government is planning to grant itself new powers to impose extraordinary measures during a state of emergency, to develop a "prevention and repression plan" for the Molenbeek area and expand police powers for search and seizure as well as for surveillance. Other measures include a €400 million increase in security spending, reinforced border controls, 520 more military positions and eliminating anonymous prepaid calling cards.



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