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The US-NATO war in Syria and the Brussels terror attacks

By Alex Lantier
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As revelations mount of police foreknowledge of the March 22 Brussels bombings, the central question that is emerging is why the security forces of Belgium and its NATO allies did not move to stop the attacks. That the Belgian state had detailed prior knowledge of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) network that carried out the bombings is emerging in numerous press reports.

On Sunday, the *Sunday Times* carried an interview with Alexandrino Rodrigues, the landlord of the flat in the Schaerbeek neighbourhood where the March 22 attackers raised suspicions by releasing chemical odours as they built the bombs they later took to Zaventem Airport. Police had previously gone to the apartment and knocked on the door, apparently without entering. “There were investigations before and after the events” of March 22, Rodrigues said, adding, “You can’t catch a rabbit without knowing where it lives.”

Police rapidly moved on the Schaerbeek apartment after the airport bombings, sealing it off only 90 minutes after the attack. Police said they had been alerted by a tip from the taxi driver who drove the bombers to the airport. However, the taxi driver subsequently contradicted this account, saying he had alerted police only after a photo of the attackers was released several hours later, leaving unexplained how police reacted so quickly.

This story, the *New York Times* wrote, is “raising questions about whether the police had perhaps already had the building in their sights but, for some reason, had not moved in and smashed through the front door of the sixth-floor apartment until it was too late.”

This news came after Friday’s reports that police knew the location of the hideout of Salah Abdeslam, the ISIS fugitive wanted in the November 13 terror attacks in Paris, throughout the four months in which he was described as “Europe’s most wanted” man, until his capture on March 18. Police did not try to apprehend him for the entire period. Once he was captured, moreover, he received only a perfunctory two-hour interrogation. Though he knew several of the March 22 attackers, including Najim Laachraoui, he was reportedly not asked whether any other attacks were being prepared.

The *New York Times*’ characterization of these events as a “trail of dots not connected,” echoing the official position of the Belgian government, does not hold water. In reality, this attack, like the two ISIS attacks in Paris last year, are the product of the reckless and reactionary decision of Washington and its major European allies to mobilize Islamist militias to wage a proxy war for regime change in Syria.

For years, a small army of European Islamist fighters has been traveling back and forth between Europe and Syria to carry out raids and terror bombings aimed at destabilizing and toppling President Bashar al-Assad’s government. A Europe1 report last December, citing the New York-based private intelligence firm Soufan Group, estimated the number of foreign Islamist fighters in Syria at between 27,000 and 31,000. These included 5,000 Europeans, with 1,700 from France alone.

Other major contributors were the Maghreb, with 8,000 fighters (including 6,000 from Tunisia), the Middle East, with over 8,000 fighters (including 2,500 Saudis), and Russia and Central Asia, with 4,500 (including 2,400 Russians).

Such a vast and undisturbed flow of fighters could not proceed without the knowledge of the intelligence agencies, many of which have worked closely with these proxy forces in Syria to plan attacks on Assad’s troops and on Syrian civilians. This is why those leading the major ISIS attacks in Europe—the Kouachi brothers who attacked *Charlie Hebdo*, November 13 attack leader Abdelhamid Abaaoud, and the El Bakraoui brothers in Brussels—were to a man well known to the security services. It is evident that protocols were in place for their movements to proceed unhindered, so they could plan and execute attacks.

“Europe knew exactly what was happening, but they started a blame game and said the entire problem was on the Turkish-Syrian border,” a senior Turkish security official told the *Guardian*.

This official complained that European intelligence agencies did not help Ankara track European Islamists arriving in Turkey to go to Syria, and even helped Islamist fighters deported from Turkey return there, the *Guardian* reported, quoting him as saying, “Without European intelligence backing, [Turkey] could only prosecute them for attempting to illegally cross into Syria and deport them back to Europe. Some of those deported were later given new passports and allowed to travel back to Turkey.”

The handful of alleged ISIS accomplices, logistical aides and document forgers now being arrested in police raids—seven in Brussels, two in Paris, several more in Germany and Italy—are a tiny part of the vast network built up during NATO’s war in Syria. Viewed in this context, European officials’ carefully worded statements on the attacks make clear that their security forces are badly stretched by the Islamist operations they have unleashed.

“We have had results to find the terrorists and, both in Brussels and in Paris, there have been a certain number of arrests that took place,” French President François Hollande said Friday, “but we know there are other networks. Even if the network that committed the Paris and Brussels attacks is on the way to being annihilated, a threat remains.”

“The threat is unprecedented, and intelligence and domestic law enforcement agencies appear to be overwhelmed by the numbers involved,” said Aaron Stein of the Atlantic Council think tank.

The conflict is all the more bitter because, through the Brussels attacks, ISIS is intervening in a raging debate over the war within the foreign policy establishments of the NATO powers, fuelled by the stark reversals suffered by their proxy forces at the hands of Syrian government forces backed by Russian air power.

These conflicts emerged publicly on Saturday with reports that a Pentagon-backed ethnic Kurdish militia, the Syrian Democratic Forces, was engaging in gun battles with an Arab Islamist militia backed by the CIA and Turkey, the Fursan al-Haq (“Army of Righteousness”). This brought US military and Turkish officials to “loggerheads,” the *Los Angeles Times* wrote.

Turkey fears that Syrian Democratic Forces victories in Syria could lead to the formation of an independent Kurdish state on Turkey’s southern border, stoking up separatist sentiment among Kurds across the border in Turkey itself.

As these conflicts erupt on the ground in Syria, correspondingly violent debates are proceeding behind the scenes in the offices and agencies of the major NATO powers, as they debate how to respond to the Russian military intervention in Syria.

The Syrian government, which recently recaptured Palmyra, has been vastly strengthened by Russian operations and airstrikes. Speaking yesterday on CBS News’ “Face the Nation” program upon his return from talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva, US Secretary of State John Kerry indicated that Washington was considering taking a more conciliatory stance toward Russia.

Kerry said, “Russia has helped to bring about the Iran nuclear agreement, Russia helped to get the chemical weapons out of Syria. Russia is now helping with the cessation of hostilities [in Syria]. And if Russia can help us to actually effect this political transition—that is all to the strategic interests of the United States of America.”

Such proposals pose a deadly threat to ISIS, its fighters in Syria, and its recruiting networks and operatives internationally, all of which are products of the US-led imperialist wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria. The Brussels attacks have the character of a bloody signal from ISIS that, due to its

substantial logistical infrastructure within Europe, it can retaliate against Russian airstrikes and a possible cut-off of NATO support in Syria with deadly terror attacks in Europe and beyond.

The victims of such atrocities, and the criminal policies of the imperialist powers that ultimately spawned them, are innocent civilians across the Middle East and North Africa, and increasingly within Europe itself.