

# Belgium and the Netherlands Ring in the New Year under the Shadow of Terrorism

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For the first time in decades, there were no fireworks illuminating the sky of Belgium's capital during the New Year celebrations. A few days earlier, the Belgian government had decided that—due to the increased risk of a terrorist attack—the annual event where thousands gather in front of the King's palace would be cancelled. In the Grand Place, the main square of Brussels, policemen watched every suspect movement. The national airport, the metro and train stations were also under rigid surveillance.

The fear of a terrorist attack surfaced just before Christmas when, on December 21, police forces arrested 14 persons allegedly plotting the escape of Nizar Trabelsi (La Dernière Heure, December 22, 2007). Trabelsi, a former professional soccer player, was arrested on September 13, 2001 and in 2004 was sentenced to 10 years in prison for plotting an attack on the military base of Kleine Brogel, in northern Belgium. Among those arrested in the alleged breakout plot was Malika al-Aroud, the widow of one of the suicide bombers who killed Afghan commander Ahmed Shah Massoud.

The 14 suspects were released 24 hours later due to lack of evidence. No plans, weapons or explosives were discovered during the investigations (La Libre Belgique, December 22, 2007). Following the arrests, the government raised the alert level to four—the maximum level—until January 2.

In the neighboring Netherlands, the threat of terrorism also marked New Year's Eve after three men were arrested on December 31 in Rotterdam. According to inside sources, they were planning an attack on crowds around Rotterdam's Erasmus Bridge (De Telegraaf, January 3). Two of the suspects are Moroccan-Dutch, the other is Sudanese. They are still in custody.

In both countries, however, many accuse the authorities of exaggerating the terrorist threat. In the Netherlands, the public prosecution department dismissed the allegations that the three suspects were planning an attack (De Volkskrant, January 4); the threat, the department said, was "plucked from thin air" (DutchNews, January 4). No explosives or weapons were found in the homes of the three detainees. Therefore, the Dutch National Coordinator for Anti-Terrorism decided—contrary to his Belgian counterpart—not to raise the alert level or take any additional measures (Xinhua, January 4).

Suspensions are also increasing in Belgium concerning the seriousness of the threat. "Was the terrorist threat real?" asked *Le Soir* on January 2, observing the absence of any sign of attack. Yet the authorities insist that if suspects were ready to use weapons and explosives to liberate Trabelsi, they could also use those arms for "other purposes" (*L'Echo*, December 22, 2007). So far, the escape plan has yet to be proven and the weapons and explosives have yet to be found. As the government refuses to give more information on the ongoing investigation, the evidence of a terrorist threat is shrinking.

The opposition has accused the new government of overstating the threat of terrorism in order to consolidate its legitimacy. A transition administration was constituted on December 23 because no government could be formed within nearly 200 days of the elections. At least two senators and one representative have decided to request a study from the Comité R—the organization in charge of monitoring the

intelligence community—to evaluate the threat of terrorism in Belgium.

The specter of the threat—exaggerated or not—shed new light on the necessity for new measures to effectively fight terrorism in Belgium. The anti-terrorist division of the police forces has publicly acknowledged that it is unable to fill 30 positions that will be open to civilians (RTBF, January 3). Simultaneously, Minister of the Interior Patrick Dewael has asked Parliament to give more power to the Sûreté de l'Etat—the main intelligence agency—in matters of eavesdropping, recording, investigation and infiltration (RTBF, January 5). Dewael also underscored the work of the Organ for Threat Analysis and Coordination (OCAM) that discovered the potential threat. OCAM was created in 2007 in order to facilitate coordination within the intelligence community. However, according to a recent report, OCAM is lacking personnel, including analysts and experts, as well as a secure communications network (De Standaard, January 10; L'Echo January 9).

In response to the criticisms of the political opposition, Dewael said in an interview to De Standaard that “matters such as terrorism are too serious for the political game. People who make the evaluation of the threat do so in total serenity... If we had allowed the fireworks display to go ahead in Brussels and something had happened, then [the opposition] would have been the first to accuse us of a lack of political courage for not cancelling it” (De Standaard, January 5).

The Netherlands has been relatively terrorism-free since 1975, when South Moluccan terrorists attacked a commuter train and seized hostages at the Indonesian embassy. The 2004 assassination of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a self-described jihadi is an indication that tensions may be rising within the country. By contrast, Belgium has suffered terrorist strikes from a variety of sources over the last decades. In 1980, Said al-Nasr—a Palestinian—threw two hand grenades into a group

of Jewish children in Antwerp. The Communist Combatant Cells (CCC), sympathetic to West Germany's Red Army Faction, carried out a series of attacks in 1984-85. In September 2006, 17 members—including 11 soldiers—of the Flemish neo-Nazi organization Bloed, Bodem, Eer en Trouw (Blood, Soil, Honor and Loyalty, or BBET) were arrested on suspicion of preparing terrorist attacks. Belgian citizens Mosa Zi Zemmori and Mesut Sen were captured in the Afghan-Pakistani border region and are incarcerated at the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay. In recent years there have been other significant examples: the Nizar Trabelsi case in 2001, the "Asparagus" case in 2004—which saw the arrest of individuals related to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group in Belgium—and the case of Muslim convert Muriel Degauque, who in 2005 became the first European female suicide bomber to kill herself in Iraq.

There is some reason to believe that the terrorist threat is relatively high in both Belgium and the Netherlands. To begin with, some terrorist networks seem to have found fertile ground in both countries. Second, Brussels and Amsterdam have sent troops to Afghanistan, which could motivate attacks domestically. Finally, Belgium is particularly worried as it hosts many offices of the European Union (EU) as well as NATO's headquarters.

This is not to say, however, that an attack is imminent or even unavoidable. It is uncertain, for instance, to what degree EU or NATO facilities are priority targets of al-Qaeda. Clearly, both Belgium and the Netherlands have realized that more has to be done in counterterrorism in order to maintain the safety of their territory. In Belgium, despite some recent successful police operations, the means seem especially inadequate compared to the potential and actual threat. The judicial system is still relatively weak on terrorism; for instance, the maximum sentence for a terrorist plot is 10 years. The intelligence community needs to adapt as well—more experts are needed. Finally, as both countries adapt their counterterrorist strategies, a balance between security and civil liberties, a very sensitive issue, will have to be found.