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EUROPE

Sweep Leads to 5 Arrests, a Foiled Plot and a Paris-Brussels Connection

By LILIA BLAISE and AURELIEN BREEDEN MARCH 25, 2016

BRUSSELS — Counterterrorism officials widened a sweep targeting suspected Islamic State operatives to several European countries on Friday, reporting newly uncovered links between the Brussels and Paris massacres, at least five arrests and the foiling of what France described as an advanced plan for another attack.

The actions reflected both new momentum from information uncovered since the Brussels bombings on Tuesday and deep worries about missed opportunities to thwart the attacks. European officials, particularly in Belgium, have come under strong criticism for lapses that might have enabled the Brussels plotters to succeed.

President François Hollande of France, who has declared a state of war with the Islamic State, praised the police work carried out in recent days but said that “we know that there are other networks” affiliated with the extremist organization and lurking in Europe.

“Even if the one that carried out the attacks in Paris and in Brussels is in

the process of being wiped out — with a certain number of its members arrested — there is always a threat weighing upon us,” Mr. Hollande said in Paris.

His warnings were reinforced by a newly released Islamic State propaganda video featuring what were described as two fighters from Belgium, apparently speaking from Iraqi territory seized by the organization and celebrating the Brussels attacks. “This is just the beginning of your nightmare,” one fighter proclaims, according to a translation by the SITE Intelligence Group, which tracks extremist organizations.

While European investigators already had established numerous links between suspects in the Paris and Brussels attacks, the Belgian prosecutor’s office confirmed the most direct connection on Friday. It said DNA matches showed that one of the bombers who blew himself up at Brussels Airport had been a bomb maker who helped produce two suicide vests used in the November Paris attacks, which killed 130 people.

The man identified as the bomb maker — Najim Laachraoui, 24, a Belgian citizen — has been described by the Belgian prosecutor’s office as an accomplice of Salah Abdeslam, 26, who was captured in Belgium on March 18 and charged with terrorist murder. Mr. Abdeslam is thought to be the sole surviving direct participant in the Paris attacks, and his arrest appeared to have accelerated the plot that culminated in the attack on Brussels, which killed 31 people.

Mr. Laachraoui traveled to Syria in February 2013, the prosecutor’s office said. Last September, while using a false identity card, he and Mr. Abdeslam were stopped at the Hungarian-Austrian border, but not detained, according to the prosecutor’s office. He rented a house in Auvelais, Belgium, that the attackers used, and traces of his DNA were found in an apartment in the Schaerbeek section of Brussels that he used as a bomb-making lab, the prosecutor’s office said.

On Monday — three days after Mr. Abdeslam was captured in Molenbeek, the Brussels neighborhood where he grew up — the authorities asked for the public's help in finding Mr. Laachraoui. A day later, he blew himself up at Brussels Airport, along with another suicide bomber, Ibrahim el-Bakraoui, 29.

News agencies widely reported Mr. Laachraoui's death, but officials awaited DNA results before confirming it. On Friday, the federal prosecutor in Brussels not only confirmed the death, but also disclosed that Mr. Laachraoui's DNA had been found on suicide vests detonated in Paris.

The investigation also spread to Germany, where officials reported a suspected link between Mr. Bakraoui and a 28-year-old German in Düsseldorf who had ties to Islamist extremists and was about to serve a prison term for robbery. He was arrested Thursday night to prevent him from fleeing to Syria, according to the prosecutor's office for the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.

Turkey deported the German man and Mr. Bakraoui to the Netherlands last year on the same flight, German news agencies and security officials said. "It is not clear whether they knew each other and, if so, how well," said Ralf Herrenbrück, a spokesman for the state prosecutor's office.

German officials also disclosed on Friday that they had arrested a 28-year-old Moroccan, who had a criminal record in Italy, during a routine identity check at a train station in Giessen, near Frankfurt. The man appeared to have circumstantial links to the Paris and Brussels assailants, the officials said.

He was hospitalized for an unexplained injury on March 18 — the day Mr. Abdeslam was arrested in Brussels — the public broadcaster ARD reported. The Moroccan man carried a cellphone with a text message with the word "fin" (French for "end") that was received on Tuesday, shortly before the attacks in Brussels, ARD reported.

According to the weekly newsmagazine Der Spiegel, another text message

on the phone contained the name of Khalid el-Bakraoui, 27 — Ibrahim's younger brother and the man identified as the suicide bomber at the Brussels subway station on Tuesday.

“Law enforcement authorities have been examining whether a connection to the attacks in Brussels exists and, if so, to what extent,” Thomas Hauburger of the a state prosecutor's office in Giessen said.

News agencies across Europe — in Spain and the Netherlands, as well as France and Belgium — reported that European intelligence authorities were searching for a Syrian, Naim al-Hamed, as part of the investigations into the Brussels attacks. Mr. Hamed, 28, was said to be linked to Mr. Laachraoui, Khalid el-Bakraoui and a third suspect, Mohamed Abrini, who is sought by the authorities.

On Thursday, the French police arrested Reda Kriket, who, according to court records, is a jihadist who raised money for a network of militants in 2012 and '13 and traveled to Syria in late 2014. Mr. Kriket was well known to the security services in both France and Belgium, and he was named in a 2015 court proceeding along with Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the on-the-ground chief planner of the Paris attacks.

In July, Mr. Kriket was convicted in absentia in Belgium of terrorist activities and possession of stolen goods.

After Mr. Kriket's arrest, the French interior minister, Bernard Cazeneuve, said Mr. Kriket had been involved in the “advanced stages” of a new terrorist plot. It was unclear whether that plot was directly connected to the attacks in Paris or Brussels.

In Brussels on Friday, the police arrested three men for questioning in connection with Mr. Kriket's arrest. One was shot and arrested in the Schaerbeek neighborhood, which was still unnerved from the bombings.

Ali Oucar, 29, was at a nearby Ladbroke's sports betting parlor when the man was shot. "I saw the police in front of the Meiser train station, shouting to a guy, 'Open your vest!'" Mr. Oucar said. "The guy was with a kid. He refused to open the vest, and the police shot him twice."

The Belgian government is under pressure for failures in intelligence, law enforcement and information-sharing that may have allowed Brussels to become a hub for militants to plot attacks in Europe. Interior Minister Jan Jambon and Justice Minister Koen Geens offered to resign after the Brussels bombings, but Prime Minister Charles Michel asked them to stay.

The Belgian officials have acknowledged some serious missteps, mostly notably their inaction on an alert last year from Turkey about Ibrahim el-Bakraoui, who had been detained in the town of Gaziantep, near the Syria border, on suspicion of terrorist activity. After the Belgian authorities did not follow up, Turkey deported Mr. Bakraoui at his request to the Netherlands, where officials have said they were not aware he was considered dangerous. Mr. Bakraoui's brother was the target of an arrest warrant issued in December, in connection with the Paris attacks. He, too, evaded capture.

Both brothers had been granted early release from prison after being incarcerated for crimes unrelated to terrorist activity.

At a parliamentary hearing on Friday, Mr. Jambon told lawmakers that he took responsibility but that subordinates had also been negligent. Mr. Geens said the Belgian penal authorities had no problems with the Bakraoui brothers, who had cooperated until they were released and then dropped from sight.

"Nevertheless," Mr. Geens told the hearing, "I would like to say that we cannot exclude that if everyone had done their job to perfection, a certain number of things would have unfolded differently."

Correction: March 25, 2016

An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of Belgium's justice minister in some references. He is Koen Geens, not Keens.

Lilia Blaise reported from Brussels, and Aurelien Breeden from Paris. Reporting was contributed by Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura from Brussels, Melissa Eddy and Alison Smale from Berlin, Benoît Morenne from Paris, Sewell Chan from London, Eric Schmitt from Washington, and Rukmini Callimachi, Neil Collier and Rick Gladstone from New York.

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