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Belgian Police Arrest Two on Terrorism Charges

Prosecutors say the arrest potentially broke up a planned terror attack in Brussels during the holiday season

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BRUSSELS—Belgian authorities said Tuesday they had potentially broken up a plan for attacks during the holiday period, holding two people on terrorism charges and seizing military-style clothing and Islamic State propaganda.

Among the intended targets were the Grand Place, the capital's central square and site of its largest Christmas market, and a nearby police station, according to a person briefed on the investigations.

Parts of the city's New Year's Eve celebrations are also scheduled to take place in the area, but authorities said they didn't have information about a specific date when the attacks were supposed to take place.

The arrests were made amid stepped-up antiterrorism operations by Belgian authorities in the aftermath of the Nov. 13 Paris attacks. Since those attacks, Belgium has conducted dozens of raids and questioned scores of people.

While Belgian federal prosecutors said there were currently no links between those

investigations and the two new arrests, they said they would continue to look for any connections in the continuing investigation.

Few details of the arrests or investigation were released, but prosecutors said there was a serious indication of planned terror attacks at several prominent locations in Brussels.

Belgium's Crisis Center, a federal agency that assesses terrorism threats, advised police stations across Brussels to be on heightened alert. The person briefed on the investigation said authorities believed police and military personnel, who have become a common presence on Brussels streets, were to be the targets of the intended attacks.

Prosecutors said Islamic State propaganda was found during one of a series of raids, and one of the two men, described as having a leadership role, was additionally charged with attempting to recruit people into a terror group.

They said it was too early to tell whether the men were simply inspired by Islamic State or have direct ties to the group.



Belgian police officers patrol along 'Winter Wonders,' a Christmas market in central Brussels on Sunday. Prosecutors say there was a serious indication of a planned terror attack in Brussels during holiday festivities. *PHOTO: REUTERS*

There were contradictory signs about how grave the threat was. Prosecutors said there was a plot to attack during end-of-the-year holiday celebrations, but they didn't find any explosives or arms.

The reaction to the purported attack was far more subdued than in late November, when authorities feared there would be a Paris-style attack in Brussels. Then authorities locked down large swaths of the city for four days, closing schools, shutting down public transportation and canceling sporting and cultural events.

In the wake of the lockdown, some Belgians said the government overreacted, needlessly raising widespread alarm and fears.

Several of the Paris attackers were from Brussels, including the fugitive Salah Abdeslam, who is now the subject of an international manhunt. Belgian authorities came under criticism for not being aggressive enough in their investigations, a charge they disputed.

Raids and arrests since the attacks have come at a quickening pace in Belgium.

The two people arrested were among six people police initially detained in a series of police raids Sunday and Monday in Brussels, Liège and the Flanders region of Belgium, prosecutors said.

Unlike the November lockdown, when large events were canceled, Brussels plans to go ahead with its New Year's Eve celebrations, which will include a fireworks display, a sound-and-light show and a DJ, said a spokeswoman for the capital. As part of additional security measures, eventgoers will only be able to access the site in the city center from a few entry points.

Some Belgians questioned whether authorities had managed to foil a plot or only announced the arrests in an effort to appear as if they were making headway in the terrorism investigations.

"Who knows if it's true" that there was a plot to attack Brussels, said Brecht Van Dam, 30, a hairdresser in Brussels. "If they found guns and weapons it would be different."

Others shrugged off the news of the arrests.

"A terrorist attack could happen any day," said Bernard Barette, 53. "We shouldn't panic, because if we do, we don't live anymore."

Since the lockdown, life has largely returned to normal in the Belgian capital, albeit with an increased presence of police and military personnel in shopping areas, hotels and government offices.

Across Europe, leaders have been under pressure to expand intelligence sharing, and have announced some initiatives to better track foreign fighters.

At the European Union summit in December, leaders pledged to move forward on various languishing initiatives to improve intelligence sharing, expand and improve systematic border checks and take action on proposals to crack down on illegal

automatic weapons.

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