

Paris terror attack suspect Salah Abdeslam arrested in Brussels

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Salah Abdeslam, a suspect in the November 13 terror attacks in Paris carried out by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militia, was arrested in Brussels on Friday. Astonishingly, the figure described for four months since the attacks as Europe's most wanted man, who had likely fled from Brussels to Syria, was in the basement of a house only a few hundred meters from his parents' apartment, in the heavily-monitored Molenbeek district of Brussels.

On March 15, police officers arriving at an apartment in the Forest district of Brussels for a search that, according to French police sources, targeted "the entourage" of some of the 11 men already arrested for complicity with the planning of the November 13 attacks. Policemen were nevertheless surprised when they were met by gunshots and an ensuing shoot-out during which Mohamed Belkaid, a 35-year-old Algerian, was killed by a police sniper. Two men fled over the rooftops during the gun battle, in which four policemen were injured.

Belkaid was staying illegally in Belgium, and his name was on the list of 22,000 ISIS fighters published by Sky News on March 10. Nonetheless, Belgian Justice Minister Koen Geens told VRT News, this did not mean that he was followed by the OCAM (Organ of Coordination for Threat Analysis), the Belgian anti-terror authority.

Abdeslam's fingerprints were found in the apartment in which Belkaid was killed, and police began tracking the cell phones of the two men who fled the building during the attacks, one of whom was Abdeslam. Remarkably, Abdeslam did not get rid of his phone or SIM card during or after the encounter with police, but continued using them, allowing police to track him through his phone.

Then came the March 17 burial of Abdeslam's

brother, Brahim, who died carrying out one of the suicide bombings in Paris. One of the men at the funeral, Abid Aberkan, was under surveillance by police as an Islamist and received a phone call from Abdeslam during the funeral, asking where to hide. Aberkan reportedly suggested that Abdeslam hide in his mother's apartment, where Abdeslam was shot in the knee and captured during a police raid the next day.

As he was caught, Abdeslam reportedly shouted out his name; police confirmed his identity shortly afterwards by analysis of his fingerprints.

Abdeslam's lawyer, Sven Mary, said he is cooperating with police but will contest attempts to extradite him to France, based on a European arrest warrant issued by French authorities. "France is asking for his extradition. I can tell you that we will refuse the extradition to France," said Mary.

It remains entirely unclear how Abdeslam can have prepared the November 13 attacks without the knowledge of police and intelligence agencies, or fled and hid in Brussels for four months after the attacks.

Intelligence and security officials said that Abdeslam had broader assistance, apparently beyond ISIS' Islamist connections, in order to escape security forces for so long in a heavily-watched city. Belgian Foreign Minister Didier Reynders said Abdeslam had help from "friends, and also criminal networks."

"To last on the run for four months, he manifestly had to rely on several networks of support. He had friends in criminal circles, others from the radicalized Islamist milieu, and then his childhood and neighborhood acquaintances," Louis Caprioli, the former counterterrorist chief at the French Directorate of Territorial Security (DST), told AFP.

In the final analysis, however, the central issue that is raised by these investigations is the role of the NATO

powers' imperialist war in Syria and of Europe itself. In the year before the November 13 attacks, Abdeslam became well-known to European authorities, who documented his ties to Islamist terrorist forces. He was arrested in January 2015 by Turkish authorities, who blocked him from traveling on to Syria and deported him to Belgium, after which Belgian intelligence identified him as a threat.

Abdeslam nonetheless was still allowed to travel across Europe, even after he had been deported by Turkey. On August 4, Greek authorities in Patras investigated him as he traveled together with Ahmed Dhamani, who was in contact with ISIS in Turkey. In October, he was investigated by German authorities in Ulm, as he traveled with another suspect holding false Belgian and Syrian papers in the name of Mounir Ahmed Alaaj and Amine Choukri.

According to another recent report in *La Dernière Heure* and *Het Latste Nieuws*, a police informant in Molenbeek in 2014 warned Belgian federal police officers that the Abdeslam brothers were “totally radicalized” and were preparing to go fight in Syria and prepared to carry out attacks. The report was passed on from a vacationing police agent to his superiors, who did not act on it, however, claiming the information was not sufficiently concrete.

Nonetheless, Abdeslam was allowed to travel to Paris apparently without hindrance, together with other ISIS figures preparing the November 13 attacks. These included Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a Belgian who became one of ISIS' best-known spokesmen on Facebook after joining the militia in 2013, and reportedly had operational control of ISIS forces during the November 13 attack.

There are conflicting reports of where Abdeslam was and what role he played during the November 13 attacks, though it appears that he considered and then rejected carrying out a suicide attack. His lawyer has stated that he was present during the Paris attacks.

The entire city of Brussels was placed on lockdown immediately afterwards, as police hunted Abdeslam, having tracked his cell phone from Paris to Brussels. As the accounts of his capture make clear, while he was in hiding, he was calling Islamist sympathizers watched by police—that is, he was hardly acting in such a way as to be invisible to the authorities.

Whatever precise series of events led to Abdeslam's

arrest, this record, taken as a whole, underscores that the key factor behind these attacks is official complacency toward ISIS operatives in Europe. As millions of refugees fleeing the Middle East face a brutal crackdown and the threat of mass deportation in Europe, and Muslims in France confront escalating repression after the January *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, leaders and associates of ISIS in Europe continue to enjoy lenient treatment.

This is rooted in the foreign policy pursued by France and all the NATO powers in Syria, arming Islamist militias in a war to topple President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Prior to the November 13 attacks, French officials justified France's decision not to bomb ISIS in Syria, but only in Iraq, by stating that ISIS was the strongest force in the war against Assad.

At the same time, the so-called “war on terror” is cynically used to justify escalating police-state measures at home. Predictably, officials are responding to Abdeslam's arrest, which Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel hailed as a “success against terrorism,” as a justification for handing over more power to police to continue the escalating series of raids and lockdowns since November 13.

French President François Hollande said, “Salah Abdeslam was directly involved in the organization and perpetration of these attacks. ... Although this arrest is an important stage, it is not the final conclusion of this story, because there have been arrests already. And there will have to be more because we know that the network was quite widespread, in Belgium, in France, and in other countries of Europe as well.”



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