

# Intelligence accounts raise more questions on origins of Brussels, Paris attacks

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Accounts of US and European intelligence's monitoring of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) make ever clearer that the key ingredient in ISIS terror attacks in Brussels and last year in Paris was the support of factions of the NATO countries' intelligence apparatus for ISIS in the war in Syria.

As NATO officials sought to use ISIS militias and terror attacks to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and to discredit Assad's accusations that they was supporting terrorists in Syria, they ignored mounting signs that ISIS was developing a broad terror network in Europe. This reckless policy led to substantial infighting inside the intelligence services, which was however hidden from the public.

On March 22 in Brussels, ISIS operatives identified as terrorists to state authorities, the El Bakraoui brothers, were able to prepare and carry out attacks, even though Belgian officials had been warned of the timing and targets of the attacks. Now, as NATO powers debate a shift towards pro-Russian forces and away from ISIS in Syria, factional infighting in the intelligence apparatus is erupting into the open. This is the content of yesterday's lengthy *New York Times* feature article, titled "How ISIS built the machinery of terror under Europe's gaze."

The article is based on internal documents and testimony of US and French intelligence operatives of how they monitored ISIS operatives returning to Europe from Syria and apprehended several preparing attacks in Europe. It presents extended accounts of the travel plans, social media postings, and political views of several European recruits to ISIS who were preparing attacks in Europe, making clear that ISIS is thoroughly penetrated and monitored by NATO intelligence agencies. This makes it all the remarkable that ISIS was allowed to repeatedly carry out large-scale attacks in Europe.

The *Times* notes, "Officials now say the signs of this focused terrorist machine were readable in Europe as far back as early 2014. Yet local authorities repeatedly discounted each successive plot, describing them as isolated or random acts, the connection to the Islamic State either

overlooked or played down."

In fact, sections of the intelligence establishment were aware and concerned from shortly after the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011 that the Islamist militias they were mobilizing against Assad would organize terror attacks not only in Syria, but also in Europe.

The *Times* cites retired US General Michael T. Flynn, the leader of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) from 2012 to 2014. Flynn was a key source in a report by Seymour Hersh in the *London Review of Books* in January, detailing contacts of US military intelligence with Russian and Syrian officials, which the DIA hoped to use in a war against ISIS.

Flynn tells the *Times*, "This didn't all of a sudden pop up in the last six months. They have been contemplating external attacks ever since the group moved into Syria in 2012."

These signals included the May 24, 2014 shooting at the Jewish Museum in Brussels carried out by Mehdi Nemmouche, an ISIS fighter from nearby Roubaix, in France. The *Times* notes, "Even when the police found a video in his possession, in which he claimed responsibility for the attack next to a flag bearing the words 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,' Belgium's deputy prosecutor, Ine Van Wymersch, dismissed any connection. 'He probably acted alone,' she told reporters at the time."

In fact, a review of Nemmouche's phone records by the intelligence agencies showed that he was in close touch with Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the public face of ISIS' social media recruiting operations, who subsequently led the November 13 ISIS attack in Paris.

The *Times* writes, "In the months before the Jewish museum attack, Mr. Nemmouche's phone records reveal that he made a 24-minute call to Mr. Abaaoud, according to a 55-page report by the French National Police's anti-terror unit in the aftermath of the Paris attacks."

The article follows in detail the movements of ISIS operative Reda Hame, a 29-year-old computer technician from Paris who traveled to Syria in 2014 and volunteered, apparently after some initial reluctance, to return and carry

out terror attacks in Europe. Despite attempts to hide and encrypt his communications with Abaaoud, Hame was apprehended in August of last year before he could carry out any attacks.

He is apparently one of 21 such ISIS operatives who were arrested before carrying out their attacks. “It’s a factory over there,” Hame told French intelligence officials after his arrest, according to the *Times*. “They are doing everything possible to strike France, or else Europe.”

As sections of the intelligence establishment were well aware, a mass of information pointed to the fact that ISIS was preparing terror attacks in Europe. “All the signals were there. For anyone paying attention, these signals became deafening by mid-2014,” adds Michael S. Smith II, a counterterrorism analyst with private firm Kronos Advisory.

The main question that emerges from the *Times*’ account, which it does not even bother to pose, is why intelligence agencies did not pay attention to the “deafening” signs that ISIS was preparing attacks in Europe. This also raises what role state agencies’ decision to downplay these reports played in ISIS’ ability to carry out the Paris and Brussels attacks—against *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, again in Paris in November, and now in Brussels—killing and wounding hundreds in Europe.

The central factor is that in the initial years of the war, there was broad support in the ruling classes of Europe and the United States for a proxy war for regime change against Assad relying on Islamist terror groups. In Europe, protocols were put in place so that thousands of Islamist fighters could travel to the Middle East, to train for war against Assad, with impunity.

Initial reports that NATO proxies were carrying out hundreds of terror bombings, like the report by the Arab League in early 2012, were denounced in the Western media. In the ruling class and reactionary layers of the affluent middle class, there was broad support for an imperialist war against Syria waged via terrorist methods. Middle class pseudo-left groups such as the International Socialist Organization in the United States, the New Anti-capitalist Party in France and the Left Party in Germany enthusiastically promoted war with Syria.

War fever swept the *New York Times*, which published extensive, favorable portrayals of terror attacks in Syria by leading journalists. C.J. Chivers’ August 2012 video report “The Lions of Tawhid” detailed his stay with an Islamist militia, the Lions of Tawhid, that carried out truck bombings and killings near the Syrian city of Aleppo.

After criticisms emerged that the video showed the Lions of Tawhid carrying out a war crime by trying to use a prisoner as an unwitting suicide bomber, Chivers dismissed his critics as supporters of Assad on his blog, *The Gun*:

“Where you stand on this probably depends on who you are. You might support this if you support the rebels and their cause. You won’t much like it if you are a member of a Syrian Mi-8 helicopter crew, or depend upon those aircraft and those crews for medevac and ammunition resupply.”

As these moods and views dominated in ruling circles, intelligence agencies ignored the mounting evidence that ISIS and similar groups linked to Al Qaeda were developing terror networks internationally. This underscores the fact that the main goal of the so-called “war on terror” is regime change and imperialist domination of the Middle East, not fighting terrorism. The *Times* report makes clear that the wars and the division of labor between the intelligence agencies and Islamist fighters have emerged as the main danger of terrorism in Europe today.

A number of questions remain, however, on how it was possible for the *Charlie Hebdo*, November 13, and Brussels attacks to proceed. In all cases, the attackers were high-ranking ISIS or Al Qaeda fighters well known to intelligence services: The Kouachi brothers were under state surveillance and spoke directly to Al Qaeda’s top leadership in the Arabian Peninsula. Abaaoud was known internationally and publicly as a leading ISIS official. And the El Bakraoui brothers in Brussels were violent felons known as terrorists to the intelligence services.

Given that the intelligence services were able to identify and stop more obscure figures such as Reda Hame, it remains inexplicable how such top Islamist fighters were allowed to travel freely across Europe to prepare mass terror attacks.



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