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EUROPE

ISIS Militant Returned to Belgium Before Paris Attacks

By MICHAEL WOLGELENTER JAN. 13, 2016

LONDON — Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the Islamic State militant who the authorities say helped plan the Paris terrorist attacks that killed 130 people, traveled widely across Europe in the lead-up to the attacks.

In recent weeks, investigators have revealed that Mr. Abaaoud, a Belgian citizen who had traveled to Syria to fight for the Islamic State, drove a rental car to Budapest to pick up two friends and even took a ferry to Britain, where he snapped photographs of London landmarks on his cellphone.

On Wednesday, officials in Belgium confirmed what had long been suspected: Mr. Abaaoud returned to his native Belgium, and was there about two months before the attacks on Nov. 13 — despite an international arrest warrant that Belgian authorities issued after they foiled a terrorist plot that Mr. Abaaoud is believed to have organized last January, in the eastern city of Verviers.

The disclosure added to the picture of failures across multiple countries to apprehend Mr. Abaaoud, 26, who died in a raid by French police in St.-Denis,

a northern suburb of Paris, on Nov. 18.

The federal prosecutor's office in Brussels said on Wednesday that it had identified three residences — in essence, safe houses — that were used to prepare for the attacks: an apartment in the Schaerbeek district of Brussels; an apartment in the city of Charleroi, about 40 miles south of Brussels; and a house in Auvelais, a town just east of Charleroi.

Fingerprints belonging to Mr. Abaaoud and Bilal Hadfi — a 20-year-old who was the youngest of the attackers and who blew himself up outside the Stade de France — were found in the Charleroi apartment, which was rented in September by someone who gave a fake name, Maaroufi Ibrahim, the prosecutor's office said. The apartment, on the Rue du Fort in Charleroi, is close to the highway leading north to Brussels and south to France; it is closer to the French border than it is to Brussels.

A search of the apartment in Schaerbeek, officials said, turned up bomb-making material; a precision scale; traces of T.A.T.P., an explosive used in the suicide vests made for the attacks; waist belts; and “a drawing representing a person wearing a large waist belt.”

In the Schaerbeek home, the authorities found fingerprints belonging to Salah Abdeslam — who is the only participant in the attacks believed to be still alive, who has been on the run since the attacks — and traces of Mr. Hadfi's DNA. The apartment was rented on Sept. 1 by a man using the fake name of Fernando Castillo, prosecutors said.

At the home in Auvelais, only mattresses were found. It was rented in October by someone calling himself Soufiane Kayal, an identity used by one of two people whom Mr. Abdeslam picked up in Budapest in early September, prosecutors said.

No weapons were found in any of the residences, which were raided in November and December. All were rented with cash, prosecutors said.

Investigators also said on Wednesday that a Seat Leon, the car which had been used during the Paris attacks, was used to travel near the residences in Charleroi and Auvélais, and that a BMW, rented by a suspect identified as Mohamed B., was used to travel to “the immediate vicinity of all three premises in Schaerbeek, Charleroi and Auvélais.” Mohamed B. is believed to be Mohamed Bakkali, who lived in Auvélais and is one of several men who have been put in preventive detention.

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