

Abrini arrest highlights Paris, Brussels attacks links

Police discover ties between suspects in the two terrorist incidents, several of whom come from Molenbeek area of Belgian capital

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BRUSSELS, Belgium — The arrest of Paris attacks suspect Mohamed Abrini in raids linked to the deadly Brussels airport and metro bombings highlighted Saturday the links between the Islamic State jihadists behind Belgium and France's worst terror outrages.

[Abrini's arrest Friday](#), along with four other suspects, marks an important step in the investigations into the November 13 onslaught which claimed 130 lives in Paris and the March 22 attacks which left 32 dead in Brussels.

In both, several of the suspects came from the largely immigrant Molenbeek neighborhood of Brussels, including Abdelhamid Abaaoud, said to have played a key role in Paris, and Salah Abdeslam, who was arrested on March 18 not far from the family home.

Abdeslam's brother Brahim blew himself up in Paris but for unknown reasons he did not follow suit, fleeing back to Brussels immediately afterwards and eluding police for four months despite a massive manhunt.

The Belgian authorities have faced intense criticism over their handling of the attacks as it emerged many of the suspects were known to police for a long time.

Critics say the government has not done enough to prevent radicalization of Muslim youth in areas such as Molenbeek, with Belgium proportionately the biggest source of foreign fighters going to join IS in Syria.

'The man in the hat'

In a change of tone, Belgium's La Libre daily carried a cartoon Saturday showing a policeman kicking a man holding a hat into a prison cell under the banner: "They criticize the Belgian police but ... Hats off!"

A police video released Thursday (seen above) showed a man wearing a hat and light-colored jacket who was seen with the two airport suicide bombers in the departure hall.

He fled after they blew themselves up and then made his way on foot back into central Brussels, appearing calm and composed before disappearing.

There has been [intense speculation](#) Abrini is the “man in the hat” but the federal prosecutor’s office later [said this could not be confirmed](#).

“Investigators are verifying whether Abrini can be positively identified as being the third person ... the so-called ‘man with the hat’,” a spokesman said at a late Friday press conference.

The two airport bombers have been identified as Ibrahim El Bakraoui and Najim Laachraoui, believed to be the cell’s bomb maker.

Ibrahim’s younger brother Khalid blew himself up at Maalbeek metro station, not far from the European Union quarter in Brussels, shortly after the airport blasts.

Anderlecht arrest

At the press conference Friday, the prosecutor’s spokesman said Abrini had been arrested in Anderlecht, a gritty mixed district.

Two other people were picked up with him but no details were given of them as police operations in the area wound down just before midnight.

Local television stations showed footage of what was said to be Abrini’s arrest, with a man pinned down on the sidewalk by several armed plain-clothed police who bundled the suspect into an unmarked car.

Abrini, a Belgian of Moroccan origin and the last known Paris suspect still at large, was seen at a petrol station north of Paris two days before the attacks with Salah Abdeslam who is now awaiting extradition to France.

The prosecutor’s spokesman named two other suspects arrested Friday as Osama K., who went by the alias of Naim Al Ahmed, and Herve B.M.

He said investigators were trying to determine if Osama K. was the man seen with Khalid El Bakraoui moments before the Maalbeek blast.

The spokesman said this second person was also filmed at a shopping mall in Brussels buying the

bags used in the airport attacks.

Swedish media said Osama K. was Osama Krayem, 23, who grew up in Sweden's southern city of Malmo, and published photographs of him holding a Kalashnikov assault rifle in front of an IS flag said to have been taken in Syria.

Making another link between the Brussels and Paris attacks, the prosecutor's spokesman said Salah Abdeslam had hired the car used to pick up Osama K. in Ulm in Germany and bring him to Belgium in early October.

Abdeslam says he had no knowledge of the Brussels attacks, according to his lawyer, despite having [links to Khalid El Bakraoui](#).

He also knew Laachraoui, who drove to Hungary with Abdeslam in September.

More links between the suspects came to light after the [arrest near Paris](#) last month of Reda Kriket, who police said was planning an attack of "extreme violence."

Two suspects in that case, identified as Abderrahmane A. and Rabah M, were remanded in custody in Belgium on Thursday.

Three other suspects held in connection with the Paris attacks, as well as Abdeslam himself, also had their detentions extended.

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