

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1lwgwGZ>

EUROPE

Paris Attacks Suspect Killed in Shootout Had Plotted Terror for 11 Months

By **ANDREW HIGGINS** and **KIMIKO DE FREYTAS-TAMURA** NOV. 19, 2015

VERVIERS, Belgium — Black smudges and faded traces of gunfire on a red brick rowhouse here in eastern Belgium mark the death foretold of Abdelhamid Abaaoud. It is the spot where, 11 months before the announcement on Thursday that he had been killed outside Paris, he began plotting an elaborate campaign of terror across Europe.

Mr. Abaaoud's inaugural terror mission here ended in disaster for his cause and cost the lives of two of his jihadist friends — both from his old Brussels neighborhood, Molenbeek — when Belgian security forces stormed their hide-out on Jan. 15.

But Mr. Abaaoud was not there. A telephone call he made shortly before the raid in Verviers to pass on instructions to those in the hide-out, a senior Belgian counterterrorism official said, was the last trace anybody had of him until the French police found on Wednesday what turned out to be his mutilated body after an early-morning shootout just north of Paris.

His whereabouts had remained a constant source of mystery and

suspected misinformation from his Islamic State handlers. That was, until the bloody raid in the Paris suburb of St.-Denis revealed the gaping holes in Europe's system of open borders that allowed him to infiltrate France under the noses of the intelligence services across the Continent.

“Not a single piece of intelligence from a European country that he might have transited through before arriving in France was communicated to us suggesting that he might be in Europe and was heading towards France,” the French interior minister, Bernard Cazeneuve, said Thursday at a news conference.

Even as he defended the performance of the French service, Mr. Cazeneuve pleaded for more intelligence sharing, saying, “It is urgent for Europe to come together.”

Along the way, Mr. Abaaoud, 27, is believed to have organized a string of attacks that made him the most talked-about — and, in jihadist circles, feted — terrorist since Osama bin Laden.

French intelligence officials have concluded that Mr. Abaaoud was involved in at least four of six terrorist plots foiled in France since the spring, Mr. Cazeneuve said.

Before his deadly ambitions culminated in the massacres in Paris on Friday that killed 129 people, they included a thwarted attack on a Sunday-morning congregation at a Paris church and an attack on a Paris-bound train this summer that was halted when passengers overpowered the gunman.

The Paris prosecutor, François Molins, said in confirming Mr. Abaaoud's death on Thursday that the delay in identifying the body, which was virtually pulverized, had been because it required fingerprint analysis. “We do not know at this stage whether Abaaoud blew himself up or not,” Mr. Molins's office said.

Also killed in the raid was a woman identified by two French intelligence officials as Hasna Aitboulahcen, 26, who fired on police officers and then blew herself apart with a suicide vest.

While Mr. Abaaoud's death ended one chapter of the intense criminal investigation that began Friday night, a manhunt continued for one of his partners in Friday's attacks, Salah Abdeslam, 26, a French citizen and another friend from Molenbeek.

The Belgian authorities also arrested nine people in a series of raids on Thursday — seven of them as part of an investigation into Bilal Hadfi, 20, also from Molenbeek, who detonated his explosive vest outside the Stade de France in the attacks last week.

Mr. Abaaoud, a former drug dealer from the same borough of Brussels, had been on the radar of Western security forces since early 2014, when he moved to Syria, apparently via Cologne Bonn Airport in Germany, and began starring in ghoulish propaganda videos filmed by the Islamic State.

But he emerged as an immediate menace when he began making telephone calls from Greece with instructions for a terrorist plot to comrades hiding here at No. 32 Rue de la Colline, a sleepy residential street near Belgium's border with Germany.

Belgian security listened in on his calls for days, a senior Belgian counterterrorism official involved in tracking him said.

Describing him as the “hyphen” connecting the militant group in Syria and operatives in Europe, the official said Mr. Abaaoud had been planning to carry out “a huge attack” from Verviers, a down-on-its-luck former industrial town with many immigrants and few jobs.

But in January, tipped off to his plans by the telephone surveillance, Belgian antiterrorism forces stormed the three-story home that two of Mr.

Abaaoud's friends and fellow militants had rented through an intermediary a few weeks earlier.

After a fierce gun battle that foreshadowed the one in St.-Denis that claimed Mr. Abaaoud's life, the security force uncovered a cache of explosives and automatic weapons. Two suspected militants — both from Molenbeek, where Mr. Abaaoud grew up — were killed.

Information about his whereabouts and plans was so closely held that intelligence officials in Brussels kept even the mayor of Verviers and its police chief unaware that the Islamic State had set up a safe house in their town and was planning a major attack.

"I only heard about Abaaoud and what he was doing by reading the press," said Marc Elsen, the town's mayor at the time of the Jan. 15 assault on the hideaway controlled by Mr. Abaaoud.

He said he had gotten a call just 15 minutes before the raid to tell him that a "large-scale operation" by the federal police was about to take place a few hundred yards from his office. "Then I heard all the shooting," he said. "It sounded like heavy artillery."

By Mr. Abaaoud's own account of what happened, published in the Islamic State magazine Dabiq, the two men killed in the raid had been "together in the safe house and had their weapons and explosive ready."

But they were overpowered by "more than 150 soldiers from both French and Belgian special forces" and "blessed with shahadah," or martyrdom, he told the magazine, saying that was "what they had desired for so long."

Belgium officials said that this was a lie and that only Belgian forces had taken part.

For Mr. Abaaoud, the police operation delivered a humiliating personal blow. The Islamic State had entrusted him with beginning what one of the

group's senior leaders, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, had promised a few months earlier would be a campaign of terror in Europe.

The blow was made worse by two brothers' success just a week earlier in attacking the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo. A rival terrorist group in Yemen, affiliated with Al Qaeda, claimed responsibility for that. The Islamic State claimed a separate attack two days later on a Jewish supermarket in Paris, but that was more a "lone wolf" assault, inspired rather than directed by the group.

Jihadist groups are "always competing," said Jelle van Buuren, an expert on jihadists at Leiden University, in the Netherlands. "Who's the best, who's the most violent, who's the most successful?"

Mr. Abaaoud's failure so soon after the successful Charlie Hebdo attacks may have galvanized him to organize and conduct an even more spectacular assault like the one in Paris last week, Mr. van Buuren added.

He described Mr. Abaaoud as "a type who is so proud of his image, the big warrior of the caliphate, that he was more than willing to take this role."

To add to the pressure to perform, Mr. Adnani, the Islamic State's chief propagandist and champion of its expansion into the West, issued an appeal shortly after the Verviers fiasco that cursed any Muslim "who has the ability to shed a single drop of crusader blood but does not do so, whether with an explosive device, a bullet, a knife, a car, a rock, or even a boot or a fist."

It was the duty of all Muslims, he said, "in Europe and the disbelieving West and everywhere else, to target the crusaders in their own lands and wherever they are found."

Mr. Adnani, following the Islamic State's custom of casting defeats as victories, still added the failed operation in Belgium to a list of successes that included a shooting at the Canadian Parliament and the January attacks in

Paris. But he put Belgium last.

If the Verviers debacle helped fire Mr. Abaaoud's zeal, it also prompted him to improve his terrorist tradecraft. He stopped using the telephone, or at least one that could be listened in on.

Security officials believe that the Paris attackers used some kind of encrypted communication, though they let their guard down by tossing a cellphone into a trash can near the Bataclan theater, the site of the most deaths in Friday's attacks. The geolocation services on the phone led investigators to one of the attackers' hide-outs.

With the carnage on Friday, Mr. Abaaoud put the Verviers disaster behind him. A dropout, he became, in the words of the French prime minister, Manuel Valls, "one of the brains" behind the deadliest assault on Paris since World War II.

Where Mr. Abaaoud was at the time of the Verviers raid is unclear. He suggested in his interview with Dabiq that he had been somewhere in Belgium and had managed to evade detection and travel back to Syria.

But the Belgian security official, noting that much of what the Islamic State says is untrue, said Mr. Abaaoud had not been in Belgium: He had called from Greece with instructions shortly before the house was stormed. That call, the official said, was the last trace security agencies had of him.

Whether Mr. Abaaoud was in Belgium at all in this period is not known, the official said. It is easy, he added, to move around Europe without leaving a trace, especially for a citizen of Belgium, part of the 26-nation zone in Europe that allows visa-free travel.

Who knew what, and when, about Mr. Abaaoud's travels is now a source of friction among European countries, which have opened their borders to one another but not their intelligence.

Far-right politicians, in particular, have seized on his travels to rally public support to end what was the proudest achievement of Europe's postwar push for more integration: the so-called Schengen Area of visa-free travel.

"It seems that just about anybody can freely enter France now, with no checks, including somebody as dangerous and well known as Abdelhamid Abaaoud," Marine Le Pen of France's National Front said on Thursday.

"The absence of national borders is criminal madness," Ms. Le Pen said. "The French elites have given themselves over to this surreal myth of a country without borders. Open your eyes, now!"

Andrew Higgins reported from Verviers, and Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura from Brussels. Aurelien Breeden contributed reporting from Paris, and Milan Schreuer from Brussels.

A version of this article appears in print on November 20, 2015, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Paris Suspect Drafted an Elaborate Plot of Terror Across Europe .

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