

Brussels terror cell 'planned to attack Euro 2016 tournament'

Jihadi group never intended to target Belgian capital but was lining up an attack this summer in France, says Libération

Kim Willsher in Paris

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The terror cell that carried out attacks in Paris and Brussels was reportedly planning to target the Euro 2016 football championships in France this summer.

The French newspaper Libération reported that Mohamed Abrini, who was arrested on Friday, had told Belgian investigators the Islamist group had never intended to target Brussels.

Instead the group intended to launch another attack in France, following the series of suicide bombings and shootings in November that left 130 dead and hundreds injured, Abrini is said to have told investigators. On Sunday prosecutors said the cell had originally intended to strike France.

“According to our information, Mohamed Abrini has explained the initial intention of this nebulous terrorist Franco-Belgian terrorist group was to go into action during the Euro football tournament,” Libération reported on Monday.

The tournament is taking place in 10 host cities across France between 10 June and 10 July, with both the opening match and final among those to be held at the Stade de France in Paris, which was also a target of the 13 November attacks.

The claim came as no surprise to French police. “It’s hardly a scoop to learn that the terrorists were hoping to attack during the Euro. The security forces are always examining possible attack scenarios to know how to respond,” a police officer told Libération.

Abrini was said to have told detectives the plotters feared police were closing in on them after the arrest of Salah Abdeslam, thought to be the last surviving Paris attacker.

Three days after the arrest, with reports that Abdeslam was cooperating with police, they switched targets and staged coordinated attacks on Brussels airport and the city metro system, killing 32 people.

Investigators have found clear links between the cell behind the Brussels attacks and the group that prepared and carried out November’s attacks in Paris. Both were claimed by Isis.

Belgian prosecutors announced this weekend that Abrini, 31, a key suspect wanted in connection with the Paris attacks, had confessed to being the third bomber at Brussels airport. Known from CCTV footage as “the man in the hat”, he left a large bag of explosives at the airport, then fled on foot. He was arrested on Friday in a police raid.

Before taking part in the Brussels bombings, Abrini had been on the run from police for four months after being identified on CCTV footage as a suspect at the wheel of a Renault Clio used by the gunmen in the Paris attacks.

The investigation has established connections between a large group of men - many of them childhood friends or brothers - who are suspected of playing roles in both the Paris and Brussels attacks.

In the week before the Brussels attacks, Belgian and French police working together to trace suspects in the Paris attacks carried out a series of raids.

Four days before the bombings, police arrested Abdeslam, who was then Europe’s most wanted man after four months on the run.

He had rented two cars involved in the Paris attacks under his real name as well as booking hotel rooms used by the attackers. He travelled to Paris with his childhood friend Abrini, and is believed to have driven the car used to drop off the three suicide bombers who blew themselves up at the Stade de France.

He was found hiding in Molenbeek in Brussels, not far from the street where his parents lived.

A few days before his arrest, police who arrived to search a flat in the Forest neighbourhood of Brussels which they thought was empty were met with gunfire from behind the door,

A police sniper shot dead one of the gunmen, Mohamed Belkaïd, a 35-year-old Algerian living illegally in Belgium who was later identified by prosecutors as “more than likely” one of the key logistics operatives behind the Paris attacks. “Next to his body was a Kalashnikov, a book on Salafism and an Islamic State flag,” according to Thierry Werts, of the Belgian federal prosecutor’s office.

Abdeslam’s fingerprints were also found at the flat.

The four identified bombers who struck Brussels - three at the airport and one in the metro - all had links to the planning and logistics of the Paris attacks four months earlier.

Khalid el-Bakraoui, 27, who blew himself up on the Brussels metro shortly after his elder brother Ibrahim had detonated a suicide vest at Brussels airport, was suspected of playing some kind of logistics role in the Paris attacks. He had rented, under a false name, the apartment in the Forest area that was raided by police. He is also believed to have rented a safehouse in the southern Belgian city of Charleroi used by more of the Paris cell before the November attacks.

Najim Laachraoui, 24, who grew up in Brussels, blew himself up at the airport. He was also a suspected Islamic State recruiter and bomb-maker whose DNA was found on two explosives belts used in the Paris attacks. In the days after the Brussels attacks, the French president, François Hollande, said the network behind the attacks in Paris and Brussels was being “wiped out”, but he added that other networks existed and there was still a threat.

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