

Paris and Brussels terror attacks were coordinated by Syria-based jihadist called Oussama Atar, French and Belgian intelligence believe



Photo thought to be of Oussama Atar, a Belgian-Moroccan who French and Belgian intelligence believe coordinated the Paris and Brussels attacks from Syria CREDIT: LE PARISIEN

By **Henry Samuel**, PARIS

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French investigators have identified a Syria-based extremist who Amnesty International campaigned to care for in Iraqi jail as a suspected coordinator of attacks in Paris and Brussels, sources close to the case have told French media.

Oussama Ahmad Atar, a 32-year-old of dual Belgian and Moroccan nationality thought to have high-ranking links in Isil, was already a suspect in the Brussels attacks on March 22 but has now been linked to the November 13, 2015 atrocities in Paris.

How it happened | Friday 13th Paris attacks

There were seven coordinated terror attacks in Paris carried out by militants armed with kalashnikov rifles and suicide vests.

The first of the attacks started at 8.20pm and they targeted:

- Locations around the Stade de France (1 killed)
- Le Carillon bar and Le Petit Cambodge restaurant (15 killed)
- Casa Nostra pizzeria (5 killed)
- La Belle Equipe bistro (19 killed)
- Le Bataclan concert hall (89 killed)

French emergency services activated 'Plan Rouge' to tackle the large numbers of casualties killed and injured in the attacks.

The incidents didn't end until 11.30pm, when police stormed the Bataclan, ending the siege taking place inside.

Death toll: By midnight on Friday the confirmed death toll had reached 120 (later rising to 130).

French investigators have long suspected that the Paris attacks, in which teams of jihadists killed 130 people, were coordinated by one or several people from Syria, but have never named anyone before.

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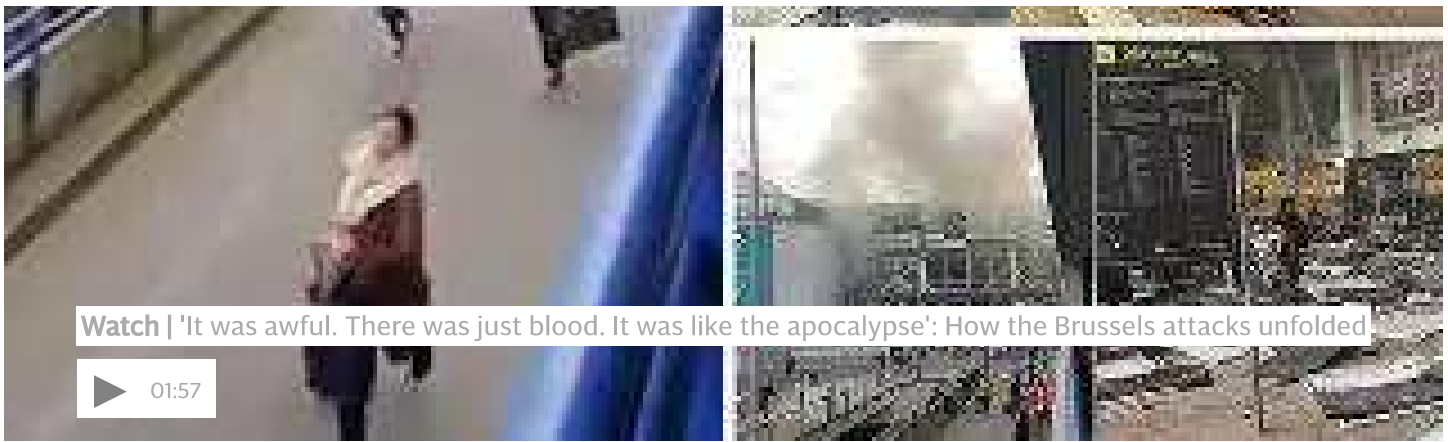
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"He's the only coordinator from Syria to have been identified during the investigations," one of the sources told AFP.

Investigators in Belgium and France were long unsure as to who was the person behind Abou Amahad, a nom de guerre long linked to the terror attacks in Paris and in Brussels on March 22, in which 32 died.





According to Le Monde, he was identified from a strip of several photograph as Oussama Atar by Adel Haddadi, one of the Syria-based terror suspects he had sent to Europe to commit atrocities but who failed to reach Paris in time for the November attacks.

Atar's name had already been mentioned in the Belgian press in August as a potential “mastermind” of the Brussels bombings with no further details. Now a “certain consensus” exists that he coordinated the attacks in both capitals remotely from Syria.

Le Monde said that he had lone been based in Raqqa, Isil's de-facto capital in Syria, where a US-backed Kurdish alliance has just launched a campaign to try and retake the city from the jihadists.

Investigators identified Atar as the recruiting sergeant for two Iraqi nationals who blew themselves up outside the Stade de France football stadium outside Paris in November and he is suspected of being the man to whom the Brussels terrorists submitted their plans before blowing themselves up in March.

In June, French police reportedly received a warning that he was seeking to return to France via Albania and was an “armed and dangerous fighter”.

Atar is the cousin of Ibrahim and Khalid El Bakraoui - two brothers who blew themselves up in the March Brussels airport and metro attacks, also linked to the Paris attacks.

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Police sought to swoop on him hours after the blasts but found his flat in Anderlecht empty.

According to Le Monde, investigators unearthed audio conversations between the Bakraoui brothers and Atar discussing their terror plans in the hard disk of a computer found in a bin shortly after the Brussels blasts. The last exchange dates from the eve of the bombings in which Ibrahim El Bakraoui said that the recent arrest of accomplices forced them to act immediately. He suggested targeting Brussels airport, where he died the following day.

Another two cousins, Moustapha and Jawad Benhattal, were arrested on June 18 on suspicion of planning an attack in Belgium during a public screening of a Euro 2016 football match, Belgian media reported at the time.

Atar has a long history of links to jihadism and reportedly met Isil leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi while detained in Bucca, the Iraqi camp said to be the birthplace of Isil where radical Sunnis and former intelligence officers of Saddam Hussein's regime first forged ties.

Atar first travelled to the Iraq-Syria area in 2002 posing as a charity worker, but American security services concluded he was a fighter and he was sentenced to ten years in prison in Iraq.

But amid rumours that he had a kidney tumour, his family launched a campaign to release him. Their demand he receive medical treatment was backed by Amnesty International along with Belgian MPs. He finally returned to Belgium in 2012 only to be arrested for seeking to join jihadists in Tunisia the following year.

He then disappeared.

His younger brother Yacine was arrested after the attacks and police found traces of explosives on his face and clothes.

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