

Abdelhamid Abaaoud: dead Paris terror planner leaves behind countless what-ifs

Any relief at his elimination is coupled with frustration that he wasn't found earlier and fears of who will replace him

Julian Borger in Brussels

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After a long and frustrating manhunt, Abdelhamid Abaaoud was finally identified using the fingerprints taken from his mutilated body - found in the ruins of his last hideout in St-Denis.

Any sense of relief that the 27-year-old jihadi was no longer at large was tempered by anger that he had not been found earlier, at least before last Friday's devastating attacks in Paris, of which he is believed to have been the ringleader.

Abaaoud's ability to move between Europe and Syria has made him the embodiment of Europe's greatest weaknesses and worst fears, suggesting that the border controls around the Schengen free movement zone are no more than a paper wall against an ever-growing terrorist threat.

In the wake of his death, the urgent manhunt by European intelligence agencies has become a postmortem exercise aimed at retracing Abaaoud's steps in the hope of discovering what went wrong, and what lessons there are to learn.

Abaaoud disappeared from his Brussels home in late 2013 or early 2014, long after becoming estranged from his middle-class Belgian-Moroccan family. He had been sent to a well-regarded Catholic school in 1999, when he was 12, but dropped out after a year to live on the streets of the district of Molenbeek, where he was drawn to increasingly violent crime.

It is there that he met another Molenbeek youth, Salah Abdeslam - one of the Paris attackers, now on the run - with whom he served a jail term in 2011 after a violent robbery. It is not clear whether he was radicalised in jail, or before.

When Abaaoud decided to leave for Syria, he appears to have gone through Germany. The federal police said on Thursday that they had questioned him at Cologne-Bonn airport on 20 January 2014 before he boarded a flight to Istanbul. His record of petty crime and suspected radicalisation had led the Belgians to put him on a watchlist, but according to Der Spiegel the instructions were for his appearance to be flagged, not for him to be detained.

A police spokesman said: "There were no indications that would have led us to stop him travelling or arrest him."

His arrival in Syria is likely to have been overseen by Abu-Muhammad al-Shimali, Islamic State's border chief responsible for easing the journey of foreign volunteers through the Turkish border town Gaziantep to the Isis-controlled Syrian border town of Jarabulus. The US Department of State on Thursday offered a reward of \$5m for information on Shimali's location.

Once in Syria, Abaaoud rose rapidly through the ranks of Isis, becoming head of a unit devoted to sending other European jihadis back to their home countries to carry out terrorist attacks.

He styled himself as Abu Umar al-Baljiki (Umar the Belgian) and cultivated an air of unflinching ruthlessness by having himself filmed in March 2014 smiling and driving a pick-up truck dragging mutilated corpses in the dust behind him.

Mehdi Nemmouche, a French jihadi who killed visitors to the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014, seems to have been in his unit.

It is believed Abaaoud returned to Europe in late 2014, in the company of two other jihadis with whom he was planning attacks in Belgium. It is not known how they managed to travel, but he told the Isis propaganda magazine, Dabiq, that it was not straightforward.

"We faced a number of trials during the journey," he said. "We spent months trying to find a way into Europe, and by Allah's strength, we succeeded in finally making our way to Belgium. We were then able to obtain weapons and set up a safe house while we planned to carry out operations against the Crusaders."

There are two main theories of how Abaaoud returned to Europe. One is that came on a forged passport, like one of the attackers who blew himself up in the Stade de France - who was fingerprinted in Greece and seems to have been carrying false travel documents under the name of a Syrian soldier who had been killed in battle.

The other possibility is that he was using the passport of a living European Isis volunteer. Would-be jihadis have to surrender their passports to Isis on arrival in Syria, giving the group a wide choice of documents to choose from for its foreign operations. Security experts say Abaaoud may have used one whose owner most resembled him.

Abaaoud and the two jihadis were planning to attack a Belgian police station disguised as police officers, but the scheme was foiled at the last moment and his two accomplices were killed in a shootout with security forces at their safe house at Verviers.

Abaaoud is believed to have been in Greece at the time directing the operation from an Athens safe house on a mobile phone. In the aftermath of the raid on the Verviers house, an Isis cell member was arrested in Greece, but Abaaoud was gone. He boasted how he was able to dodge the combined efforts of the world's intelligence agencies to return to Syria.

Once there, he is believed to have given marching orders to an Algerian student, Sid Ahmed Ghlam, who is suspected of having planned attacks against churches in Villejuif in France and of killing a dance instructor.

In July this year, Abaaoud was sentenced to 20 years in prison in absentia by the Belgian court, for his role as a principal recruiter of European jihadis for Isis, in particular for the recruitment of his own 13-year-old brother, Younes, who is infamous for being the youngest known Isis fighter.

He is also thought to have been a mentor to Ayoub al-Khazzani, a Moroccan-born jihadi whose attempt to kill passengers on a high-speed train from Amsterdam to Paris in August was thwarted when his gun jammed and he was tackled by off-duty American soldiers.

His name surfaced in August in Paris, where a French jihadi known as Reda H told France's senior counter-terrorism prosecutor Marc Trevidic, that he had been at a six-day training course at an Isis base near Raqqa. According to Libération, Abaaoud gave him €2,000 (£1,400), passwords to enter encrypted online forums, and some clear instructions: "Hit a concert hall to cause the maximum number of casualties."

Le Parisien quotes a young French Isis recruit who said they had been questioned by France's interior security service DGSI. It is not clear if this is the same person who talked to Trevidic. He said that Abaaoud worked in Isis's internal security unit, known as EMNI, which has the task of sending European jihadis back to their homelands to carry out terrorist attacks. The unit is run by two Tunisians, he said.

Abaaoud is said to have told the young Frenchman that he had managed to find 25kg of explosives in Belgium, but that it was too difficult for him to return to his home country himself. He was in charge of selecting candidates, who could be paid as much as €50,000 for carrying out attacks, but it was the two unnamed Tunisians who had the final decision on who would be sent.

Clearly, however, Abaaoud was sent back in person to oversee the assault on Paris. And once again, his trip back appears to have left almost no trace, other than a report from a non-European intelligence agency that he had used his mobile phone in Greece over the summer. But there his trail evaporated, only to materialise again when it was far too late, under the rubble in St-Denis, leaving behind him an infinite number of what-ifs and fears of who might follow in his footsteps.

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