

The Atlantic

The Mysterious Life and Death of Abdelhamid Abaaoud

French officials have confirmed that the man they believe planned the Paris attacks was killed in a police raid.



An image of Abdelhamid Abaaoud published by ISIS

Reuters

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Abdelhamid Abaaoud—a suspected organizer of ISIS’s Paris attacks, whom French authorities say died on Wednesday in a police raid—appears to have fit the kind of profile that European counterterrorism officials fear: raised in Europe by not especially religious parents; early dabbling in petty crime; then

an abrupt fixation on fundamentalist Sunni Islam and a turn to terror, bringing about scores of deaths on European soil.

Abaaoud's father was born in Morocco but reportedly moved to Belgium in 1975, where he found decent success as a clothier in Molenbeek, the predominantly Muslim borough of Brussels that has come under scrutiny this week as [a major source of jihadists](#). (Not much seems to be known about his mother.) Abaaoud was born in 1987, and *The New York Times* [tartly notes](#) that “despite his subsequent denunciations of the mistreatment suffered by Muslims in Europe, he enjoyed privileges available to few immigrants, including admission to an exclusive Catholic school, Collège Saint-Pierre d’Uccle, in an upscale residential district of Brussels.”

But he was thrown out of that school, either for poor grades or bad behavior. Like many eventual jihadists, he turned to criminal activities and befriended Ibrahim Abdeslam, one of the attackers in Paris on Friday, and Ibrahim's brother Salah, who is still being hunted. Abaaoud was briefly imprisoned and [apparently hung around](#) bars known for attracting drug dealers. He suddenly became very religious and moved to Syria in early 2014, reportedly to his family's surprise and dismay. “All my life I have seen the blood of Muslims flow,” he said in a video made in Aleppo, Syria, where he joined ISIS. “I pray that God breaks the backs of those who oppose him.”

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In Syria, he became an “emir of war,” which *The Wall Street Journal* describes as “an unusually high rank for a fighter who hailed from Europe.” He reportedly [helped train new ISIS fighters](#). A video discovered by *Paris Match* depicts Abaaoud dragging corpses in Syria. (It is, needless to say, painful to

[watch](#).) Later in 2014, he recruited his brother Younes, who was just 13, to come and join him. Younes Abaaoud was able to reach Syria without arousing suspicions. He has been [described](#) as the youngest European jihadist fighting with ISIS.

“I can’t take it anymore,” their father, Omar Abaaoud, [told reporters earlier this year](#). He also joined a state prosecutor’s case against Abdelhamid. “He destroyed our families. I don’t ever want to see him again.” Omar has reportedly since returned to Morocco.

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Abdelhamid Abaaoud later returned to Belgium—an exploit he described in an interview with *Dabiq*, ISIS’s slick English-language magazine.

“Alhamdulillah [thanks be to God], Allah chose me, Abuz-Zubayr al-Baljīkī (Khālīd), and Abū Khālīd al-Baljīkī (Sufyān) to travel to Europe in order to terrorize the crusaders waging war against the Muslims,” he said. “As you know, Belgium is a member of the crusader coalition attacking the Muslims of Iraq and Shām.”

Abaaoud was able to escape detection even though he was known to Belgian authorities as an ISIS fighter. He told *Dabiq* that an officer he encountered simply didn’t make the connection:

A brother had taken video footage of some of us before a battle, but his camera got lost and was later sold by a murtadd [apostate] to a Western journalist. I suddenly saw my picture all over the media, but alhamdulillah, the kuffār [infidels] were blinded by Allah. I was even stopped by an officer who contemplated me so as to compare me to the picture, but he let me go, as he did not see the resemblance! This was nothing but a gift from Allah.

In Belgium, it seems, he quickly began making plans for terror plots. Counterterrorism officials [believe](#) he had ties to the perpetrators of a string of attacks in France and Belgium over the last two years, including an attempted shooting on a train over the summer foiled by three Americans. In January, Belgian commandos raided a safehouse he had helped establish, in what CNN called “the biggest firefight Belgian commandos have faced since World War II.” Two men whom he said he had traveled with from Syria were killed, but [Abaaoud was not](#).

“We are praying that Abdelhamid really is dead.”

Officials announced that they had foiled a major terrorist plot, but Abaaoud slipped away, apparently returning to Syria, where he gave his interview to *Dabiq*. “All this proves that a Muslim should not fear the bloated image of the crusader intelligence,” he said. (The magazine is [online](#), but be warned that it also contains horrific images.) This summer, Abaaoud was sentenced in absentia to a long prison term in Belgium for organizing terror. In October, the French military, which had recently [expanded its operations](#) to include air strikes against ISIS in Syria as well as Iraq, attacked a training camp for foreign fighters in Raqqa, Syria, reportedly [in an attempt to kill Abaaoud](#). At first, the strike seemed to have worked; word got to his family that he had been killed. His sister Yasmina said, “We are praying that Abdelhamid really is dead.”

But investigators now believe the intelligence they received was a ruse to allow him to return to Belgium undetected. Authorities don’t yet know how or when he returned to Europe, but they think he played a central role in planning the attacks in Paris.

Before dawn on Wednesday, French police commandos raided an apartment

building in the Saint-Denis neighborhood of Paris. At least two people were killed, including a woman who activated a suicide vest. NBC [reports](#) that Abaaoud's body was riddled with bullets, and had to be identified by fingerprints.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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