

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/investigators-home-in-on-scope-of-terror-network-behind-brussels-paris-attacks-1459728742>

WORLD | EUROPE

## Investigators Home In on Scope of Terror Network Behind Brussels, Paris Attacks

Documents, interviews paint portrait of some of the at least 22 members believed to be still at large



Belgian police stand guard during a March raid in the Brussels district of Molenbeek, home to some of the suspected members of a terror network behind the Paris and Brussels attacks. *PHOTO: JOHN THYS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES*

By **MATTHEW DALTON**

Updated April 4, 2016 1:59 a.m. ET

**BRUSSELS**—At least 22 radical Islamists from Europe linked to the terror network behind the Brussels and Paris attacks are suspected to be still at large, putting security services on high alert as they rush to prevent Islamic State from striking again in the region.

Many of the fugitives have been involved in previous Islamic State plots, officials say,

and almost all of them have spent months or years fighting in Syria.

Interviews and confidential court documents seen by The Wall Street Journal portray the fugitives as part of an extensive web of young men who developed a deep hatred of the West after embracing radical Islam at underground mosques and clandestine meetings in Molenbeek, a heavily Muslim district in the heart of Brussels. They have since become central to Islamic State's plans to strike the West, according to investigators, who suspect the Brussels network is behind the movement of battle-hardened operatives from Syria to Europe.

"We see many plots and several cells that we now know are part of the same network," said Jean-Charles Brisard, president of the Center for the Analysis of Terrorism, a Paris think tank. "They're already here. The problem is how to find them."

The 22 men investigators are scrutinizing include those prosecuted in absentia during a major terror trial in Belgium last year, as well as several with links to a foiled plot to kill Belgian police last year. But people familiar with investigations say they believe the reach of the Brussels network extends beyond the group to others from the city who went to Syria and their sympathizers who stayed behind.

The two most influential members of the network—both from Molenbeek—were Khalid Zerkani, a preacher who authorities allege was one of Europe's most prolific recruiters for extremist groups in Syria, and Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the ringleader of the Nov. 13 Paris attacks. Mr. Zerkani has been jailed in Belgium for two years; Mr. Abaaoud was killed in a police raid outside Paris five days after the attacks on the French capital.

Those still at large have become a key focus for investigators. "At least we know who they are," a Belgian law-enforcement official said.

The fugitives include men not discussed by investigators so far, including Tunisian-born Sami Zarrouk, now 32, who also lived in Molenbeek. Mr. Zarrouk first alarmed his in-laws a few years ago by proposing to take his wife with him to Afghanistan, where he wanted her to become a suicide bomber. When they objected, he went to Syria instead without her, eventually joining Islamic State.

"I consider Sami a danger to society," Mr. Zarrouk's father-in-law told Belgian interrogators, according to the court documents. "I think that if he comes back to Belgium, he could commit a bloodbath."

Mr. Zarrouk "assiduously" attended meetings led by Mr. Zerkani at the Mosque Loqman

## Brussels Network

Khalid Zerkani was convicted in Brussels in 2015 of recruiting young Belgians to go to Syria for Islamic State. They included Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who deployed some of them back to Europe to conduct terror attacks.



**Khalid Zerkani**

### The Recruiter

Called "Papa Noel," Mr. Zerkani ran a network of thieves, using some of the proceeds to send people to Syria.



**Abdelhamid Abaaoud**

### The Ringleader

Mr. Abaaoud plotted and led the attacks in Paris that claimed 130 lives. He was killed in a police raid Nov. 18 in Paris.

### Verviers, Belgium



**Nouredine Abraimi**



**Omar Damache**



**Soufiane Amghar**



**Khalid Ben Larbi**

Mr. Abaaoud led this foiled plot to behead Belgian police officers and escaped to Syria. Mr. Amghar and Mr. Ben Larbi died in the raid. Mr. Damache was arrested in Athens. Mr. Abraimi escaped and is still a large.

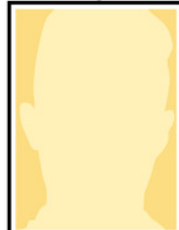
### Others in the network



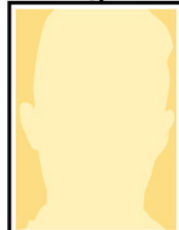
**Reda Kriket**



**Yassine Lachiri**



**Sami Zarrouk**



**Yoni Mayne**

Mr. Kriket was arrested March 24 in France on the verge of carrying out an attack. All four were allegedly among Mr. Zerkani's recruits. Mr. Lachiri, Mr. Zarrouk and Mr. Mayne's whereabouts are unknown.

Sources: court documents, interviews

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

and in apartments around Molenbeek, according to documents filed with a July ruling from a Brussels court that convicted Messrs. Zerkani, Abaaoud and Zarrouk of terrorist offenses.

Mr. Zarrouk left home in July 2013, telling his wife that he was traveling to Tunisia to visit family. In fact, he had taken a plane to Rome and then Istanbul, according to Belgian intelligence sources cited in the documents. Several weeks later, she received a short call from him telling her to take care of herself and their son.

That December, according to the documents, Mr. Zarrouk's father-in-law received a text message from a Syrian cellphone number: "Tell Leila...I divorce her."

Neither Mr. Zarrouk nor his relatives could be reached for comment. Belgium issued an international arrest warrant for him in February 2015.

Within the broader network, authorities say they are particularly worried about Mr.

Abaaoud's connections. In Syria, he assumed a key position in Islamic State's external operations division and enlisted a number of people from Brussels to conduct terror

---

RELATED

---

- How Islamic State Infiltrated Europe (<http://graphics.wsj.com/brussels-terror-network/>)
- Terror Network's Web Sprawls Beyond Brussels and Paris (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/terror-networks-web-sprawls-beyond-brussels-and-paris-1459124085>)
- Islamic State Terror Cell Found Refuge in Brussels District (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-terror-cell-found-refuge-in-brussels-district-1458694455>)

officials say.

One of them allegedly is Nouredine Abraimi, a 29-year-old from Molenbeek who left his pregnant wife and three children to join Islamic State in Syria toward the end of 2014, according to people familiar with the investigation.

In January 2015, police stormed his family home on suspicion he provided logistical support to a narrowly foiled attack that Mr. Abaaoud was plotting against Belgian police. Days earlier, two of Mr. Abaaoud's operatives had been killed in a ferocious gunbattle with police at a hideout in Verviers, in the east of Belgium.

Belgium has since issued arrest warrants for Mr. Abraimi and eight of his accomplices in the Verviers plot, officials say.

"He went to war," one of Mr. Abraimi's brothers said in an interview. "I said to him on Facebook, 'You didn't have to leave four children for a war that has nothing to do with you.'" Mr. Abraimi responded that he couldn't live among "infidels," his brother said.

Another of Mr. Abraimi's brothers, Lazez, was detained after the Paris attacks on suspicion that he helped one of the alleged attackers, Salah Abdeslam, evade capture for four months.

Lazez Abraimi had nothing to with helping Mr. Abdeslam, his brother said. Sokol Vljahen, Lazez Abraimi's lawyer, said authorities lack evidence to continue holding his client and is arguing for him to be released later this month.

Another close associate of Mr. Abaaoud was Yoni Mayne, a 25-year-old Belgian of Malian descent who attended Mr. Zerkani's meetings, according to the court documents. His mother told authorities how he became increasingly radical, growing his beard and dressing in traditional Muslim garb, as he spent time with Mr. Zerkani. "One day he threatened to kill me, because I was the devil," she is quoted in the court documents as saying.

In January 2014, Mr. Mayne accompanied Mr. Abaaoud and Mr. Abaaoud's younger brother on a trip to Syria. Jihadists published photos of Mr. Mayne's body announcing his death later that year, but some authorities question whether he is actually dead. Belgian officials believe Mr. Abaaoud faked his own death before mounting a string of attacks in an effort to throw off Western security services. France's internal security directorate recently circulated a bulletin urging officers to be on the lookout for Mr. Mayne along with other terror suspects, a French police officer said.

Mr. Zerkani, a charismatic 42-year-old preacher known as Papa Noël, or Santa Claus, has been behind bars since February 2014, when he was picked up on suspicion of operating a jihadist pipeline. He was arrested carrying thousands of dollars' worth of cash in multiple currencies, according to the documents, despite having been unemployed since at least 2010.

A Brussels court convicted him in July of leading the recruitment ring, financed by money from the theft of phones, cars, laptops and cash around Brussels. Thirty-one others were convicted of participating in a terrorist organization, though 18 of them, including Messrs. Abaaoud and Zarrouk, were convicted in absentia.

Mr. Zerkani's lawyer declined to comment. Under police questioning, Mr. Zerkani told police the charge that he was running the network "has no correspondence to reality," according to the court documents.

Days after the March 22 bombings in Brussels, French authorities said they barely foiled another attack by a Zerkani recruit, a Frenchman named Reda Kriket who went to Syria in 2014 and was convicted in absentia in last year's trial. An international arrest warrant was issued for him in March that year.

On Saturday, Belgian authorities said they had arrested another man, a Belgian identified only as Y.A., also in connection with the foiled French terror plot.

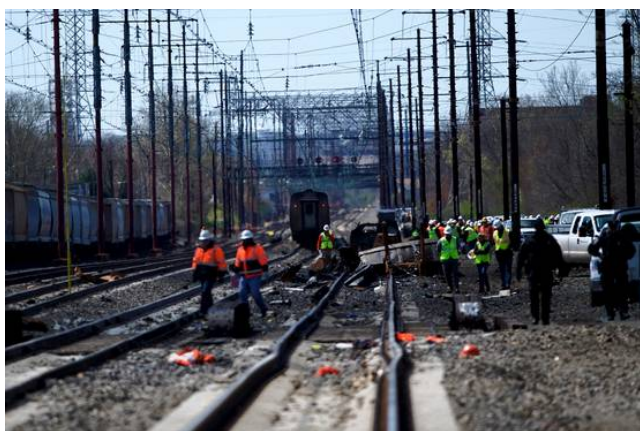
Court documents portray Mr. Kriket as one of the group's financiers, providing €12,000 (almost \$14,000) for Islamic State recruits to get to Syria.

Mr. Zerkani is facing judgment in another trial in May, this time for allegedly sending another batch of recruits to Syria, including Najim Laachraoui, who investigators say blew himself up at Brussels airport last month.

*—Inti Landauro in Paris and Benoit Faucon in London contributed to this article.*



## WHAT TO READ NEXT...



## U.S. NEWS

**Amtrak Train Derails After Crash Near Philadelphia**

## SOCCER

**Retired Soccer Star Abby Wambach Arrested in Oregon**

## EUROPE NEWS

**Paris Attacks Plot Was Hatched in Plain Sight**

## ELECTION 2016

**Bernie Sanders's Cash Keeps Flowing**

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).