

**The New York Times** | <http://nyti.ms/1S0hw0n>

---

EUROPE

# In Suspects' Brussels Neighborhood, a History of Petty Crimes and Missed Chances

By **ANDREW HIGGINS, KIMIKO DE FREYTAS-TAMURA and KATRIN BENNHOLD** NOV. 16, 2015

BRUSSELS — Just eight days before Ibrahim Abdeslam blew himself up in Paris as part of an elaborate terrorist operation that killed 129 people on Friday, the authorities in the heavily immigrant Brussels district of Molenbeek already had the future terrorist in their sights.

Unfortunately, they had identified him not as a potential killer, but as the proprietor of a bar that played host to drug dealers and drunks. Under an order signed by Molenbeek's mayor, the bar was shut down on Nov. 5 “for compromising public security and tranquillity” through the spread of illegal substances.

Molenbeek is well known as a haven for extremists, home to dozens of young men accused of leaving to wage jihad in Syria and, in some cases, plotting attacks against Europe. The area has now been linked to at least four terrorist attacks in two years.

But the inability to stop Mr. Abdeslam was just one example of the missed opportunities by the Belgian and French authorities and intelligence services, a list that also included allowing Mr. Abdeslam's brother Salah, 26, another suspect, to slip through their fingers.

Salah Abdeslam rented a car in Brussels that was apparently used to transport some of the gunmen who killed 89 people in a Paris concert hall. He had a criminal record, which outlines his suspected involvement in organized crime, but there was no arrest warrant linked to his file. Because of that record, his name popped up during a routine traffic stop by the French police on Saturday. But he was allowed to drive on because he had not yet been linked to the attacks. He remains at large.

The near misses raise troubling questions about the Belgian intelligence service and their French counterparts, not to mention concerns about Europe's system of open internal borders, which has allowed terrorists to move freely between countries while outpacing the intelligence sharing needed to stop them.

"Every time there is an attack, we discover that the perpetrators were known to the authorities," said François Heisbourg, a counterterrorism expert and former defense official. "What this shows is that our intelligence is actually pretty good, but our ability to act on it is limited by the sheer numbers."

The missed opportunities before and since the attacks in Paris, intelligence officials and experts say, pale when compared with the fact that the attackers were able, at least in part, to organize their plot under the noses of the authorities in Molenbeek.

Mr. Abdeslam, the suicide bomber in Paris, and Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the suspected architect of the attacks, had each lived barely 200 yards from Molenbeek's main police station and had had brushes with the law.

The Paris attacks indicate that few real steps have been taken to keep the neighborhood under surveillance adequately and break up its small but lethal extremist underground.

Investigators believe that the massacres on Friday, the worst terrorist attacks in France, involved at least three people from Molenbeek, including the Abdeslams and Mr. Abaaoud, a foreign fighter in Syria for the Islamic State who investigators believe orchestrated the carnage.

Mr. Abaaoud has appeared regularly in gruesome recruiting videos issued by the Islamic State. But by his own account, he, too, managed to slip in and out of Belgium without being arrested, despite being stopped at one point by an officer who “let me go, as he did not see the resemblance” to photos of himself published in the Belgian news media.

Posing for pictures holding an Islamic State flag and the Quran, Mr. Abaaoud boasted in an interview this year with the militant group’s magazine, Dabiq, of outsmarting security services. “We spent months trying to find a way into Europe, and by Allah’s strength, we succeeded in finally making our way to Belgium,” he said.

He added, “We were then able to obtain weapons and set up a safe house while we planned to carry out operations against the crusaders.”

One of their biggest allies, however, may have been a Belgian security system ill equipped to deal with a tight knit community like Molenbeek, where a mostly white police force has only tenuous links to a largely immigrant population resentful of being labeled potential terrorists.

The police have on occasion pounced, but mostly for petty crimes unrelated to Islamist extremism.

Ibrahim Abdeslam, the bar operator turned suicide bomber, was convicted of criminal activities as far back as 2010, and even stood trial for

minor offenses with Mr. Abaaoud, according to a people briefed on information from the federal prosecutor's office. The mayor of Molenbeek, Françoise Schepmans, said Mr. Abdeslam had been convicted of crimes involving drugs.

"This is a small place; we all crossed paths with them," the deputy mayor of Molenbeek, Ahmed el Khannouss, said Monday, referring to the three suspects from the district. But, he added, "we are all totally shocked that they could have been involved in something so terrible."

Family members and friends voiced complete surprise, too, highlighting how difficult it is to penetrate a small group of determined jihadists.

Mohamed Abdeslam, the brother of one of the Paris suicide bombers, was picked up on Saturday by the police and released on Monday. An employee with the municipal government, he told reporters in Molenbeek on Monday that he first learned of his brother's extremist affiliations from news media reports of the Paris attacks.

He said he previously knew "absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing."

The father of Mr. Abaaoud was so shocked and appalled by his son's embrace of violent jihadism that he sued him in Belgium in May, asserting that the son had "kidnapped" another sibling, who was just 13, and lured him to Syria.

"If there is anyone who is certainly not aware of what is going on, it's the father," said the father's lawyer, Nathalie Gallant.

The terrorists not only hid their radical views and intentions, but they also benefited from Belgium's large pool of angry Muslim youths and its longstanding role as a center for the illegal arms trade. The tiny country has seen more than 400 of its citizens leave to fight in Syria, the highest per capita number in Europe.

“Long before jihadism was on the scene, Belgium was a hub for illegal gunrunning,” Mr. Heisbourg said.

Terrorists planning to carry out an attack find it much easier to coordinate and procure weapons from Belgium than anywhere else in Europe, said Jelle van Buuren, a lecturer in counterterrorism at Leiden University in the Netherlands. Belgium “is considered to be the weak link in Europe’s approach to tackling terrorism,” he said.

Belgium is also divided into three different languages and cultures, Mr. Van Buuren said, which makes it hard for agencies to communicate and coordinate with one another, including the sharing of intelligence.

Crucially, Belgium’s strict laws on surveillance, including the interception of telephone conversations, make it hard for the authorities to monitor potential terrorists.

In contrast, he said, France has wider surveillance on terrorist suspects. “You know that the chances of being discovered are not high in Belgium,” Mr. Van Buuren said. “Meanwhile, Brussels is just a few hundred kilometers away and shares the same French language, and you can plan very easily from there. So why wouldn’t you?”

Yet the French intelligence service has recently fared little better.

A French official briefed on the investigation said Mr. Abaaoud had mentioned plans to attack “a concert hall” to a French citizen who had come back from Syria three months ago and was interrogated by security officials.

Mr. Abaaoud, the official said, was also in contact with Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, another of last week’s Paris attackers. Mr. Mostefaï traveled to Turkey in 2013, Turkish officials said, and is believed to have crossed into Syria.

His name was flagged to French officials twice, in December and again in

June, Turkish officials said. But until after Friday's attack, there was never any follow-up, they said.

The two brothers who fatally shot 12 people in the office of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris in January were well known to the authorities in the United States and France and had been under surveillance for long stretches. They struck just a few months after the authorities let the wiretap on their phones expire.

Intelligence officials said there were now so many Europeans either in Syria or with links to Syria that to follow them all had become impossible. "We just haven't got the resources," one senior European official said.

But many of these extremists have clustered in a small area, a phenomenon that has long been noticed by terrorism experts. Few areas have been linked to quite so many bloody episodes as Molenbeek, which is relatively poor with a high unemployment rate but, far from a slum, is full of handsome homes, galleries and restaurants along with halal butchers and kebab houses.

Many of the people linked to a suspected terrorist hide-out broken up in January in eastern Belgian came from Molenbeek.

Amedy Coulibaly, who was involved in the Charlie Hebdo attack and an assault on shoppers in a Jewish supermarket in Paris, is believed to have bought weapons in Molenbeek. So did Mehdi Nemmouche, a Frenchman who targeted Jews at a Brussels museum in 2014, killing four. Ayoub el Khazzani, a Moroccan, who was thwarted in his attempt to attack passengers on a high-speed train traveling between Brussels in Paris in August, is also thought to have lived there for a while.

But many locals still believe their neighborhood has been unfairly maligned. "This is not a Molenbeek problem; it is a global problem," said Mustafa Zoufri, who directs a local youth center.

Local officials on Monday denied turning a blind eye to extremism. The mayor, Ms. Schepmans, whose office looks out on the government-owned apartment building where Mr. Abdeslam's family lived, insisted that while there might have been a period of "denial" under her predecessor, her own administration had "worked hard to fight radicalization."

Still, she acknowledged that while officials and police officers kept tabs on formally registered mosques, a plethora of small worship halls operated in the shadows with little supervision.

On Monday, scores of armed officers wearing black face masks sealed off a street that runs by the district's biggest mosque as they hunted, in vain, for Salah Abdeslam, who rented the car used in the attacks.

As reporters from around the world swarmed into the borough's cobblestoned square, a resident screamed at them, denouncing the news media and security officials for linking her neighborhood to terrorism.

"You are all scum," she shouted. "Do you have no shame?"

Andrew Higgins and Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura reported from Brussels, and Katrin Bennhold from London. Milan Schreuer contributed reporting from Brussels.

Get news and analysis from Europe and around the world delivered to your inbox every day with the Today's Headlines: European Morning newsletter. **Sign up here.**

A version of this article appears in print on November 17, 2015, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: In Neighborhood Known for Extremists, a Trail of Petty Crimes and Missed Plots.