

## EUROPE

# ISIS Operative Suspected in Paris and Brussels Attacks Is Identified

By RUKMINI CALLIMACHI NOV. 22, 2016

The United States government revealed the identity on Tuesday of an Islamic State operative believed to have been one of the overseers of last year's attacks in Paris, as well as of the coordinated suicide bombings that tore through the international airport and a metro station in Brussels this year.

The operative — who until recently was known only by his nom de guerre, Abu Souleymane al-Faransi — is a 27-year-old originally from Morocco whose real name is Abdelilah Himich, according to a statement issued by the State Department, which announced his designation as a global terrorist. The listing describes Mr. Himich as a senior fighter and “external operations figure,” a reference to his suspected role in planning attacks abroad for the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

“Himich created the Tariq Ibn Ziyad Battalion in 2015, a European foreign terrorist fighter cell that has provided operatives for ISIL attacks in Iraq, Syria and abroad,” the statement said. “Himich was also reportedly involved in the planning of ISIL's November 2015 Paris attacks and March 2016 Brussels attacks.”

The assault on multiple locations in Paris on Nov. 13, 2015, was led on the ground by Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a Belgian member of the Islamic State who traveled from Syria and maintained telephone contact with the various teams of attackers. He was killed in a police shootout days later.

But evidence quickly emerged that Mr. Abaaoud and his team had been taking orders from and reporting back to higher-ups inside the terror group. Among the first clues was the testimony of one of the hostages inside the Bataclan concert hall in Paris, who said he had overheard one of the suicide bombers asking the other, “Should we call Souleymane?”

After the March 22 attacks in Brussels, the Belgian capital, the police recovered a laptop belonging to one of the plotters and discovered recorded chats between the attackers and their handlers in Syria, including Abu Souleymane and another commander who went by the nom de guerre Abu Ahmad, according to Jean-Charles Brisard, who leads the Center for Analysis of Terrorism in Paris.

French officials have refused to confirm that the “Souleymane” mentioned in these two episodes is indeed Mr. Himich. However, a joint investigation by ProPublica and Frontline identified Mr. Himich as one of the architects of the Paris attack and revealed that he had lived in Lunel, France, and was deployed to Afghanistan after enlisting in the French Foreign Legion.

“He was promoted very quickly once he reached Syria and became the commander of a brigade of foreign fighters, and this is surely as a result of his background and his combat experience,” said Mr. Brisard, who described Mr. Himich as “the conceiver” of the Paris attacks.

According to records consulted by Mr. Brisard, Mr. Himich joined the Islamic State in April 2014 and fought as one of the group’s snipers before being wounded in combat. He participated in at least one filmed execution, in which he crucified two victims, Mr. Brisard said.

Mr. Brisard cautioned, however, that the Islamic State’s external operations arm, the unit responsible for inspiring and carrying out terrorist attacks abroad, was a team effort. Although Mr. Himich may have sketched the broad outlines of the plot, the planning passed through multiple hands. Records from the laptop seized in Brussels indicate that Abu Ahmad may have had a more direct role in “piloting” both the Nov. 13 and March 22 plots, Mr. Brisard said.

Reached by telephone, the office of the chief prosecutor in Paris, which is leading the investigation into the French attacks, declined to comment on the State Department announcement.

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Eric Schmitt and Aurelien Breeden contributed reporting.

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