

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

EUROPE

Salah Abdeslam, Suspect in Paris Attacks, Is Captured in Brussels

By STEVEN ERLANGER and ALISSA J. RUBIN MARCH 18, 2016

BRUSSELS — He traveled back to Belgium unrecognized and unchallenged the day after the Nov. 13 terrorist attacks in Paris. His fingerprints were found in two apartments in Brussels in subsequent months, but he kept eluding the police dragnet, amid speculation that he might have escaped to Syria.

But late Friday afternoon, the Belgian authorities finally managed to hunt down the most wanted man in Europe: Salah Abdeslam, believed to be the sole surviving participant in the Paris attacks.

With heavily armed officers closing in on him, Mr. Abdeslam stumbled onto a street in the Brussels neighborhood where he had grown up, reportedly brandishing a handgun, before being shot in the knee and trundled away by the police.

The capture was the biggest breakthrough in the case since the days immediately after the attack, which killed 130 people and wounded more than 400 others in the deadliest terrorist violence in Western Europe since 2004.

It could give security and intelligence agencies an opportunity to interrogate Mr. Abdeslam about his ties to the Islamic State and how the attacks were planned and carried out, at a time when officials are saying that the Paris plot might have been larger and more elaborate than first thought.

He was arrested three days after the police found his fingerprints in an apartment in another Brussels neighborhood. The authorities gave few details about how they had tracked him down, but the Belgian prosecutor's office said it had also arrested three members of a family on charges of sheltering him.

The capture concluded what had been a frustrating hunt for Mr. Abdeslam, 26, a Belgian-born French citizen of Moroccan ancestry who is thought to have driven the car that carried a team of terrorists to the French national soccer stadium outside Paris on Nov. 13. Mr. Abdeslam's brother Ibrahim blew himself up as a member of a separate team of attackers in Paris.

"This evening is a huge success in the battle against terrorism," Prime Minister Charles Michel of Belgium said at a news conference with President François Hollande of France.

Mr. Hollande said he would request the extradition of Mr. Abdeslam to face trial in France. "Although this arrest is an important step, it is not the final conclusion," he said, appearing alongside Mr. Michel after the two leaders received a congratulatory phone call from President Obama.

"We must catch all those who enabled, organized or facilitated these attacks, and we are realizing that they are much more numerous than we had originally thought and identified," Mr. Hollande said.

Mr. Hollande said the authorities would continue to pursue connections between the Paris attackers and other Islamic State militants.

Of the 10 men believed to have participated directly in the Paris attacks, Mr. Abdeslam was the only one who was at large. The rest died in the attacks

or soon afterward.

The operation on Friday began around 4:30 p.m., when the police raided three locations simultaneously, two in Molenbeek, where Mr. Abdeslam had grown up, and one in another neighborhood, Jette. Mr. Abdeslam was captured 10 minutes later after fleeing a house on the Rue des Quatre-Vents in Molenbeek.

Inside the house, the police arrested a man suspected of being an accomplice, who was slightly wounded.

That suspect — who has used the aliases Monir Ahmed Alaaj and Amine Choukri, and whose real identity is unclear — was stopped in Ulm, Germany, with Mr. Abdeslam on Oct. 3, the police said, and the suspect's fingerprints matched prints found after the Paris attacks in a safe house in Auvelais, a town in Belgium.

About four hours after the arrests of Mr. Abdeslam and the man thought to be his accomplice, and after further gunfire and explosions, the police arrested the three members of the family that they believe had helped hide Mr. Abdeslam.

Eric Van der Sijpt, a spokesman for the federal prosecutor in Brussels, said it was possible Mr. Abdeslam had spent “days, weeks or months” in the area.

The raids on the other two locations turned up empty.

As the police operation unfolded, Molenbeek filled with journalists and angry onlookers, who have protested what they consider unfair and heavy-handed interrogations by the police since the November attacks.

But other residents welcomed the capture.

Christophe Van Damme, a contractor who lives yards from where Mr.

Abdeslam was apprehended, said heavily armed officers had jumped from vehicles pouring into the neighborhood late in the afternoon. He said he then heard 10 to 15 gunshots.

“When everything was O.K., people were leaning out their windows, applauding the police,” he said.

Michel Eylenbosch, the chairman of the Molenbeek City Council, expressed relief at Mr. Abdeslam’s arrest and said there was “now the possibility to have big steps in this case.”

Over the past four months, the French and Belgian police have raided dozens of buildings, scooped up troves of documents and questioned scores of suspects as part of their investigation into the attacks and Mr. Abdeslam’s whereabouts.

The turning point in the case appears to have been on Tuesday, when the authorities raided a home on the Rue du Dries in the Forest section of Brussels, as part of an effort to collect more intelligence.

That raid, which yielded Mr. Abdeslam’s fingerprints, did not begin as an attempt to capture him.

The French and Belgian officers who conducted the raid on Tuesday were surprised to find the residence occupied. They immediately came under fire, and in the ensuing gunfight, a man believed to have been an accomplice of Mr. Abdeslam — Mohamed Belkaid, 35 — was shot dead. Four police officers were slightly wounded.

But two men escaped from the apartment, one of whom might have been Mr. Abdeslam.

It was the second time the authorities had found Mr. Abdeslam’s fingerprints in an apartment in Brussels. In December a fingerprint of his was found in an apartment in the Schaerbeek section, along with material that

might have been used to make suicide belts.

Belgian prosecutors said Friday that the Algerian man killed in the raid, Mr. Belkaid, was “most probably” a man who had helped the Paris attackers. Mr. Belkaid had been using fake Belgian identity papers in the name Samir Bouzid.

A man traveling under that name had been previously identified as one of two men in a car with Mr. Abdeslam in September as the three drove between Hungary and Austria. After the attacks, someone using that name wired 750 euros, about \$845, to a cousin of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the on-the-ground organizer of the attacks. (Mr. Abaaoud and his cousin died in a police raid outside Paris on Nov. 18.)

Before the Paris attacks, Salah Abdeslam had several brushes with the law, mainly for minor offenses. In 2010, he served time in a Belgian prison with Mr. Abaaoud, who also lived in Molenbeek.

A week before the attacks, the Belgian authorities shut down a bar and cafe that Ibrahim Abdeslam operated because the two brothers were suspected of selling drugs.

In September, Salah Abdeslam drove to Budapest, where he picked up two men who returned with him to Belgium with fake identity cards. The following month he was stopped in Ulm, near Stuttgart, Germany, along with the man suspected as his accomplice who was captured with him on Friday. But they were not detained.

The morning after the attacks, Mr. Abdeslam was stopped on a highway in Cambrai, a French town near the Belgian border, but he was waved through.

There had been almost weekly reports by French and Belgian media organizations of Mr. Abdeslam’s whereabouts, none confirmed by the authorities.

In December it was revealed that Mr. Abdeslam may have evaded the Belgian police two days after the attacks because of an arcane law that prevented law enforcement officers from raiding a private home after 9 p.m.

Last month his fiancée was quoted in the Belgian media saying that he would rather be killed than captured.

Correction: March 18, 2016

An earlier version of this article misstated the location where Salah Abdeslam is believed to have driven a team of terrorists involved in the Paris attacks.

Investigators think he drove them to the French national soccer stadium outside Paris, not the Bataclan theater in Paris.

Steven Erlanger reported from Brussels, and Alissa J. Rubin from Paris.

Reporting was contributed by Aurelien Breeden, Lilia Blaise and Milan Schreuer from Paris; Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura from London; and Russell Goldman from New York.

A version of this article appears in print on March 19, 2016, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Belgians Arrest Fugitive Suspect in Paris Attacks.

Related Coverage

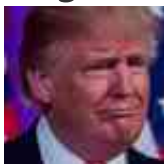
1. How Belgium Became Home to Recent Terror Plots NOV. 15, 2015



2. Belgium Says Law Limiting Raids May Have Allowed Suspect in Paris Attacks to Escape DEC. 16, 2015



Trending



1. Republican Leaders Map a Strategy to Derail Donald Trump



2. Op-Ed Columnist: Will Trump Be Dumped?



3. A View of ISIS's Evolution in New Details of Paris Attacks



4. A Mother's Death, a Daughter's Life: Remembering Natalie Wood



5. Opinion: When Did Porn Become Sex Ed?



6. Cuba on the Edge of Change



7. What Happens When Millennials Run the Workplace?



8. Carrier Workers See Costs, Not Benefits, of Global Trade



9. First Draft: Protester Punched and Kicked at Donald Trump Rally in Tucson



10. **Apple vs. the F.B.I.: How the Case Could Play Out**

[View More Trending Stories »](#)

© 2016 The New York Times Company