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BELGIAN RADICAL NETWORKS AND THE ROAD TO THE BRUSSELS ATTACKS

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Abstract: As the Paris and Brussels attacks made clear, the high number of Belgian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq has severe national security implications for Belgium and neighboring European countries. The emergence of three overlapping radical networks in Antwerp and Brussels and their early recruitment of fighters for the Syrian jihad is the key reason why Belgium has more foreign fighters per capita than any other Western nation.

Belgium is at the epicenter of the Islamic State's efforts to attack Europe. With at least 451 foreign fighters who have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq,[a] Belgium has the highest number of foreign fighters per capita[1] of all Western countries. This article looks at how the steady flow of foreign fighters from Belgium over the course of the last five years culminated in the attacks on Paris on November 13, 2015, and Brussels on March 22, 2016. It draws on hundreds of pages of Belgian court documents and a database of Belgian foreign fighters maintained by the author to focus on three overlapping recruitment networks that have been active in sending Belgian residents to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq: the Sharia4Belgium network, the Resto Tawhid network of Jean-Louis Denis, and the so-called Zerkani network.

The reason Belgium has seen the largest per capita flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq is not because radicalization is higher in Belgium than other northern European countries. There are no metrics to suggest Belgian exceptionalism in this regard. And it cannot simply be explained by failures of Belgian authorities, police, and security services to prevent travel. Instead, arguably the key reason behind the elevated travel flows from Belgium is that clusters of likeminded militants emerged in Antwerp and Brussels and were drawn into the orbit of radical preachers who encouraged and facilitated their travel to fight jihad early on in the Syrian civil war. This laid the groundwork for increasing numbers to join them on the frontlines.[b] As several Belgian counterterrorism officials have pointed out, Belgian foreign fighters got a "head start." [c]

These early travel flows were, in turn, partly explained by the fact that Belgium has a sizeable population of North African Arab Muslims, which allowed the uprising against the Assad regime to resonate strongly on the streets of Brussels, and made travel to the conflict easier than for residents of a city with a high concentration of south Asian immigrants, for example, Birmingham in the United Kingdom.

Historical Roots

Belgium has been grappling with the nexus of foreign fighter recruitment and terrorism for more than a generation. In the 1990s Belgium was a transit country for recruits of Islamist terrorist groups like GIA and the GICM.[2] The al-Qa'ida hit team that assassinated Ahmad Shah Massoud, the head of the Northern Alliance, two days before 9/11 were residents of the Brussels district of Molenbeek.[3] Malika el-Aroud, the Belgian-Moroccan widow of one of the suicide bombers, was sentenced in May 2010 together with her new husband, Moez Garsallaoui, for recruiting young Belgian and French extremists to join al-Qa'ida.[4][d] Her website, Minbar SOS, was one of the most visited forums by Francophone jihadis across the Western world. [5] One individual that el-Aroud championed was Muriel Degauque, a Catholic convert from Charleroi who became the first-ever Western, female suicide bomber in Iraq after she and her husband, Issam Goris, traveled from Belgium to Iraq.[6] Another key figure in Belgian extremist circles in the 1990s and 2000s was el-Aroud's mentor Bassam al-Ayachi, a French cleric of Syrian descent whose Centre Islamique Belge in Brussels was linked to several terrorism cases. His son was one of the first Belgians to die in Syria,[e] and some of the so-called Zerkani network were influenced by his teachings.[7]

The First Wave: Sharia4Belgium

Many of the Belgians who were part of the first wave to travel to fight in Syria were linked to Sharia4Belgium, a Flemish extremist group founded by

Fouad Belkacem, an Antwerp-based radical with a track record of petty crime.[8] His group was modeled on Islam4UK, led by radical cleric Anjem Choudary and had launched throughout its existence a series of publicity stunts to attract attention from the media and potential supporters.[f] Though Belkacem was dismissed out of hand by some, in March 2012 the head of Belgium's Sûreté de l'État (domestic intelligence), Alain Winants, warned that Belkacem was radicalizing individuals to violence and Belgian security services needed to track those in his network. At the time, Winants estimated there were about 1,000 jihadi sympathizers in Belgium of which 100 were hardcore supporters and of which about a dozen had traveled to fight jihad overseas.[9] Although Sharia4Belgium claimed to have disbanded in October 2012 it continued proselytizing as wave after wave of recruits left for Syria.

To date, 75 of the Belgian foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria and Iraq were directly linked to Sharia4Belgium, while six others at first were linked to Sharia4Belgium but later ended up in the network of Jean-Louis Denis.[10] The arrival of Sharia4Belgium members in Syria early on in the civil war had a snowball effect on recruitment. As members arrived they encouraged their friends back in Belgium via social media to join.

The first Belgians who left for Syria joined a variety of jihadist outfits, often small and independent groups that, in time, affiliated with the Islamic State. One of the most attractive groups was Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin, a group led by brothers Firas and Amr al-Absi. One of the first Belgian fighters to join the group was former Sharia4Belgium member Houssien Elouassaki (also known as Abu Fallujah), who subsequently became a key point of contact for other Belgians joining the group. Elouassaki himself had no jihadist contacts whatsoever in Syria before he left and wandered the Turkish-Syrian border for days before hitchhiking his way through to the country.

Elouassaki became the emir of a brigade of foreign fighters within Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin, which grew to include Belgian, Dutch, and French fighters. Contacting a Belgian who already was accepted as a *mujahid* in Syria was far easier than trying to get into groups like the al-Qa'ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, which strictly vetted recruits. Most of the brigade's members later joined the Islamic State, while Elouassaki and a few other Belgians and Dutch joined Jabhat al-Nusra.[11][g]

Resto du Tawhid – The Jean-Louis Denis Network

The growth of Sharia4Belgium was mirrored by the rise of several smaller networks. One of these was Resto du Tawhid, an organization led by Belgian convert Jean-Louis Denis (also known as Le Soumis), 41, a former farm laborer turned convert turned extremist rabble rouser. At least 50 of Belgium's foreign fighters have some sort of connection to Jean-Louis Denis, according to a database maintained by this author. Illustrating the overlap between Belgian radical networks, a significant number of these also had connections to Sharia4Belgium (six individuals) and the so-called Zerkani network (11 individuals).[12][h] Resto du Tawhid was active around the Gare du Nord Brussels railway station, distributing food aid to needy Muslims. However, by April 2013 it was clear that Resto du Tawhid was not just about charity. When two 16-year-old boys from Fernand Blum High School in Schaerbeek left for jihad in Syria, Jean-Louis Denis was arrested and questioned for recruiting them. He said defiantly that the men were following their religious duty. [13]

While Sharia4Belgium focused its recruitment efforts in Antwerp and the Flemish areas between Antwerp and Brussels, including Vilvoorde, they also had recruits in the capital, including in Molenbeek, a majority Francophone district in Brussels with a large population of North African immigrants. Denis mainly operated in the Gare du Nord area but steadily became more involved in Sharia4Belgium, at one point becoming the leader of its Brussels branch.[14] The trial of Denis and his recruits made clear that there was not mere spillover between these groups. Not only did Denis connect Sharia4Belgium and Resto du Tawhid, he also provided a key connection between Sharia4Belgium operating mainly in Flanders and the so-called Zerkani network based in and around the Molenbeek district of Brussels.[15]

The Zerkani Network

By far the most dangerous network to have surfaced in Belgium was a group of Brussels-based radicals centered around Khalid Zerkani, a 42-year-old, Moroccan-born resident of Brussels who targeted youngsters in and around Molenbeek. Nicknamed Papa Noel (Santa Claus) because of his cash handouts, Zerkani led his network of criminals as a gang. If Zerkani was the father figure of the group, then Fatima Aberkan, 55, a close associate of Malika el-Aroud,[i] who Belgian officials labeled a "passionara of jihad," was its mother figure, inciting her children and their circle to fight jihad in Syria and raise funds.[16][j] While Zerkani played a leading role in proselytizing, a review of hundreds of pages of court documents by the author reveals that the young men in these social networks also encouraged each other to travel to Syria.[k]

Zerkani's recruits were constantly on the move in Brussels, robbing tourists and passers-by. Between 2012 and 2014 at least 60 Belgium-based extremists linked to the Zerkani network traveled to Syria and Iraq.[17] with Zerkani facilitating their travel and paying some of them up to €4,000 from the proceeds of his gang's thefts. Investigators established that he provided recruits with fake documentation and put them in touch with individuals who could smuggle them across the Turkish-Syrian border.[18]

The most infamous of Zerkani's recruits was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the coordinator of the November 13 attacks in Paris.[19] Others who were part of the network and who subsequently became involved in European terror plots include the Belgian Islamic State operative Chakib Akrouh, who blew himself up during a French commando raid in Saint Denis several days after the Paris attacks; Najim Laachraoui, the cell's bomb maker; and Reda Kriket, a French Islamic State recruit who was arrested in Paris with explosives and weapons several days after the Brussels attacks.[20]

Abaaoud had connections to many of the Islamic State-linked plots and attacks against Europe over the past two years. The French Islamic State recruit Mehdi Nemmouche spoke on the phone with Abaaoud for almost half an hour a few months before he attacked the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels in May 2014, while Abaaoud also coordinated the terror plot that was thwarted in Verviers in Belgium in mid-January 2015.[21] He is also suspected of playing a role in a plot by Sid Ahmed Ghlam to attack a Paris church in April 2014 and of links to Ayoub el Khazzani, a Moroccan extremist who tried to carry out an attack onboard a Thalys train in August 2015.[22]

The Zerkani network had a very different profile from Sharia4Belgium. Whereas Fouad Belkacem openly preached in the streets and Sharia4Belgium even had a YouTube channel and website, the group around Zerkani operated clandestinely. Whereas the Zerkani network operated more like a criminal

gang and drew in a lot of unemployed people from the Brussels Canal Zone and a significant number with criminal backgrounds but little or no Islamic background, Sharia4Belgium had recruits from Antwerp, Vilvoorde, and Brussels of various backgrounds, including from all layers of the Muslim population, even people with higher education who had been inspired by their message.

While Sharia4Belgium recruits have tended to be very amateurish, Zerkani's recruits' history of petty criminality and gangsterism naturally equipped them with better tradecraft in operating clandestinely, helping them travel to and from Syria with ease. Those subsequently plotting attacks were able to draw on contacts from criminal milieus to source weapons as well as the chemicals needed for bomb-building in addition to cars and safe houses.

Despite these differences in the networks, Belgian extremist circles were a small world. For example, Paris attack bomb maker Najim Laachraoui, who was recruited to fight in Syria by the Zerkani network, attended a protest at the Myanmar Embassy in Brussels in July 2012 in the company of Jean-Louis Denis and Sharia4Belgium member Houssien Elouassaki.[23]

Abaaoud and Laachraoui both left Belgium for Syria in early 2013 and joined the ranks of Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin, which at that point was led solely by Amr al-Absi whose Katibat al-Muhajirin[1] was led by Sharia4Belgium member Elouassaki.[24] When al-Absi decided to join the Islamic State, both Abaaoud and Laachraoui followed his lead.[25]

The Syrian Terror Factory

It appears that in the summer of 2013 Abaaoud joined the ranks of Katibat al-Battar al-Libiyya, a Libyan branch of the Islamic State that was founded in December 2012.[26] Some described the group as an elite brigade of the Islamic State, counting upwards of 700 and maybe even 1,500 members. [27] Most of the members were, as the group's name suggests, of Libyan descent, some of them with a jihadist pedigree going back to the Iraqi insurgency and even Afghanistan. There was, however, an important branch of French-speaking fighters counting a significant amount of Belgian, French, and Tunisian fighters.

In Syria, French and Belgian fighters had a strong connection to each other because of linguistic and national links. This brought together one-time members of Sharia4Belgium, Resto du Tawhid, and the Zerkani network. For example, Mohamed Soulayman, a Belgian foreign fighter recruited by the Zerkani network, used the same cell phone while in Syria as Houssien Elouassaki, the Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin commander, and other former Sharia4Belgium members.[28]

The Belgian contingent in Syria maintained contact with fighters who had returned to Europe as well as their social circle and families back home. It was via these networks that new fighters were recruited and that weapons, ammunition, money, and fake identity papers were transferred across Europe.[29][m] The case of Soufiane Alilou,[30] the son of Fatima Aberkan, the so-called "passionara of jihad," demonstrated just how easy it was to move back and forth to Syria. Alilou spent a month in Syria between October 19, 2012, and November 16, 2012. He then left Belgium a second time with two new recruits on February 12, 2013, and came back to Belgium with one of them on February 25, 2013. A month later he left Belgium again but was stopped at the Turkish border and sent back to Belgium. The Belgian police ignored him on arrival in Belgium, and two weeks later he escorted two more recruits to Syria, escorting his mother back to Belgium in May on his return home. Extraordinarily, he made a fourth successful trip to Syria on November 9, 2013. When Alilou returned to Belgium on July 25, 2014, he was finally arrested.[31]

In the summer of 2014 a Twitter account under the name "the lover of martyrs," closely affiliated with Katibat al-Battar, published a list of killed fighters in the ranks of the Libyan branch. Among the purportedly deceased Belgian fighters with links to the Zerkani network was Abu 'Umar al-Belgiki, a.k.a. Abdelhamid Abaaoud.[32] By faking his own death Abaaoud was able to go off the grid for several months, giving himself the opportunity to prepare for a terror plot in Belgium that the following January was thwarted by a Belgian commando raid in Verviers.[n]

It is possible that operatives within Katibat al-Battar encouraged Abaaoud to set in motion a campaign of terrorism against Europe. The Paris attacks resembled the group's mass-casualty 'Inghimasi'[o] operations.[33] As Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi has noted, the group was tasked with organizing plots that "involved foreign fighters, sleeper cells in Europe that were connected with an operative inside of Syria and Iraq, usually in a lower to midlevel position." [34] It is also noteworthy that Paris attacker Bilal Hadfi was in contact with several members of Katibat al-Battar via Facebook.[35]

Target: Europe

Since the fall of 2014 Zerkani's street gangsters, hardened by their experience fighting with the Islamic State in Syria, have been at the heart of the Islamic State's campaign of terrorism in Europe. This was set in motion after senior Islamic State operative Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, the Islamic State's spokesman, declared war on the West in a September 22, 2014, audiotape.[36]

The first time Europe was confronted with a clear attempt to follow up on these orders came on January 15, 2015, when Belgian police and security forces raided a house in Verviers. Phone taps had revealed that the men hiding inside were probably planning an attack in France or Belgium. [37] During the raid, two Belgian foreign fighters, later named as Sofiane Amghar and Khalid Ben Larbi,[38] were killed while a third was arrested. The plotters had all been in touch with Abaaoud who had traveled to Athens to coordinate the plot.[39][p]

The November 13, 2015, Paris attacks were coordinated, planned, and launched from Belgium. After slipping back into Europe cell members went underground in three safe houses in Belgium, including a bomb factory in Brussels. While Abaaoud led the attack team that carried out the Paris attacks on the ground, Belgian investigators believe the overall leader of the cell was Mohammed Belkaid, an Algerian Islamic State operative who had previously resided in Sweden.[40]

Belkaid was killed on March 15 as he provided covering fire for several cell members, including Salah Abdeslam, a childhood friend of Abaaoud, to escape a safe house in the Forest neighborhood of Brussels.[41] When Abdeslam was located and arrested a few days later, the remaining members of

the cell, including Najim Laachraoui and Khalid and Ibrahim Bakraoui (two brothers with a history of armed robberies) fearing arrest, accelerated an attack on the Brussels airport and metro, killing 32.[42][q]

Conclusion

Three overlapping recruitment networks in Belgium—Sharia4Belgium, Resto du Tawhid, and the Zerkani network—have been responsible for the recruitment of a significant number of foreign fighters from Belgium. Court proceedings have established these networks have ties to at the very least 174 Belgian foreign fighters who traveled to Syria and Iraq.[r]

These numbers illustrate the recruitment power of charismatic preachers and the significant problems created by clusters of radicalized, likeminded individuals. As American academic Marc Sageman has argued, in-group radicalization within social networks has been key to radicalization to violence. [43] To prevent future Brussels and Paris attackers, Western governments should focus on preventing the growth of similar radical networks in the rest of Europe. Belgium and its European neighbors will be living with their legacy for some time to come.

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Substantive Notes

[a] The term “Belgian foreign fighters” refers to Belgian nationals and non-Belgian residents of Belgium who have traveled to or tried to travel to join jihadist groups overseas. The official estimate includes 269 still in Syria or Iraq (or elsewhere), six individuals on their way to the warzone, 117 who have returned, and 59 who tried to leave but were stopped. See Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “New Official Numbers on Belgian fighters in Syria and Iraq,” pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com, February 22, 2016. According to a database of Belgian foreign fighters maintained by the author and Guy Van Vlierden, the high-end estimate for the number of Belgian nationals and residents who have traveled to Syria and Iraq is 626. See also Jim Brunsten, “Belgium: Journeys to Jihad,” *Financial Times*, June 3, 2016. One of the reasons the official count is likely lower is that it is based on those for whom there was enough evidence to bring criminal charges. See Paul Cruickshank, “View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Alain Grignard,” *CTC Sentinel* 8:8 (2015). Another reason the database maintained by the author should be considered a high-end estimate is because only fragmentary information is available for some of the foreign fighters such as only a *kunya*, meaning some individuals may be counted more than once.

[b] It could be argued that the British foreign fighter phenomenon linked to al-Qa’ida in Pakistan in the 1990s and 2000s was similarly linked to clusters of extremists associated with radical figures in the United Kingdom such as Abu Hamza al Masri, Omar Bakri Mohammed, and Abu Qatada. See Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, “Clerical Error: The Dangers of Tolerance,” *New Republic*, August 8, 2005. American academic Marc Sageman has written about how informal radical groups or “bunches of guys” formed in such places as the fringes of the al-Quds mosque in Hamburg, the M-30 mosque in Madrid, the Islamic Cultural Center in Milan, and Finsbury Park in London, and contributed a significant proportion of the Westerners who became involved in Islamist terrorism in the years leading up to and following 9/11. See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terrorist Networks* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 114, and Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 86.

[c] Belgian counterterrorism officials have cited the comparatively early departure of Belgian militants to fight in Syria as one of the key reasons so many have traveled. For example, see Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, “Belgium on edge after year of terror,” *CNN*, December 30, 2015.

[d] Before he was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan’s tribal areas, Garsallaoui encouraged Toulouse terrorist shooter Mohammed Merah to launch attacks in France. Paul Cruickshank, “Taking Tea with a Terrorist,” *CNN*, October 17, 2012; Eric Pelletier, “Moez Garsallaoui, ‘mentor’ présumé de Merah, aurait été tué,” *L’Express*, October 18, 2012.

[e] Bassam al-Ayachi joined the rebel group Suqur al Sham in Syria. Joanie de Rijke, “DS Weekblad op frontbezoek bij de Molenbeekse imam die shariarechter werd in Syrië,” *De Standaard*, February 7, 2014.

[f] Examples are abundant. A lecture by Dutch poet Benno Barnard at the University of Antwerp was disrupted. Marie-Rose Morel, a politician of Vlaams-Belang, was damned to hell. In Molenbeek and Antwerp there was frequent rioting linked to the group. See Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “Van Kruijstochten tot Kalifaat,” *Pelckmans*, 2015, pp. 114-117.

[g] A significant amount of the detail on Elouassaki comes from messages the author exchanged with Dutch and Belgium Jabhat al-Nusra members via direct messaging on Twitter during the months of September, October, and November 2015. Contacts included, among others, Levantenaar, Abu Saeed al-Hallabi/al-Hollandi, Polderjihadi, and Abu Jandal at-Tawzani.

[h] Jean-Louis Denis received a 10-year prison sentence for his recruitment activities in a trial that concluded in January 2016. Nine others who traveled were given prison sentences as well. For more on the case, see Jim Brunsten, “Belgium: Journeys to Jihad,” *Financial Times*, June 3, 2016.

[i] Aberkan’s brother Abdelhouaid was an associate of el-Aroud’s husband, Abdessater Dahmane, who killed Massoud and was convicted for helping get him to Afghanistan. Another man tried in relation to the Massoud assassination was Abderrahmane Ameuroud who was shot in the leg and arrested at a train stop in Brussels in March because he was suspected of involvement in a terror plot being organized by Zerkani acolyte Reda Kriket. Guy Van Vlierden, “The Zerkani Network: Belgium’s Most Dangerous Jihadist Group,” *Jamestown Foundation*, April 12, 2016.

[j] She was the actual mother of three of the Belgian foreign fighters tried in the Zerkani trial: Abdelmouneim Lachiri, Yassine Lachiri, and Soufiane Allou. During the time she spent in Syria she sent messages to her circle in Belgium encouraging them to travel to Syria to fight jihad. See verdict in

ained. During the time she spent in Syria she sent messages to her circle in Belgium encouraging them to travel to Syria to fight jihad. See verdict in first Zerkani trial, "Jugement, Tribunal de première instance Francophone de Bruxelles," July 29, 2015, pp. 144-155.

[k] For example, the family members of Zerkani acolyte Chakib Akrouh believe Zerkani's right-hand man Gelel Attar, 27, was the one who persuaded Akrouh to travel to Syria. Attar housed Zerkani at his Molenbeek residence, where he organized meetings encouraging young men to travel to wage jihad, before traveling with Akrouh to Syria in January 2013. Akrouh was part of the 10-man Islamic State team that attacked Paris last November. He blew himself up during a French commando raid on a Saint Denis terrorist safe house several days after the attacks. Verdict in first Zerkani trial, pp. 65-69.

[l] This should not be confused with Katibat al-Muhajirin wa'l-Ansar, the group led by Umar as-Shishani, who later became a high-ranking official in the Islamic State.

[m] Between the Paris and Brussels attacks these networks also helped hide surviving members of the Islamic State terror cell, for example Salah Abdeslam.

[n] After the raid and the killing of Abaaoud's accomplices, the same Twitter account published pictures of both deceased men on January 26, 2015, linking them to the Libyan Islamic State brigade.

[o] Inghimasiyyun are highly trained, heavily armed fighters carrying pistols, light machine guns, and explosive belts. They aim to kill as many adversaries or civilian victims before they themselves are killed in battle by enemy fire or by running out of bullets and self-detonating themselves amidst a crowd of enemies/targets. These kind of attacks have been used frequently on the battleground in Syria and Iraq and resemble the attacks in Tunisia on the Bardo Museum in Tunis and on the beach in Sousse.

[p] Besides an entire arsenal of heavy weapons, including Kalashnikovs and hundreds of bullets, there were also Belgian police uniforms found in the safe-house. One of their targets was reportedly a high-ranking police officer, with the intention of beheading him on camera. "Wat we weten over de antiterreuroperatie in Verviers," *Het Laatste Nieuws*, January 16, 2015.

[q] The so-called 'man in the hat' at Brussels airport, Mohamed Abrini, a longtime Molenbeek resident, told Belgian investigators that Euro 2016 was the ultimate target of the cell, a claim that is still being assessed. See Paul Cruickshank and Mariano Castillo, "Paris, Brussels attackers sought to target Euro 2016," CNN, April 11, 2016.

[r] These were the cases in which biographical information indicated a link. As this information is fragmentary on a significant number of those in the database, the number of Belgian foreign fighters with links to the three networks is likely to be significantly higher. This database is maintained by the author and Guy Van Vlierden.

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[14] Verdict in first Zerkani trial, pp. 44, 66.

[15] Ibid., pp. 63, 85, 86.

[16] Guy Van Vlierden, "Van 9/11 tot Parijs: Fatima's familie zit ertussen," *Het Laatste Nieuws*, March 1, 2016; Guy Van Vlierden, "Paris Attack Ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud," *CTC Sentinel* 8:11 (2015).

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