



# The November 2015 Paris Attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees

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*Abstract: This article provides an in-depth analysis of the role of foreign fighter returnees in the attacks by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Western Europe. To do this, it focuses primarily on the operatives and logisticians responsible for the November 2015 attacks in Paris. The threat from foreign fighter returnees remains under-appreciated in expert and policymaking communities. ISIS's rhetorical emphasis on the caliphate, combined with a series of attacks by lone actors, has made it easy for policymakers to misinterpret ISIS's true intentions against the West. This case study illustrates that ISIS leaders have been able to plan and execute parallel strategies within the Middle East (Islamic caliphate) and Western Europe (terrorist campaign). Moreover, they have pursued these parallel strategies through using foreign fighters.*

On November 13, 2015, at 9:20 p.m., a man detonated a suicide vest at a soccer match between France and Germany at the *Stade de France* in Paris. This detonation was followed by two others at the stadium, as well as shootings by three armed gunmen at restaurants and bars in Paris' 11<sup>th</sup> District, and a hostage event at the Bataclan Concert Hall. One hundred and twenty nine individuals died. The assailants included seven individuals from France and Belgium, who had travelled previously to Syria to fight for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Two additional assailants, Iraqis, were sent by ISIS commanders to Europe for the attack. But beyond these immediate operatives, French and Belgian investigators found a total of 30 individuals<sup>1</sup> who were involved in the attacks; 16 of whom had been foreign fighters in Syria or Iraq. This case study provides an analysis of these coordinated attacks.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Belgian Foreign Minister Reynders cited in "Suspect Salah Abdeslam Planned Further Attacks," *BBC News*, March 26, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35857388>.

<sup>2</sup> This article draws on multiple primary and secondary data sources. These include relevant books, journal articles, newspaper accounts, and press releases by security officials in Europe specifically on the Paris and closely-related Belgium attacks. This article also uses videos,

## The Paris Attacks in Context

The November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris did not occur in isolation. In many ways, they represented one manifestation of broader unrest in the Middle East and North Africa. This unrest began in December 2010 with the advent of the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia. There, Mohammad Bouazizi, a street vendor, set himself on fire to protest his treatment at the hands of Tunisian police. Bouazizi’s action sparked a series of protests that led to the resignation of Tunisian President Zine al-Abdine Ben Ali in January 2011. The revolution in Tunisia was followed by mass protests in Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and, eventually, Syria in March 2011. Importantly, neither al Qaeda nor ISIS played a significant role in these protests. In fact, documents discovered by U.S. security forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan, revealed that then-leader Osama bin Laden struggled to find a way to insert al Qaeda into this broader movement.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Tunisia, however, the protests in Syria had turned violent by July 2011. This spiraling violence provided an opportunity for al Qaeda to re-position itself to take advantage of the chaos in Syria and, subsequently, in Iraq. By March 2013, those who opposed Bashar al-Assad, many of them associated with al Qaeda, had taken control over the city of Raqqa in Syria. Over the course of two years, al Qaeda had gone from being irrelevant to the Arab Spring, to playing a central role in the ongoing unrest. Approximately one year later, ISIS, al Qaeda’s main competitor, declared the creation of an Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq with its headquarters in Raqqa.<sup>4</sup>

Much has been written about the historical origins of ISIS and its ties to al Qaeda.<sup>5</sup> Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), initially travelled from Jordan to Afghanistan in 1989. Zarqawi interacted with al Qaeda leaders at that time and again when he returned to Afghanistan in 2000, where he established a training camp.<sup>6</sup> But Zarqawi never joined al Qaeda while he was in

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statements, tweets, and other primary source materials published by ISIS in English and Arabic. Most of these communications were obtained through the SITE Intelligence Group. SITE maintains an ongoing database of terrorist-related propaganda materials, which can be accessed by subscription. These sources also were used to build a dataset of plots and attacks against the West by ISIS sympathizers. This dataset informs the network analysis of Paris attackers contained in the article and the timeline of events.

<sup>3</sup> For further information, see R. Kim Cragin, “The Recent History of al-Qaeda,” *The Historical Journal*, July 2014, pp. 803-824. Many of these documents have been posted online, see <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/resources/bin-laden-bookshelf>.

<sup>4</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, *This is the Promise of Allah*, statement released by al-Hayat Media Center, June 30, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015); and William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of The Islamic State* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Jason Burke, *The 9/11 Wars* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), pp. 164-165; Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 281-282; and Mary Anne Weaver, “The Short, Violent, Life of Abu Musab Zarqawi,” *The Atlantic*, June 8, 2006, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/>.

Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> His disagreement with al Qaeda leaders centered on the extent to which other Muslims, including Shi'a, should be killed in pursuit of an Islamic caliphate. Zarqawi also disagreed with al Qaeda's emphasis on "the far enemy" over the "near enemy," or so-called corrupt Arab regimes.<sup>8</sup>

After the United States invaded Afghanistan, Zarqawi, along with approximately 50 associates, made his way through Iran to northern Iraq, arriving sometime in 2002.<sup>9</sup> At that point, Zarqawi began to build a logistics network that reached all the way from North Africa, the Gulf States, and South Asia to the Levant.<sup>10</sup> This network helped Zarqawi expand his group and supplied them with essential foreign fighters, weapons, and funds following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in May 2003. Zarqawi's group also officially joined al Qaeda in October 2004, adopting the name "al Qaeda in Iraq." But disagreements continued between Zarqawi and al Qaeda leaders.<sup>11</sup> One of the more pivotal moments in the relationship was an attack by AQI operatives against a series of hotels in Amman, Jordan, in November 2005.<sup>12</sup> The attack caused some within al Qaeda to turn against Zarqawi, leading to an improvement in U.S. intelligence collection.<sup>13</sup> The end result was that Zarqawi was killed by an airstrike in July 2006. Three months later, AQI changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).<sup>14</sup>

These past tensions set the stage for an official split between ISIS and al Qaeda almost eight years later in 2014. By some accounts, as the Arab Spring gained momentum in Syria, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani as ISI's representative to the fight against President Bashar al Assad's regime. In other accounts, al-Jawlani acted independently.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of its initial inception, personality and strategic differences between al-Jawlani and al-Baghdadi caused a fracture among Salafi-jihadists in Syria by early 2013. Perhaps in a bid to gain greater

<sup>7</sup> Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab Zarqawi."

<sup>8</sup> William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, pp. 10-11; and Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab Zarqawi."

<sup>9</sup> McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, p. 10; Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*, p. 165; Michael Weiss, *ISIS*, p. 14; and Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab Zarqawi."

<sup>10</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 282; and Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*, p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> General Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task* (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 152.

<sup>12</sup> Hassan M. Fattah and Michael Slackmannov, "3 hotels Bombed in Jordan; at Least 57 Die," *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 2005, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/10/world/middleeast/3-hotels-bombed-in-jordan-at-least-57-die.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/10/world/middleeast/3-hotels-bombed-in-jordan-at-least-57-die.html?_r=0).

<sup>13</sup> Jason Burke, *9/11 Wars*, p. 254; and McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, pp. 150-156.

<sup>14</sup> Burke, *9/11 Wars*, p. 282.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, "ISI Leader Rebrands ISI and al-Nusra Front as 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant,'" translated and released by SITE Intelligence Group, April 16, 2013; Stephanie d'Arc Taylor, "Jabhat al-Nusra's Rising Stock in Syria," *al-Jazeera News*, May 19, 2013, [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/05/20135161073885661.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/05/20135161073885661.html); and Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al Nusra: A Strategic Briefing," Quilliam Foundation, nd., <http://quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>.

control over the situation, on April 8 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced a merger between ISI and al-Jawlani's group, al Nusrah Front (ANF).<sup>16</sup> The next day, however, al-Jawlani refuted this merger and pledged his allegiance to al Qaeda and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>17</sup>

The in-fighting between al Baghdadi and al Jawlani on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, of course, reverberated throughout al Qaeda. In response, Ayman al-Zawahiri sent an emissary, Abu Khalid al-Suri, to the region in May 2013 in an attempt to resolve these differences. But al-Suri was killed by ISIS fighters in February 2014.<sup>18</sup> Four months later, in June 2014, then-ISIS spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani announced the creation of a newly-formed Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq. The primary message from ISIS, at the time, was that the Islamic State had established governing structures and religious law in its territories and, thus, all Muslims had a religious obligation to transfer their allegiance to ISIS and relocate to this newly-established caliphate.<sup>19</sup>

Significantly, the declaration by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani was aimed not only at local sympathizers in Syria and Iraq, but also at prospective foreign fighters. Foreign fighters had been pouring into Syria to assist with the fight against the Assad regime. Many of them used the exact same logistical network built by Zarqawi over a decade earlier to do so. Some joined ANF, others joined ISIS, and still others fought with alternative opposition forces. By November 2015, slightly more than 30,000 foreign fighters had travelled to Syria and Iraq, representing an average of 7,500 additional fighters per year.<sup>20</sup> These numbers were unprecedented. Soviet forces in Afghanistan faced approximately 20,000 foreign fighters in the 1980s with an average of 1,650 new fighters per year. Similarly, 5,000 foreign fighters travelled to Iraq to fight U.S. and allied forces between 2004 and 2009.<sup>21</sup> ISIS wanted the new generation of foreign fighters to join their group and not ANF. This competition was clear from ISIS's inception. Take, for example, the following statement from al-Adnani's declaration of ISIS's caliphate. Adnani was appealing to Muslim residents of the West.

Come O Muslims to your honor, to your victory. By Allah if you disbelieve in democracy, secularism, nationalism as well as all of

<sup>16</sup> "ISI Leader Rebrands ISI and al-Nusra Front as 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant,'" translated and released by SITE Intelligence Group, April 16, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> John Muir, "Al-Nusra Pledges Allegiance to al-Qaeda," *BBC News*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22095099>.

<sup>18</sup> "Militants Kill al-Qaeda Emissary in Syria," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, Feb. 25, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, *This is the Promise of Allah*, statement released by al-Hayat Media Center, June 30, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Patricia Zengerle, "U.S. Fails to Stop Flow of Foreign Fighters to Islamic State," *Reuters*, Sept. 29, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/29/us-mideast-crisis-congress-fighters-idUSKCN0RT1VZ20150929>; and Michael Pizzi, "Foreign Fighters in Syria, Iraq have doubled since anti-ISIS intervention," *al-Jazeera*, Dec. 7, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/12/7/foreign-fighters-in-syria-iraq-have-doubled-since-anti-isil-intervention.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," *International Security*, Winter 2010/11, p 61.

the other garbage and ideas from the west, and rush to your religion and creed, then by Allah, you will own the earth. This is the promise of Allah.<sup>22</sup>

This declaration became the template that well-known ISIS voices active on social media used to encourage recruits and volunteers to travel to Syria to join their newly formed caliphate and fight against the Assad regime. This rhetorical theme continued throughout 2014 and into early 2016. So-called “lone wolf” attacks in the West—attacks not directed by ISIS, but undertaken independently by ISIS sympathizers—were discussed as a last resort, only if recruits could not make it to Syria for some reason. For example, on August 28 2015, the ISIS-affiliated “Granddaughters of Eایشa Brigade” issued the following statement via Twitter, “My brother, if you are unable to immigrate to the lands of Islam and follow the soldiers of the caliphate, then you are not unable to be a lone wolf.”<sup>23</sup> ISIS’s rhetorical emphasis on the caliphate dovetailed with events on the ground. That is, the sheer number of foreign fighters entering, or trying to enter, Syria suggested that ISIS prioritized its fight to establish control over territory in Syria and Iraq as part of its effort to form an Islamic caliphate. Attacks against the West appeared to be less of a priority. And, in this context, the limited Western attacks seemed to be less sophisticated and often conducted by lone actors and sympathizers, not trained operatives. Several of these attacks and plots are listed below.

- **February 2014.** 23-three-year-old Ibrahim Boudina was arrested in France. He allegedly plotted to attack the Nice Carnival.
- **May 2014.** Mehdi Nemmouche opened fire inside the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels, killing four people.
- **June 2014.** Police in Kosovo charged three men with planning a suicide attacks.
- **July 2014.** Two men were accused of plotting attacks against potential targets in Italy, including the train station in Milan and a military base near Brescia.
- **September 2014.** An 18-year-old ISIS sympathizer was shot dead after stabbing two counterterrorism officers outside a Melbourne police station.
- **October 2014.** A man killed a soldier who was guarding the National War Memorial in Ottawa and then stormed Canada’s parliament.
- **December 2014.** A gunman, who said he was acting on ISIS’s behalf, seized 17 hostages in a Sydney café.
- **December 2014.** A man charged into a police station in Tours, France, armed with a knife and attacked three police officers.

<sup>22</sup> al-Adnani, *This is the Promise of Allah*.

<sup>23</sup> “Pro-IS Female Jihadist Calls on Lone Wolves to Strike in Enemy Homelands,” Aug. 28, 2015, posted and translated by SITE Intelligence Group, Sept. 2, 2015.

- **February 2015.** Omar Abdel Hamid El-Huseein attacked a cultural center in Copenhagen; he radicalized in jail.
- **May 2015.** Two men shot and killed a security guard outside an event in Garland, Texas; police killed the perpetrators.
- **June 2015.** Yassine Salhi attempted to cause a gas explosion inside a Lyon gas plant by ramming his car into gas cylinders; he also severed his boss' head.
- **August 2015.** Ayoub al-Khazzani opened fire on passengers on a train from Amsterdam to Paris before being overpowered.

Yet, ISIS's rhetorical emphasis on the caliphate and this pattern of less-sophisticated attacks hid a greater threat. This threat emanated from the possibility that foreign fighters were returning home to conduct attacks in a more systematic way. Even prior to the establishment of its Islamic caliphate, ISIS leaders had begun to consider ways to conduct external operations, utilizing its pool of foreign fighters.<sup>24</sup> Mehdi Nemmouche, the perpetrator of the May 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels, was the first foreign fighter sent home to conduct an attack against the West. He was part of an external operations cell, led by Abdelhamid Abaaoud. Moreover, in early November 2015, ISIS leaders reportedly gathered in Tabqah, Syria, to discuss the need to devote greater emphasis and resources towards attacks in Europe—primarily Italy, Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom. They expected to use foreign fighter returnees to execute these attacks.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, even as ISIS rhetoric emphasized the need for foreign fighters to support the Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq, its leaders quietly built an organizational structure to support attacks by those returning to Europe. ISIS's dual-track approach began slowly in 2014, gained momentum in 2015, and continued into the spring of 2016. In May 2016, Adnani interestingly reversed course in his rhetoric and publicly emphasized attacks against the West. He stated, "the tiniest action you do in the heart of their land is dearer to us than the biggest action by us. . . . There are no innocents in the lands of the crusaders."<sup>26</sup> The ambiguity in ISIS's rhetoric had ended. By this time, however, it was obvious that ISIS wanted to attack the West: the Paris attackers had already killed 129 people.

<sup>24</sup> "How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers," *Asharq al-Awasat*, Aug. 5, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> "How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers." See also, Martin Chulov, "How ISIS Laid out its Plans to Export Chaos to Europe," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "They Live by Proof," Video Statement by ISIS Spokesman, translated and released by al-Hayat Media Center, May 22, 2016.

## The Perpetrators

The core group of operatives for the November 2015 Paris attacks was comprised of nine individuals under the leadership of Abdelhamid Abaaoud.<sup>27</sup> Seven of the operatives were foreign fighters who returned home specifically to conduct an attack in Europe. Two of the operatives were Iraqi nationals who were sent to Europe by ISIS leaders to participate in the attacks.<sup>28</sup> The nine operatives did not travel from Syria to Europe together, but came in two different waves: first, in September and second, in October 2015. The Iraqis used a well-known route for refugees, travelling via the processing centers in Greece, with forged Syrian passports.<sup>29</sup> Table 1, below, lists these core operatives and their roles in the Paris attacks.

**Table 1. Core Operatives in the Paris Attacks**

	Date of Departure for Syria	Citizenship	Family Origin	Attack Site in Paris
Abdelhamid Abaaoud	March 2013	Belgium	Morocco	Restaurants in 11 <sup>th</sup> District
Ibrahim Abdeslam	January 2013	France	Morocco	Restaurants in 11 <sup>th</sup> District
Chakib Akrouh	January 2015	Belgium	Morocco	Restaurants in 11 <sup>th</sup> District
Bilal Hadfi	October 2015	France	Morocco	Stade de France
Ukashah al-Iraqi	N/A	Iraq	Iraq	Stade de France
Ali al-Iraqi	N/A	Iraq	Iraq	Stade de France
Sami Amimour	September 2013	France	Algeria	Bataclan Concert Hall
Omar Ismael Mostefai	September 2013	France	Algeria	Bataclan Concert Hall
Foued Mohammed Aggad	December 2013	France	Morocco	Bataclan Concert Hall

<sup>27</sup> In January 2016, ISIS released the names of the operatives in a video entitled, “Kill Them All Wherever you Find Them,” al-Hayat Media Center, Jan. 24, 2016; see also, Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Video Appears to Show Paris Assailants Earlier in Syria and Iraq,” *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> “Kill Them All Wherever you Find Them,” al-Hayat Media Center, Jan. 24, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Glackin, “Paris and the end of the beginning,” *The Daily Star (Lebanon)*, Nov. 16, 2016; Kate Connolly, “Three suspected ISIS operatives arrested at German refugee shelters,” *The Guardian*, Sept. 13, 2016; and Eric Pelletier and Thibault Raisse, “From Raqqa to Salzburg, in the Steps of the Phantom Commando,” *Aujourd’hui en France*, April 25, 2016, p. 14.

Equally important, these nine core operatives recruited an additional 21 individuals to provide logistical support for the attacks. Of these additional 21 recruits, seven had previously fought in Syria or Iraq, including Najim Laachraou, whom authorities believe helped build the explosive devices for both the Paris and subsequent attacks at the Brussels airport and subway. So it is not unreasonable to assume that some of the logisticians might have known the core operatives while fighting or training in the Levant, prior to their return to Europe from Syria.

*Figure 1*, below, illustrates these linkages. It is a basic network analysis of 23 the 30 perpetrators of the attacks in Paris.<sup>30</sup> The Figure identifies these individuals by name and their associated circles have a dark fill with white dots. It also reveals those individuals who played the most central roles—they had ties to the most number of individuals—in the Paris cell. But, beyond these linkages, *Figure 1* highlights those individuals who fought previously in Syria and Iraq. These foreign fighter returnees can be identified by the bold font of their names. The names of local recruits are presented also in greyscale.

This network analysis underscores the central role played by Abdelhamid Abaaoud in the Paris attacks. Readers can easily identify Abaaoud in *Figure 1* by the black circle associated with his name. He functioned as both operative and leader, but also clearly assembled the team, including many of the logisticians. That said, Abaaoud was not the only central actor in this network; other individuals also emerged as crucial to the Paris operation's success. Sami Amimour, for example, brought three additional individuals to the team with him, including one of the core operatives and two logisticians. All four men fought together in Syria and Iraq.

Salah Abdeslam similarly functioned as the primary link between the Paris operatives and those responsible for the March 2016 attacks on the airport and a subway station in Brussels. In the Brussels attack, 28 people were killed. The operatives responsible for the Brussels attacks have been identified by name on the network analysis and their associated circles have bold stripes. Salah Abdeslam, likewise, has been coded with two patterns in *Figure 1*—stripes and dark fill with white dots—because he provided logistical support to both attacks. He is unique among the central actors in this network analysis: Salah Abdeslam is the sole local recruit; other central actors were foreign fighters.

Additionally, Najim Laachraou helped to build the explosive devices for both the Paris and Brussels attacks. But he also had ties to Reda Kriket, who was arrested in France in March 2016 before he could execute a planned attack. Reda Kriket has been coded in *Figure 1* with a circle that has white fill and grey dots as have all of the lone actors or plotters in this chart. Note that *Figure 1* does not include all of the “lone wolves” who have plotted for ISIS, but only those with known and direct linkages to the Paris or Brussels attacks.

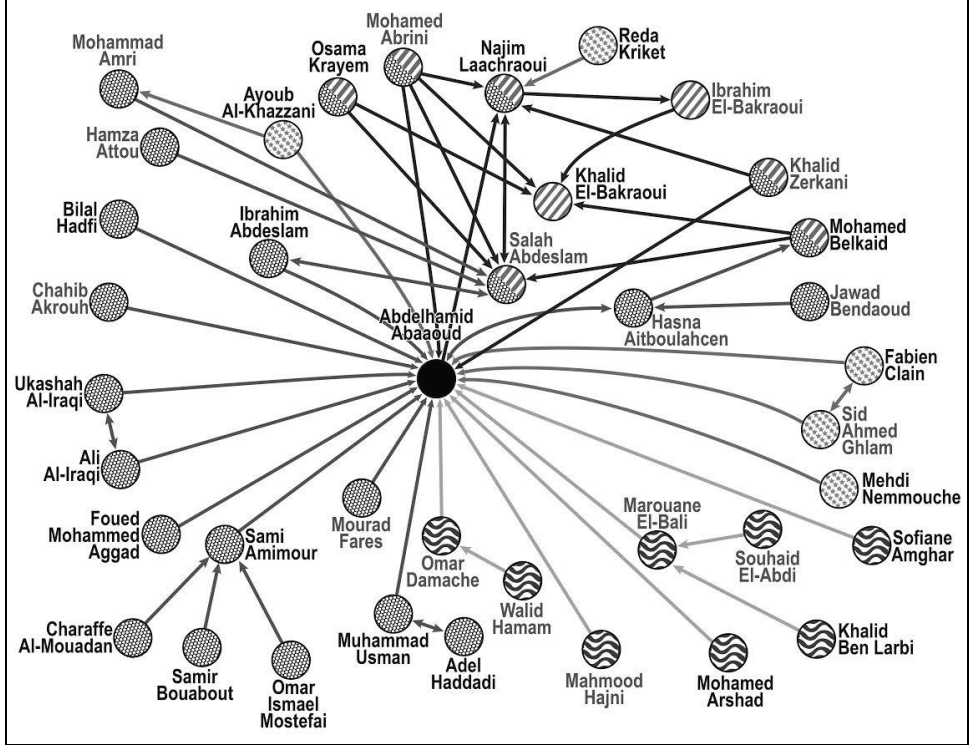
Note also that *Figure 1* includes those individuals who were arrested in Verviers, Belgium, prior to the November 2015 attacks in Paris. These individuals can be found with a wave pattern inside the nodes of the network analysis. They

<sup>30</sup> There is limited information available on the relationships between the other seven individuals responsible for providing logistical support to the Paris attackers. Thus, they are not included in *Figure 1*.



plotted to attack police officers in Verviers in January 2015, and security officials believe that they just missed arresting Abdelhamid Abaaoud at that time.<sup>31</sup> Given these ties, we have also included the Verviers perpetrators in the network analysis. Interestingly, the Verviers perpetrators do not have as many ties to others outside their operational cell as the other terrorists in this network. This fact, once again, reinforces the central role played by Abaaoud for ISIS in its external operations against the West.

**Figure 1. Network Analysis of Paris Operatives**



Credit. John D. Elliot, U.S. Department of State, Graphics Designer

Figure 1 illustrates the important role that returning foreign fighters have played in ISIS attacks against the West, even in the plots with only one assailant. They represented over half of the perpetrators for the Paris attacks and half of those responsible for the Belgium attacks. They conducted and plotted a majority of the lone actor attacks in this network analysis. The foreign fighter returnees also appear to have stitched together the various operational teams in this network analysis. The one exception is Salah Abdeslam. But, he is also the brother of Ibrahim Abdeslam, a

<sup>31</sup> Josh Halliday and Jonathan Bucks, “Abdelhamid Abaaoud: what we know about the Paris attacks ‘mastermind,’” *The Guardian*, Nov. 19, 2015; and Timothy Boutry, Eric Pelletier, and Thibault Raisse: “Secret Lost Battle Against Abaaoud” *Aujourd’hui en France*, May 13, 2016.

foreign fighter, and one of the core operatives in the Paris attacks. So it is difficult to determine the extent to which Salah Abdeslam and his centrality in two different attacks was unique or an emerging pattern. Furthermore, the foreign fighter returnees enlisted local support. Fourteen of the 21 local recruits had not previously travelled to Syria or Iraq. In two instances—Salah Abdeslam and Hasna Aitboulahcen—the local recruits were family members of the core operatives. The other 12 local recruits were not. This illustrates a lesser-acknowledged threat posed by foreign fighter returnees: they can recruit others to conduct attacks locally.

## Mechanics of the Attacks

Upon reflection, the mechanics of the Paris and Brussels attacks presented multiple warnings and opportunities for intervention. The challenge for security officials in Europe was how best to position themselves to take advantage of these opportunities. For example, all of the core operatives for the Paris attacks crossed international borders as they travelled from Syria to France. Coming in two waves, the first wave arrived in early September and the second wave in early October 2015. The core operatives also obtained forged travel documents. At least two of them—Ukashah al-Iraqi and Ali al-Iraqi—went through the refugee processing center in Leros, Greece.<sup>32</sup> And, as noted earlier, at least one of them, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, was known to authorities as an operational leader for ISIS and for claiming plots against Europe on social media.<sup>33</sup> Five other operatives in the Paris attacks had been placed on watch lists.<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, some of the individuals involved in both the Paris and the Brussels attacks also crossed international borders as they travelled from Syria to Belgium. Najim Laacharaoui and Mohamed Belkaid, for example, were picked up by their friend Salah Abdeslam in Budapest, Hungary, as they returned from Syria in September 2015.<sup>35</sup> These three individuals provided logistical support to the Paris attackers. Furthermore, they were detained by Austrian officials on the border as

<sup>32</sup> Subsequent investigations in Germany found approximately a dozen refugees with passports forged from the same facility as the Iraqi perpetrators of the Paris attacks. See, Michael Glackin, “Paris and the end of the beginning,” *The Daily Star (Lebanon)*, Nov. 16, 2016; Kate Connolly, “Three suspected ISIS operatives arrested at German refugee shelters,” *The Guardian*, Sept. 13, 2016; and Peter Tiede, Hans-Joerg Vehlewald, Liana Spyropoulou, Andreas Thewalt, Dirk Hoeren, and Paul Ronzheimer, “Bild Hard on Heels of Passport Forgers - Terror Militia ISIS Sends Fighters, Supporters Holding Forged Documents to Europe,” *Bild*, Dec. 21, 2015, reissued by *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, Dec. 23, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Lonnie Shekhtman, “Abdelhamid Abaaoud: Mastermind of the Paris attacks?” *The Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 16, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> The following individuals had been placed on watch lists prior to the Paris attacks: Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Saleh Abdelislam, Brahim Abdelislam, Bilal Hadfi, Omar Ismael Mostefai, Sami Amimour, and Mohamed Abrini. The latter was not directly involved in the Paris attacks. See, Mark Eeckhaut, “A Lot of Information on Paris Attackers, Nothing Concrete.” Groot Bijgaarden *De Standaard Online*, Feb. 26, 2016; and Leo Cendrowicz, Adam Lusher, and Alistair Dawber, “Series of missed chances allowed attacks to go ahead,” *The Independent*, Nov. 17, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> “Paris Abdeslam: pot-smoking ‘little moron’ of Paris attacks,” *Paris AFP*, April 27, 2006.

they tried to cross into Belgium from Hungary, but they were released. They also used forged travel documents.<sup>36</sup>

Beyond international travel, the Paris attacks perpetrators rented vehicles and leased safe houses as they planned and executed the operation. They also recruited support from local residents. Indeed, between September 2015 and November 2015, operatives rented eight safe houses, leased 11 vehicles, recruited local logisticians, obtained necessary weapons, and planned for the attacks. One report estimated that the Paris attacks cost approximately \$87,000.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, events beyond the activities of the core operatives also forewarned of pending attacks. For example, ISIS sympathizer Mohamed Abrini travelled to England in July 2015 to collect funds from Islamists in that country.<sup>38</sup> It is possible that some of these funds were used for the Paris attacks. Similarly, Reda Hame, upon his capture by French authorities in August 2015, confessed that Abaaoud had ordered him to attack a concert hall in Paris. And, finally, Western intelligence agencies were informed through multiple channels that ISIS wanted to attack the capital cities of Europe prior to the Paris attacks. So it is possible that enough warnings and signs existed for security authorities to be prepared for the Paris attacks and perhaps disrupt them.

The timeline below presents a basic chronology for the Paris attacks, including prior warnings and subsequent investigations by authorities in France and Belgium.

### **Timeline for Paris Attacks and Investigations**

*January 10, 2015.* The United States issued a worldwide travel alert amid fears that recent attacks in France, Australia and Canada may be the beginning of a new wave of violence sparked by a deadly competition between Islamic terror organizations across the globe.

*January 15, 2015.* Belgian police raided a safe house of suspected terrorists in Verviers. They discovered evidence of Abdelhamid Abaaoud among its occupants. The raid also uncovered weapons, cash, a body camera, multiple cell phones, handheld radios, fraudulent identification documents, and the precursor chemicals for the explosive triacetone triperoxide (TATP). Officials lost track of Abaaoud after his SIM card stopped transmitting. Police later found his DNA in an Athens apartment.

*February 12, 2015.* Abaaoud appeared in ISIS's online magazine, *Dabiq*. He claimed to be in Syria and boasted about having plotted terrorist attacks under the noses of the European authorities.

<sup>36</sup> "Paris—Abdeslam: pot-smoking 'little moron' of Paris attacks," and Jean-Claude Brisard, "Belgian Federal Prosecutor Confirms Media Reports on Identity, Role of Brussels Terror Suspects," via *Twitter*, March 18, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> "The Financing of the Paris Attacks (7-9 Jan. and 13 Nov. 2015)" *Centre d'Analyse du Terrorisme (CAT)*, Oct. 20, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Vikram Dodd, Jamie Grierson, and Nazia Parveen: "Five Arrested in UK After Inquiry Linked To Attacks on Brussels and Paris," *Guardian.co.uk*, April 15, 2016.

*June 30, 2015.* The French interior minister established a small team, referred to as the Terrorism Prevention Operations Staff, to gather all terrorism-related threat information. This new team was created in response to an attack in Saint-Quentin-Fallavier on June 26, 2015.

*July 7, 2015.* Abdelhamid Abaaoud told Mohamed Abrini to travel to Birmingham, United Kingdom, to obtain funds. Abrini received 3,000 GBPs in cash from Mohammed Ali Ahmed and Zakaria Boufassil. The money came from the bank account of Anwar Haddouchi, a Belgian fighting in Syria.

*August 2015.* Reda Hame informed French authorities that he was given instructions from Abaaoud to attack a concert hall in Paris. Abaaoud gave Hame money and encryption software.

*September 1, 3, 2015.* The first group of attackers entered Europe from Syria. Unknown individuals, using forged identity documents, rented safe houses in Brussels and Charleroi, as well as other locations for the month of September. They paid cash. These safe houses were used by the perpetrators of the Paris attacks.

*September 9, 2015.* Salah Abdeslam, Najim Laacharaoui, and Mohamed Belkaid were stopped by Austrian officials on the border as they attempted to travel from Budapest, Hungary, to Belgium by way of Austria. Laacharoui and Belkaid were returning home from Syria.

*October 3, 2015.* The second group of Paris attackers entered Europe from Syria. This group included Ukashah al-Iraqi and Ali al-Iraqi, who used a well-known route for refugees, travelling via the processing centers in Greece, with forged Syrian passports.

*October 5, 2015.* Unknown individuals rented a safe house in Auvelais, as well as other locations (a total of eight safe houses were rented) for the month of November. They paid cash for these safe houses for the Paris attacks.

*November 4, 2015.* ISIS leaders gathered in Tabqah, Syria, to discuss a strategic shift from lone actors to sleeper cells used to attack capital cities in Europe. This information was conveyed to Western intelligence officials by counterparts in the Middle East.

*November 13, 2015.*

21:20 Stade de France. A suicide bomber detonated at a soccer match between France and Germany, killing one passerby. It was one of three suicide bombs at this location between 21:20 and 21:53. The perpetrators were 1) Bilal Hadfi, a dual-Moroccan national, who travelled to Syria in November 2015 to become a foreign fighter; 2) Ukashah al-Iraqi, an Iraqi national sent to assist with the operation, who had a fake Syrian passport in the name of Ahmad al-Mohammad; and 3) Ali al-Iraqi, another Iraqi national sent to assist with the operation, who had a fake passport in the name of Mohammad al-Mahmud. Salah Abdeslam, brother of Ibrahim Abdeslam, drove the operatives to the stadium.

21:25 11<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement. Gunmen opened fire with Kalashnikov rifles from a black car on customers at Le Carillon bar and Le Petit Cambodge restaurants, killing fifteen people. This same car was seen at La Belle Equipe Café in the 11<sup>th</sup> district at 21:36 where the shooters killed another 19 people. An additional five people died at the Café Bonne Biere in the 11<sup>th</sup> district. And, a suicide bomber detonated at a café called Comptoir Voltaire, injuring several others. The

perpetrators were 4) Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who was the mastermind of the attacks and designated as the leader of ISIS external operations in France and Belgium; 5) Ibrahim Abdeslam, a foreign fighter from Belgium, whose brother provided logistical support to the attack; and 6) Chahib Akrouh, who was killed in the police siege in Seine Saint Denis on November 18, 2015.

21:40 Bataclan Concert Hall. Three gunmen held concert audiences hostage, killing 89 individuals and injuring others. The perpetrators were 7) Sami Amimour, 8) Omar Ismael Mostefai, and 9) Foued Mohammed Aggad. One was killed by French police and the other two killed themselves with suicide bombs. The perpetrators were heard asking, “should we call Souleymane?” during the operation.

23:55 Mandatory Curfew. President Hollande of France declared a state of emergency and instituted a mandatory curfew.

*November 14, 2015.* ISIS released a statement and took responsibility for the attack. Salah Abdeslam fled Paris for Brussels with the help of two friends, Hamza Attou and Mohammed Amri. They were reportedly stopped by security officials on their way to Belgium, but not detained. They were carrying forged identity cards.

*November 15, 2015.* Security officials in France coordinated a manhunt for unknown assailants who were believed to have escaped after the Paris operations. They reportedly mobilized 115,000 police, gendarme, and soldiers, raided homes, and arrested several individuals believed to be involved in the attacks. The French military also launched airstrikes on ISIS headquarters in Raqqa, Syria.

*November 16, 2015.* Investigators in France and Belgium stated that Abaaoud was the mastermind behind the attacks in Paris. But they still did not know that he was involved directly, instead claiming that Abaaoud was in Syria. Investigators also identified Omar Ismael Mostefai, Sami Amimour, and one of the two Iraqi perpetrators and alleged that he had travelled to France through Greece and the refugee system.

*November 17, 2015.* Security officials in France claimed to have identified five of seven perpetrators in the Paris attacks. They announced a manhunt for Salah Abdeslam, who was the brother of Ibrahim Abdeslam and provided logistical support for the attack. France extended the state of emergency for three months.

*November 18, 2015.* Security officials in France raided the Parisian suburb of Saint-Denis, killing two suspects, including Abdelhamid Abaaoud and his cousin Hasna Aitboulahcen, and arresting eight others.

*November 21, 2015.* Turkish officials arrested Ahmed Dahmani, a 26 year old Belgian national of Moroccan origin, in Antalya, Turkey, on suspicion of having scouted out targets for the Paris attacks. He allegedly returned to Turkey from Amsterdam on November 14, 2015. Belgium was put on high alert under threat of a “serious and imminent” terror attack by ISIS; Brussels was locked down for security officials to track terrorist threats more easily.

*December 4, 2015.* Security officials in Belgium issued an arrest warrant for Hamza Attou and Mohammed Amri, who assisted Salah Abdeslam as he fled Paris.

*December 9, 2015.* French authorities identified Foued Mohammad Aggad as one of the Bataclan Hall attackers.

*January 14, 2016.* French security officials identified Chahib Akrouh as one of the victims of the raid at Saint-Denis, as well as one of the Paris attackers.

*January 20, 2016.* French media reported that authorities had identified seven of the nine perpetrators of the Paris attacks and had issued warrants for Salah Abdeslam, who was assumed to have fled back to Belgium.

*January 24, 2016.* ISIS's al-Hayat Media Center released a video with statements recorded by nine perpetrators of the Paris attacks. In the video, Sami Amimour confirmed that the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdad, ordered the attacks. The video also confirmed that Ibrahim Abdeslam had been in Syria, which was previously suspected but unknown. Salah Abdeslam was not in the video.

*March 15, 2016.* Belgian authorities raided a house in Brussels and killed suspected ISIS sympathizer, Mohamed Belkaid. They also found fingerprints from Salah Abdeslam in the house. News reports stated that Abdeslam and two of the individuals linked to the Belgium airport and subway attacks, Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui, likely fled prior to the raid.

*March 18, 2016.* Salah Abdeslam was arrested in Brussels. The investigators found Abdeslam after a phone linked to him was reactivated and traced.

*March 21, 2016.* French and Belgian authorities announced that they were looking for Najim Laachraoui and Mohammed Abrini, with suspected ties to Salah Abdeslam and the Paris attacks. Laachraoui allegedly assisted with the explosive devices, while Abrini allegedly drove some of the perpetrators to Paris. Authorities say they had traced 30 individuals to the Paris attacks.

*March 22, 2016.* ISIS-sponsored attacks on the Brussels airport and metro that killed 32 people. The perpetrators were Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakroui, Najim Laachraoui, Mohammed Abrini, and Osama Krayem.

As part of the investigation into this attack, authorities found communications between the el-Bakrouis and ISIS operative, Adelilah Himich, who was based in Syria at the time, providing guidance for this attack. Adelilah Himich also went by the name "Abu Souleymane al-Faransi," and authorities also suspected that he had ties to the Paris attackers.

## Conclusion

This case study suggests that ISIS rhetoric, combined with a series of attacks by lone actors in the months preceding the Paris attacks, has obscured ISIS's true intentions against the West. ISIS leaders were not focused on the caliphate to the exclusion of plotting terrorist attacks against Europe. Indeed, the case study illustrates that ISIS leaders were able to plan and execute parallel strategies within the Middle East (Islamic caliphate) and Western Europe (terrorist campaign). This made it easy for experts and security officials to focus on the former and disregard the magnitude of the threat from the latter.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> After the Paris attacks, the interior minister of Belgium, Jan Jambon, claimed that 85 of the 130 foreign fighter returnees from Belgium were living in Molenbeek. See, Jon Henley and

Similarly, the network analysis reveals that overlapping ties existed between different operational cells for ISIS in Europe. These overlaps included both lone actors and covert cells of ISIS operatives. Foreign fighter returnees, in many ways, functioned as the connective tissues between these disparate cells. They plotted, organized, and recruited locals for these attacks, representing a greater threat than mere numbers might initially suggest. And, finally, it is clear from the timeline that opportunities for intervention existed in the run-up to the attacks in Paris and Brussels. The challenge for intelligence and law enforcement officials—as always—was to find the pattern in the noise of threats, rhetoric, and the wider conflict in Syria and Iraq.



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Ian Traynor, “Fight against Isis heats up as UN backs action after Paris attacks,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 21, 2015.