

BLUNDERS IN BRUSSELS

Recriminations abound that the 22 March bombings in Brussels could have been avoided. Certainly the attacks highlighted crucial failures over intelligence sharing between Belgium, Germany, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Turkey and the US. Crucially, the Belgian security services missed a series of red flags that indicated a major terrorist attack was about to take place in their capital. The political fallout from this saw the Belgian Transport Minister forced to resign for lying about being unaware of shortcomings with the country's airport security.

Neil Fretwell, Operations Director for Intelligent Software Solutions Global highlights that the Dutch employs its Dfuze Intelligence Management Suite. This provides vital data integration and intelligence analysis that flags up areas at risk from attack. He stresses: "After the recent attacks in Paris and Brussels cross-agency data and information sharing is now an operational necessity more than ever".

Two years ago the British National Counter Terrorism Network (NCTN) announced it had selected Dfuze IMS as its preferred system. This gave Dfuze the UK's seal of approval, as it had to meet very stringent police data handling criteria and present it in a centralised way. The NCTN comprises a series of dedicated counter terror policing units across the UK that work hand in hand with the Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command.

There can be no denying there has been a series of serious intelligence blunders in Brussels. The Belgian authorities should have been particularly vigilant as a number of those involved in the 13 November 2015 Paris attacks came from Brussels and the bombs had been made there. Parisian suspects Salah Abdeslam and Abid Aberkan were caught by Belgian police on 18 March just four days before the Brussels bombings. Salah's brother, Ibrahim, blew himself up during the Paris attacks.

All the warning signs of an imminent attack in the Belgian capital were found at the arrest location including a detonator and weapons. At this stage something went wrong. Salah Abdeslam, a French national of Moroccan origin, did not give up the Brussels terror cell comprising Mohamed Abrini, Khalid el-Bakraoui, Ibrahim el-Bakraoui and Najim Laachraoui. Crucially Khalid had been hiding Salah Abdeslam right up until 15 March. Also Abrini was wanted in connection with Paris, as CCTV surveillance footage showed him with Abdeslam two days before the Parisian

attacks. He had driven twice from Belgium to Paris and back with the Abdeslam brothers on 10 and 11 November 2015.

Some experts feel that the Brussels attacks could have been predicted and that better predictive policing should have prevented it. Behavioural analysis drawing on historic data and more recent experiences clearly shows that public spaces particularly railways, metros and airports are at continual risk of terror attacks. This is because they provide 'grandstanding' targets that garner the most casualties and therefore the most media coverage. While specific targeted intelligence can pinpoint and thwart an attack, the use of predictive policing is on the up in devising much broader counter terror strategies.

According to French and Greek media sources, evidence of the planning for the Brussels airport bombing was found in an Athens flat, used by the ringleader of the Paris attacks Abdelhamid Abaaoud, way back in January 2015. Bombers Khalid and Ibrahim el-Bakraoui both had records so were known to the authorities – Ibrahim served four of a nine-year jail term for shooting at police. In June 2015 he was picked up by the Turkish authorities near the Syrian border having violated his parole and was deported. Both the Belgian and Dutch Governments deny Ankara flagged Ibrahim as a foreign fighter. As a result he slipped through Schiphol airport and back into Belgium with impunity. America placed him on a counter-terrorism watch list in September 2015 and in December Interpol issued a red notice for Khalid. None of these warnings seem to have come together.

To make matters worse, Abid Aberkan, a radicalised associate of Salah Abdeslam, was likewise already on the Belgian authorities' radar. In late 2015 North of Brussels, local police in the city of Mechelen had information on Aberkan but failed to pass it on. Mechelen was one of the first Belgian cities to deploy automatic number plate recognition, which checks all incoming and outgoing vehicles against an alert database. This automatically notifies the dispatch room if there is a positive match. Therefore, it is likely that the authorities were aware of Aberkan's movements.

In the case of Salah Abdeslam, German police stopped him in Ulm in early October 2015. He was with another man called Monir Ahmed Alaaj, also known as Amine Choukri, who was subsequently caught with



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Abdeslam in Brussels. At the time both were sent on their way. Similarly Laachraoui who had joined Daesh in Syria in 2013, returned to Brussels last year unhindered. Hungarian police on the Austrian border stopped Laachraoui along with Abdeslam and Mohamed Belkaid in September 2015. They were allowed to proceed.

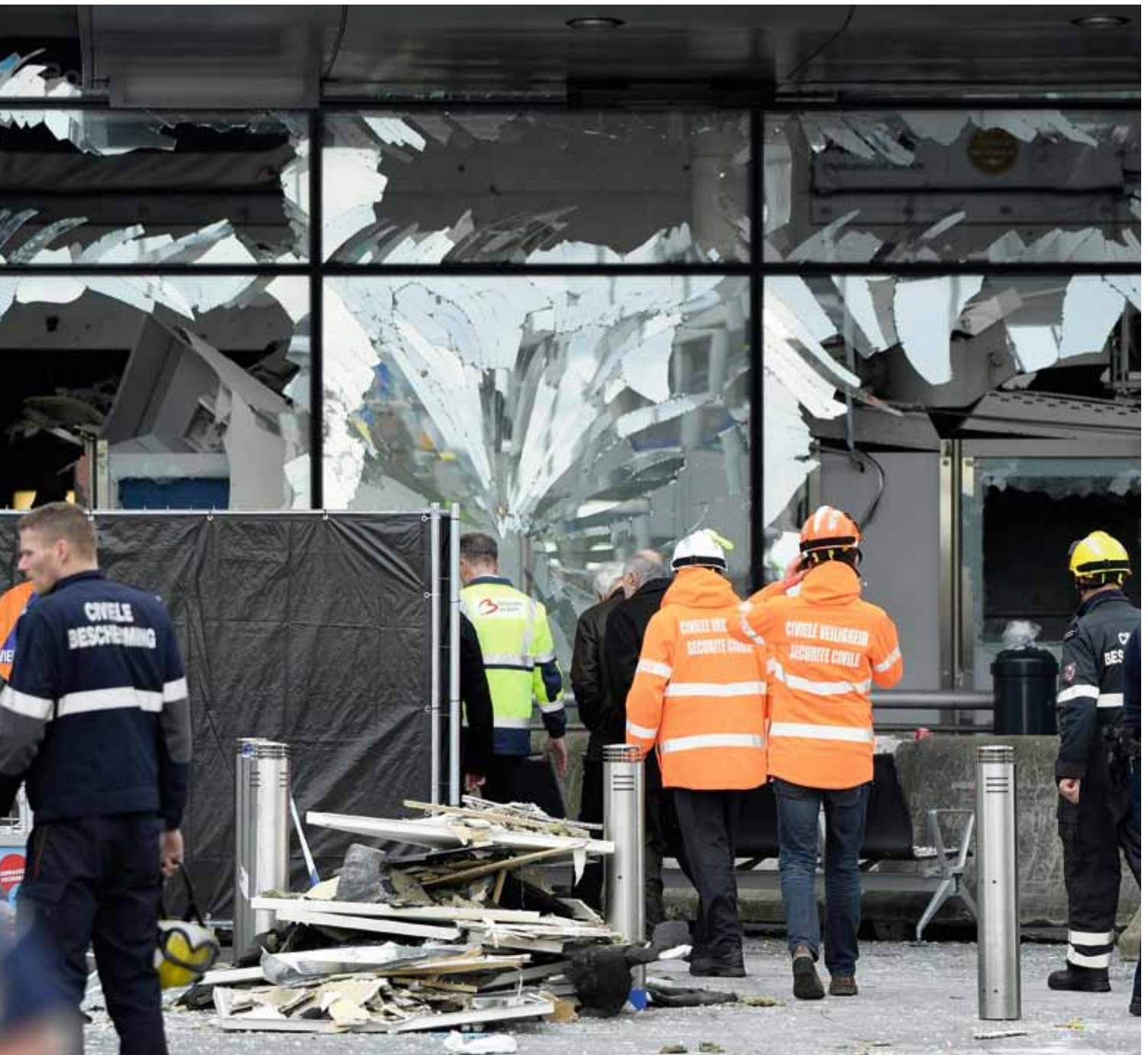
Neil Fretwell is acutely aware that Europe needs a much more holistic approach to intelligence sharing, but is also aware of the funding constraints. "We work closely with the military, public safety and law enforcement agencies across 40 countries," he says. "The Dutch are users of our system and the Belgians do interface with the Dutch National Forensic Institute".

However, he accepts that the Brussels bombings are indicative of a broader intelligence failure. "Unfortunately, Europe is not joined up. If a system such as Dfuzze was deployed across the EU it would

certainly help". However, he adds, ultimately it is down to resources. Take for example Norway, says Fretwell: "Prior to Anders Breivik, the country had no real record of utilising bombing and IED data to identify emerging threats – the Norwegians only had a single analyst. That, of course, has since changed".

Charles Michel, the Belgian Prime Minister has called for improved intelligence sharing in order to avoid a repetition of such attacks. This is already underway after the creation of Europol's European Counter-Terrorism Centre in January. It is intended to assist with operational co-ordination and to act as a central information hub. However, with a staff of just 50 it can achieve only so much and is only as good as the data that is being fed into it. After Brussels, funding of the ECTC will be given added impetus.

The bombing at Brussels airport was one of the



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aviation industry's worst nightmares as it took place in a departure lounge. This should not have happened. In March 2015 a European Commission report highlighted 'serious deficiencies' with security at Belgium's airports. At the time Belgian officials quoted resource problems. After the attacks, Transport Minister Jacqueline Galant denied there were problems and even denied seeing the report. Charles Michel was forced to admit that this was not the case.

Belgium's contingency security planning for such attacks was also found wanting. The two bombs went off at Brussels airport at 07.58 – it was almost an hour before the decision was taken at 08.50 to close Brussels rail stations and the metro. Tragically the third bomb went off on a metro train at Maelbeek station at 09.11. Even then, train services continued and the rail operator did not put its emergency plan into action until 09.45. Belgian ministers have struggled to justify the reason for this crucial delay in locking down the city's transport system.

Confusion then reigned trying to establish the identity of the third airport-bombing suspect who had escaped. Dubbed the 'man in the hat' CCTV footage showed an individual in a dark hat and white jacket entering the airport with the two suicide bombers. His luggage contained a bomb that failed to go off so he simply fled the scene. Initially he was thought to be Najim Laachraoui, but he was already dead. Faycal Cheffou was arrested then let go. Finally on 9 April Mohamed Abrini was caught in Brussels along with Osama Krayem. The latter was believed to be the accomplice of Khalid el-Bakraoui at Maelbeek metro station. Abrini, a Belgian

of Moroccan origin was taken in the Anderlecht district – home to those linked to the Paris attacks. This meant that all the main players in the Paris and Brussels attacks were finally under arrest or dead.

Mohamed Abrini may prove to be the key to various European jihadist cells operating in Belgium and France. Certainly former French terrorism judge, Jean-Louis Bruguière, went on record as saying Abrini's capture was "undoubtedly one of the most important arrests in the investigation so far". Abrini has connections in France, the UK and Syria and could provide vital intelligence. He and Abdeslam were childhood friends and well connected. He is believed to have travelled to the city of Birmingham in the UK a number of times during 2015. Abrini is also believed to have visited Syria where his late brother was a Daesh fighter.

Whether Abrini will cooperate with the Belgian security services remains to be seen. As he fled the scene at Brussels airport, it indicates that perhaps he had no desire to die for militant Islam. Nonetheless his involvement in the Paris and Brussels bombings makes him a highly dangerous individual.

The Belgian Government faces some tough questions. "Drawing different data sources together gives you the best chance of predicting when and where something is going to happen," concludes Neil Fretwell. Clearly in the case of Brussels this did not happen and is something the Belgian authorities will have to address.

A full interview with Neil Fretwell, Operations Director for Intelligent Software Solutions Global on the growth of predictive software will appear in *intersec's* June issue.

Mohamed Abrini – 'the man in the hat' – (right) was wanted in France as long ago as December 2015

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