

Brussels attacks: Europe is at war

By Tom Steinfert, The Australian, 24 March 2016

If the Brussels Airport bombings took place two days earlier, chances are I wouldn't be writing this.

At that exact time of morning at those exact check in counters just 48 hours earlier, my cameraman and I were preparing for a flight to Greece.

I look at the footage now of the obliterated desks there, and can only just vaguely make out where we were standing — it's a spot burned black, covered in mangled metal, clouded by smoke.

On the day we travelled we walked past young families excitedly preparing for a family holiday, and I distinctly remember seeing a couple of Irish lads that had clearly enjoyed a big weekend sampling many Belgian beers.

They were all people having the time of the lives ... and exactly the kind of people who lost their lives in the attacks last night.

The hallmark of terrorists in Europe

It has become the hallmark of terrorists in Europe these last few months to kill people who are enjoying going about their daily lives — think back to the locations hit in the Paris attacks by Islamic State last November: a football game, a concert, bars and restaurants.

And nowhere is the warped mentality of Islamic extremism more prevalent in Europe right now than in Brussels.

The Paris attacks were conceived and coordinated out of the Belgian capital, which is a city that's seen more than 50 terrorism suspects arrested this year alone.

And it's one of those police operations last week that seems to have inadvertently set off a dramatic and disastrous chain of events.

Last Tuesday French and Belgian authorities conducted what they thought at the time was a relatively run of the mill raid at a house in the south of Brussels.

Molenbeek and Forest, the epicentre of Islamic extremism in Europe

The suburbs of Molenbeek and Forest are now recognised as pretty much the epicentre of Islamic extremism in Europe.

The areas have been described by some as ghettos and I can tell you from visiting there a number of times, they're certainly not welcoming places.

Last week I had abuse hurled at me as I walked down a street, and witnessed a German reporter get rammed by a car.

In various raids in recent weeks, they've discovered bombs, AK47s, grenades and Islamic State flags ... you don't keep an arsenal like that in your backyard unless you've got some pretty evil intentions.

But back to that raid last Tuesday that began this week of mayhem — police thought the occupant there had loose links to Islamic extremists, but when they arrived they came under a hail of gunfire from a number of men armed with automatic weapons — four police officers were wounded, one suspect shot dead, two arrested, and two more men escaped out a back window.

It wasn't until two days later that it was revealed one of those who escaped the property was Salah Abdeslam — a kingpin of the Paris terror attacks who's been the most wanted man in Europe for the last four months.

After having next to no leads since November, detectives suddenly went into overdrive — surveillance operations were put in place across Brussels, and lo and behold a suspicious pizza order to the suburb of Molenbeek was the final clue police needed to raid an innocuous looking apartment there.

Once again gunshots and explosions rang out in the south of Brussels, and after 126 days on the run, police finally got their man ... Salah Abdeslam was shot in the leg, but captured alive.

This was celebrated by authorities in both Belgium and France, but the achievement also came with a warning — it was quite possible that the arrest of such a revered figure in Islamic State circles could lead to reprisal attacks by his deranged associates.

And so it was that coordinated attacks were carried out less than a week later, striking Brussels Airport, and killing dozens more in a separate bomb blast on the city's Metro system.

There is another theory for these attacks that is also very plausible: Salah Abdeslam's lawyer said a few days ago that his client was cooperating with police questioning, so his cowardly cohorts may well have thought they'd better strike quickly before they too were arrested.

Whatever the motive, it's an outcome that is becoming all too familiar for increasingly fearful Europeans.

For the third time in a week I've arrived in Brussels to see the streets being patrolled by army tanks and soldiers everywhere with their fingers poised on their triggers.

French President Francois Hollande: "Europe is at war"

It's a big statement, but standing here right now, I think French President Francois Hollande is right when he declared, "Europe is at war".

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