

France: Efforts to Counter Islamist Terrorism and the Islamic State

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Recent Terrorist Attacks in France and the Islamist Terrorist Threat

On November 13, 2015, coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris left at least 129 people dead and over 350 injured at six locations throughout the city. French President François Hollande attributed the attacks to the Islamic State terrorist organization (which subsequently claimed responsibility). The attacks were the deadliest-ever terrorist incident on French soil, and the latest in a number of attacks by Islamist extremists in France over the past several years. In early January, terrorists killed 17 people in three related [attacks in Paris](#) that targeted the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, police officers, and a kosher supermarket (for more on recent Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe, see CRS Insight IN10209, [European Security, Islamist Terrorism, and Returning Fighters](#), by Kristin Archick and Paul Belkin).

French governments have long viewed Islamist terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda and, more recently, the Islamic State as the chief security threat facing the country. However, the November attacks have prompted a major escalation in what President Hollande characterizes as a "[war](#)" against the Islamic State. French officials stress that the threat posed by a group in Syria directing French citizens in France and elsewhere to commit attacks in France [presents a unique and complex challenge](#), with domestic, European, and international dimensions. Of particular concern is the growing number of French citizens training and fighting with terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State.

According to European officials, France, which is home to Europe's largest Muslim population (an estimated 5-6 million), is also the source of the largest number of European fighters in Syria and Iraq, most of whom are thought to be fighting with the Islamic State. [French officials estimate that over 500 French nationals are currently fighting in Syria and Iraq](#) (although the total number who have traveled to fight or perished may be triple that); they [believe roughly 2,000 French citizens are involved in Muslim extremist cells in France and 3,800 show signs of Islamist radicalization](#).

The three perpetrators of the January attacks and at least five of the reportedly eight or more perpetrators of the November attacks were French citizens. At least one of the January attackers reportedly [spent time in Yemen](#) with members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); at least two of the November attackers reportedly [spent time with the Islamic State](#) in Syria.

Domestic Responses and Challenges

The recent attacks and the growing number of combatants training abroad have challenged what has long been

considered a highly effective French law enforcement and counterterrorism apparatus. French prosecutors have broad powers to pursue terrorism cases, which, over the past decade, have been expanded through a series of new counterterrorism laws. Nonetheless, some analysts contend that recent attacks have exposed shortcomings.

French authorities have at times been criticized for an apparent inability to prevent individuals under state surveillance with known links to violent extremists from carrying out killings. The perpetrators of the January Paris attacks and at least two of the November assailants reportedly had been under French state surveillance at various times prior to the attacks. Observers note, however, that it may be unrealistic to expect any government to monitor effectively every individual identified as a possible threat, especially given budgetary constraints. They underscore that several of the suspects in recent attacks were ["inactive targets who had been quiet for a long time."](#) The fact that much of the planning for the November attacks may have been carried out in Belgium also highlights the constraints facing French law enforcement authorities and possible shortfalls in intra-European counterterrorism cooperation and information sharing.

Over the past year and a half, the French government has bolstered law enforcement budgets and enacted a series of new counterterrorism measures. These include:

- Imposing travel bans on individuals suspected of seeking terrorist training abroad, arresting individuals for speech deemed supportive of terrorism, and blocking websites that encourage terrorism.
- Enacting a [new surveillance law](#) allowing authorities to monitor the communications of anyone linked to a terrorism investigation, without the prior approval of a judge; Internet service providers and phone companies are legally obliged to comply with requests for data.
- Counter-radicalization programs focusing on the French prison system. According to some estimates, up to [half of France's 68,000 inmates are Muslim](#), and several perpetrators of recent terrorist attacks appear to have been radicalized in prison.

In the aftermath of the November 13 attacks, President Hollande [announced](#) a series of additional counterterrorism measures, including:

- A three-month state of emergency, granting law enforcement expanded authority to search and seize terrorist suspects.
- Emergency controls on France's borders with countries with which it normally has open borders.
- Expanding the state's authority to expel dual-nationals and foreigners who are deemed to pose a terrorist threat.
- Creating 10,000 new law enforcement jobs over the next five years.

Some analysts point out that while France has developed a far-reaching law enforcement apparatus to counter terrorism, efforts to integrate Muslims into French society have had limited success, at best. Critics contend that to help prevent radicalization, the government must do more to address the significant socioeconomic disparities between "native" French citizens and those of North African and/or Muslim descent. They argue that many policies adopted in the name of France's secularist values, including restrictions on Islamic dress, [may serve to further alienate Muslims](#) who already feel disenfranchised. Some also argue that new laws against speech deemed sympathetic to terrorists [unfairly target Muslims](#).

Combatting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

Along with the United States, France has been at the forefront of the international coalition conducting military operations against the Islamic State in Iraq (see CRS Report R44135, [Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State](#), by Kathleen J. McInnis). Until September, France had ruled out conducting operations in Syria in part because it did not want to inadvertently support the Assad regime, but changed course due to growing concerns about the Islamic State. Following the November attacks, President Hollande [vowed to redouble](#) the military campaign to destroy the Islamic State. Within 48 hours of the attacks, France launched its most aggressive air strikes yet, on the Islamic State stronghold of Raqqa, Syria; the number of French fighter jets conducting airstrikes is to increase from 12 to 38.

Hollande has also stressed that he will focus on unifying and bolstering the international military coalition fighting the Islamic State. This would include greater cooperation with the United States, Russia, and countries in the region.

Some analysts and French military officials have expressed concerns about France's capacity to sustain the enhanced commitments to counterterrorism operations both at home and abroad. Like other European governments, France has faced significant budgetary constraints in recent years. About [7,000 French soldiers](#) are currently deployed to military operations abroad, including 3,500 conducting counterterrorism operations in West Africa's Sahel region. Although Hollande says he will not decrease France's defense budget before 2019, he has not proposed to increase it.

U.S.-French Counterterrorism Cooperation

President Obama strongly condemned the recent terrorist attacks and asserted that the United States would work with France to ["bring these terrorists to justice."](#) By all accounts, the United States and France have a long history of close and effective counterterrorism cooperation. This extended to the aftermath of both the January and November attacks, with U.S. intelligence officials reportedly assisting their French counterparts in tracking and identifying suspects. U.S. officials, including some Members of Congress, have backed France's calls for the European Union (EU) to establish a Passenger Name Record (PNR) system to collect airline passenger data in an effort to improve tracking of suspected militants and enhance intelligence-sharing among EU member states. U.S. policymakers have also welcomed French counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region and France's bolstering of military strikes against the the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.