

European Security, Islamist Terrorism, and Returning Fighters

November 16, 2015 (IN10209)

—|

Related Authors

- [Kristin Archick](#)
 - [Paul Belkin](#)
-

—|

Kristin Archick, Specialist in European Affairs (karchick@crs.loc.gov, 7-2668)

Paul Belkin, Analyst in European Affairs (pbelkin@crs.loc.gov, 7-0220)

Terrorist Attacks in France and Mounting Security Concerns

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), and asserted that France's response would be "["merciless."](#)" The attacks were the worst-ever terrorist incident on French soil, and the latest in a number of examples of Islamist terrorism in France and Europe over the past year and a half. (Also see CRS Insight IN10301, [France: Efforts to Counter Islamist Terrorism and Radicalization](#).)

These attacks have reinforced European concerns about European citizens training and fighting with extremist groups in foreign conflicts (especially in Syria and Iraq) and heightened fears that terrorists could slip into Europe as part of an ongoing influx of migrants and refugees. News reports indicate that [one of the seven assailants killed during the attacks may have entered Europe through Greece](#) in early October with a Syrian passport as part of the refugee flows (authorities have not conclusively made this link); [at least two suspects—both French nationals—may have traveled to Syria](#). While [evidence suggests that the Islamic State was directly involved](#) in planning and carrying out these attacks, worries also persist about "homegrown" extremists inspired by Islamist propaganda to commit violence at home without ever traveling abroad. Other recent terrorist incidents in Europe include:

- The [May 2014 killing](#) of four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium; the suspect is a French Muslim who reportedly spent a year with Islamist fighters in Syria.
- The January 2015 attacks in Paris in which gunmen killed 17 people in three related incidents that targeted the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, police officers, and a kosher supermarket. The perpetrators of the attacks were [French-born Muslims](#), with [possible ties to Al Qaeda in Yemen or the Islamic State](#).
- The February 2015 shootings in Copenhagen, Denmark, in which a self-radicalized [Danish-born citizen of Palestinian descent](#) murdered two individuals—one at a cafe that had been hosting a free speech debate, another at a synagogue—and wounded five police officers.
- The attempted August 2015 attack on a train traveling from Amsterdam to Paris that was thwarted by six passengers, including [three Americans](#); the suspect is a [Moroccan man who may have traveled to Syria](#).

Although it is difficult to assess the precise number of Muslims from Europe who have joined extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, their ranks have increased significantly over the past two years. European Union (EU) officials suggest that [at least 3,000 and upward of 5,000 EU citizens](#) have left to fight in Syria, Iraq, or other conflict zones. Key [countries of origin](#) reportedly include Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The conflict in Syria and Iraq has also attracted fighters from Russia and the Western Balkans. (For more information, see CRS Report R44003, [European Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessments, Responses, and Issues for the United States](#).)

European Responses and Challenges

[European governments](#) have employed a range of measures to combat Islamist extremism and the foreign fighter threat, including increasing surveillance, prohibiting travel, and arresting returning fighters and terrorism recruiters. Several European countries have bolstered their counterterrorism laws and enacted measures to ensure they can prosecute those who travel or attempt to travel abroad for terrorist purposes, as required by [U.N. Security Council Resolution 2178](#) of September 2014. European officials are also working to more aggressively counter radicalization and extremist propaganda, especially via the Internet and social media. Some have [called on U.S. technology companies](#) to assist these efforts by preemptively removing terrorist content from their sites.

France, which is home to Europe's largest Muslim population (about 5-6 million) and the source of the largest number of European fighters in Syria and Iraq, has been at the forefront of European efforts to counter the threat posed by Islamist militants. 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](#). Over the past year, the government has taken steps to strengthen counterterrorism policies already considered some of the most stringent in Europe. These have included imposing travel bans on individuals suspected of seeking terrorist training abroad, blocking websites and prohibiting speech that encourage terrorism, and [significantly enhancing the state's surveillance authorities](#).

Nevertheless, stemming the flow of European fighters to Syria and Iraq and keeping track of those who go and return remain challenging. Prosecuting individuals preemptively is often problematic without strong evidence that a suspect has actually engaged in terrorism abroad or has returned to commit a terrorist act. Even governments such as France's with far-reaching legal authorities have encountered difficulties monitoring a growing number of potential assailants amid budgetary and personnel resource constraints. French authorities had previously questioned the suspects in the Brussels shooting and the January attacks in Paris, but surveillance was lifted before the incidents; at least some of the suspects in the November attacks were [known to security services in France and Belgium](#).

Analysts assert that more must also be done at the EU level given the [Schengen](#) system of largely open internal borders (which permit individuals to travel without passport checks among most European countries). Both the thwarted train assailant and the alleged Brussels gunman appear to have traveled between several European countries prior to the attacks. Belgium has arrested at least seven individuals possibly connected to the November attacks, while [a suspected "8th attacker" reportedly entered Belgium from France](#) the morning after and remains at large.

Over the last two years, the [EU has sought to](#) enhance information-sharing among national and EU authorities, strengthen external border controls, and improve existing counter-radicalization efforts, particularly [online](#). However, implementation of some initiatives has been slowed by national sovereignty concerns, law enforcement barriers to sharing sensitive information, and civil liberty protections. Work also continues on finalizing a long-standing proposal for an [EU-wide system for the collection of airline Passenger Name Record \(PNR\) data](#). In July 2015, [the European Parliament's civil liberties committee endorsed](#) a revised PNR proposal, but it must still be approved by the full Parliament and EU governments. [Critics contend](#) that the envisioned system infringes too much on data privacy rights and does not go far enough in ensuring that PNR data is meaningfully shared.

The November attacks in Paris will put [further pressure on the EU's borders and efforts to manage the ongoing migration and refugee crisis](#). After the attacks, France instituted temporary border controls, which follow those imposed

by other Schengen countries over the last two months because of the migrant and refugee flows. While [EU officials caution against linking refugees with terrorism](#), the attacks could increase anti-immigrant sentiments and threaten previously-agreed EU policies, including controversial plans to relocate some asylum-seekers from Italy and Greece to other EU countries (see CRS In Focus IF10259, [Europe's Migration and Refugee Crisis](#)).

Issues for the United States

President Obama strongly condemned the most recent terrorist attacks on Paris and asserted that the United States will work with France and other countries to ["bring these terrorists to justice."](#) The attacks may raise additional questions about U.S.-led military efforts to counter the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Among other issues, some [Members of Congress](#) remain concerned that Europeans fighting with Islamist extremist groups abroad could enter the United States under the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which allows short-term, visa-free travel for citizens of most European countries (see CRS Report RL32221, [Visa Waiver Program](#)). Some Members of Congress and other U.S. politicians also worry that violent extremists could gain entry not only to Europe but potentially to the United States by posing as refugees. U.S. policymakers underscore the importance of maintaining close U.S.-EU counterterrorism cooperation in light of the Islamist terrorist threat and the foreign fighter phenomenon (see CRS Report RS22030, [U.S.-EU Cooperation Against Terrorism](#)).