

CRS Insights

France: Efforts to Counter Islamist Terrorism and Radicalization

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June 29, 2015 (IN10301)

Recent Terrorist Attacks in France and the Islamist Terrorist Threat

Several recent deadly terrorist attacks in France and Europe and a growing number of French citizens training and fighting with terrorist organizations in the Middle East and North Africa have considerably heightened concern about the threat of Islamist terrorism in France and Europe. Most recently, on June 26, [a man was beheaded](#) during an attempt to blow up a U.S.-owned chemical factory near the city of Lyon. French police have arrested at least one suspect, a French citizen of Muslim background. The attack follows the killing of 17 people in three related [terrorist attacks in Paris](#) in early January. Officials believe that the assailants in both the Lyon and Paris attacks had links to Islamist groups espousing violent ideologies.

According to European officials, France, which is home to Europe's largest Muslim population (an estimated 5 million-6 million), is 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. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence estimates that roughly [1,200 of the 4,000 Western Europeans](#) who have travelled to fight in the region are French citizens, more than double estimates from 2014. The French government has declared that these citizens' return to France and Europe represents ["the biggest threat the country faces in the coming years."](#)

Press reports indicate that at least one of the three perpetrators of the January Paris attacks had spent time in Yemen [cultivating relationships](#) with members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Another assailant had declared his allegiance to the Islamic State. The perpetrators of the Lyon and Paris attacks had each been under state surveillance at various times prior to the attacks, and two of the Paris attackers had spent time in French prisons.

The Lyon and Paris attacks followed other attacks carried out by radicalized French Muslims. These include the killing of four people during a May 2014 [attack at the Jewish Museum](#) in Brussels, Belgium, and the [killing of seven people](#)—including a rabbi and three Jewish children—in France's Toulouse region in March 2012. Both perpetrators reportedly developed ties to radical Islamists while serving time in French prisons. The alleged Brussels attacker reportedly had spent over a year with Islamist militants in Syria.

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. Successive French governments have aggressively sought to combat Islamist terrorism, both by implementing stringent domestic counterterrorism policies and by conducting military operations in West Africa's Sahel region, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. French prosecutors have broad powers to pursue terrorism cases, which, over the past decade, have been expanded through a series of new anti-terrorism laws. Nonetheless, some analysts contend that the aforementioned attacks have exposed shortcomings.

French authorities have been criticized for an apparent inability to prevent individuals under state surveillance with known links to violent extremists from carrying out killings. The suspects in the Lyon, Paris, Brussels, and Toulouse attacks had all been previously questioned and monitored by French authorities, but surveillance was lifted in each case. 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."](#)

Over the past year, and particularly in the aftermath of the Paris attacks, the French government has enacted a

series of new counterterrorism measures focused on strengthening law enforcement and preventing radicalization. These include:

- Aggressively using new counterterrorism authorities adopted in late 2014, including 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 in May 2015 a [new surveillance law](#) to allow authorities to monitor the digital and mobile communications of anyone linked to an investigation of a terrorist suspect. Prior approval of a judge is not required; Internet service providers and phone companies are legally obliged to comply with requests for data.
- [Allocating close to \\$900 million in new funds](#) for domestic counterterrorism and counter-radicalization initiatives, including hiring 2,500 new law enforcement personnel.
- [Reversing about \\$5 billion](#) in planned defense spending cuts to maintain enhanced counterterrorism operations in France, Africa, and the Middle East.

A focal point of the French government's new counter-radicalization programs will be the French prison system. According to some estimates, up to [half of France's 68,000 inmates are Muslim](#). Among other measures, France has pledged to increase the number of Muslim chaplains in its prison system and expand an existing program that separates groups of radicalized prisoners from the rest of the prison population in order to prevent recruitment efforts.

Some analysts point out that while France has developed a far-reaching law enforcement apparatus to counter terrorism, it has had limited success improving the integration of Muslims into French society. 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](#).

U.S.-French Counterterrorism Cooperation

U.S. officials have strongly condemned the recent terrorist attacks in France and have consistently expressed confidence in French counterterrorism efforts. By all accounts, the United States and France have a long history of close and effective counterterrorism cooperation. This extended to the period during and directly after the Paris attacks, when U.S. intelligence officials [reportedly assisted](#) 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 participation in military strikes against the Islamic State in Iraq.