France: Implications and Repercussions of the Paris Attacks

On the evening of 13 November, 130 people were killed and more than 350 wounded in a series of coordinated attacks across Paris claimed by Islamic State (IS), broadening the scope of the threat posed by terrorism in France and beyond. The significance and ramifications of the attacks are complex and multiple, both in terms of the extensive networks they have exposed and the pressures they have placed on established mechanisms within the EU. The impact of the attacks on France’s security and policy framework is profound and unprecedented, but deeper still are the broader ramifications for the international community, its response to IS, and its long-term approach to security.

Key Observations

- The events of 13 November mark the first successful high-profile, high-casualty attacks by IS in Europe, demonstrating the group’s ability to project and export violence beyond the core conflict zone.
- While the terror threat has been evident in France over the past year, the attacks and subsequent raids have alerted the nation to the presence on French soil of battle-trained networks with plots at an advanced stage of preparation.
- The attacks have placed even greater emphasis on the migrant crisis, forcing a re-evaluation of the fluidity of borders and existing policies within Europe, including the continuity of the Schengen agreement.
- The attacks have altered the general security context and forced Western countries involved in the coalition, France and the UK in particular, to quickly re-assess their response to the threat.
- There is a high risk that the firm measures taken in the immediate aftermath of the attacks could result in a shift and the decentralisation of the threat in the conflict zone, while elevating the risk of attacks in France and to the West.

Background

France has been the target of a number of terrorist attacks and major security incidents since the beginning of the year: the Charlie Hebdo attack in January, the beheading of a businessman and failed attack against a gas plant in Saint-Quentin-Fallavier near Lyon in June, the Amsterdam-Paris Thalys attack in August and the multiple shootings and suicide bomb attacks in Paris and Saint Denis on 13 November. The Charlie Hebdo attack and subsequent hostage situation at the Kosher supermarket two days later, until then unprecedented, tested the ability of the security forces to respond to coordinated attacks in the capital. The 13 November events, which involved suicide bombers for the first time on French soil, tested the government’s response and resources even further, with at least seven militants targeting six sites, all soft targets, simultaneously.

Paris was targeted for a number of reasons. The French capital is highly symbolic, and the impact of a successful terrorist attack in the city radiates well beyond the country’s borders. Both the 7 January and 13 November attacks struck at emblematic sites or figures at the very heart of French culture and identity: the Charlie Hebdo journal, editor and cartoonists; the Bataclan concert hall; the Saint Denis stadium and Paris’s terrasses.

France’s policy in the Middle East, which was highlighted in the claim of responsibility made by IS, has featured prominently in terrorist propaganda in recent years. Al-Qaeda, Ansar al-Dine and MUJAO have all repeatedly threatened to attack France and French nationals in Algeria, Niger and the wider Sahel region – incidents at In Amenas in Algeria and Arlit in Niger are two such examples. France’s intervention in Iraq and Syria, coupled with its diplomatic and commercial engagement with Gulf countries, has served to crystallise militant resentment towards France.
France’s social composition and demographic complexities also make it a strategic target. France stands out in Europe as a country that struggles to integrate, both economically and culturally, a large, young population of North African descent, mainly from Algeria, a challenge that has been associated with the marginalised banlieues. As such, the country presents an ideal target for groups seeking to exploit and inflame deeply-entrenched communal tensions in a context of growing Islamophobia. Anti-Muslim sentiment has been on the rise since the shooting by Mohammed Merah of two soldiers and five Jewish civilians in Montauban and Toulouse in March 2012, and the backlash against Muslim communities that often results from terrorist attacks is exactly what IS seeks to achieve, highlighting the need for restraint at both the political and societal levels to prevent the alienation, stigmatisation and indoctrination of vulnerable youth. To mitigate this risk is a complex task for European governments, as a growing population of young Muslims fails to identify with national and transited through Greece among migration presents an eye.“

Four coordinated groups involved:

**Stade de France**
Ahmad al-Mohammad
Bilal Hafdi
Unknown

**Terrasses - 10th and 11th Arrondissements**
(Le Petit Cambodge, Le Carillon La Bonne Bière, Casa Nostra, Le Comptoir Voltaire, La Belle Équipe)
Brahim Abdeslam

**Bataclan**
Omar Ismail Mostefai
Samy Amimour
Foued Mohamed-Abbadi

**Saint Denis (18 November raid)**
Abdel Hamid Abaaoud
Hasna Aitboulahcen
Unknown

**Still at large:**
Salah Abdeslam
Mohamed Abrini

**Broader Ramifications**

The terrorist threat has been evident in France over the past year, but the Saint Denis raid on 18 November, which led to the death of three suspects, including the mastermind of the attacks, Belgian national and prominent IS figure Abdel Hamid Abaaoud, showed that it had been underestimated, both in terms of scope and readiness. Intelligence leading to the Saint Denis operation indicated that the cell was preparing an attack on 18 or 19 November against a police station and the Quatre Temps shopping centre in the high-profile business district of La Defense, revealing the existence of terror plots at an advanced stage of preparation. The group had also planned to attack Charles de Gaulle Airport.

The investigation quickly pointed to a wider network linked to the Brussels district of Molenbeek, an area often cited as a hotbed of jihadism in Europe which has hosted a number of radical elements heading to Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria. They include Dahmane Abd al-Sattar, one of the killers of anti-Taliban commander Ahmad Shah Massoud in Afghanistan in 2001; Hassan El Haski, one of the perpetrators of the 2004 Madrid train bombings; and French gunman Mehdi Nemmouche, who killed four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014. The mayor of Molenbeek, Francoise El Haski, had turned a blind eye to growing radicalisation. Among them were Abaaoud, Brahim Abdeslam, Salah Abdeslam and Mohamed Abrini, himself linked to Ayoub El Khazzani, the Thalys gunman, confirming the existence of an intricate extremist network within Molenbeek.

Criticism has been levelled at both the French and Belgian authorities for their apparent failure to act on the intelligence. On 10 November, French authorities announced that they had arrested a man linked to IS in Syria over a plot to attack sailors at the major Mediterranean naval base of Toulon, the latest in a series of plots against security personnel. Concert halls in France have featured prominently in IS’s Dabiq magazine, as well as its French language magazine Dar al Islam. As early as February 2015, a month after the Charlie Hebdo attack, two Belgian IS fighters issued a warning in an online video “to those who speak French” that they would “come and cut off [your] heads” and that “car bombs from Paris to Brussels” were “not a problem”. Another video released in July warned of "spilling blood on the streets of Paris", raising questions over the preparedness of the French authorities in the face of potentially imminent threats. Abaaoud, who had been linked to four out of six major terrorist plots foiled on French soil this year (including the Thalys attack and one against a church in the Paris suburb of Villejuif in April), visited the scene of the Bataclan concert hall undetected mere minutes after the attacks while still believed to be in Syria, a claim that had been made by IS on social media. While the confusion about Abaaoud’s location could point to an effective deception on IS’s part, it also raises questions about the effective monitoring and detection of suspects. The French authorities only received intelligence on 16 November, three days after the attacks, that Abaaoud had transited through Greece among migrants in September, highlighting major gaps in intelligence-sharing or even discrepancies with regard to the perception and assessment of the threat among EU members and beyond. One of the terrorist groups had visited London and Birmingham in 2015, and Abaaoud is believed to have been in contact with cells in both cities, again indicating a wide network of connections across Europe. Turkey had also warned
French authorities about Omar Ismail Mostefai, one of the suicide bombers, prior to the attack, a warning which appears to have been ignored.

Beyond apparent intelligence failures, the investigation has highlighted an overall lack of resources with which to monitor suspected individuals and activities, including clandestine gathering places and prayer sites in areas such as Molenbeek and within the economically-depressed Parisian suburbs of Alfortville, Bobigny, Montrouge and Saint Denis, among others. This was aggravated in Belgium by months of political paralysis following the 2011 and May 2015 elections as well as federal complexities that have hampered the national response to a growing terrorist threat. The rise of Belgium as a major jihadi recruitment hub and potential target was made apparent in February 2015 with the trials of members of now-defunct Salafist organisation Sharia4Belgium, and revelations following a raid in the eastern town of Verviers that a plot believed to have been organised by Abaaoud and on the scale of the Paris attacks was in preparation. Up to 500 Belgian nationals have travelled to Syria, making Belgium one of the highest “providers” in Europe per capita of foreign fighters in the conflict. Some 10 percent of those Belgian nationals are believed to have been linked to Sharia4Belgium.

Response

President Francois Hollande responded firmly by announcing the immediate intensification of anti-IS airstrikes in Syria, which had first been launched on 27 September, as well as a series of unprecedented domestic security measures. These include the revision of the constitution, providing for a robust judicial framework in the event of an emergency situation; the freezing of plans to cut troop numbers through 2019 and the recruitment of an additional 8,500 police and intelligence officers over the next five years; the restoration of systematic controls of EU internal and external borders until further notice and the extension of emergency powers for at least three months, a measure that was last implemented in 1961 during the Algerian war. The government has also called for greater security around water supplies in the capital amid concerns that IS or other groups could resort to the use of chemical and biological weapons, prompting Prime Minister Manuel Valls on 14 November to authorise the supply of nerve gas antidote atropine sulfate to hospitals in the event of an unconventional attack.

While the attacks have highlighted the need for a greater focus on prevention and intelligence, including a review of the thousands of suspects listed by French security services, France and Belgium have opted primarily for a firm public stance, with Francois Hollande declaring that France was “at war” and Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel calling for authorities to “get repressive”, especially with regard to Molenbeek. France has witnessed a sharp rise in arrests and raids at homes and private property, including Muslim-owned businesses, since the implementation of the state of emergency, with Interior Ministry Bernard Cazeneuve announcing on 3 December that authorities had raided 2,235 homes and buildings and taken into custody 232 people. Authorities have also closed three mosques in Lyon, Lagny-sur-Marne (east of Paris) and Gennevilliers (northwest of Paris) for suspected radicalism, marking the first time that France had taken such controversial steps. Up to 160 more mosques may be closed in the coming months, a move that risks fuelling claims of discrimination and possibly further extremism. On 13 December, Paris Airport authorities also announced that some 70 security agents working in high security zones at the Charles de Gaulle and Orly airports had had their security passes revoked since the Paris attacks over suspected radicalisation and suspicious behaviour.

The 13 November attacks have forced Western coalition countries, France and the UK in particular, to quickly re-assess their approach to security, responses to the threat and the internal and external policies currently in place. The attacks have brought to the fore the controversial EU Passenger Name Record (PNR) which would oblige airlines to share the data of passengers on flights entering or leaving European airspace with EU countries. France, the UK and Germany had for some time called on the EU to implement a scheme similar to that which it currently operates with Australia, Canada and the US, but the legislation was blocked by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) and a number of MEPs on grounds of data privacy. In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack, however, the European Commission in March 2015 announced its support for the policy and on 10 December the EU Parliament's Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee finally reached a deal which will be put to a vote by MEPs early in 2016, and then to the EU Council of Ministers. A number of contentious issues remain, however, and the scheme, if approved, will take at least a year before it can be fully enforced in national laws.
Repercussions

The 13 November attacks plunged Paris into a state of paralysis, with sporting events, concerts, museums, cinemas and major tourist sites and attractions cancelled or closed for the weekend. The following week, fears that Salah Abdeslam, who managed to flee after the Paris attacks, was hiding in Brussels, prompted the Belgian authorities to raise the terror threat level to a maximum “4”, placing the city on lockdown for three days amid fears of a similar attack in the Belgian capital. Anti-terror raids in Brussels, Charleroi, Verviers and Molenbeek resulted in eight suspects being charged in connection with the Paris attacks.

The impact of the attacks and the security measures announced in their wake, in particular the prolonged emergency powers, have been acutely felt on tourism, which represents 7 percent of France’s GDP, and on the wider economy ahead of the Christmas season. The Bank of France estimated on 2 December that the attacks will likely reduce GDP growth by 0.1 percent in the fourth quarter of 2015. Airlines and the hospitality industry have also recorded a sharp decline in reservations since the attacks, with hotels and restaurant reporting a 40 percent drop from 2014 figures. Air traffic decreased by 6 percent during the second half of November compared with the previous year, with a 28 percent drop in reservations for international flights to Paris recorded a month after the attack, and a general decline in bookings for the next three months. This will impact the tourism economy in the first quarter of 2016. Shopping centres are expected to suffer from a general sense of nervousness, and tourists may be reluctant to travel to a country that has been the target of four major attacks in the space of a year. Since the 13 November attacks, shopping centres in Paris have reported a 100 million euro (50 percent) increase in their security spending compared with 2014. A number of embassies warned against travel to France, including those of the US, Australia and Indonesia. The French ministry of education also cancelled all school trips across the country until 22 November, a decision relayed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which recommended that UK schools follow the advice. Many schools have postponed their trips until 2016.

More stringent controls and screening at transport hubs, on flights and at borders will translate into delays at entry points, potentially disrupting travel plans and business continuity as well as cross-border trade, in particular at the French-Belgian border. The state of emergency also entails the possibility of restrictions on movement, evacuations and the last-minute cancellation of flights, concerts and sporting fixtures in the event of a genuine threat or false alert.

France has taken firm steps in its response to recent events, and Western partners and corporations will retain their confidence in, and support for, the French government. However, repeated attacks or false alarms that prompt further lockdowns could severely undermine the country’s reputation as a safe tourist destination and business partner. A number of foiled attacks and incidents were reported in France and in the UK in the days following the attacks. These include the arrest at Gatwick Airport on 14 November of a French national following the discovery of a firearm, which prompted the evacuation of the North Terminal; a bomb threat against the Germany-Netherlands football match in Hanover on 17 November that led to the evacuation of the stadium and a bomb scare at Gare du Nord. An increase of false alerts has since been reported on the Metro and on a number of international flights across Europe. Such alerts are expected to be a long-term feature of Europe’s security landscape. Greater national security will require additional funds which will stretch public spending and may lead to social tension. This may force the EU Parliament to redefine its fiscal policies, including the convergence criteria, for the member states within the Eurozone whose budgets will be increasingly stretched by security constraints.

Implications for Borders

The range of weapons deployed on 13 November and the discovery of others during subsequent raids raise serious questions over the availability and accessibility of such weapons in the country. More than 330 weapons have been seized in raids since 13 November; 34 of which were military-grade (including a rocket launcher). This highlights the need for greater measures to tackle organised crime and the proliferation of high-powered weapons on the black market, disrupt local supply sources and curb cross-border arms smuggling.

Calls for these measures come at a time when criticism is increasingly voiced at the decisions of France and other European countries to open their borders to thousands of migrants. The Paris attacks, and reports that at least two of the attackers
managed to cross from Syria to Greece among migrants, will put the continuity of such policies in question. An increasing number of Schengen members, including France, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia and Sweden have already implemented temporary border controls, with France now demanding the unprecedented closure of borders in the event of an intelligence alert. Beyond the security ramifications of the Paris attacks, the operation will force Europe to review institutions and mechanisms that appear increasingly inadequate, if not obsolete, in the face of growing tensions between its member states over key national and trans-border issues.

Greece has been under significant pressure to put greater controls in place in the face of the continuous influx of migrants and refugees reaching its shores, prompting the European Commission in early December to threaten the country with suspension from the Schengen area – a claim Greece has denied – unless Athens implements a series of obligations, including the creation of “hotspots” to assess individuals. While this threat has now lessened, with Greece agreeing on 3 December to accept EU help and foreign border guards, the suspension of one of the 26 members of the Schengen agreement would be unprecedented, and is reflective of a deepening crisis within Europe following Grexit fears in the summer, again illustrating the impracticalities of a 20-year-old system overwhelmed by increasing political and humanitarian pressures. The Netherlands is also considering the creation of a “mini-Schengen” zone comprising Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, Germany and Austria, should the current mechanism fail. The migrant crisis, which has led to a number of protests in the affected countries and paralysed rail, road traffic and trade between Greece and Macedonia and with neighbouring countries, is affecting an already struggling Greek economy. The gradual closure of borders also elevates the risk of a major humanitarian crisis in the Balkans, and, in a worst-case scenario, the implosion or redefinition of political Europe.

The 13 November attacks have provided grounds for a re-evaluation of open-door policies in Europe, including of the Schengen agreement. Germany announced in October that it would turn away migrants deemed ineligible for asylum, while Canada is contemplating rejecting single male Syrian refugees. Growing antagonism towards asylum seekers and migrants will play into the hands of IS. The decision to turn away refugees will nurture a feeling of alienation and rejection, providing opportunities for further radicalisation. IS also has little interest in seeing thousands of people fleeing the conflict zone – without populations to control, the idea of a caliphate appears redundant.

Prospects

The 13 November attacks will boost IS’s morale and recruitment at a time when the group appeared to be facing a series of setbacks in the core conflict zone. The assaults took place shortly after the announcements of IS’s loss of the symbolic city of Sinjar in northern Iraq and the still-unconfirmed death of leading IS executioner Mohammed Emwazi in a US airstrike in Raqqa, IS’s de facto capital in Syria. Such developments should have severely dented IS’s propaganda machine, which had been very successful and uninterrupted by major failure. While the degree of preparation and sophistication of the Paris attacks rule out the possibility that IS was acting to avenge the death of Emwazi, they reinforce the perception that IS remains unaffected by the actions of coalition forces in Iraq and Syria.

Increased airstrikes will not suffice in the absence of a cohesive, long-term political strategy for the region, which is constrained by the divergent objectives and ever-changing alliances of state and non-state actors on the ground. The Paris attacks and the Russian airliner crash in northern Sinai on 31 October initially raised hopes that the events would result in renewed resolve among the coalition members and a more coordinated approach in the fight against IS, starting with greater intelligence-sharing to improve the effectiveness of the bombing campaign. Although Russia and France have announced greater cooperation, the Downing of the Russian jet by Turkey on 24 November will frustrate these efforts. Tensions between Russia and Turkey are set to persist, both in the region and within NATO, while reinforcing a debilitating rift in the response of the international community to the Syrian conflict, especially over the role and fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The incident will also complicate mediation efforts over the crisis, with the main players unlikely to want to join talks or compromise, running the risk of exacerbating a proxy war on the ground.

While the strikes are, in effect, merely the extension of a military operation across a border that no longer exists, the UK’s involvement raises a number of security implications, both in Syria and at home. The vote in Britain’s parliament was politically and diplomatically necessary in the wake of the Paris attacks, which were a stark reminder of the threat posed by
terrorism in Europe and the possibility of Mumbai-style attacks in Western capitals. By validating intervention in Syria, the UK joins the US, France, Jordan and Russia in an air campaign aimed at targeting IS’s leadership and destabilising the organisation, though with little guarantee of ultimate victory. Although the strikes may weaken the group in Raqqa, they will only serve to shift and decentralise the threat to other areas amid reports that fighters are increasingly fleeing to Libya and other ungoverned spaces. While the intensification of airstrikes could hamper IS’s efforts to consolidate the territories it holds in the core conflict zone, the move also elevates the risk of further retaliatory action against countries that are members of, or which support, the coalition. IS has already exploited France’s decision to intensify its operations against Raqqa by publishing pictures of civilians allegedly killed in French airstrikes. Any increase in civilian casualties will serve to support IS’s propaganda and recruitment machine, with the additional risk that countries participating in airstrikes in Syria might be perceived, or portrayed, as siding with the Syrian regime.

The Paris attacks could be indicative of a shift away from the modus operandi of the “lone-wolf” towards tactics previously associated with al-Qaeda and illustrate the broader spectrum of risks to which France and other European countries are exposed. IS fighters and supporters have proven able to mobilise weaponry, personnel, resources and funds across borders.

The attacks also continue to demonstrate the threat posed by returning battle-hardened foreign fighters to their home countries – at least six of the Paris attackers travelled to Syria between 2013 and 2015 – and recent IS warnings raise concerns that the group or sympathisers may resort to such tactics, with videos also promoting the use of car bombs. Western capitals are likely to see a mix of micro-attacks involving one or two individuals against a specific site or security forces, and high-profile, high-casualty attacks against soft targets as well as critical national infrastructure assets. International organisations and major international events (including high-profile sporting fixtures) may also be at risk.

The campaign in the Middle East may degrade the IS core, but it will not destroy the threat, which is rapidly expanding to other regions, whether through new alliances and allegiances in Africa and Asia, or by way of its influence on individuals acting in its name irrespective of actual links with the group. Even if IS is defeated militarily, the idea of a caliphate will remain alive in the minds of a core of sympathisers around the world who may want to emulate the success of the Paris attacks. The 13 November events have altered the security context in Europe and beyond. As governments struggle to adjust to a quickly evolving, asymmetric threat, Western capitals will have to adapt to a context of permanently elevated security for the foreseeable future.