Militancy/Terrorism

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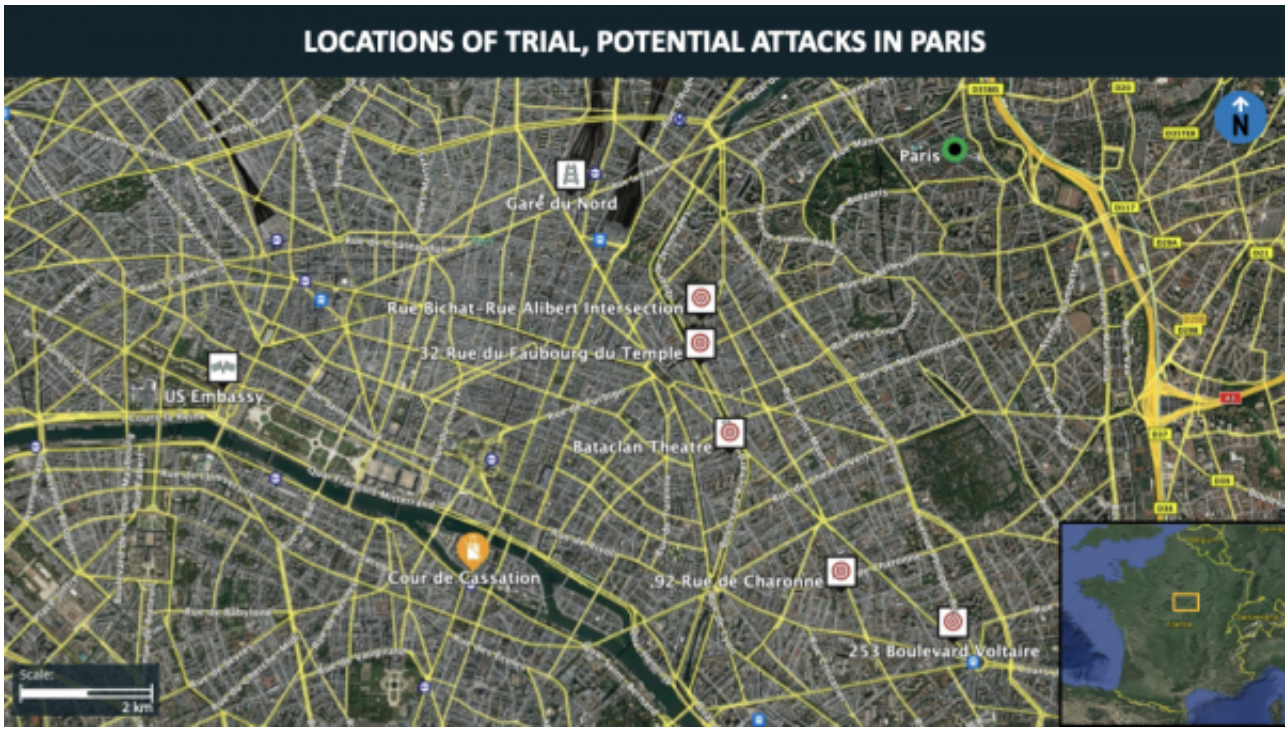
France Alert: Trial for IS-claimed 2015 attacks to begin in Paris on September 8; threat of localized attacks increased over coming week

Please be advised

- The trial for the 2015 Paris attacks, claimed by the Islamic State (IS) militant organization, that led to the death of 130, is scheduled to begin on September 8 at Paris' Cour de Cassation. 20 suspects have been accused of planning, aiding, and carrying out the attacks. 14 of the suspects will be tried in court, including the only surviving attacker, while six will be tried in their absence. The trial is set to last until May 2022.
- On November 13, 2015, a group of three suspected Islamists carried out a suicide bombing outside Stade de France during an ongoing match with at least 80,000 spectators after failing to enter the stadium. This was followed by drive-by shootings by other suspects at cafes and restaurants, and a shooting inside the Bataclan hall during a concert, in Paris. The main suspect in the trial, French national Salah Abdeslam, is believed to have helped the three bombers enter France from Syria and planned a separate suicide plot in Paris. Abdeslam was later arrested in Brussels in March 2016.
- The attacks prompted the government led by then-president Francois Hollande to declare a State of Emergency (SoE), which lasted until November 2017 when President Emmanuel Macron introduced permanent legislations that were part of the SoE, including enhanced police powers to conduct raids and the closure of radical religious sites.
- In September 2020, coinciding with another high-profile Islamist trial for the January 2015 attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine's headquarters and a supermarket in Paris that began, at least three lone-wolf attacks by radical Islamists were recorded across France. These included a stabbing near the magazine's old office and the beheading of a teacher in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine in October 2020.
- On July 21, the Ministry of Interior warned regional prefectures to "maintain vigilance at a high level" as the September trial approaches following the release of a video by a media agency operated by al-Qaeda with threats against France, particularly against President Macron and Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin.



Assessments

1. Given precedent of lone-wolf attacks during high-profile trials in France, including the Charlie Hebdo trials, there is a heightened risk of small-scale attacks by radical Islamists in Paris, as well as other cities through the course of the trials. Potential attacks are likely to be primarily in the form of stabbings- and other knife attacks, with the risk of vehicular ramming, shooting, and, to a lesser extent, low-sophisticated bombings.
2. Militant groups are likely to launch aggressive radicalization and incitement efforts online calling for attacks against law enforcement and the general public, especially as the trial is expected to receive extensive media coverage. This is further evidenced in the video released by the al-Qaeda-affiliated media agency ahead of the start of the trial. Given already elevated anti-government sentiments over the introduction of tough preventive counter-militancy efforts following the 2020 attacks, which have been accused of targeting the local Muslim population, there is an especially high risk of vulnerable individuals, including minors and youths, being further radicalized by extremist propaganda linked to the trial.
3. That said, with the government having already ordered regional authorities to bolster security, the threat of a large-scale coordinated attack remains relatively limited. Security is likely to be especially bolstered in the vicinity of the Cour de Cassation over the course of the trial, as well as other federal entities and public areas. Additionally, based on the stabbing in September 2020, attacks may take place in the vicinity of the 2015 attack locations. Security is also expected to be heightened at border crossings and airports to prevent regional movement of Islamists within Europe as there is increasing collaboration between radicals across the region, evidenced most recently during investigations into the 2020 Vienna attacks.
4. In addition to the threat of potential lone-wolf attacks by radical Islamists, attacks targeting the Muslim population and places of worship, especially by the far-right, cannot be ruled out as Islamophobic sentiments are liable to rise. Given the upcoming 2022 elections, right-wing leaders may attempt to capitalize on the trial to garner support among voters with anti-immigrant rhetoric, further polarizing the public.

Recommendations

1. Travel to France may continue on September 8 and the coming weeks as per government guidelines while maintaining heightened vigilance for potential attacks by radical Islamists and the far-right during the course of the trial.
2. As a general precaution, maintain heightened vigilance in the vicinity of security detachments, government buildings, public areas, diplomatic offices, restaurants, shopping centers, and places of worship as they remain potential targets for militant attacks.
3. In Paris, allot for travel disruptions in the vicinity of Cour de Cassation on September 8 and the coming weeks as heightened security deployment and large presence of the media is anticipated.
4. Alert authorities immediately upon witnessing suspicious items or behavior.
5. Public, private, and third sector organizations are advised to increase their awareness of threats on social media through the use of threat monitoring services. Increased awareness of an organization’s political footprint and perceptions from fringe online groups can help uncover potential violent actors and plots before they occur.