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The 2015 Paris Terrorist Attacks: An Assessment

By Weimeng Yeo

Synopsis

The suicide armed attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 were unprecedented in magnitude and scale. It has exposed France's vulnerability to political armed violence and has alerted the rest of Europe to the jihadist threat within their domain.

Commentary

THE SERIES of simultaneous armed and suicide bomb attacks that killed more than 130 people and left 350 injured in multiple locations in Paris have highlighted once again the terrorism threat in France. Though tragic, these attacks in Paris, France, do not come as a complete surprise.

In the last 18 months, France has already suffered from more than five major terrorist attacks. What is surprising is the magnitude and scale of these six assaults, which were very ambitious. Divided into three distinct groups, the militants were able to execute simultaneous strikes on six locations. Simultaneous attacks are very effective as they cause significant number of casualties before the security services have the time and ability to respond. These attacks were also very well coordinated and involved myriad attack devices reflecting a sophistication that can only come from having some level of military training and expertise as well as centralised control.

Similar to the Mumbai attacks in 2008

The worst violence occurred at the siege of the Bataclan Theatre that left more than 80 people killed. Such suicide armed attacks or sieges witnessed at the theatre involve an individual or a group opening fire on a gathering of people in order to kill

as many as possible. Similar to the Mumbai attacks in 2008, the ability to roam around and sustain the attack, while being willing to kill themselves in the onslaught, makes such terrorist attacks more difficult to combat.

From the terrorist's perspective, this attack mode offers a number of advantages. It allows for greater target discrimination, flexibility during the operation, cause large numbers of casualties and generate extensive worldwide media exposure. Such attacks are stunning but not unprecedented. Several terrorist groups have also incorporated such assaults as part of their attack repertoire. For example, the Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are famous for sending suicide squads against military targets. These attacks are not explicitly suicidal, although the chances of survival are slim and the militants are often killed.

Use of TATP explosives

French authorities have disclosed that triacetone triperoxide (TATP) explosives were used as part of the suicide bomb vests for the attacks at the stadium and the Bataclan Theatre. This is an interesting point. TATP is basically a mixture of hydrogen peroxide and acetone with sulfuric, nitric, or hydrochloric acids. These are chemicals relatively available in your neighbourhood stores.

However, TATP is highly unstable and is very sensitive to heat as well as shock. More often than not TATP will detonate prior to the desired time. Given the high level of precision and coordination needed to orchestrate these attacks, an experienced bomb maker had to be involved in creating the suicide bomb vest stable enough to be used in these operations.

IS' claimed responsibility

The Islamic State (IS) has claimed responsibility for the catastrophic attacks in the French capital, though this has not been officially authenticated. The suicide operations and the synchronous nature of these attacks are consistent with the modus operandi of salafi-jihadi militant groups such as IS and al-Qaeda.

In the eyes of the jihadi community, France's military incursion in the Middle East such as its recent bombing campaigns against IS positions in Syria and Iraq, justifies its targeting. Both IS and al-Qaeda linked groups have in the past have threatened reprisals against France for its military intervention in the region.

On the domestic side, the fact the one of the suicide bombers was a Syrian refugee will also further fuel longstanding ethnic tensions in the country. France continues to struggle to deal with the problems of poor integration and perceived marginalisation of its large Muslim population. Domestic policies such as the deeply unpopular headscarf ban have contributed to the feelings of victimisation claimed by some sections of the French Muslim community.

French jihadists returning home

Compounding the threat landscape are indications that many French individuals have travelled to countries such as Syria and Libya to receive paramilitary training.

The experience of other Western European countries, which face their own home-grown terrorist threat, has shown that individuals benefiting from foreign training and combat experience can act as lightning rods for local radicalised individuals and provide an addition impetus to orchestrate attacks in their homeland.

So far, French authorities believe that there are about 400 French citizens in Syria fighting with extremists, making the French among the largest western contingents of foreign fighters in Syria.

More attacks to come?

The attacks in Paris are the deadliest in Europe since the 2004 train bombings in Madrid, Spain where 191 people were killed and over 1,800 people injured. These attacks have probably made suicide armed assaults and bomb attacks a more attractive tactic for terrorist groups to replicate. Such attacks will typically target people in crowded areas that lay outside any security perimeter checks such as a ticketing area of an airport. Most probable targets for such attacks are landmark buildings where there is a large civilian presence.

With regard to the terrorism risk landscape in France, while the suicide bombers have been all killed, the drive-by shooters remain at large. Moreover, despite several arrests in Belgium of individuals allegedly linked to the attacks in Paris, it is still unclear whether these detentions have broken up the terrorist network that supported these attacks. Thus, in the short term, subsequent attacks in France or even neighbouring countries cannot be discounted.

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