



NDC Research Report

*Research Division
NATO Defense College*

16 January 2015

After the Paris Attacks Implications for the Transatlantic Security Debate

by Andreas Jacobs / Jean-Loup Samaan¹

Almost ten years after the London attacks, Europeans have been served dramatic notice that the threat of jihadi terrorism has not disappeared. On Wednesday 7 January 2015, two brothers, Cherif and Said Kouachi, stormed the building of the French satirical weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and killed twelve people. The next day, another French citizen, Amedy Coulibaly, killed a police officer on the outskirts of Paris. Then, on Friday 9, Police and Gendarmerie forces surrounded a building in a small town north of Paris where the Kouachi brothers had taken refuge. While negotiations between the two terrorists and French forces started, a new front opened up in the early afternoon when Coulibaly entered a Jewish supermarket in the Paris suburbs and took hostages. As indications emerged that the actions of the three gunmen had probably been coordinated, at least to a limited degree, French security forces decided to launch simultaneous attacks on both locations. All three terrorists were killed. In the supermarket standoff, four hostages were killed and fifteen survived.

The Paris attacks triggered a discussion on new jihadist threats and possible counter-terrorism measures in Europe. This debate may soon spill over into a broader and more structured debate on transatlantic security and the role of NATO in fighting jihadi terrorism. In anticipation of such a debate, this paper detects the main pattern emerging from the Paris attacks and the strategic lessons to be learned. Against this backdrop, it gives recommendations for the upcoming debate on a transatlantic strategy against jihadi terrorism.

¹ Andreas Jacobs and Jean-Loup Samaan are both Research Advisers at the NATO Defense College in Rome. The views expressed in this paper are the responsibilities of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

1. The pattern of the Paris attacks

Many details of the Paris attacks remain unclear at the time of writing. However, the attacks showed a number of distinctive features that are relevant for an assessment of future threats from jihadi terrorism.

Soft targets. As in the 2013 Boston Marathon attacks, terrorists in Paris attacked targets with limited security: only two policemen were guarding the *Charlie Hebdo* offices, the murdered policewoman was unarmed, and the Jewish store had no security. For the last decade, the discussion on terrorist attacks has centred on the safety of critical infrastructure (airports, public transport, and government buildings). With the Paris attacks it has become clear that soft targets are easier and more effective for terrorists. This fits into the new strategy of Al Qaeda (AQ). Back in 2008, Al Qaeda's English-language magazine *Inspire* called for a "strategy of a thousand cuts": i.e. attacking the West through "smaller, but more frequent" attacks. In 2013, *Inspire* added the cynical motto, "A bullet a day keeps the infidel away".

Loose coordination. According to public information, these terrorist attacks were loosely coordinated. In his posthumous video, Coulibaly affirmed that he and the Kouachi brothers joined forces to "multiply the impact". Although there is concrete evidence that the three perpetrators knew each other, it is not yet clear whether these attacks can be said to have been coordinated in the same way as the 2005 London attacks. The *Charlie Hebdo* attack was clearly the most prepared. Stéphane Charbonnier, the Editor in Chief of the magazine, had been on the AQ 'wanted list' for several years. With regard to the attacks by Coulibaly, there seems to be a degree of randomness: he first shot a policewoman in the street, and then stormed a supermarket on the following day. Some sources indicate that he considered attacking a Jewish school initially. Coulibaly's targets represented symbols of the "enemy" (law enforcement personnel and the Jewish community), but otherwise seem to have been randomly chosen. All in all, this does not leave the impression of two teams that closely coordinated and orchestrated their attacks. Based on the publicly known facts, two interpretations of the relationship between the attacks seem plausible. The first of these is that Coulibaly knew of the Kouachi brothers' plan and decided to "jump on the bandwagon" by perpetrating his own attacks shortly after. The second possibility is that the authors of the separate attacks acted like a "wolf pack", opportunistically joining forces on the basis of a loose, informal coordination.²

Different affiliations. This impression of a loose coordination is enhanced by the differences in the terrorists' claimed allegiances: AQ for the Kouachi brothers, and the Islamic State (IS) for Coulibaly. The two organizations have never cooperated before, and are considered to be rivals. In the case of the Kouachi brothers, Western intelligence sources revealed that they had been travelling to Yemen to receive training from the local AQ branch. The fact that AQ had explicitly designated Charbonnier as a target would support the idea that their attacks were prepared in advance. But Coulibaly's known record does not show strong international connections. However, he was known to be affiliated with a Paris-based Islamist network (the so-called "Buttes Chaumont cell") and was also involved in the attempted prison breakout by Smaïn Ait Ali Belkacem, involved in the 1995 Paris bomb attacks. The fact that Hayat Boumedienne, the companion of Coulibaly, entered an IS-controlled area of northern Syria on the very day the policewoman was killed in Paris may prove the connection with IS. But as Coulibaly left prison only in the summer of 2014, his formal allegiance to IS and to its leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi may prove to have been a matter of last-minute ideological opportunism.

² The Soufan Group, "The New Spectacular Terror Attack", 12 January 2015.

2. The lessons of the Paris attacks

The distinctive pattern of the Paris attacks suggests several lessons that should be considered for a further assessment of the jihadi terrorist threat in NATO countries.

The competition between AQ and IS. If the claims made by Coulibaly are correct, the Paris attacks are to be seen as marking the first known cooperation between AQ and IS. Given the bitter rivalry between the two in the Middle East, this interpretation seems to be unlikely. Instead, the pattern of the Paris attacks indicates that both organizations have started to extend their competition for leadership of the jihadi movement to Europe. For two years now, IS has been seen as the major new jihadist threat in the Middle East. With the killing of Osama Bin Laden and the rise of IS, AQ was more or less out of the picture. Now, with the Paris attacks, AQ has brutally made clear that it is not gone, defeated or sidelined. Rather, it has shown that it can still recruit new volunteers and strike Western targets. While the *Charlie Hebdo* attack fulfilled a purpose on Al Qaeda's agenda, those perpetrated by Coulibaly do not clearly serve any such purpose for IS. To date, IS still follows a territory-based strategy which differs from AQ's. However, the momentum it gained by occupying vast areas of Syria and Iraq has gradually faded away over the last months as the US-led coalition has started to conduct air strikes against its positions. Increasingly, in its propaganda videos IS uses the presence of Europeans among its fighters to convey the message that it has gained traction in European countries. The Coulibaly attack may thus be read as an indicator of IS's future goals: not only to attract European fighters to join the fight in Syria and Iraq, but to order operations against coalition members on their own territories.

The immediate problem of foreign (and domestic) fighters. The (formal or informal) connection to the two main global jihadi networks underlines the problem of so-called "foreign fighters". All three perpetrators of the Paris attacks were born and raised in France and held French passports. However, their personal profiles do not qualify them as "sleepers", but rather as obvious and well-known jihadists. The Kouachis and Coulibaly had a long criminal record. They became radicalized in prison, were connected to militant jihadists in France and were well known to the French authorities. Additionally, the Kouachi brothers travelled to the Middle East and received training and indoctrination in the region. This profile highlights that the perceived threat of foreign fighters is unfortunately all too relevant. The Paris attacks were not implemented by inconspicuous citizens who were suddenly "activated" by foreign actors. Rather, the Paris attackers were – at least in the case of the Kouachis – well trained and well known jihadists.

The religious message. Scholarship has established the idea that terrorism is essentially a message or a communication strategy. In the Western debate, the Paris attacks are largely discussed as an attack against the freedom of speech. For many islamists and jihadists, the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks had a different meaning. Following the jihadist narrative (which is rejected by the overwhelming majority of Muslims), the Kouachi brothers executed a justified sentence of capital punishment against individuals who had committed the offense of defamation against the prophet. Against this backdrop, the attacks conveyed a clear message to the international jihadist community: We (AQ or IS) are able to defend our faith wherever and whenever it is offended. Until now jihadist attacks in the West had mostly political motivations: no religious significance was attributed to the 9/11 attacks, the 2004 Madrid attack or the 2005 London attacks. Religiously motivated attacks were randomly planned and perpetrated by individuals (for instance, the

murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004). The Paris attacks are the first example of a larger attack in the West that has a clear religious component and message.

3. Recommendations for the transatlantic security debate

Based on these preliminary findings, the following recommendations for the debate on transatlantic security after the Paris attacks can be made.

Differentiating between the Kouachi and Coulibaly attacks. The evidence shows the Paris attacks to have been only loosely coordinated. It may prove misleading for analysts and policy makers to look at them as part of a well-orchestrated and integrated campaign of terror. It seems more likely that the *Charlie Hebdo* attack reveals new patterns in terms of AQ's operational conduct and volunteer-leadership relations. On the other hand, the Coulibaly attack seems increasingly to have been the work of a lone wolf (or of a small cell) that spontaneously claimed affiliation to the larger jihadi framework of IS.

Preventing lone wolf attacks against soft targets. Assuming there is a paradigm shift in jihadist terrorism towards attacks by loosely connected fighters on soft targets, countermeasures have to be adapted accordingly. Of course, personal security for highly endangered individuals such as certain politicians and journalists has to be increased. But as soft targets are difficult to protect, a sharper focus on the potential attackers is necessary. The Paris attacks were the acts of criminals who had turned into jihadi fighters, pledging their allegiance to transnational terrorist organizations. Therefore, the top-down approach – based on action against the leaders of these organizations – must always go together with a bottom-up approach – focusing on the volunteers. Dismantling transnational networks and eliminating their leaders limits their ability to act and to attack; but it does not protect NATO countries from the threat of home-grown volunteers ready to take the initiative.

Preparing for political and public pressures and expectations. The Paris attacks triggered an unprecedented political mobilization all over Europe. This mobilization will most likely lead to public demands and expectations. Policymakers and political institutions will be under pressure to take action and find new, more efficient measures against terrorism. NATO itself is unlikely to play a direct role in this. It might become involved indirectly, as some of its member states consider using their armed forces in the fight against terrorism. France has already announced the deployment of 10,000 soldiers nationwide – the highest figure since the Algerian war – in support of law enforcement personnel. This raises the question whether European military forces, especially in times of budget cuts, are well equipped and trained to contribute to counterterrorism missions. Additionally, the problem of dealing with two or more (loosely) coordinated attacks at the same time has to be addressed.

Monitoring domestic terrorist networks. In addition to the question of armed forces, the monitoring of terrorist networks at home might be back prominently on the transatlantic security agenda. Hayat Boumedienne's escape to Syria epitomizes the soft spots of counter-terrorism cooperation among NATO allies. Her ability to travel through three NATO countries (France, Spain and Turkey) and to finally enter Syria, in spite of having been monitored for the past few months and being known for close links with Paris-based Islamist networks, casts doubt on the Allies' ability to evaluate critical threats and to swiftly

exchange information on them. More than NATO, the European Union may well be challenged on the principles of the Schengen laws that are increasingly seen as a security liability.

Reassuring democratic values. Freedom of expression and freedom of religion are fundamental values. Not every NATO member state has the same interpretation of these values and balances them in the same way. Acts of defamation (alleged or real) against religious figures, symbols or texts have been an issue for NATO in several operations. NATO soldiers have died in attacks related to so-called “acts of blasphemy”. To date, the Alliance has not defined a clear position on religious matters and has kept a very low profile in reassuring its own values in this field. The Paris attacks might put some pressure on NATO to change this stance. This might require action in two directions. First, NATO should re-evaluate its training and capacity-guiding mechanisms and add elements which deal with the difficult relationship between freedom of expression and the protection of religious belief. Second, guidelines could be necessary to clarify NATO’s understanding of its identity as a secular alliance that respects freedom of expression, freedom of religion and the inviolability of human dignity.

Conclusion

The debate about the implications and lessons of Paris for the transatlantic security debate has only just started. For the moment, four (interconnected) aspects are important. First, from a jihadist terrorist perspective, the attacks were highly “successful”. Given their limited cost and complexity, the threat of copycat attacks is quite high. Second, if the Al Qaeda connection proves to be substantial, the *Charlie Hebdo* attack painfully reminded the West that Al Qaeda still constitutes a major threat. Third, as Al Qaeda’s jihadist competitor, the Islamic State, faces setbacks on the ground in the Middle East, it may change its strategic approach and could discover terrorist operations in the West as a new field of activity. Fourth, the Paris attacks were not primarily about the Middle East and the Western interference in the region. They were about the worldwide implementation and enforcement of the jihadi terrorist interpretation of Islam. This last aspect, in particular, will fundamentally change the perception of global jihadi terrorism.