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Commentary

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Islamist Terrorism on the March

The Paris Attacks and the Implications for Canada

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Canadians responded to the horrific Nov. 13 attacks in Paris that killed 129 people from 17 countries and wounded hundreds more with an outpouring of grief and condolences. The full meaning of what happened will doubtless take time to assess, and the ramifications for Canada in this brazen attack on a close ally are many. But two stand out.

First, the Paris attacks corroborate, once again, that Islamist terrorism is on the march, not on the retreat. French President François Holland has been exceptionally firm on this, calling the current state of affairs a “war” with “a jihadist army, Daesh [ISIS, ISIL].” That jihadists, once part of al Qaeda’s global franchise and 14 years after 9/11, have succeeded in carving out a substantial territory that spans Iraq and Syria, is – to be perfectly blunt – dramatic. It’s a blow to our collective security, and puts our counter-terrorism, counter-radicalization, and intelligence strategies under renewed scrutiny. Canada, as a vocal, ambitious, and dedicated partner of global counterterrorism initiatives since 2001, is in the crosshair.

Second, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) recruitment of westerners continues. Thousands have travelled to ISIS territory to fight, train, and die. The Paris attacks seem to have involved at least half a dozen European radicals. Some had travelled to Syria, and appear to have been purposefully dispatched back to Europe to co-ordinate attacks. While exact figures are hard to come by, recent estimates suggest that up to [30,000 foreign fighters](#) from 100 countries, have travelled to Syria and Iraq over the past five years. Many have joined ISIS. These figures, if accurate, far surpass the number of foreign recruits al Qaeda was able to attract to [Afghanistan during the 1980s](#).

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Some new phenomenon is at work here. And despite global efforts to stem the flow, it appears as though 7,000 of these foreign fighters arrived in the first six months of 2015 alone. So there are very real, and very pertinent, policy questions at stake. ISIS continues to attract thousands of Westerners with its bloody message, and few practical solutions are evident. Canadians are among these recruits. Some will fight and die overseas. Others – as the Paris attacks again confirm – may well return to die on our streets instead.

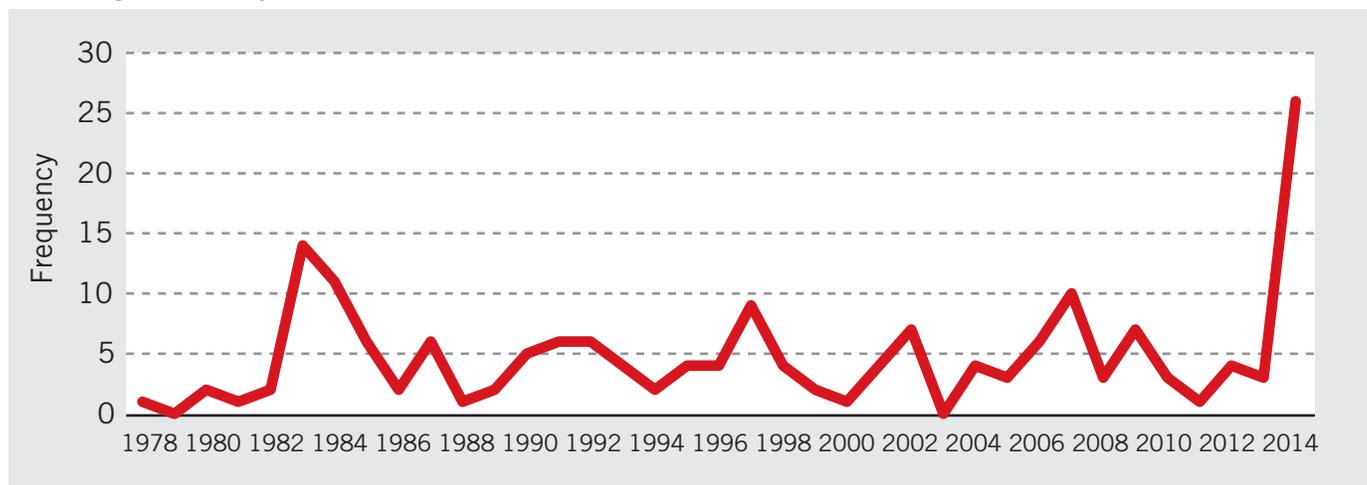
WHAT PARIS TELLS US ABOUT ISIS’S CAPABILITIES, GOALS, AND MOTIVATIONS

Last week’s horror in Paris – and this week’s deadly [police raid in the Parisian suburbs](#) of St. Denis in which suspected ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a Belgian, was killed – helps settle the debate terrorism experts and analysts had had until recently as to whether ISIS would focus on its regional aspirations – namely, consolidating its territorial toehold in the Middle East – or would emulate al Qaeda in orchestrating mass-casualty attacks against “the far enemy”, the United States, Europe, Canada, and others. Paris is yet another indication that ISIS has begun to emphasize the latter.

There have been a string of spectacular, ISIS-orchestrated attacks all over the world since 2014. The 129 killed in Paris on Nov. 13 are but the tip of macabre iceberg. Thousands more have been killed in attacks around the world in the past 12 months: Close to 50 dead Lebanese in ISIS bombings in Beirut (November 2015); over [200 dead Russians](#) in a bombing of a passenger jet over the skies of Sinai, Egypt (October 2015); nearly 100 Turkish citizens killed in a suspected ISIS suicide blast in Ankara (October 2015), and another 32 Turks killed in a suicide blast in Suruc (July 2015); the indiscriminate slaughter of several dozen British and European tourists on the beaches (June 2015) and landmarks (March 2015) of Tunisia. The list goes on. ISIS has likewise inspired smaller, less sophisticated attacks in Canada, the US, Australia, Denmark, France, and elsewhere since September 2014. Dozens of plots have been uncovered and thwarted. And we haven’t even mentioned the thousands more killed in ISIS terrorist attacks closer to home in Yemen, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, and Syria.

Data compiled by the US National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) paint a grim picture: between 1970 and 2013, an average of four mass-fatality terrorist attacks (defined as attacks resulting in the deaths of more than 100 people, excluding perpetrators) occurred worldwide. In 2014, [26 such attacks](#) took place. [See table below] An exponential rise. Figures for 2015 are on par with 2014: in the first six months of the year, 11 such attacks occurred. Things are spiraling out of control. ISIS appears motivated and willing to slaughter its perceived adversaries, at home and abroad, with wanton disregard for human life. Unfortunately, it also appears capable of doing so.

FIGURE 1: Number of Times More than 100 People Were Killed by Terrorist Attacks on a Single Day in a Single Country



Source: [Global Terrorism Database](#)

CANADA'S VULNERABILITY TO ATTACKS ON SOFT TARGETS

Countering threats like the Paris attack takes a combination of several things: good intelligence and policing, robust defence and denial, and rapid first response are top of mind.

Canada has a reasonably robust domestic intelligence gathering capability that is meant to catch wind of attacks and help local and national police forces stamp out plots before they come to fruition. We're pretty good at it. Until the October 2014 attacks – in which two Canadians died in two separate terrorist events – Canadians could even point to a nearly flawless record. While Canadian militants had [conducted attacks abroad](#) and were responsible for the deaths of foreign citizens, at home we've been largely successful at arresting, trying, and jailing would-be Canadian terrorists.

But perfect intelligence isn't possible, and cannot be expected. France, despite decades of experience tackling a variety of domestic radicals, wasn't able to pre-empt the Paris attack. Rather than reflexively point to Paris and label it an obvious intelligence failure of grand proportion – [as some have done](#) – I think it wise to take stock of what France and its allies knew about the plot and those involved, and then assess how, where, and why authorities were blind-sided. There are lessons therein for Paris, and for Ottawa.

Protecting soft target is a complex problem. You need to balance security with access. I don't think Canadians would find it necessary or appropriate to have airport-like security at local restaurants, bars, malls, and theatres. It isn't a given that the French feel much differently, even after the Paris attack. [Israelis](#) have put up with that sort of defensive posture within their cities, but they face, and have faced, a far more challenging security environment. Nor would defensive measures against suicide bombers at the Parisian restaurants and bars targeted last Friday have done much to protect patrons sitting outside from the hail of bullets coming from the street.

Where security measures appear to have succeeded was in ensuring that two – and perhaps even three – suicide bombers [couldn't easily enter the soccer stadium](#) to target spectators. At least one of the bombers had a ticket to the match, but was turned away by security staff at the gate. President Holland was at that game. Another 80,000 spectators were too. Had any one of these bombers managed to detonate their explosives amongst fans, the carnage could have been immense. President Holland's life might have been threatened. We should consider all of this a bright spot, then, on an otherwise dark day. Canadians should be prepared to enforce a similar level of external security at major gatherings – as [NHL hockey stadiums](#) began to do in September 2015, for instance – and ensure that other public spaces and buildings that welcome large crowds, like shopping malls, universities, and public transportation hubs, have defensive measures and plans in place.

As for rapid first response, it appears as though the French were quick to react to the attacks as they were taking place. For instance, French police forces engaged the terrorists holed-up at the [Bataclan theatre](#) – where most of Friday's victims perished – killing them before more harm could be done to civilians. The [police raids in Paris](#) on another terrorist cell on the morning of Nov. 18, in which several militants were killed including a female suicide bomber who detonated her explosives, further illustrate this point. French police did much the same during the hostage-taking at a [Kosher Parisian grocery](#) store in January 2015 – an attack linked to the earlier shootings at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*. Several civilians were saved. Given that many of the recent attacks in Europe have involved militants who have gained first-hand experience and raw training in the battlefields of Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, western police forces should expect to encounter an adversary potentially more accustomed to open conflict than they are. Indeed, following the Nov. 18 raids in Paris, French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve commended his police officers' bravery: they'd endured “gunfire for many hours, [in conditions that they had never encountered until now.](#)” Militant sophistication must be taken into account when training our urban first responders.

Otherwise, France's medical system appears to have speedily absorbed the hundreds of casualties following Friday's attack. The system's [White Plan](#) likely saved lives. Canadian first responders can learn from how their counterparts in France and elsewhere have responded to mass-casualty terrorist attacks. While Canadian police and emergency responders were tested during the October 2014 storming of Parliament Hill, and likely used the attack to iron out kinks in their training and planning, they have yet to be fully tested by a Paris-like event. Until then, the most we can do is canvases the best advice and prepare accordingly.

NATO OBLIGATIONS TO FRANCE

NATO's next move will largely depend on France's next move. Canada is a member of NATO, of course, so if France is compelled to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, effectively turning the Paris attack into an attack against all members of the alliance, Canada may be compelled – even required – to do more to combat ISIS. There's important precedent. The US invoked Article 5 on September 12, 2001, the day after al Qaeda's brutal attack on the US, in which close to 3,000 civilians were killed. NATO went to war with al Qaeda the following month.

In response to the latest Paris attacks, France has already invoked the [EU's mutual defence clause](#) – created following the 2004 mass-casualty attack in Madrid, Spain – which opens the door for further, bi-lateral co-operation between France and its European partners. Any NATO involvement in battling ISIS, post-Paris, will entail deeper intelligence-sharing amongst allies – both regarding ISIS activities overseas and concerning potential plots targeting the West. NATO could help out with that. The alliance could likewise offer to assist US Special Forces currently active in Iraq and Syria.

More dramatically, NATO could ultimately take over management of the US-led air campaign battling ISIS. That would be tricky – diplomatically and practically speaking – and not without its risks given Russia's competing air campaign in support of Damascus, but it's nonetheless something NATO could explore. The Libyan intervention of 2011 might serve as a model, of sorts. Importantly, Russia recently suffered a mass-casualty attack of its own when ISIS's Sinai branch destroyed a Russian airliner in Egypt. This could mean that there's a window of opportunity to explore greater co-ordination between American, European, and Russian forces active in the Middle East. [President Holland](#), in his stirring address three days after the terrorist attack, called on Moscow and Washington to “unite” in a “wide and single coalition” to destroy ISIS. He is set to travel to both capitals in the coming days.

DEFEATING ISIS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

There's certainly no easy military fix to the problem of ISIS. Speaking at the G20 Summit in Turkey, on Nov. 16, US President Barack [Obama chided](#) his critics for suggesting that he hadn't yet developed or implemented an effective plan to counter ISIS. “If there was a swift and quick solution to this,” he said, “I assure you that not just the United States, but France and Turkey and others who have been subject to these terrorist attacks would have implemented those strategies.”

Still, the rough outline of an effective framework seems to exist, even if the specific policies and strategies are still being identified and hammered out. It's multi-pronged. The US and its various partners need to: stop the flow of foreign fighters from entering ISIS territory; contend with the radicalization process that drives ISIS recruitment from among their citizens; starve ISIS of its finances; bolster states on ISIS's frontline (namely, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon); destroy ISIS materiel, training camps, operation centres, and other necessities in a co-ordinated air campaign; target ISIS fighters and leaders in precision strikes and special operations; train, equip, and coordinate anti-ISIS fighters capable of rolling back ISIS advances; and address real and perceived political grievances in both Iraq and Syria. None of this is easy, but unfortunately all of it may be necessary.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CANADA'S MILITARY COMMITMENT IN IRAQ

The Paris attack has presented Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's newly minted government with its first major international conundrum: how to fulfill an election promise to end Canada's participation in the US-led air campaign against ISIS at the exact moment when international consensus seems to be shifting the other way, towards greater military engagement and co-operation. The Paris attack has galvanized France and Europe to do more. The US seems eager, too, having recently sent [US Special Forces](#) to Syria's front line. And Russia, stung by the Sinai bombing, has also finally turned its guns on ISIS. Consider: on the night of Nov. 16, the Syrian city of Raqqa, ISIS's self-proclaimed capital, was first bombed by [French fighter jets](#) (with US assistance), and later by [Russian bombers and cruise missiles](#).

A window of opportunity for further co-operation may be presenting itself. But Canada's government has nixed continuing its modest contribution to the air campaign. By some accounts, Canadian fighter jets have conducted a paltry [3 percent of the coalition's raids](#), so the issue isn't a question of how our partners will pick up the slack once we leave. The issue is how does Canada signal its intention to engage the global community on ISIS in other concrete and effective ways?

Besides the six CF-18 fighter jets, Canada also committed two Aurora CP-140M surveillance aircraft and one refuelling aircraft to the anti-ISIS coalition. Perhaps the government can meet its various competing demands by cutting out the fighter jets but maintaining or even increasing the use of these other aerial assets. Otherwise, redoubling our efforts to train anti-ISIS forces in Jordan, Iraq, and elsewhere makes sense. Prime Minister Trudeau has already signalled his commitment to send more Canadian military personnel to bolster the 69 [trainers](#) and advisers Canada sent to Iraq in 2014 to help train Kurdish forces. The exact number of additional trainers still has to be worked out. But certainly, as part of the larger framework for countering ISIS, training local fighters is an important contribution. Canada might be in a position to pledge its heavy support.

Canada could also further its ongoing contribution to humanitarian assistance to the communities and countries in the region who need it, ensure it is doing its part to counter ISIS financing, and continue to prevent Canadian radicals from joining ISIS ranks. Finally, perhaps Canada can find a way to "[offer ... its good offices](#)", as suggested by Dr. Ann Griffiths at Dalhousie University, to help find a political and diplomatic solution to the Syrian and Iraq conflict.

CANADA'S REFUGEE COMMITMENT

The investigation into the Paris attacks is still unfolding. There's some uncertainty as to how the Paris bombers got to France and travelled within Europe. It appears that some of the European nationals among the perpetrators had been living in France and Belgium for some time. Others appear to have travelled to Syria to join ISIS, only returning to Europe to help co-ordinate the attack. And at least one of the suicide bombers travelled to Western Europe via Greece and the Balkans posing as a [Syrian refugee](#). This has led to speculation that ISIS may have taken advantage of the current refugee crisis sweeping Europe to surreptitiously send operatives to the continent to conduct attacks. That is an especially troubling development.

Enter Prime Minister Trudeau's pledge to fast-track the resettling of 25,000 Syrian refugees. Last week, the worry was largely about the logistics of [physically transporting](#) that many people to Canada before January 2016. Today, following the Paris attacks, the much more pressing concern is how Canada plans to effectively screen and vet that many refugees before they are whisked to Canada for resettlement. At least one [provincial premier](#) has voiced concern about Ottawa's plan. While the specifics of the plan are expected to be made public in the coming days, we can stipulate that the government will rely on security checks conducted both overseas and domestically. Overseas, Canada will likely rely on data provided to it by the UNHCR and other international [aid and security organizations](#) that identify refugees that meet Canada's criteria.

Domestically, CSIS, CIC, CBSA, and the RCMP, working together, will conduct their own screening processes, by for instance, cross-referencing information from various sources.

Canada has a long history of welcoming refugees from the World's crisis zones. That'll continue. The question for today – in light of Paris and ISIS's presumed ambitions, and in light of the magnitude of the refugee crisis in Europe – is whether or not Canada has dedicated itself too far and too fast. In its 2013-2014 Annual Report, for instance, CSIS notes that it helped screen roughly [8,500 people claiming refugee status](#) that year. Canada can very reasonably identify, vet, transport, and effectively relocate many more than 25,000 Syrian refugees. Given time, of course. Doing all of this in a safe, rigorous, and systematic way in under six weeks may be another question.

About the Author



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