



## What the Paris attack could mean for Ireland?

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Multiple complex well planned attacks throughout Paris on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2015 have highlighted a perception of a growing risk of terrorist activity throughout Europe. SAR Consultancy has examined what this may mean for Ireland and argues that it at least warrants a comprehensive review of the National Threat Assessment, especially given some of the emerging information coming from initial investigations in Paris. Primarily, if IS are responsible for the attacks in Paris, this action marks a significant departure from their focus to date, which has largely concentrated on building the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, with their attacks largely restricted to the Middle East. If proven to be the work of IS, this attack, in conjunction with the alleged attack on the Russian plane last week and the attack in Beirut on Thursday indicate that their focus is changing and with it a significant escalation of risk. Before this incident, the risk was different; the majority of incidents in Europe linked with IS would appear to have been inspired by IS rather than directed by the group. If this is shown to be different in this case, which is becoming increasingly likely, this is a game changer. That said, this may not actually be the first attempt in France or Europe of this nature, given that a number of incidents have been thwarted over recent weeks and month in Europe.

The Modus Operandi (MO) used in these recent attacks also illustrates a shift for IS activity in Europe, with this attack designed to achieve mass casualty, mass fear and terror, more synonymous with Al Qaeda. This attack differs largely from the Charlie Hebdo attacks earlier in the year, where the attacks were conducted against relatively specified targets. However, on this occasion the target selection process appears to be different; the attackers selected soft, high impact, targets within the general population, which significantly impacts a nation's risk assessment. Similar to such attacks conducted by Al Qaeda, this one appears to have been well planned, both logistically and strategically. It is currently thought that it was conducted by a self-contained cell made up of French and Middle Eastern individuals. While some analysts have suggested, the tactics used were relatively simplistic, the incident illustrates a high degree of planning and coordination, ensuring a mass casualty impact. Albeit the incident at the Stade de France would appear to have been contained, the alleged possession of a ticket on one of the attackers would indicate they had prepared to gain access to the game and most likely detonate inside. It should be noted that the security forces are likely to have prevented a further loss of life by their swift action.

The primary weapons used in the Paris attack were reported to have been AK47s and homemade TATP explosives, easily accessible and easy to use. That said, bomb making experience would most likely be have been required. As a result, it would appear that the weapons used were done so with a sophistication and apparent experience that is likely to be indicative of a degree of training and experience amongst the attackers. At this point it is suggested that all attackers wore the same suicide vests and were armed with the same explosives and detonators. The use of suicide vest also marks a shift in MO and is likely to

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indicate the presence of a trained bomb maker in Europe. While the explosives used to make these vest are thought, at this time, to be quite rudimentary, the fact the majority of them worked would indicate a high level of proficiency in their makeup and design. The use of suicide vests in Europe marks a new challenge for security forces and Ireland needs to review what this may mean for the country. As many analysts have suggested, if someone is prepared to kill themselves whilst conducting such an attack, there is very little the security forces can do to prevent it. That said, intelligence gathering, exchanges, surveillance, etc. are paramount to mitigating the risk, but it must be acknowledged that one slip up and such attacks can occur, there is no '*perfect preparedness*'. As a result, incidents of this nature are likely to continue to occur and worse still are likely to have mass causality impact before armed responses even get to the scene. Therefore, preparedness must involve a high degree of response capability. Given the current pressures on the health services, the cuts in spending on training, equipment, personnel numbers etc. in An Garda Siochana and the Defence Forces, does Ireland really have the capacity to respond? Whilst there are significant resources within such organisations, the collective capacity still may not be sufficient to respond effectively if required.

Many have argued that Ireland does not share commonalities with France that would make it as vulnerable to such an attack? As known, while no country is immune, some are more vulnerable. There are numerous reasons frequently given why France may have been a target, stemming from both their domestic and foreign policy, many of which do not resonate with Ireland. That said, one reason now being given as to why this attack may have been conducted in France and at this time, which may be worth examining in a review of the threat assessment is that proposed by William McCants, author of *The IS Apocalypse*. Whilst being interviewed in the aftermath of this attack, he purported that one explanation for a departure from the tradition MO of IS may be due to them losing territory in Syria and Iraq. If proven to be the work of IS, an attack in Europe, the alleged bomb on the Russian plane over Egypt and the attack in Beirut could all be seen as a back lash against these offensives in Syria and Iraq against them. While this may not resonate with thoughts of Ireland at present given our lack of military action in these offensives, the refuelling of US plans in Shannon cannot be ruled out as a provocation to such extremists, given the US's role in the offensive.

That said, a number of positive factors exist in Ireland which are likely to help mitigate against such an attack of this nature. Ireland, the Defence Forces and An Garda Siochana have experience dealing with terrorism, and although austerity has reduced capacity, these organisations are proficient to a degree to monitor, assess, analyse intelligence and threats of this nature. Furthermore, the social fabric of Ireland is such that Ireland, to a large degree, has welcomed people of different countries and faiths for years and has allowed them worship and practice their religion without interference and threat. With that, in the majority of cases, new communities to Ireland have valued this freedom and integrated into society. This is likely to have reduced the development of feelings of isolation, disenfranchisement etc. Furthermore, with respect to Islam at least, the Muslim community have actively sought to be open in Ireland to discussion and debate about their faith and the role it plays in Irish society. Through voices of Dr Ali Selim, of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland (ICCI) and Dr Shaykh Umar al-Qadri,

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of the Irish Muslim Peace and Integration Council (IMPIC) messages of condemnation against such attacks clearly illustrate that such actions are not acceptable in the name of their faith. Furthermore, the anti IS ‘not in our name’ demonstration organised by IMPIC in Dublin earlier in the year, clearly illustrated that the Islamic community is proactively making efforts to denounce the use of Islam as an excuse for terror and are challenging publically such views.

That said the presence of extremism in Ireland cannot be denied. Research from King’s College London and Irish government statements have stated that at least 30 Irish nationals have left Ireland and gone to Syria and Iraq to fight with IS and as a result, there is likely to be an associated risk, if these individuals were to return. That said, this should not be seen as absolute, research has shown many foreign fighters come back home disillusioned and therefore are unlikely to pose a risk to society, more importantly they may be potential advocates for challenging extremist views.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, research has also shown through interviews with foreign fighters that their motivation is not always purely extremist in nature, with many arguing they see their role as more of a freedom fighter than a terrorist. As such both examples of returnees may be highly unlikely to be motivated to conduct, plan or even support attacks in Ireland. White washing all returnees as potential terrorists and risks to Ireland may taint any discussions of this nature. That said, the presence of contained cells, similar to claims being currently applied to the recent attacks in Paris, cannot be ruled out, nor can the presence of lone wolf type individuals, and as a result, the associated risks must be examined. By their natures, such issues are complex and, as such, so are the threats associated with them.

As a result, we cannot afford to be complacent in Ireland, as one attack even of minor impact could seek, as many would like, to polarise society. It is important that this is not allowed to happen, a message iterated by Peter Neumann, Professor of Security Studies, Department of War Studies, King’s College London in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. It is a time for unity against terrorism and not a time for Islamophobia to be allowed to take hold. We as a nation who know too well the indignity of being treated as terrorists when the vast proportion of the population never played any role or supported such activities. It is not time to stand by and let others be condemned by the same accusations when their faith is being abused. This is a time for balance, restraint, solidarity and unity whilst at the same time, a time for ensuring there is no complacency and that Ireland is best prepared to this ever changing threat.

In conclusion, whilst it may be assessed that the probability of such a threat against Ireland after the Paris attacks still remains low, such an incident is likely to have high impact if it were to occur. Preparing for a High Impact Low Probability (HILP) incident is by its nature difficult, as they are hard to forecast and as a result are costly to mitigate against. As a result, the Irish Government not only need to review the National Threat Assessment but they also need to evaluate exactly what measures they are willing to fund to mitigated against a HILP of this nature, because at this point, it is difficult to assess that the country currently has this capacity.

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<sup>1</sup> Maher, (S) & Neumann, (P) 2014. ICSR Insight – Offering Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq a Way Out. Article Published in the Independent Newspaper, UK 27/08/2014.

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