



## **Brief**

# **Holiday Season Terror Threat Raises Global Alarm**

B-2023-12-08a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: HIGH

Intelligence Requirements: Government, Social Unrest

**December 8, 2023**

## Scope Note

ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 10:00 AM (EST) on December 8, 2023**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

# **Brief** | Holiday Season Terror Threat Raises Global Alarm

## **Executive Summary**

Multiple Western security authorities have warned that the conditions for a terrorist attack are high in the run-up to the holiday period. Christmas markets and Hannukah events and celebrations from December 7–15 present soft targets, especially given the increased sensitivities surrounding the Israel–Hamas War. An uptick in extremist propaganda online could further inspire would-be attackers, who, in the recent past, have viewed large public gatherings as ideal targets. Additionally, European authorities are concerned that broader, longer-term societal fissures will drive an increased threat over the holiday period. Protests over immigration and the cost of living have already turned violent multiple times this year and could resurface during the holidays.

## **Details**

On December 5, 2023, European Home Affairs Commission chief Ylva Johansson said there is a “huge risk” of a terror attack in the European Union (EU) during the holiday period.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>

[hXXps://www.euronews\[.\]com/my-europe/2023/12/05/huge-risk-of-terrorist-attacks-in-the-european-union-home-affairs-chief-warns](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/05/huge-risk-of-terrorist-attacks-in-the-european-union-home-affairs-chief-warns)

- Johansson highlighted the Israel-Hamas War, as well as the overall feeling of polarization across Europe that predates it, as key triggers.
- There have been some small-scale terror attacks in Europe since the war broke out, which have, in some instances, led to riots by far-right groups angry over migration and the attacks themselves.

In addition to the warning by EU authorities, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) issued a similar warning that groups like Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) will use the Israel-Hamas War to increase calls for violence in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Each terror group probably calculates that events in Israel and Gaza, coupled with its propaganda, will inspire lone-wolf actors to carry out terror attacks in Western nations.

- A similar dynamic existed from 2014–2018 when IS gained control of considerable territory across Iraq and Syria. At that time, the group orchestrated attacks, primarily in Europe, as well as used its online propaganda to inspire lone wolves to carry out attacks elsewhere. In the years since, an effective Western military coalition drastically reduced the territories under IS control and its online messaging capability.
- IS' remaining online presence is still used to call for attacks in the West, but the group is largely reliant on individuals to carry out the attacks with little instruction; calls for violence could take on added resonance from individuals angry over the Israel-Hamas War.

In addition to the Israel-Hamas War, European authorities, in particular, are also concerned that broader, longer-term societal fissures will drive an increased threat over the holiday period. The EU is likely referring to concerns around the cost of living and immigration that have worsened in recent years and have resulted in acts of violence across the continent.

- In recent weeks, there have been several large-scale riots by far-right groups in response to supposed acts of violence committed by immigrants. Predating the

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[hXXps://www.cbsnews\[.\]com/philadelphia/video/fbi-director-warns-us-facing-unprecedented-number-of-terror-attacks-this-holiday-season/](https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/video/fbi-director-warns-us-facing-unprecedented-number-of-terror-attacks-this-holiday-season/)

war period, these groups also clashed with police over lockdowns, housing affordability, energy costs, public spending, and environmental reforms.

- The Israel-Hamas War is likely to continue into 2024, and the polarization that existed before the war will most likely be amplified during large gatherings and demonstrations, increasing the risk of violence.

## **France on Edge**

Overall, France experienced significant political unrest and polarization long before the Hamas terrorist attacks on October 7, 2023. However, these underlying factors make the country more susceptible to spillover violence from the ongoing Israel-Hamas War, especially during the Hanukkah and Christmas holiday seasons.

- During the first half of 2023, the country witnessed at least 14 rounds of nationwide strikes and protests against President Emmanuel Macron's centerpiece domestic reform, which raised the retirement age from 62 to 64 years.<sup>3</sup>
- Large-scale demonstrations brought between 500K and 1.3 million people out onto the streets from January to June 2023 and turned violent in mid-March.<sup>4</sup>

Although the last round of nationwide strikes and demonstrations occurred on June 6, 2023, France experienced a fresh round of violence after police officers shot and killed a 17-year-old delivery driver during a traffic stop in a Paris suburb on June 27.<sup>5</sup> This incident sparked several nights of riots, which resulted in widespread looting, 1,000 damaged buildings, and over 5,000 burned vehicles.<sup>6</sup>

- In addition, the Arab-Muslim background of the driver led to accusations of racial profiling by law enforcement and calls for reform. One consequence was a judicial

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[hXXps://www.lemonde\[.\]fr/politique/live/2023/01/10/reforme-des-retraites-en-direct-le-gouvernement-propose-de-decaler-l-age-legal-de-depart-a-64-ans-en-2030\\_6157310\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/live/2023/01/10/reforme-des-retraites-en-direct-le-gouvernement-propose-de-decaler-l-age-legal-de-depart-a-64-ans-en-2030_6157310_823448.html)

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[hXXps://www.lemonde\[.\]fr/politique/live/2023/03/16/reforme-des-retraites-en-direct-elisabeth-borne-s-exprime-a-la-tribune-de-l-assemblee-nationale-sous-les-huees-de-l-opposition\\_6165692\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/live/2023/03/16/reforme-des-retraites-en-direct-elisabeth-borne-s-exprime-a-la-tribune-de-l-assemblee-nationale-sous-les-huees-de-l-opposition_6165692_823448.html)

<sup>5</sup> [hXXps://www.theguardian\[.\]com/world/2023/jul/04/first-edition-france-unrest-police-nahel-merzouk](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/04/first-edition-france-unrest-police-nahel-merzouk)

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[hXXps://www.leparisien\[.\]fr/faits-divers/interpellations-voitures-brulees-batiments-degrades-les-emeutes-en-chiffres-nuit-par-nuit-03-07-2023-S7M7QZT5TBC63IC6AAC7XTBETQ.php](https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/interpellations-voitures-brulees-batiments-degrades-les-emeutes-en-chiffres-nuit-par-nuit-03-07-2023-S7M7QZT5TBC63IC6AAC7XTBETQ.php)

investigation of four individuals belonging to a tactical unit accused of using excessive force against protesters in Marseille.<sup>7</sup>

- Their indictment in July 2023 prompted slowdowns and walkouts by hundreds of police officers and thousands of their supporters in the south of France and the Paris region, which also turned violent.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, security experts have warned of the increased danger of “lone actor” attacks. In France, there have been two such incidents since the start of the Israel-Hamas War. On October 13, a teacher was killed in a knife attack in the city of Arras.<sup>9</sup> Then on December 2, one person was killed and two others injured during a knife and hammer attack in central Paris.<sup>10</sup>

- In both cases, police have classified the incidents as “acts of terrorism” and believe that they are related, at least in part, to events in the Middle East.
- Finally, in a separate case, a 16-year-old student was stabbed to death in the small town of Crépol on November 18, 2023. Although a motive for this crime has not yet been established, far-right groups blamed Muslim immigrants for the killing and engaged in two nights of rioting in the neighboring community of Romans-sur-Isère on November 25 and 26, 2023.<sup>11</sup>
- France has since banned the group called Division Martel, along with others, fearful that a wave of far-right violence could engulf the country.<sup>12</sup>

Overall, the protests and their aftermath are indicative of a broader, more long-term issue: namely, the breakdown of trust between law enforcement and large segments of French society. An attack by a lone actor over the holiday period is likely to exacerbate

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<sup>7</sup>

[hXXps://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/violences-policieres-presumees-quatre-policiers-mis-en-examen-lun-den-tre-eux-place-en-detention-provisoire-21-07-2023-Y67YGHEQQJAVRIHAL5XMX5BYM.php](https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/violences-policieres-presumees-quatre-policiers-mis-en-examen-lun-den-tre-eux-place-en-detention-provisoire-21-07-2023-Y67YGHEQQJAVRIHAL5XMX5BYM.php)

<sup>8</sup>

[hXXps://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/policier-ecroue-arrets-maladie-greve-du-zele-5-minutes-pour-comprendre-la-tension-a-la-bac-de-marseille-22-07-2023-XZ2NEQUNDJGCXEO2X5AQYEBEHY.php](https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/policier-ecroue-arrets-maladie-greve-du-zele-5-minutes-pour-comprendre-la-tension-a-la-bac-de-marseille-22-07-2023-XZ2NEQUNDJGCXEO2X5AQYEBEHY.php)

<sup>9</sup> [hXXps://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/13/europe/arras-france-school-knife-attack-intl/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/13/europe/arras-france-school-knife-attack-intl/index.html)

<sup>10</sup>

[hXXps://www.lemonde.fr/societe/live/2023/12/03/en-direct-attentat-a-paris-le-point-sur-les-dernieres-informations\\_6203619\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/live/2023/12/03/en-direct-attentat-a-paris-le-point-sur-les-dernieres-informations_6203619_3224.html)

<sup>11</sup> [hXXps://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67548173](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67548173)

<sup>12</sup> [hXXps://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20231207-ultra-right-group-disbanded-after-violent-clashes-in-south-of-france](https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20231207-ultra-right-group-disbanded-after-violent-clashes-in-south-of-france)

these longstanding tensions, which have an increased risk of prompting even more violence in response, no matter how law enforcement responds.

## **Other Incidents of Violence**

Around the same time as the stabbings and riots in Crépol, France, a similar event occurred in Dublin, Ireland, on November 23. Rioters angry over a supposed stabbing carried out by an immigrant attacked police and carried out acts of violence with strong anti-immigrant undertones, despite the lack of evidence an immigrant carried out the attack.<sup>13</sup> The animosity had been building in Dublin for months over a nationwide housing shortage that many blamed on Ireland's increasing acceptance of immigrants.<sup>14</sup> Similar dynamics exist across Europe, with European countries taking in ever more migrants due to the myriad crises across Africa, the Middle East, and Ukraine while also running up against cost-of-living pressures triggered by the aftermath of COVID-19 and Russia's war in Ukraine. The holiday period presents an opportunity for these sometimes-opposing groups to gather, and if an incident of violence occurs, there is a high chance it could result in additional acts of rioting and vandalism.

Days after the attack in Arras, France, a gunman in Brussels, Belgium, shot dead two Swedish soccer supporters ahead of a Belgium-Sweden match. The gunmen claimed to have been inspired by IS, which at the time called for attacks against Swedish and Danish interests over those countries' tolerance of Koran burnings.<sup>1516</sup>

On November 30 in Germany, police arrested two teenagers allegedly inspired by IS who planned to carry out an attack on a Christmas market in the western city of Leverkusen. During the period of heightened Islamic terror attacks in Europe, a man in communication with IS stole a truck and rammed it into a Christmas market in Berlin, killing 11 and injuring dozens in late 2016. A Christmas market in Strasbourg, France, was also targeted in 2018 by a gunman inspired by IS.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [hXXps://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2023/1207/1420746-how-dublins-riots-developed/](https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2023/1207/1420746-how-dublins-riots-developed/)

<sup>14</sup> [hXXps://time.com/6343248/dublin-riots-irish-youth-housing-crisis/](https://time.com/6343248/dublin-riots-irish-youth-housing-crisis/)

<sup>15</sup> [hXXps://time.com/6303348/quran-burning-sweden-denmark/](https://time.com/6303348/quran-burning-sweden-denmark/)

<sup>16</sup>

[hXXps://apnews.com/article/sweden-quran-desecration-attack-belgium-0b2b52e448823377d9ed42493960faf6](https://apnews.com/article/sweden-quran-desecration-attack-belgium-0b2b52e448823377d9ed42493960faf6)

<sup>17</sup> [hXXps://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-terror-strikes-france-strasbourg-christmas-market-attack/](https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-terror-strikes-france-strasbourg-christmas-market-attack/)

## **Conclusion**

EU and U.S. authorities are most likely concerned about the risk of lone wolves hitting soft targets like Christmas markets or large public religious gatherings like those taking place during Hanukkah throughout December and the New Year period. The Israel-Hamas War likely also makes continued calls from groups like IS and AQ more effective than they have been in years, increasing the probability of an attack. Finally, there is the added concern that polarization linked to the high cost of living and anti-immigrant sentiment could reignite and turn violent during the 2023 holiday season.



## | Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	<b>Red</b>	<b>Amber</b>
<b>WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?</b>	<b>Sources may use</b> <b>TLP:RED</b> when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	<b>Sources may use</b> <b>TLP:AMBER</b> when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
<b>HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?</b>	<b>Recipients may NOT share</b> <b>TLP:RED</b> with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	<b>Recipients may ONLY share</b> <b>TLP:AMBER</b> information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. <b>Note that</b> <b>TLP:AMBER+STRICT</b> restricts sharing to the organization only.
	<b>Green</b>	<b>Clear</b>
<b>WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?</b>	<b>Sources may use</b> <b>TLP:GREEN</b> when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	<b>Sources may use</b> <b>TLP:CLEAR</b> when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
<b>HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?</b>	<b>Recipients may share</b> <b>TLP:GREEN</b> information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	<b>Recipients may share</b> <b>TLP:CLEAR</b> information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.



## | Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%