

## Bastille Day terrorist attack in Nice, 14 July 2016

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### WHAT

On 14 July 2016, a 31-year-old Tunisian-born French national, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, drove a rented truck through a crowd observing Bastille Day fireworks on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. The attack killed 86 people and injured more than 300.<sup>1</sup>

Lahouaiej-Bouhlel drove 2 kilometres before stopping the vehicle and discharging a pistol into the crowd. He was eventually shot dead by French national police and reportedly said ‘Allah Akbar’ (God is great) before being killed. A pistol, a dummy grenade and two replica rifles were found inside the truck.



Emergency services vehicles work on the scene after a truck, left, drove through Bastille Day revellers in the French resort city of Nice, France, 14 July 2016. Sasha Goldsmith via AP/AAP.

1 Initial reports stated that 84 people were killed. This figure was later revised to 86 when two of the injured died of wounds sustained during the attack.

The attacker was known to police for petty criminal offences involving theft and violence but he wasn't known to have Islamist terrorist associations. Lahouaiej-Bouhlel's mobile phone records reveal that he used dating websites and consumed alcohol and drugs; he wasn't known to be religious.

Lahouaiej-Bouhlel was not a lone actor; he was supported by a network, and at least five accomplices were arrested by authorities and are now in custody. None of those detained was known to French authorities to be linked to terrorism before the attack.

On 16 July, the so-called Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack through a news bulletin on its Al Bayan Radio, stating that the attack was in response to its call for attacks on 'crusader states' fighting in the Iraq and Syria territories of its 'caliphate'.

## SO WHAT?

The Bastille Day attack was an unsophisticated terrorist attack using a truck as a weapon, supported by firearms. It appears to have been deliberately carried out on a national day of celebration to target a large public gathering and inflict mass casualties. Islamic State aims to generate this type of effect to instil fear. This was a low-cost and relatively simple attack that could be replicated elsewhere with minimal resources.

**Strategic messaging.** France was still reeling from the November 2015 Paris attacks, so Bastille Day was an opportunity for it to demonstrate national strength, resolve and solidarity in a time of crisis. Instead, the attack challenged the effectiveness of the government's security and intelligence apparatus and became an additional friction point in domestic politics.

**Response capability.** Although French authorities were already at heightened alert levels because of the state of emergency in effect since the November 2015 attacks, they didn't have specific warning indicators of this attack and were unable to prevent it. Lightly armed municipal police officers unsuccessfully fired upon the fast-moving truck with pistols after it bypassed a police barrier. More heavily armed national police eventually fired upon and killed the driver, but the response was too late to prevent mass casualties.

At the strategic level, on 19 July 2016 the French Government extended the state of emergency for an additional three months, and President François Hollande announced increased commitments to coalition operations against Islamic State in Iraq. The government mobilised thousands of additional police and military personnel to enhance domestic security and called upon citizens to join the military reserves.

**Intelligence sharing.** A parliamentary commission into the 2015 terrorist attacks on Paris highlighted information- and intelligence-sharing problems among security agencies, and within Europe, in a report tabled a week before the Nice attack. It recommended integrating intelligence agencies into a national counterterrorism (CT) body, as well as enhancing police powers, particularly search-and-arrest capacity. The report concluded that new police powers wouldn't prevent future attacks. As none of the attackers identified to date was known to CT agencies, it's unclear at this stage whether better information-sharing arrangements might have disrupted the plot. Reports to date indicate that the perpetrators evaded detection. A question for French agencies is whether the investigation into Nice identifies new information requirements and collection opportunities.

**Terrorist strategy.** This was the third mass-casualty terrorist attack in France in 18 months and the first outside the Paris metropolitan area and in a regional city. The attack indicates the ongoing intent of Islamic State and other Islamist extremists to attack Western targets where they can.

**Terrorist tactics.** Vehicles have commonly been used as terrorist weapons through the 2000s, particularly in the Middle East, but this tactic has been uncommon in Western countries. Like Australia, France has strict gun laws, yet the attacker was able to obtain firearms. Semi-automatic and automatic weapons also featured in France's 2015 attacks. Unlike in Australia, Western Europe's open borders and illegal arms trade make it relatively easy for criminals and terrorists to obtain firearms.

**Event security.** The Bastille Day event in Nice was secured by local and national police. The truck bypassed a municipal police barrier at high speed and was stopped only when fired upon by more heavily armed national police. A heavy truck having access to a public space without restriction is conceivable for almost any major city. The requirement for law enforcement officers to neutralise a target in a heavily populated area is challenging because of the risk of collateral damage.

## NOW WHAT?

**Strategic messaging.** The Australian Government's messaging has been responsible and consistent: Australia's terror alert level remains 'PROBABLE: a terror attack is likely'. This should be maintained. While Australia has experienced three terrorist attacks in the past two years, none was a large-scale mass casualty incident such as in Nice. It's not realistic to expect Australian authorities to disrupt and prevent every possible plot. Strategic messaging should continue to highlight the likelihood of future attacks while communicating both the need for community resilience to withstand them, and efforts underway to prevent them. Authorities need to continue to invest heavily in prevention as part of the overall CT strategy.

**Response capability.** The simplicity and effectiveness of the attack indicates the capacity of terrorists to adapt their methods to available 'soft' targets and to use a range of tactics and weapons depending on the environment and availability. Australian emergency and security responders should incorporate lessons learned in responding to a vehicle attack but also prepare to respond to the spectrum of low-level attacks promoted by terrorists, including improvised bombs, firearms and bladed weapons.

**Location.** Australia needs to be prepared for a terrorist attack in a rural town or a regional centre where high-readiness police forces are not based. Local responders should be equipped, trained and rehearsed to ensure effective integration when responding to a mass-casualty scenario, including a terrorist incident. Additionally, command, control and communication capabilities need to be tested at all levels during such training exercises. Notably, first responders would be likely to include all emergency services: police, fire and ambulance.

**Defence.** In France, soldiers have been mobilised to boost domestic security. In Australia, the ADF's role in domestic security is governed by the *Defence Act 1903* and the Constitution. Under current arrangements, the ADF could only be called upon to assist federal, state and territory police for domestic CT *in extremis*, when the use of force is required. In the aftermath of an incident, the ADF could be called out to assist the recovery operation under Defence Aid to the Civil Community provisions. In light of the French experience, the ADF's role in supporting domestic CT should be reviewed to identify and inform how it might best support CT efforts. This would both optimise ADF contributions and enhance understanding of the ADF's capabilities and role.

**Intelligence sharing.** Compared to French intelligence and law enforcement agencies, Australian agencies are collaborative and effectively sharing information. For CT, this is coordinated at the strategic level through the Australian Counter-Terrorism Centre and managed operationally through Joint Counter-Terrorism Teams.

**Terrorist strategy.** Australia continues to rate highly in Islamic State's list of target countries and, as seen in France, the group is seeking to conduct and inspire attacks. One lesson from Nice for Australia is to be aware of terrorists targeting regional centres rather than higher profile and hardened capital cities; another is to remember the continuing importance of symbolic dates, such as national holidays.

**Terrorist tactics.** Australia's gun laws and border security mean that it's more difficult and more expensive to procure illegal firearms here than it is in Europe.

**Event security.** It's unlikely that a layered cordon of law enforcement officers could have physically prevented the truck from entering the public area. However, a larger array of security forces may have been able to fire upon the driver and vehicle sooner and more effectively, thereby reducing overall casualties. Large concrete bollards or other obstacles restricting vehicle access may have helped disrupt the attack, although it's unrealistic to secure every public space in such a way. Physical barriers and increased security force presence also incur significant cost. An important lesson from Nice is that a consequence of hardened security is that terrorists look instead for more vulnerable targets.

## CONCLUSION

The Bastille Day attack in Nice is a timely reminder that, while Islamic State's primary physical base is in the Middle East, its ideology, support base and targets extend beyond that region. Regardless of, and partly because of, its declining territorial control in the Middle East, Islamic State will continue to attempt to strike 'soft' targets in the West and elsewhere.

To date, the Australian Government has proactively implemented new counterterrorism initiatives that include countering violent extremism programs and legislative reforms. More can be done, however. A comprehensive review of national CT arrangements in light of the recent attacks in Europe would be a positive step towards strengthening Australia's resilience and enhancing our national security apparatus.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Australian Government should conduct a holistic **review of national CT arrangements**, with a particular focus on security requirements for large public gatherings and the ADF's role in domestic CT.
2. Australian governments should enhance the **CT strategic communications** to better communicate the ongoing threat level and the need for community resilience. This should be linked to **preventative** initiatives to make our communities safer.
3. The federal, state, territory and local governments should conduct a holistic review of **first responder capabilities**, including of training requirements to cover a spectrum of terrorism scenarios and of equipment, integration and command and control requirements.

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