



Europe Holiday Threats



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Overview

In recent weeks, U.S. embassies across Europe have released security alerts informing Americans about ongoing heightened security measures due to transnational terrorist threats, many of which focus on tourist locations such as Christmas holiday markets, shopping malls, airports, clubs, restaurants, places of worship, transportation hubs, and other soft targets frequented by Westerners.

The alerts have prompted concern among private-sector security professionals. Some worry that the terror threat has spread far beyond the traditional targeting of urban areas in Western Europe, to include more rural settings, as well as countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Others have suggested that the release of dozens of alerts for countries that have traditionally faced a lower risk of terrorism challenges the ability of the U.S. private-sector to calibrate the likelihood of a terrorist attack. Ultimately, it is OSAC's observation that the threat does remain the highest in Western Europe's dense urban centers. Nevertheless, the terrorism threat to suburban or rural areas, as well as to countries that have never experienced an attack, should not be discounted.

Holiday Threats in Europe

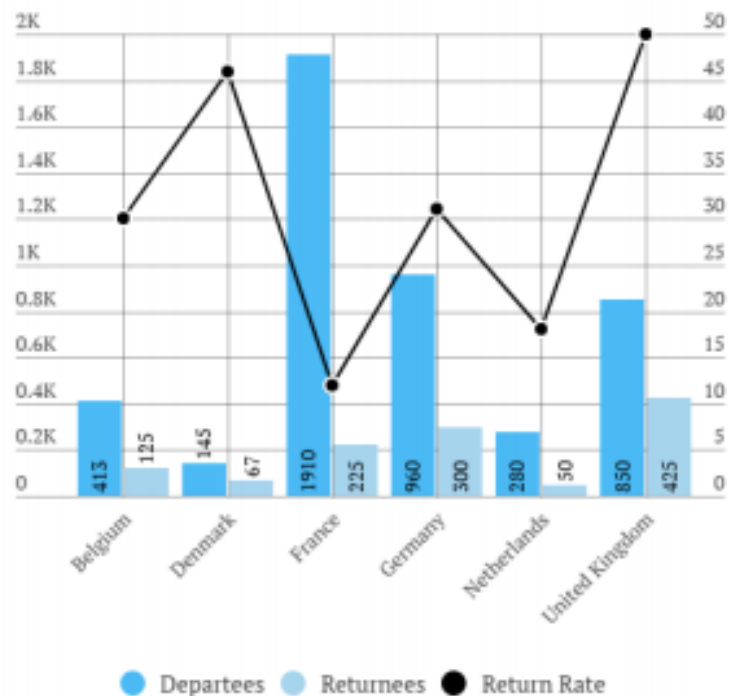
Terrorist groups have been focusing their energies on attacks yielding the greatest impact, while decreasing potential detection and employing the least amount of manpower and materials. In recent years, a trend emerged in the form of vehicular attacks and incidents using small arms and edged weapons in dense public areas. The possibility of these types of attacks remains heightened throughout the holiday season, when many European cities host public celebrations that attract large crowds. Incidents like those in [Berlin in 2016](#), [Istanbul in 2017](#), and [Strasbourg](#) this week illustrate the trend of attacks against soft targets during the Christmas/New Year's period.

Terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qa'ida have experienced considerable territorial losses in recent years; however, the threat to soft targets in the West has not lessened. In fact, transnational terrorist organizations have discouraged foreign fighters from entering conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria, instead encouraging them to undertake operations in their home countries or areas to which they have easy access. ISIS routinely issues propaganda encouraging supporters to "kill the citizens of Crusader nations wherever you find them." ISIS referenced the Berlin attack in a [graphic](#) released at the beginning of this holiday season. Another recent [graphic](#) specifically depicted a threat to the Pope, possibly interpreted as a threat to the Roman Catholic Church or to Christianity. A third [graphic](#), showing the skyline of New York City, names New Year's Day 2019 as the planned day of attack.

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The risk of homegrown radicalization remains much higher in Western European countries, which have seen far more residents travel to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq than countries in Eastern Europe. In absolute terms, France has witnessed the highest number of foreign fighters, with nearly 2,000 extremists leaving for conflict zones, and over 200 returning. A European Parliament report noted approximately 30% of Europe's foreign fighters returned home from the war zones, but that the numbers were as high as [46%](#) and [50%](#) in Denmark and the UK, respectively.

While no country can guarantee absolute safety due to the unpredictable and destructive nature of terrorism, the security response following attacks in Western Europe has been robust. This is evidenced by France's immediate increase in its security threat level following the [attack in Strasbourg](#). Hundreds of security forces were immediately mobilized and two days later, the [suspect was shot and killed by French police](#). This collaboration is crucial for countries within Europe's Schengen region, where the breadth of road and rail connections and lack of internal borders means easy regional access for extremists in the area.



A Change in Government Messaging

Security managers face steep challenges with limited resources to secure their facilities and personnel under a seemingly persistent threat that is not confined by borders. To assist and advise in implementing appropriate security measures, security managers should refer to U.S. government messaging.

Until this year, the U.S. Department of State issued annual, region-wide Travel Alerts warning the U.S. public of the increased threat during the winter holiday season.

In 2018, [Department messaging](#) assesses security on a more localized basis, rather than region-wide.

- The Department includes messaging, when necessary, in its [Travel Advisories](#) for specific countries, based on the level of security measures travelers should employ while visiting. Much of Central and Eastern Europe, for example, is assessed at Level 1, the lowest of the four-tiered system, indicating that travelers should exercise normal security precautions. Much of Western Europe, by comparison, is assessed at Level 2, indicating that travelers should exercise increased precautions, generally because of an ongoing terrorism threat. These levels can change as the situation warrants.
- Security managers should note that messaging published by each U.S. Embassy is not uniform. While each Security Alert generally follows the same structure, there is variety in verbiage that indicates differences in the threat and security environment. For example, a country that has experienced an attack in the past may specifically mention a location like a Christmas market while

others may simply indicate the increased presence of local law enforcement. Security managers should continue to follow messaging in these [Security Alerts](#) for indications of a more specific and/or credible threat.

For Further Information

While the law enforcement presence across Europe will likely be increased as a result of both the Strasbourg attack specifically and the general security environment more broadly, the threat persists of attacks against soft targets that could result in collateral damage or injury to private-sector interests. Security managers and analysts are encouraged to use OSAC's [Risk Matrix](#) as a holistic approach to analyzing the different dimensions of a given risk in a way that is the most relevant to their organization and its interests. OSAC's [Europe Team](#) is available to discuss specific security questions or any other issue affecting private-sector security in the region.

Resources

OSAC's [Europe Page](#)

Holiday Security Reminders (Security Alerts) from U.S. Embassies across Europe:

Albania	Georgia	Norway
Armenia	Germany	Poland
Austria	Greece	Portugal
Belarus	Hungary	Russia
Belgium	Iceland	Serbia
Bosnia	Ireland	Slovenia
Bulgaria	Italy	Slovakia
Czech Republic	Kosovo	Spain
Denmark	Lithuania	Sweden
Estonia	Macedonia	Switzerland
Finland	Malta	Ukraine
France	Moldova	United Kingdom
	Montenegro	
	Netherlands	