

Sections of Paris on lockdown after pre-election shooting

By Johannes Stern and Alex Lantier
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Only three days before the first round of the French presidential election on Sunday, Paris was hit by a shooting targeting police on Champs-Élysées avenue. One policeman was killed, and two were wounded, together with one passer-by, during the attack. The area, at the heart of the tourist districts of downtown Paris, was blocked off last night.

French media have already demanded that candidates and commentators place the issue of terrorism at the center of the election debate. With France already under a perpetually-extended state of emergency suspending basic democratic rights after the 2015 terror attacks, this latest attack will doubtless strengthen political forces calling for an escalation of law-and-order measures. The day before the attack, French authorities were planning to put 50,000 troops in the streets on Election Day, effectively holding the election at gunpoint.

After the attack, authorities sealed off the famous boulevard and the surrounding streets with heavily armed military and police forces calling on the public to avoid the area. A police helicopter flew low over central Paris.

While only initial accounts of the attack are available, they already raise questions as to how it was allowed to happen.

Early this morning, Paris prosecutor François Molins and Interior Ministry spokesman Pierre-Henry Brandet spoke to reporters on the Champs-Élysées.

“Inquiries by technical and scientific police are continuing,” said Brandet, who added, “Tonight at 8:50p.m., an individual armed with an assault rifle fired at on-duty policemen in front of the Marks & Spencer firm, killing one policeman, and wounded another seriously, as well as a tourist who was passing by. The terrorist was killed by return fire.”

“The identity of the attacker is known and has been verified,” Brandet said. “I will not give it to you because police raids are ongoing, to see if he had accomplices.”

Officers at the scene said they were searching for a potential second assailant, and Brandet said it could not be ruled out that there were others involved.

According to French officials and media reports, a car approached a parked police van packed with officers at around 9pm on Thursday evening. A man emerged from the car and opened fire on the van with an “automatic weapon,” killing one officer instantly, Brandet said. The man “then ran away, managing to shoot and wound two other policemen. Other policemen engaged and shot and killed the attacker,” he explained.

Choukri Chouanine, the owner of a restaurant on the nearby rue de Ponthieu told AFP that he had heard a short round of “a lot of gunfire. ... We had to hide our diners in the basement,” he said. One woman said there had been “panic” at the Franklin D Roosevelt métro station nearby. “People were running in all directions.”

A witness identified as Ines told French television station BFM-TV that she heard shooting, saw a man’s body on the ground and that the area was quickly evacuated by police.

Late Thursday night, the Islamic State (IS) militia claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement by its propaganda outlet, Amaq. According to AFP, the statement said the attacker was one of the group’s “fighters” known as Abu Yousef al-Belgiki, “the Belgian.”

Reuters also reported that an arrest warrant had been issued in the Paris shooting for a suspect who arrived from Belgium by train.

Press accounts later identified the suspect as Karim C., a 39-year-old man living in the Paris suburb with a long police record. If media reports about this man’s history are correct, it is remarkable that he was allowed to prepare a deadly attack on policemen in France. He had been sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2003 for a 2001 shooting attack near Paris that nearly killed two

policemen. He was released on appeal, but recently landed in custody again in Meaux, after making statements declaring that he was looking for weapons to kill police officers.

He was “well known to the police services,” declared Audrey Goutard, police-justice correspondent for France2 television. “He already had been condemned for attempted homicide.” AFP reports that he was also under investigation by anti-terrorist police.

Astonishingly, Karim C was not considered by the police to be dangerous, however, and he was released shortly before he went on to carry out the terror shooting.

Outgoing French President François Hollande held a press conference around 11:30 p.m. to discuss the shooting. He called the attack “terrorist in nature” and promised “utmost vigilance” by security services to secure the election. “A national commemoration will be held for the police officer who was murdered in a cowardly fashion. ... The nation's support for the police forces is total,” Hollande declared.

Hollande has also convened a meeting of his defense council at 8 a.m. today.

If the claims of Hollande and of ISIS about the attack are correct, it appears that this episode is yet another consequence of NATO's bloody wars in Libya and Syria. Bombings in Europe by various networks of terror operatives used by the NATO powers in their proxy wars for regime changes in those countries have already claimed hundreds of lives. The Mohamed Merah shootings of 2012 around Toulouse, the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, the 13 November 2015 bombing attack in Paris, and the 22 March 2016 bombings in Brussels were all carried out by such forces.

Given the close links between NATO authorities and the Islamist terror networks, on the one hand, and the intense political crisis in France on the other, it is entirely legitimate to ask whether factions of the state machine were in some way involved in this attack.

Faced with growing anti-war and anti-establishment sentiment in the population, an unpredictable presidential election, and the historic collapse of the ruling Socialist Party (PS), the French ruling class is desperate. After the illegal and unprovoked April 7 US strike on Syria, the French ruling elite was terrified by the rise of anti-war sentiment, after which candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon rose significantly in the polls. It responded with demands for stepped-up law-and-order measures.

Interior Minister Matthias Fekl's proposal to put 50,000 troops on the streets of France during the elections was

followed by a wave of media demands that the electoral debate focus on counter-terrorism and law and order.

Nothing said or done by the government or, for that matter, the various intelligence and security agencies can be taken at face value. Powerful sections of the ruling elite clearly believe they have every interest in shifting the political atmosphere in the final days of the election far to the right.

Their main advantage is that none of the presidential candidates oppose the pro-war, pro-police state agenda of the ruling class. On the contrary, all the major candidates, who were participating in a television debate when the attack occurred, hailed the police. This includes Mélenchon, whose pro-police reaction once again underscored that he is not a “left” alternative to the other candidates.

Neo-fascistic candidate Marine Le Pen wrote on Twitter: “My emotions and solidarity for the police, once again targeted.” The right-wing conservative Francois Fillon tweeted, “Paying homage to police who give their lives to protect ours, #ChampsElysees.”

Emmanuel Macron of the PS-backed “On the March” movement struck a similar tone: “Tonight, I want to indicate my full solidarity to our security forces.”

Mélenchon for his part wrote on Twitter, “We send to the family of the deceased policemen and to the family of the wounded policemen thoughts laden with emotion... Criminals will never go unpunished and their accomplices will never be forgotten.”

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