

French Police in Intense Shootout as Suspected Terrorists Surface

French forces sealed off a small northern town where police sources said gunmen had seized at least one hostage, and shooting broke out in Paris as the biggest security dragnet of modern times closed on chief suspects in an attack on a Paris journal.

The attack has raised questions in France about policing, surveillance of radicals, far-right politics, religion and censorship—all in a country still struggling to integrate its 5-million-head Muslim population, the E.U.'s largest.

On Friday, police vans, armored cars and ambulances ringed the town of Dammartin-en-Goele, set in marsh and woodland, and helicopters hovered overhead. Residents were told to stay at home and schools near a printing works where two gunmen were holed up were evacuated.

A second hostage-taking was reported at a Paris kosher supermarket. AFP news agency was cited by French media as saying at least two had been killed in a shoot-out there, but police said they could not confirm any deaths.

The Interior Ministry said security forces surrounding a small print works in Dammartin-en-Goele were trying to make contact with the gunmen, who had earlier in the day evaded police in a high-speed car chase on a highway to Paris.

"This can take a long time, hours and sometimes days," Interior Minister spokesman Pierre-Henry Brandet said in a tweet.

Yves Albarello, local MP for the Seine-et-Marne department and member of the crisis cell put in place by authorities, told iTELE the two suspects had let it be known that they wanted to

die “as martyrs”.

The gunmen had been on the run since they stormed the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical journal known for its ridicule of Islam and other religions as well as political figures. Western leaders condemned the attack as an assault on democracy. Al Qaeda’s North Africa branch praised the gunmen as “knight(s) of truth”.

A senior Yemeni intelligence source told *Reuters* one of the two suspects was in Yemen for several months in 2011 for religious studies; but there was no confirmed information whether he was trained by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

News of a further shootout, in Paris, a third in two days, demonstrated the scale of the threat facing French authorities and the force of nearly 90,000 mobilized nationwide for the search action.

A police source said several people were taken hostage at a kosher supermarket in eastern Paris after a shootout involving a man armed with two guns.

The source said he bore a resemblance to the gunman suspected of killing a policewoman in a separate shooting in southern Paris on Thursday and believed to be a member of the same jihadi group, Butte Chaumont, as the two Hebdo suspects.

Police released pictures of a 32-year-old man, Amedy Coulibaly, and a 26-year-old woman, Hayat Boumeddiene, wanted in connection with the southern Paris incident.

The prospect of multiple attacks is one that has troubled Western security services since Islamist militants hit a number of targets in Mumbai in 2008, killing 166 people.

Yohann Bardoux, a plumber whose office is two doors down from the printing shop where the hostage-taking was playing out stayed away from work after hearing gunfire. But he said his mother was in the building next door to the printing shop.

"Of course I'm worried about her, I hope it all comes down soon, and turns out well," Bardoux said.

"They are everywhere. It's really jumping. They've blocked the whole zone, we've got helicopters overhead, the police presence is impressive."

A spokesman for Charles-de-Gaulle airport said all its runways were open but that landings were only taking place at the two south terminals.

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The gunmen shouted "Allahu Akbar" (God is greatest) as they carried out the attack, which has been described by President Francois Hollande and other world leaders as an attack on the fundamentals of democracy.

The attack has raised fears in other capitals of similar actions. Western leaders have long feared Islamist militants drawn into fighting in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere could launch attacks in their home countries on their return.

London suffered an assault on its transport system in 2005, four years after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. More recent attacks have been carried out by militants in countries including India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Kenya.

The fugitive suspects are both in their early 30s, and were already under police surveillance. One, Cherif Kouachi, was jailed for 18 months for trying to travel to Iraq a decade ago to fight as part of an Islamist cell.

U.S. and European sources close to the investigation said the second, Said Kouachi, was in Yemen in 2011 for several months training with AQAP, one of al Qaeda's most active wings.

U.S. government sources said both were listed in two U.S. security databases, a highly classified database containing information on 1.2 million possible counter-terrorism suspects, called TIDE, and the much smaller "no fly" list maintained by the Terrorist Screening Center, an inter-agency unit.

Amid local media reports of isolated incidents of violence directed at Muslims in France, Hollande and his Socialist government have called on the French not to blame the Islamic faith for the *Charlie Hebdo* killings.

Hollande has held talks with opposition leaders and, in a rare move, invited Marine Le Pen, leader of the resurgent anti-immigrant National Front, to his Elysee Palace for discussions on Friday.

Many European newspapers either re-published *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons or lampooned the killers with images of their own.

The younger Kouachi brother's jail sentence for trying to fight in Iraq a decade ago, and more recent tangles with the authorities over suspected involvement in militant plots, raised questions over whether police could have done more to watch them.

Cherif Kouachi was arrested on Jan. 25, 2005, preparing to fly to Syria en route to Iraq. He served 18 months of a three-year sentence.

"He was part of a group of young people who were a little lost, confused, not really fanatics in the proper sense of the word," lawyer Vincent Ollivier, who represented Cherif in the case, told *Liberation* daily.

In 2010 he was suspected of being part of a group that tried to break from prison Smain Ali Belkacem, a militant jailed for the 1995 bombings of Paris train and metro stations that killed eight people and wounded 120. The case against Cherif Kouachi was dismissed for lack of evidence.

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