



European Christmas Markets Risk Assessment

December 2024



Introduction

Christmas markets in Western Europe have opened for the upcoming holiday season and run through the end of December. These markets draw millions of visitors worldwide annually and the security environment across Western Europe is ripe for a homegrown violent extremist (HVE) to carry out a mass causality attack. In the past two decades, there have been two successful fundamentalist Islamist attacks that targeted Christmas markets, one unsuccessful attack, and a myriad of attacks that security forces have foiled. Christmas markets present an ideal target due to the high concentration of people assembled in open areas. A prime ideological motive of Islamist fundamentalist perpetrators is the symbolic act of violently disrupting a Christian and culturally Western tradition for many during the holiday season.

Trends Impacting Security in Western Europe

Broadly, Western Europe has recorded a prominence of three different security trends over the past year, which have influenced the terrorism threat assessment of individual countries. Interconnected factors such as high levels of irregular immigration coupled with inflamed anti-immigrant discourse, dramatic rises in antisemitic and Islamophobic hate crimes, and the intense rhetoric over the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War (including several violent incidents). This has been heightened by the perceived support by Western governments towards Israel. Producing a more volatile social fabric – an essential condition for radicalization that encourages extremist violence. Vulnerable individuals tend to drift toward more extremist viewpoints if they feel alienated by their surroundings or motivated by geopolitical developments – commonly becoming fully radicalized online. This dynamic increases the risk of an HVE deciding to undertake violent action. Additionally, countries in Western Europe – each to varying degrees – have relevant precedents for fundamentalist Islamist terror attacks being carried out within their borders – regardless of the time of year.

Key Take Aways

- The danger of Islamist terrorism in Western Europe remains persistently high in 2024.
- Risk mitigation capacity within the EU to anticipate attacks is high, but gaps in information sharing and collaboration between member states persist.
- Security at Christmas markets was substantially increased after the attacks in Germany (2016) and France (2018) – these measures have been maintained, but gaps remain.
- Christmas markets are attractive targets for Islamist terrorism because of the high concentration of people in an open area and the symbolic weight attached to conducting an attack on a Christian/Western event.



- Tensions over the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War are unlikely to abate, and the recent ceasefire with Hezbollah will not significantly alleviate global agitation over the conflict.
- Islamist extremists who attempt to carry out an attack are more likely to be HVE's, radicalized online, and acting alone without formal ties to terrorist networks.
- Security measures at Christmas markets have increased all over Europe and there is heightened security in the majority of markets in 2024. This includes allocating additional police and military forces, physical barriers, entry controls that include bag checks, and CCTV surveillance.

Individual Country Risk Analysis

Germany: The US State Department has raised Germany's travel advisory level to "2: exercise increased caution" on a four-tier scale due to the persistent elevated threat of terrorism.¹ Germany has historically, and continues to be, ranked first amongst the EU member states in the total number of immigrants accepted. This has created a domestic environment in which the discourse surrounding immigration has become acute. Debate over integration efforts has polarized the population and resulted in a rise in ethnonationalism. Islamophobic comments toward Muslim immigrants have become normalized in the public discourse.

Since October 2023, antisemitic hate crimes have reportedly risen by 80 percent, according to the Federal Association of Departments for Research and Information on Antisemitism (RIAS), while Islamophobic incidents have increased by over 100 percent. Most incidents are characterized by abusive behavior. Several protests related to the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War in Germany have been rejected permits, banned, or met with an overwhelming police presence.

Approximately 124 Christmas markets operate in Germany annually from early November through December – the highest within the EU. Germany was the site of the first successful Christmas Market attack on 19 December 2016, when a Tunisian national hijacked a semi-truck loaded with 25 tons of construction steel and drove it into the Breitscheidplatz Christmas market in Berlin. This attack killed 13 people and injured 70 others. The assault was the first major and deadliest terrorist attack of the decade in Germany. The event effectively pushed the threat of Islamist terrorism to the forefront of the European collective consciousness. It also sparked several questions on the perpetrator's ability

¹ Level 1: exercise normal precautions, Level 2: exercise increased caution, Level 3: reconsider travel, Level 4: do not travel



to execute his plan so successfully, despite recent suspicious activity on his part and his violent past, without intervention from law enforcement. As a result, this casted doubt on the efficacy of the European immigration screening process and security collaboration. To combat this, the European Counter Terrorism Centre officially started operating on 1 January 2016, with a renewed focus on reducing the number of migrants heading for northern Europe.

German authorities immediately increased physical security, including concrete bollards and metal gates, and instituted a greater police presence at Christmas markets. Similar security measures were put into place for Christmas markets throughout Europe. Furthermore, Germany took steps to improve intra-governmental collaboration between state/local and national law enforcement to better mitigate threats. Their efforts have been highly successful in preventing a recurrence. Notably, in 2023, two teenage boys were arrested on suspicion of planning a militant Islamist attack on a Christmas market in Leverkusen, Germany. In the same year, a 20-year-old Iraqi was deported after German authorities suspected he was planning an attack on a Christmas market in Lower Saxony. In November 2024, a 17-year-old suspect, motivated by his fundamentalist Islamist views, was arrested on suspicion of planning a violent attack on a Christmas market using a semi-truck. According to authorities, 24 Islamist-motivated attacks have been thwarted in Germany in 2024.

France: The current security posture regarding the terrorist threat in France is currently at its highest level, “attack emergency,” on a four-tiered scale.² The Muslim community has increasingly been the target of Islamophobic and controversial conservative policies, such as the ban on hijabs in public schools, which are often cited as religious persecution. Many French Muslims equate the occupation conditions that Palestinians live under with Israel as similar to what their ancestors experienced under French colonial rule. This has led to significant anti-Israel sentiment that can become an avenue for the expression of antisemitism, which is reflected in the stabbing of a Jewish woman in Lyon in November 2023 and the attempted arson of a synagogue in Rouen in May 2024. Intense anti-Israel demonstrations and counter-demonstrations have regularly taken place on a large scale, heightening inter-communal tensions.

France has experienced a steady occurrence of Islamist terrorist attacks over the past decade, providing a strong precedent. A Christmas market attack took place on 11 December 2018 when a French Algerian fundamentalist opened fire in the streets surrounding the Strasbourg Christmas

² Vigilance, Attack Risk, Enhanced Security, and Attack Emergency.



market, killing two people and injuring a dozen more. The assailant was revealed to have been a known concern to authorities for his documented links to extremists and extensive criminal background. This laid bare, once again, the failures of counterterrorism efforts in Europe due to disorganization. Additionally, it proved that Christmas markets would remain ideal targets for Islamist extremists.

Sweden: Currently, Sweden has a terrorist threat warning level of 4, or “high,” on a five-tier scale.³ The political rhetoric about immigration has grown more extreme, creating a polarized society within Sweden. In 2023, protests that included burning the Quran publicly received an outcry from the Muslim domestic community. Counter-protests included low-level violent incidents and acts of vandalism targeting primarily public and private property. These highly publicized incidents enraged Islamist fundamentalists abroad, who considered the action a dire offense.

Ongoing protests related to the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War have heightened tensions in Sweden. Several violent incidents, including the targeting of the Israeli Embassy in Stockholm, have further exacerbated inter-communal tensions. In February 2024, an explosive device outside the Israeli Embassy was destroyed by the Swedish bomb squad. In May 2024, gunshots were fired outside the embassy, leading to increased security around all Jewish institutions. In October 2024, the embassy was targeted in another shooting – no one was injured in any of these incidents. The Swedish Security Service (SAPO) has recently confirmed that criminal networks in Sweden are acting as Iranian proxies to carry out attacks on Israeli or Jewish targets. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRA) released a report stating there had been a five-fold increase in antisemitic incidents since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War.

While Sweden has never experienced a successful terrorist attack on a Christmas market, the 2010 Stockholm bombing attempt serves as a significant reminder of the potential threat to public spaces. On 11 December 2010, an Iraqi-born Swedish national tried to detonate a car bomb loaded with gas canisters next to a Christmas market but ended up killing himself and injuring two others at a distance from his intended target. This was the first suicide attack linked to fundamentalist Islam in a Nordic country. Sweden does not have a strong precedent for Islamist terrorist attacks – besides this incident and another in 2017 where a truck rammed into a department store in Stockholm.

³ Level 1: no identified threat, Level 2: limited threat, Level 3: elevated threat, Level 4: high threat, Level 5: very high threat.



United Kingdom: Currently, the UK has a terrorist threat warning level of “substantial,”⁴ which is the third highest on a five-tiered scale. Immigration statistics issued in June 2024 show that irregular immigration levels have remained high over the past five years. This has stoked a controversial debate over integration efforts. The possibility of escalatory violence is compounded by the highly visible protest movement surrounding the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War, which has been described by Scotland Yard as the largest protest movement in the country's recent history. Limited low-intensity violent incidents related to demonstrations from both sides of the ideological spectrum have been recorded. Increasingly, extreme rhetoric has circulated rapidly online, mirrored by the tenor of real-life public discourse. Government statistics have recorded an all-time high of antisemitic hate crimes, while Islamophobic hate crimes have increased by 25 percent. The UK has been the victim of five Islamist fundamentalist attacks in the past five years. In a stabbing attack in Hartlepool (north-east England) on 15 October 2023, the perpetrator cited the violence as an act of protest against the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War. All these attacks employed an indiscriminate modus operandi via bombings or stabbings. The UK has never experienced a Christmas market terror attack but have increased security measure in light of the high rate of terrorist attacks the country has faced.

Belgium: The terrorist threat in Belgium stands at level 3, “serious,” the second highest on a four-tier scale.⁵ Irregular immigration remains a hotly contested issue in Brussels, and the resulting tenor of public discourse has become more extreme. Islamophobia and antisemitism have been rife, according to independent organizations monitoring hate trends – but no major violent incidents have been reported. Protests over the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War have been the norm but have not been notably unruly. Belgium is one of the most outspoken critics of Israel's conduct in Gaza and has repeatedly called for a ceasefire.

There has never been a Christmas market terror attack in Belgium, nor is there a strong precedent for Islamist terror attacks within the past five years. The only incident occurred on 16 October in 2023 when an assailant, on behalf of the Islamic State (IS), carried out a shooting in Brussels that was

⁴ Low, Moderate, Substantial, Severe, Critical.

⁵ Level 1 – low, Level 2 – medium, Level 3 – serious, Level 4 – very serious



reportedly unrelated to the Israel-Hamas War. Regardless, Christmas markets have had their safety measures reinforced by authorities.

Austria: The current terror threat level is at level 4, or “high,” on a five-step scale within Austria. Immigrants make up more than a quarter of the Austrian population, and the ensuing crisis over national identity and the distribution of public services has facilitated fierce debate. Anti-immigrant rhetoric continues to permeate public life. Tensions over the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War are prominent within society, but there have been no major sustained protests or violent incidents stemming from the demonstrations. An Austrian Jewish organization has reported a five-fold increase in antisemitic incidents against the Jewish community, although there have been no major violent episodes. Islamophobia has similarly been rising within Austria, heralded by the policies of the hardline conservative government.

Although a successful terrorist attack on the markets has never been carried out, there have been several high-profile plots. In December 2017, a fundamentalist Bosnian national was arrested for planning an attack against a Christmas market. A bombing plot involving three suspects was foiled in December 2019. Several Tajik suspects with alleged ties to IS were arrested in Vienna in December 2023 for planning an attack. Only one Islamist fundamentalist terrorist attack – a shooting in 2020, which IS claimed – has taken place in the past five years. Overall, this demonstrates the high capacity of the internal security services to mitigate potential threats. Austria has implemented additional safety measures at their Christmas markets, including greater police presence, access control measures to regulate visitor flow at certain markets, physical barriers, and a public awareness campaign.

Denmark: The Police Intelligence Service (PET) assesses the current terrorist threat at a heightened “significant” level, the third highest on a five-tier scale.⁶ Immigration levels in Denmark have remained relatively high over recent years. This has strained public services and resulted in resentments that have increased Islamophobia. Denmark experienced a bout of intense debate over Quran burnings that occurred in 2023, ultimately banning it as a form of protest.

⁶ Minimal, Limited, General, Significant, and Very Significant.



The Jewish community in Denmark is miniscule, yet they have reported a spike in antisemitic hate crimes since late 2023. Most incidents are characterized by abusive behavior or online hate messages. The substantial Muslim community has similarly reported a dramatic uptick in Islamophobic incidents. Protests surrounding the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War have remained relatively non-violent, aside from property damage. On 2 October 2024, two Swedish teens were arrested for lobbing hand grenades at the Israeli embassy in Copenhagen. There is a concerning pattern of Swedish criminal gangs influencing teens to carry out attacks, with investigations identifying these gangs as proxies for Iran.

A terrorist attack has never been successfully conducted against a Christmas market in Denmark. However, in December 2023, three people were arrested for planning a terrorist attack on a Christmas market in conjunction with other operatives arrested in Germany and the Netherlands. Israel's security service, Mossad, praised the police operation as having allegedly exposed " Hamas infrastructure on European soil."

Netherlands: The terrorist threat warning level for the Netherlands has been declared "substantial", the fourth highest on a five-tier scale.⁷ Irregular migration levels in the Netherlands are considered high. There are large refugee communities originating from Turkiye and Syria. Consequently, growing resentment regarding immigration levels has intensified, and efforts toward integration have been complicated by anti-immigrant rhetoric.

A marked increase in Islamophobic and antisemitic hate crimes has been recorded since the start of the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War in the Netherlands. Protests regarding the conflict have been mostly peaceful, although there were violent clashes with police at an anti-Israel protest in Amsterdam in May 2024. Recent escalatory violence took place on 7 November in Amsterdam related to a football match that featured an Israeli team.

The Netherlands has never experienced a Christmas market terror attack. However, there have been two known foiled plots. In 2019, two suspects, an Iranian and a Dutch Iranian, were arrested for allegedly preparing to target Christmas markets using a suicide bomb vest and a car bomb. In 2023, a Dutch national was arrested in connection with three men detained in Germany for planning terror attacks on Christmas markets.

⁷ Level 1: Minimal, Level 2: Limited, Level 3: Significant, Level 4: Substantial, Level 5: Critical.



Conclusion: In 2023, EU officials warned that the increased polarization in society, caused by the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War, was increasing the risk of violence – a risk factor that remains elevated in 2024 due to the ongoing conflict in Gaza. The recent ceasefire reached between Israel and Hezbollah remains extremely fragile and is unlikely to dramatically alter tensions in the short term. Last year, the EU made an additional EUR 30 million available in early December for extra security throughout the bloc. It remains to be seen if additional funds will be allocated for security during the holiday season this year, as risk mitigation continues to present challenges.

Overall, the data shows a steady decrease in carried out or foiled DVE terrorist plots in Europe since 2020. The last attack in the EU to be claimed by a terrorist organization was a shooting in Austria in November 2020, which was claimed by IS. While IS and al-Qaeda have called for attacks in the West and violence against Jews in response to the Israel-Hamas/Hezbollah War, the overall threat from IS and al-Qaeda has receded. The two infamous terrorist attacks on Christmas markets in Berlin (2016) and France (2018) were attributed to individuals with direct ties to organized Islamist extremist groups. Therefore, the current threat is posed by HVEs who are radicalized online by terrorist group propaganda, act independently, and with no formal ties to terrorist networks. HVEs may attempt to employ a modus operandi that includes shootings, stabbings, vehicular rammings, grenades, or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) targeting areas with high foot traffic. The fragmented and dispersed threat of Islamist fundamentalist terrorism makes it more difficult for authorities to anticipate, but proper security precautions can mitigate the risks.

Advice:

- Exercise heightened vigilance in proximity to Christmas markets, particularly in areas with heavy foot traffic.
- Anticipate heightened security measures, including bag checks, metal detectors, and randomized searches and questioning by security forces.
- In the event of an attack, follow all official directives given by security forces and emergency personnel.