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Paris and Boston attacks pose striking parallels

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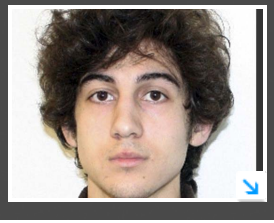
Kevin Johnson, USA TODAY *4:16 p.m. EST January 9, 2015*



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WASHINGTON — As French authorities pursued terror suspects into the Paris suburbs, ending Friday in deadly confrontations, there was no escaping the striking similarities between the assault on the Paris

(Photo: FBI file, AP)

offices of a popular satirical newspaper and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings.

As in Boston, French police were seeking two apparent radicalized brothers who allegedly planned and executed a methodical attack against a specific target that brought another major city to a standstill.

"Against the backdrop of jury selection for (surviving bombing suspect) Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, it's like Boston is reliving what happened all over again," said Rep. William Keating, D-Mass, referring to the start of Tsarnaev's murder trial.

The House Homeland Security Committee member said the two attacks both appeared to unravel from closely held missions into chaotic chases when the suspects' identities

This photo provided by The Paris Police Prefecture Thursday, Jan. 8, 2015, shows the suspect Said Kouachi in the newspaper attack along with a plea for witnesses. *(Photo: AP)*

were made public.

"I'm watching what's happening in Paris, and I'm thinking of Watertown," Keating said, referring to the Boston-area pursuit that — like Paris — featured a carjacking before ending in the death of Tamerlan Tsarnaev and the capture of his younger brother, who now faces a possible death penalty if convicted.

Ed Davis, who helped lead the marathon bombing investigation as then-Boston police commissioner, said the parallels between the two cases are "shocking."

"The whole family-relationship aspect is something that analysts will be looking hard at and how that plays into radicalization," Davis said. "There is a whole science developed around precursors to violence."

As investigators have amassed larger dossiers on the Paris suspects, the paths of the two attacks have begun to separate. While the Tsarnaev brothers were believed to have been largely self-radicalized, French authorities have told their U.S. counterparts that Said Kouachi, 34, had traveled in 2011 to Yemen, the home base of al-Qaeda's most active terror cell, where it is suspected that he received some training.

Cherif Kouachi, 32, meanwhile, was arrested on terror-related charges in 2008 days before he planned to leave for Iraq via Syria. The younger Kouachi had helped recruit operatives to assist al-Qaeda's fight in Iraq.

Both men were killed Friday following a hostage standoff with French authorities. A third suspect, an associate of the Kouachis, also was killed in a separate confrontation with French authorities.

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A hooded police officer stands on a roof in Dammartin-en-Goele, northeast of Paris, where the two brothers suspected in a deadly terror attack were cornered on Friday. *(Photo: Christophe Ena, AP)*

Terror analyst Evan Kohlmann said it was "too early" to draw close connections between the two cases.

"Obviously it's tempting to look at the ... suspects in France through the lens of the Tsarnaev brothers," Kohlmann said. "But beyond the shared family bond, there is no way to know yet whether the latest attack in Paris was the work of lone wolves inspired by ISIS or AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), operatives consciously directed by those groups, or even something else."

Yet one aspect of both attacks remains most troubling to authorities: Each involved apparent closely held plots involving few people who were able to largely shield their activities from law enforcement.

A string of such attacks in the U.S., including the 2009 mass shooting at Fort Hood, Texas, which left 13 dead and more than 30 wounded, has helped transform likely terror threat scenarios that once focused largely on preventing large-scale 9/11-type operations.

Philip Mudd, a former CIA and FBI counterterrorism official, said the small-scale nature of recent attacks has been critical to their deadly success.

"A disproportionate amount of the activity has been low-tech and small-scale to the max," Mudd said. "Because as soon as you broaden the conspiracy, you raise vulnerability."

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Police officers guard the entrance to Franklin street where there was an active crime scene search for the suspect in the Boston Marathon bombings, Friday, April 19, 2013, in Watertown, Mass. *(Photo: Matt Rourke, AP)*

Closely held operations, he said, pose little risk that communications can be intercepted or that the movement of money to finance the operations can be traced.

"The more people who are involved means more risk to them (operatives)," Mudd said. "Law enforcement and intelligence officials need to establish a toe-hold. I need them to make a mistake. I need them to hit a trip-wire someplace."

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