

SAFEABROAD



SITUATION REPORT

July 4, 2023

Anti-Police Brutality Riots

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAVELERS IN FRANCE

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Overview

Anticipate ongoing travel and security disruptions throughout France due to widespread, violent protests following the death of a 17-year-old Parisian in police custody. Demonstrations will likely continue through July 14 during the celebration of Bastille Day.

On June 27, Nanterre police shot and killed 17-year-old Nahel Merzouk during a police traffic stop. Protests denouncing the shooting developed into a nationwide movement against police brutality, culminating in five nights of rioting between June 27–July 1. The associated violence saw major acts of arson and vandalism in almost all French urban centers, including Paris, Marseilles, Lyon, Bordeaux, and Roubaix, leading to the arrests of thousands of participants.

While violent clashes are expected to slow, protests and demonstrations will likely continue until the celebration of Bastille Day on July 14. French authorities are expected to continuously suppress all public gatherings in order to ensure the safety of travelers attending the highly anticipated parade in Champs-Élysées, Paris.

Key Takeaways

1. **On June 27, Merzouk was killed by French police in the Nanterre suburb of Paris, sparking protests and riots across the country.** Reforms to the nation's police in 2017 have made confrontations between police and aggravators more likely to end in fatalities, and Merzouk's death immediately led to outrage in Nanterre's large Muslim community.
2. **By July 1, riots and protests resulted in over 2,000 arrests, emergency curfews, and the deployment of around 45,000 emergency police officers in cities across France.** Localized unrest sparked sympathetic and copycat movements across the country, with thousands filling the streets and demanding the arrest of the police officers involved in the shooting. Between June 27 and July 1, over 200 French towns and cities reported riots, demonstrations, or acts of arson.
3. **As of July 3, the most intense outbreaks of violence have been dispersed following calls for peace from respected community leaders, along with the rigorous enforcement of curfews and anti-riot legislation.** Violence in French cities peaked between June 27–July 1 and began to slowly decline following the burial of Merzouk. While demonstrations are ongoing, the French government has announced that the peak of the violence has most likely passed and that ongoing emergency orders keeping French citizens indoors and restricting public gatherings will remain in place for the time being.
4. **The protests have caused widespread disruption and damage to France's cities, targeting public transportation, government buildings, and city centers.** As clean-up efforts progress, early assessments of the damage indicate that the riots have involved arson attacks and vandalism to hundreds of buildings. Travelers should anticipate a short-term effort to restore order through the deployment of police officers to national monuments and government buildings, and a medium-to-long-term effort to rebuild and restore the damage done to public amenities.

Shooting and Response

The death of Merzouk during a traffic stop by police sparked a nationwide movement against police brutality, resulting in the arrests of thousands and violent clashes with police in almost all French urban centers.

On the evening of June 27, Merzouk, a 17-year-old French citizen of Algerian descent, was shot and killed by police during a routine traffic stop after allegedly attempting to flee the scene.¹ While the circumstances surrounding the incident remain unclear, French authorities claim that Merzouk's attempt to flee in his vehicle posed a threat to others, justifying the use of deadly force under the 2017 police reform law, which permits such measures to apprehend fleeing suspects.² While the French police union and the national government have supported the use of force and refused calls to arrest the officers involved, a national movement denouncing police brutality and advocating for policing reforms has broken out across the country.

Following Merzouk's death, small-scale protests erupted in Nanterre on the night of June 27, primarily attended by members of the suburb's significant Muslim community; however, these demonstrations swiftly escalated into direct clashes with the police.³ On June 28, authorities began deploying police forces to Nanterre, and by the night of June 30, protests had spread to other major cities in France, including Marseilles and Lyon, leading to more than 600 arrests in just 24 hours.⁴ Since the start of the riots, the total number of arrests has surpassed 2,000, with minors constituting more than one-third of those detained.⁵ Parisian suburbs such as Clichy-sous-Bois and Aubervilliers have been particularly hard-hit in addition to the epicenter, Nanterre.⁶ To restore order, the French Interior Minister has deployed more than 45,000 police officers across the country.⁷

Demonstrations continued into July 1 following the public funeral of Merzouk at Nanterre's Ibn Badis Mosque, and his burial at the nearby Mont-Valerien Cemetery.^{8,9} Between July 1–3, demonstrations and violent clashes were reported in over 200 French towns and cities, with public schools, libraries, museums, government buildings, and courts targeted by protestors.¹⁰

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/30/europe/nanterre-france-police-protests-explainer-intl/index.html>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/30/world/europe/france-police-traffic-stop-shooting-law.html>

³

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/28/outrage-in-france-after-police-shoot-17-year-old-in-paris-suburb>

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<https://www.npr.org/2023/06/30/1185268439/more-than-600-arrests-after-a-new-night-of-protests-across-france-over-teens-kil>

⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/france-riots-nahel-merzouk-paris-b2367848.html>

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/frances-macron-hold-new-crisis-meeting-after-third-night-riots-2023-06-30/>

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<https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/europe/in-pictures-france-struggles-to-contain-riots-with-4500-0-police-deployed-on-streets-imageid-1.html>

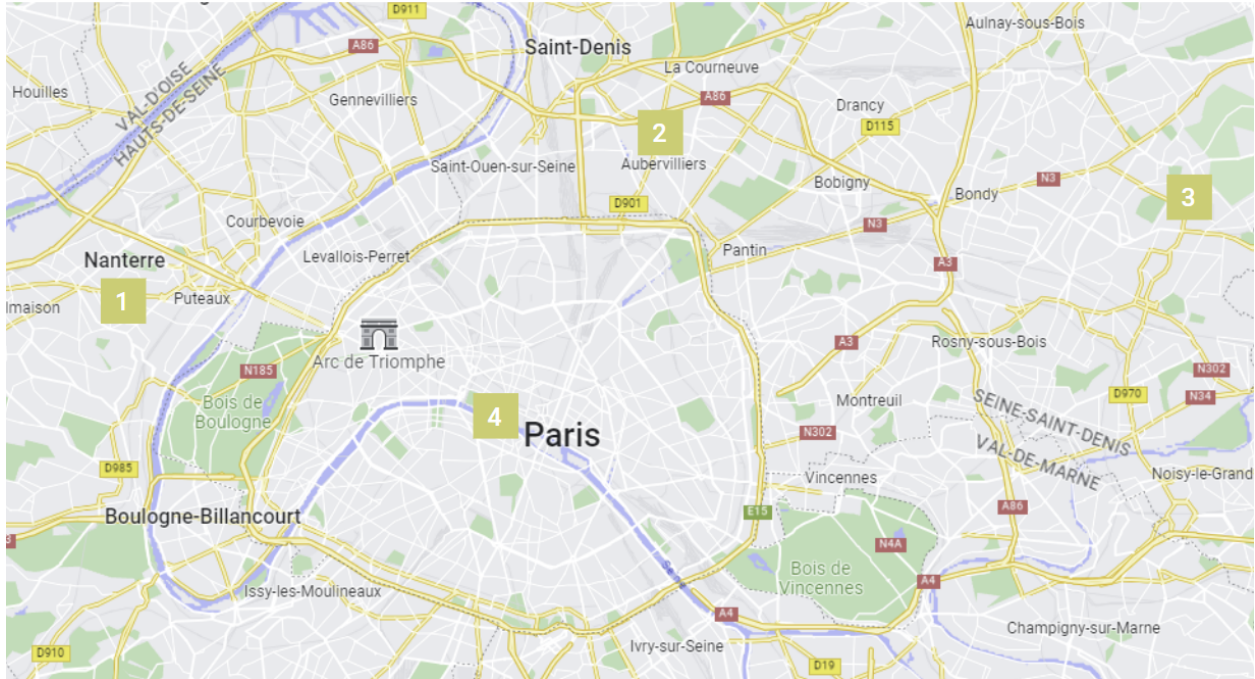
⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/01/world/europe/nahel-funeral-france-protests.html>

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https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2023/07/01/nahel-m-s-family-holds-funeral-as-crowds-watch_6040792_7.html

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-europe-66073728>

Beyond the major cities of Paris, Marseilles, and Lyon, smaller-scale demonstrations occurred in Bordeaux and Roubaix. Even ordinarily peaceful tourist destinations like Clamart, Pau, and Neuilly-sur-Marne experienced rare episodes of violence, prompting the implementation of overnight curfews through Monday, July 2.¹¹



- 1** Nanterre / Mont Valerien Cemetery
- 2** Aubervilliers
- 3** Clichy-sous-Bois
- 4** Champs-Élysées / Ile de la Cité



¹¹ <https://www.marca.com/en/lifestyle/world-news/2023/07/01/649f55a146163f69668b45cf.html>





Implications for International Education

SafeAbroad travelers should anticipate ongoing travel and security disruptions in the lead-up to Bastille Day on July 14. The combination of ongoing protests and political tensions, and a history of civil unrest on Bastille Day, will likely lead to violent protests and police crack-downs nationwide.

The months of unrest that have followed President Macron's divisive pension reform package, coupled with the ongoing violence triggered by the death of Merzouk, have resulted in a significant increase in political and civil tensions in France. In recent months, thousands of protesters have been arrested by French police, and millions of dollars worth of damage has been inflicted due to acts of arson and vandalism.^{12, 13, 14}

Bastille Day, July 14, celebrates the Storming of Bastille, a major battle that occurred during the French Revolution in 1789. While Bastille Day is generally marked by a large military parade at the Champs-Élysées in Paris, it has also been a historical focal point for civil unrest in France, with intense protests taking place as recently as 2019 and 2021.¹⁵ Thousands of French citizens, and other tourists, are expected to travel to Paris for the parade and other festivities, amplifying preexisting travel and security concerns. Given the political tension of recent months, French authorities will likely further increase security measures to prevent unrest or interruptions during the events.

Travelers should avoid unnecessary travel to urban areas of France, such as Paris, Marseilles, Lyon, Bordeaux, and Roubaix, in the coming days due to the elevated risk of violent protests. Anticipate severe travel disruptions, and plan alternate routes prior to departure. Monitor local news and security directives, and contact emergency services, your program manager, or the closest embassy or consulate in case of an emergency.

¹²

<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230703-%F0%9F%94%B4-live-france-s-mayors-call-for-public-to-mobilise-against-riots>

¹³ <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/07/02/france-riots-paris-damage-protests-jg-orig.cnn>

¹⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/01/world/france-protests-arrests-hundreds-intl-hnk/index.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/14/france-riot-police-use-teargas-to-disperse-bastille-day-protesters>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/15/france-protests-clashes-with-police-on-bastille-day-amid-anger-at-tighter-covid-rules>

