

Weekly Report – Lafarge Trial, Paris Criminal Court

Hearings of 18–21 November, 2025

Continuation of the trial

On 18 November, the Paris Criminal Court resumed hearings in the trial of Lafarge SA, and several former executives, managers and intermediaries, following a minor adjustment to the indictment timeframe concerning Bruno Pescheux, former director of Lafarge Cement Syria (LCS). The presiding judge read the updated referral order to all defendants, including Amro Taleb (Syrian intermediary for raw material procurement) and Ahmad Al Jaloudi (LCS security manager) who were both absent at the trial’s opening, and remarked with irony: “*Good, you’ve found your way to the courthouse.*”

Despite the Court’s decision to merge procedural objections with the merits of the case, several defense teams introduced new challenges, essentially the same as those settled ten days earlier. The Court referred to these submissions as a set of “*Russian-doll irregularity claims*” (nested, repetitive procedural challenges), and emphasized that no further procedural delays would be accepted.

Syria’s conflict landscape and the rise of ISIS

After recalling the main procedural developments since the complaint was filed on 11 November 2016 by ECCHR, Sherpa and 11 former Syrian LCS employees, the Court presented an extensive overview of the Syrian context from 2011 onwards.

According to the factual elements recalled by the Court, thousands of foreign fighters fuelled by violent jihadist propaganda flocked to Syria and Iraq from 2012, largely joining ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front. Both groups were accused of war crimes against the Syrian population and were designated as terrorist organizations from 2013 onwards. This account directly contradicted parts of a report commissioned by the defense from academic Fabrice Balanche, who later testified that the period until 2015 had been marked by “*a phase of euphoria*” in which such groups allegedly “*provided security*” to local populations, even referring to a supposed “*nostalgia for ISIS.*” The Court also exhaustively listed major attacks claimed or orchestrated by ISIS, emphasizing that these were not only isolated attacks but also coordinated operations carried out by trained fighters — including the 29 May 2014 attack at Brussels’ Jewish Museum, the 13 November 2015 Paris attacks, and the 22 March 2016 suicide bombings at Brussels Airport and metro station.

Of crucial contextual relevance in a case of terrorism financing, the Court emphasized that the Islamic State, whose “*Caliphate*” was officially proclaimed on 29 June 2014 in Raqqa, south of the Lafarge factory plant, developed an unprecedented economic model based on local funding sources, including checkpoints, taxation and exploitation of natural resources. A

representative of FENVAC, a French federation of associations representing victims of terrorist attacks, stated that “*a terrorist organization like ISIS cannot sustain itself without significant funding*”, and that external funds directly support its expansion, territorial control and operational capabilities.

Start of the defendants’ examination

The Court began questioning each defendant, except for Syrian intermediary Firas Tlass, who remains absent and is still subject to an international arrest warrant. The hearings focused on internal hierarchies and decision-making processes at Lafarge, particularly regarding the closure of the Jalabiya cement plant. Several defendants justified remaining on-site despite escalating violence, invoking “*humanitarian and moral duties*” toward employees and local communities, and arguing that “*leaving at the first gunshot*” would have been irresponsible. Some also recalled that French officials had spoken of Bashar al-Assad in the past tense, suggesting that the war would be short-lived.

A witness called by the defendant, Christian Herrault — the former Deputy CEO in charge of Syrian operations — described him as someone who had gotten himself into a vicious cycle. Bruno Pescheux, former LCS Director, further described a climate of “*permanent tension*”, where “*nine times out of ten, a phone call meant bad news*”. However, his successor, Frédéric Jolibois, claimed he was unaware of the presence of internationally sanctioned terrorist groups in Syria when he took office in summer 2014, a statement the Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor’s Office (*Parquet National Anti-Terroriste, PNAT*) found unconvincing given the public reports on ISIS exactions available at the time. The PNAT also questioned how the company could justify keeping the factory running in this context, particularly since it was no longer insured due to the civil war. Former CEO Bruno Lafont responded that he “*had delegated Syrian operations to a small group of trusted people*” and claimed that he had not had the time to read the safety reports transmitted to him by his secretary. The PNAT questioned this assertion, pointing to an email he sent on 15 September 2013 showing that he had in fact read one of these reports, which specifically mentioned the situation in Syria.

Finally, Lafarge SA’s legal representative insisted that, despite “*robust internal controls*”, the current situation resulted from “*failures by a small group of individuals.*” Bruno Pescheux’s attorney strongly rejected this position, accusing the company of scapegoating former executives to protect top management and safeguard access to the U.S. market, in the context of the 2022 guilty plea with the Department of Justice.

Ongoing debate over civil party admissibility

Attorneys Matthieu Bagard and Élise Le Gall, representing several former employees of Lafarge, requested that the charges be reclassified as participation in a terrorist criminal

association (*association de malfaiteurs à caractère terroriste*). This requalification would allow former Syrian employees to seek compensation more easily.

Each of the defendants invoked his right to remain silent and refused to answer questions from the civil parties – NGOs and former Syrian employees respectively – whom they consider inadmissible. Defense attorneys argued that, although “*for the moment, the Court is giving the civil parties the floor*”, “*they should not be permitted to speak*.” According to them, the presence of civil parties “*distorted the debates*”, with one attorney describing the proceedings as “*trapped by emotional reactions that should have no place here*.”

“*Enough with the admissibility of civil parties!*” the presiding judge finally remarked, reminding the defense that the question had already been joined to the merits.

ECCHR and Sherpa’s submissions before the Court

Despite the defense’s ongoing objections, both ECCHR and Sherpa testified before the Court. They emphasized their long-standing involvement in the case – from the initial complaint to the current trial – and reiterated their mandates: ensuring access to justice for communities affected by human rights violations.

Cannelle Lavite, Co-Director of the Business and Human Rights Program at ECCHR, highlighted that ECCHR’s work on the Syrian conflict aims at ensuring that *all* actors – including Western corporate actors – are held accountable for their wrongdoings. Anna Kiefer, Litigation and Advocacy Officer at Sherpa, further underscored the stark power imbalance between civil society organizations and multinational corporations, which possess vast legal, financial and communication resources, insisting that “*no one is above the law*.”

Read our previous weekly report (hearings of November 4–5, 2025) here:

https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Fallbeschreibungen/Weekly_report_04.11_05.11_-_Lafarge_trial.pdf