

Weekly Report – Lafarge Trial, Paris Criminal Court

Hearings of 24-28 November, 2025

The trial continues

The Paris Criminal Court continued hearings in the trial of Lafarge SA, several of its former top executives, managers and intermediaries. The debates were notably marked by the testimony of a senior officer from the French domestic intelligence agency (DGSI), persistent relativization strategies deployed by the defendants, and the powerful accounts of three Syrian former employees of Lafarge Cement Syria (LCS). While these plaintiffs were heard during the week, a summary of their testimonies, along with additional accounts from the following week, will be provided in the next report.

Deciding to stay in a country torn apart by the rise of terrorist groups

The former top executives claimed that, at a time when the 13 November 2015 attacks in Paris “*had not yet occurred*”, they could not and had not realized the terrorist nature of the groups they entered into agreements with. A further argument was that Lafarge’s decision to remain in Syria served France’s intelligence-gathering purposes. These arguments contrasted with the testimony of a DGSI senior officer working in the Counter-Terrorism Department during the relevant time period, called by the prosecutors of the Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor’s Office (*Parquet National Anti-Terroriste, PNAT*).

A deep dive into the rising of ISIS crimes and presence in Syria : former secret services officer testifies

The DGSI officer firmly stressed that, in 2013, there was no doubt whatsoever about the terrorist nature of ISIS and the Al Nusra-Front. He insisted on the fact that both groups are direct offshoots of Al-Qaeda, listed as a terrorist organization since 2004 by the United States, the European Union, and the UN Security Council sanctions regime.

He then provided a detailed overview of the abuses committed by these groups in Syria from 2012 onwards. As early as 2013, French journalists were kidnapped by ISIS and held in Aleppo, about 150 kilometers from the Jalabiya cement plant – an event that received significant coverage in the French press at the time. More generally, atrocities committed by ISIS in Syria were thoroughly documented in both mainstream Western media and propaganda videos showing the beheading of Western hostages (among them, James Foley and Steven Sotloff) and footage of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the instigator of the 13 November 2015 attacks, dragging civilians corpses behind a pickup truck.

By summer 2013, Raqqa, after its seizure by ISIS, had become a “laboratory” where the group tested the violent governance practices later implemented across its territory: executions, beheadings, stonings, crucifixions, and enforcement of strict moral rules by the *hisba* (religious police). The DGSi officer also recalled the systematic enslavement of Yazidi women and girls. These crimes were widely documented at the time, including in an Amnesty International report. Therefore, the Court questioned the defendants’ claims of ignorance: “*As media coverage of ISIS crimes was increasing, why was there no red alert within Lafarge?*”. The defense called journalist Georges Malbrunot as a witness, who relied on cultural relativism: “*we are not in France or Norway; we must remember that we are in the Middle East*” Christian Herrault, former Deputy CEO in charge of Syrian operations, also insisted: “*Middle easterners invented business long before westerners.*”

Attempts to minimize responsibility by invoking alleged intelligence involvement

The defense relied on statements by Georges Malbrunot suggesting that the Lafarge plant served as “*France’s only foothold*” to gather information, after the closure of the French Embassy in Damascus in March 2012.

The DGSi officer strongly contradicted this narrative, stating that, as far as he knew, the Counter-Terrorism Department had never been in contact with Lafarge, and that intelligence services’ opportunistic information-gathering methods cannot in any way be interpreted as encouragement to remain in a conflict zone. He concluded emphatically: “*This was not a confidential conflict. It was one of the most heavily covered conflicts of the decade, documented by the terrorist groups themselves for propaganda purposes.*”

Further examination of the defendants : “the Lafarge language” confusing and unconvincing defence arguments

The Court repeatedly confronted defendants with material evidence on a large screen projected above them, notably emails and internal Lafarge documents, contradicting their claims of ignorance.

Executives involved in overseeing the Jalabiya plant insisted they knew nothing, prompting the prosecutors to remark: “*one gets the feeling that everyone suddenly discovered everything in 2015.*” Bruno Pescheux, former LCS Director, even claimed he only found out that ISIS, the Al Nusra Front and Ahrar al Sham were terrorist organizations at the time of his indictment in this case, back in 2017.

This stood in contrast with the projected emails on the screen, which he received as early as January 2013 and referred to the “*presence of terrorist networks*”, while a February 2014 message mentioned LCS’s relations with “*the jihadists of the Islamic State.*” In August 2014,

Christian Herrault described ISIS fighters as “*hardcore terrorists*” and “*madmen*”, adding that it didn’t take extensive research to realize this, while security committee minutes of the Lafarge headquarters also stated the groups ISIS and Al Nusra Front that Lafarge entered into agreements with were in fact sanctioned, listed terrorist organizations.

“I don’t know, I can’t remember”

Across the hearings, defendants repeatedly invoked variations of the same arguments to deny their knowledge of, or involvement in payments to terrorist organizations: “*I didn’t know*”; “*I wasn’t informed*”; “*I was in total uncertainty*”; “*I don’t remember*”; “*I wasn’t curious enough to ask*”; or even – more surprisingly for Bruno Lafont, the former CEO – “*it was a public holiday; no one was in the office*” and “*I am not a child of internet*” and therefore didn’t read emails. Some relied on rhetorical evasions, with Bruno Pescheux, using a musical metaphor to downplay his role : “*I am more of a musical arranger than a composer.*” Amro Taleb, Syrian intermediary for raw material procurement – who has become well-known for his evasive answers – was even reprimanded by the presiding judge: “*A bit of concision would be welcome!*”

Semantic dilution caused further tensions with the Court. Some defendants became visibly irritated when confronted with specific internal documents. The prosecutors observed ironically: “*In 2025, it seems we can change the meaning of words. For 15 days now, we’ve seen what is perhaps the ‘Lafarge language.’*” Often, defendants insist that payments to armed groups were the result of a “*racket system,*” something “*unintentional*” they were victims of, according to Christian Herrault’s lawyer Solange Doumic. Yet, the Court pointed to numerous emails referencing “*negotiated deals*”, “*agreements*”, “*list of beneficiaries*” and “*donations*” to ISIS and the Al Nusra Front. The presiding judge told Frédéric Jolibois, former LCS Director, while unpacking his email communication, “*you seemed to be directing the discussions*” with Firas Tlass and not a victim of racketeering. In response, defendants gave a somewhat acrobatic explanation: it was a “*negotiation in a very constrained setting*”. When Christian Herrault attempted to minimize the amounts involved by comparing them to Lafarge’s turnover at the time, the prosecutors answered : “*Let me give you a scoop: five million euros is by far a record in our terrorism financing cases.*”

(Self-)contradictions among defendants

Executives claimed that the decision to close the plant had already been made “*in their minds*” and that “*in their heads, they had already left.*” The Court pointed out the obvious contradiction: a closure requires concrete operational implementation, yet operations at the plant resumed following negotiations with terrorist groups on the ground. Christian Herrault argued he had made the decision to close the factory, but needed to keep it running some more weeks to sell the remaining cement, arguably to avoid it being left at the disposal of terrorist

groups. However, he was faced with clearly contradicting evidence showing that fresh cement was produced in August 2024. At some point, the presiding judge noted: *“I still do not understand what you are trying to say, but we will eventually figure it out.”*

Defendants also struggled to explain the covert financial channels used to pay armed groups via the Syrian intermediary Firas Tlass, still under an international arrest warrant. The Court questioned why they continued working with Firas Tlass as they claimed *“we got totally scammed/ripped off by him”*, or with Amro Taleb, described as a *“fraudster,”* and a *“parasitic mythomaniac”*. The judge wondered: *“Normally one stops working with such individuals. Did you never say ‘enough’?”* Bruno Pescheux replied: *“Practices that may seem strange in some countries are not in others,”* invoking cultural relativism again. Christian Herrault said *“we were beginning to wonder”*, that they were waiting to *“see”* the *“level of aggressiveness in terms of the overall racketeering.”*

Former CEO Bruno Lafont claimed long-standing trust in his team and said they *“knew they could knock on [his] door.”* Upon hearing of a deal with ISIS, he asserted he *“fell off [his] chair,”* insisting he was unaware of any arrangements with terrorist groups. His former secretary testified that Bruno Lafont was *“very concerned with security.”* Grégoire Rialan, representing ECCHR and Sherpa, noted that it would be all the more unlikely that Lafont did not read the security committee minutes on Syria.

Read our previous weekly report (hearings of 18-21 November, 2025) here :
https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Fallbeschreibungen/Weekly_report_2_-_Lafarge_2025.pdf