ProtectUK

Directed and enabled attacks

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A directed terrorist attack is one that has been carried out by terrorists trained, funded, and logistically supported by terrorist groups, predominantly those based overseas. An enabled terrorist attack is one carried out by terrorists who have received some support from terrorist groups, usually in the form of targeting or methodology guidance.

Headline assessment

Although the predominant threat to the UK is now from self-initiated terrorists (S-ITs), groups like al-Qa'ida (AQ) and Islamic State (IS) almost certainly retain the intent to direct or enable attacks against the West including the UK.

Terrorist groups like IS and AQ are learning organisations and will likely adapt their tactics in light of previous experience. Therefore, it is likely that any future directed terrorist attack will focus on 'soft' targets.

What is a directed or enabled terrorist attack?

The threat

The terrorist threat to the UK has evolved over the last decade. Ten years ago the most serious terrorist threat came from complex, multi-operative plots that were planned and sanctioned overseas, and targeted strategic or symbolic targets. Most attack plots in the UK between 2005 and 2014 were directed or enabled by terrorist groups overseas.

Although the predominant threat to the UK is now from self-initiated terrorists (S-ITs), who are inspired to act by terrorist ideology rather than through direction or support from groups overseas, groups such as AQ and IS almost certainly retain the intent to direct or enable attacks against the West including the UK.

What is the difference between a directed and an enabled terrorist attack?



Directed attack

A directed terrorist attack is one that has been carried out by terrorists trained, funded, and logistically supported by terrorist groups based overseas. One of the best known examples of this type of attack is the 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001 carried out by AQ.

Enabled attack

Meanwhile, an enabled terrorist attack is one carried out by terrorists who have received some support from terrorist groups, usually in the form of targeting or methodology guidance but also potentially military-type training in places where they are free to operate (such as Syria or Afghanistan). Enabled terrorists will be provided with guidance and the skills to mount an attack, but the final methodology and targeting decisions will be left to the operative.

Returning foreign-terrorist fighters (FTFs) planning and carrying out attacks in their country of origin, having acquired military-type skills while fighting with a terrorist group in a conflict zone, can fall under this category. An example of this is the attack on Brussels' Jewish Museum on 24 May 2014 by Mehdi Nemmouche, in what is considered as the first attack on European soil by a returning foreign fighter from Syria.

What are the key features of directed and enabled terrorist attacks?

Directed attacks conducted by AQ, and to a lesser extent IS, have generally been characterised by the following:

- **Planning** – With often protracted planning cycles, attacks have tended to be planned well in advance, increasing the risk of detection by the authorities.
- **Complexity** – Directed attacks often have more than one target with multiple actors involved who have received training beforehand.
- **Sophistication** – The use of firearms and/or home-made explosives have been favoured as opposed to simpler methodologies (such as vehicle as a weapon or a bladed weapon attacks).
- **Lethality** – Methodologies employed by trained operatives have resulted in higher casualties.
- **Targeting** – Directed attacks have tended to target iconic sites or transport infrastructure.

While enabled attacks have exhibited similar characteristics to directed ones, these have tended to be less complex and have sometimes used operatives recruited locally.

How has it previously manifested in the UK?



Directed and enabled terrorist plots in the UK have been carried out exclusively by terrorists following an Islamist ideology. Since 2000, there have been no successful terrorist attacks in the UK directed or enabled by terrorist groups from an Extreme Right Wing, Left Wing, or Single-Issue ideology.

The last directed attack in Western Europe was IS's 2016 Brussels bombings that killed 32 people and wounded 340 others.

There has not been a successful directed attack in the UK for some time. The last such attack occurred in 2005 when four suicide bombers set off devices on London's transport system, killing 52 people. While it was typical of an AQ-planned complex, multi-operative and mass-casualty terrorist attack, the extent to which it was externally planned, directed or controlled by contacts overseas remains unclear.

Examples of enabled attack plots are those that British national Junaid Hussein co-ordinated while in Syria with IS. Between 2012 and his death in 2015, he is reported to have guided and incited numerous attacks in the West including several in the UK.

How could it manifest in the future?

The desire and ability of terrorist groups overseas to direct attacks in the UK has declined in recent

years. There are many reasons for this, but include the following:

- Significant counter-terrorism pressure on groups overseas in places like Syria, Yemen and until recently, Afghanistan.
- The collapse of IS's physical caliphate in Syria and Iraq.
- A change of priorities, focus and approach by overseas Islamist groups.

However, with the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, the prospect of an increased directed or enabled threat in the medium-term cannot be discounted. It is unlikely that an Afghanistan-based terrorist group will have the capability to conduct directed attacks in the West from 2022. However, it is likely that events in Afghanistan will increase the UK S-IT threat, with the greatest threat likely to emanate from a S-IT inspired by ISKP.

Terrorist groups like IS and AQ are learning organisations and will likely adapt their tactics in light of previous experience. Therefore, it is likely that any future directed terrorist attack will focus on 'soft' targets - those that are easily accessible to the public and relatively unprotected, and thus vulnerable to terrorist attack. Although they will likely use methodologies which have already proven successful, there is a realistic possibility that they will also adopt methodologies used successfully by self-initiated terrorists (S-ITs).

What does this mean for business and the public?

If future directed and enabled attacks follow the same pattern as those that have previously taken place in Europe and the UK, then this is highly likely to have a significant impact on UK business.

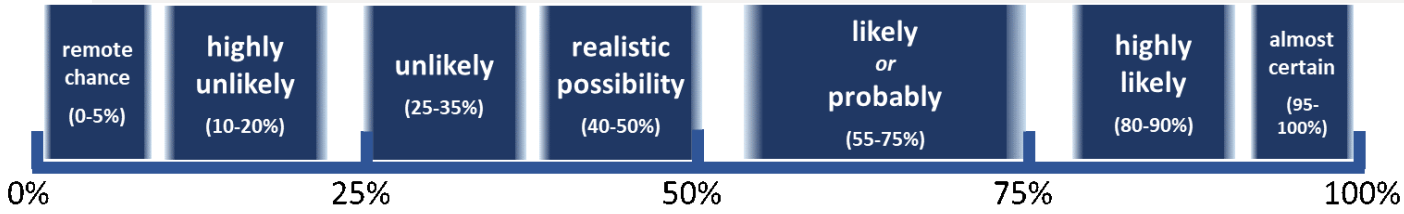
In addition to the human cost, a multi-site attack using Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) can cause significant damage to buildings and infrastructure. Additionally, as with any major incident, widespread disruption to daily activity is almost certain together with raised levels of distress and anxiety amongst affected communities.

Probability and Likelihood in Intelligence Assessments

> *When describing threats in intelligence assessments, Counter Terrorism Policing utilises the Probabilistic Yardstick.*
>
> *The Probabilistic Yardstick is a tool created by the Professional Head of Intelligence Analysis (PHIA), in the UK government, to standardise the way in which we describe probability in*

intelligence assessments. For example, if we use the term 'likely' what we mean is 'a 55-75% chance'.

Use the scale below as a reference when reading ProtectUK Insights.



KEYWORDS

ATTACK
ATTACK METHODOLOGY
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PAGE CATEGORY

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