

## Terrorist Trends and Protecting London through Partnership

On 22 November 2016 the Security and Resilience Network at London First held a breakfast briefing with representatives from *New York University in London*, *SO15 Counter-Terrorism Command*, *King's College London*, and the *Evening Standard* to discuss terrorist trends and protecting London through partnership. The event was hosted by CityPoint and Ultimate Security.

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### Terrorism Threat Update in London

- The current threat level for the UK is Severe, a level which has been maintained since ISIS declared the Caliphate of Iraq and Syria in 2014.
  - The decision to set the threat level to Severe was based upon an accumulation of developments which included threatening rhetoric from several extremist organisations towards the UK and the West, in addition to a speech made by ISIS's former Head of External Operations, Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani, in which he declared war on the West and the coalition forces.
- Over the last decade, the threat has evolved considerably and, more recently, attack methodologies have been focussed around low-sophistication attacks, mass casualties and martyrdom. To mitigate this threat, counter-terrorism police are evolving their tactics to fight extremist activity in three main arenas:
  - **Online:** There is a vast amount of propaganda and extremist material aimed at vulnerable individuals on the internet which encourages lone-actors and inspires them to commit attacks against targets in the UK.
  - **International:** As migration from warzones in the Middle East continues to flow into Europe, terrorist actors are increasingly taking advantage of this opportunity to smuggle themselves into Europe amongst legitimate refugees. There has been a corresponding increase in the use of false documentation such as passports and ID paperwork to facilitate travel into Europe. With British tourists as prime targets for kidnapping and attacks, UK counter-terrorism police have increased the number of Counter-Terrorism Police Liaison Officers (CPLOs) posted around the world to extend their coverage.
  - **UK:** The UK remains a primary target for ISIS and other extremist organisations and, more specifically, they aim to attack police, military and civilians primarily in crowded places. The UK security community has disrupted 12 such attacks in the last three years. With borders across Europe starting to tighten, some individuals who were intending to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the ranks of ISIS have instead decided to remain in the UK and plot attacks here instead. As a result, UK Counter-Terrorism police are working more closely with the National Crime Agency to reduce even further the number of weapons in circulation on UK streets.
- Over the last few years, the language used in extremist propaganda has changed dramatically.
  - In 2014 extremist messaging via official Islamic State and Al Qaeda publications, such as *Dabiq* and *Inspire* magazines, centred around declaring the Caliphate and encouraging foreign fighters to join the cause in Iraq and Syria.

- As the dynamics of the conflict have changed, the messaging has evolved to promote the Caliphate as a fully functioning state.
- The rhetoric has moved away from encouraging fighters to travel to the front line of the conflict and, instead, promotes attacks on home soil and provides detailed instructions on executing an attack.
- Following Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani's speech in 2014 when he made a call to arms against the West, there was a sharp increase in the number of attacks.
  - These attacks broke away from the traditional methodology of using bombs and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and embraced the new trend of using bladed weapons.
  - Attacks, by and large, have become significantly less sophisticated with the new ISIS publication, *Rumiyah*, promoting the use of pressure-cooker bombs and motor vehicles to target pedestrians in crowded public places.
  - Children are also being increasingly used to execute so-called 'prisoners of war' and there has been evidence of widespread brain-washing in schools throughout ISIS-occupied areas of Syria and Iraq.
- While ISIS remains the predominant threat to UK security, there are many more extremist elements on the horizon that require increased vigilance.
  - Al Qaeda remain a serious threat and is very active in operations against the West.
  - Irish Republicanism via the IRA (Continuity IRA and other disparate groups) is still very active in its attacks against police officers in Northern Ireland.
  - Emboldened by Brexit and other events across the world, right-wing extremism promoted by groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) are on the rise and will continue as social unrest in Europe continues.
- Next steps for the UK Counter-Terrorism Police.
  - Building trust and confidence in communities and across security intelligence agencies.
  - More safeguarding to protect and prevent individuals from travelling to warzones.
  - More safeguarding of families and children. This will be partly achieved through the National Digital Exploitation Service to disrupt the dissemination of online extremist media and propaganda.
  - Policing across the UK has and will continue to increase its firearms capability to mitigate the escalating threat in the UK.
  - Counter-Terrorism police will also seek to build partnerships with the public and private sector to increase collaboration.

### **Radicalisation Trends and De-Radicalisation Efforts**

- There is an increasing nexus between people who used to be criminals and who are now becoming terrorists.

- Criminals engaging in extremist activity is not a new concept and is a trend which was observable in the 1990s. Terrorists in France were frequently referred to as ‘gangster terrorists’ during this period and the Madrid bombing was partly financed by drug dealing.
- However, the number and prominence of criminals in terrorist organisations have become more pronounced in recent years.
- When comparing terrorist operatives from 2004 to today, their biographies appear to be vastly different.
  - In a 2004 study by Mark Sageman, 60% of terrorists were university educated, 75% were middle or upper class, and over 50% were in skilled employment (e.g. teachers, doctors, engineers).
  - In a 2015 study of German Syria fighters, 12% were university educated, 25% were unemployed, 66% were known to the police, and 33% had criminal convictions (of which each had committed an average of seven offences).
  - The proportion of former criminals amongst jihadists that has gone to join Islamic State stands at 66% from Germany, 40% from Spain, 50% from Belgium, 60% from Norway, 60% from the Netherlands.
- How does criminality affect processes of radicalisation?
  - **The Redemption Narrative:** Many former criminals become involved in terrorism as a way of making up for sins they have committed in the past. This typically occurs following a traumatic event which prompts the criminal to reflect upon their past behaviour and to seek redemption. This narrative is underpinned by a perverse form of logic whereby criminals attempt to make up for past violent behaviour by engaging in the very same behaviour as terrorists.
  - **Legitimising Crime:** Criminals involved in terrorist activity are also becoming more prominent as a result of recruiting practices which explicitly endorse criminal behaviour. Jihadist operatives are increasingly encouraged to commit crimes, such as theft, to finance terrorist activities rather than out of their own pockets.
- Many people joining extremist groups had undergone radicalisation at least in part during their time in prison. This is relevant for two reasons:
  - First, when people enter the prison system they are vulnerable because incarceration often prompts them to ask existential questions – How did I end up here? How do I change my life? As such, these people are particularly susceptible to the message of extremists.
  - Secondly, they are also cut off from their traditional social networks and they need to create new ones in prison with many other angry, disenfranchised men which is the typical target recruitment group of extremist organisations.
- One very practical way in which this connection between crime and terrorism is significant is the skills transfer.

- Criminals have skills that are transferrable to terrorism, the most important of which is access to weapons.
  - Criminals are also able to stay under the radar, organise a safe house, and obtain fake identification and travel documents.
  - Criminals are often familiar with violence and are desensitised to it making them ideal recruits for the jihadist agenda. This category is overrepresented amongst those people who have attempted to commit terrorist attacks at home.
  - Criminals also possess the ability to use crime to raise money for terrorist plots. Of the 40 major plots that took place between 1994 and 2013, nearly 40% were at least part-financed by the proceeds of crime.
- Recommendations.
    - We have to rethink radicalisation. In the past, if we had observed changes in someone's behaviour, for example if they stop smoking, drinking and socialising, then it would have been considered as suspicious activity and possible indicators that an individual is being radicalised. With the advent of 'gangster terrorists' we are seeing extremists continuing what would be considered as conventional behaviour right up until the day of an attack and so we must reassess our perception of the radicalisation process.
    - We need to broaden our idea of terrorist finance and target all financial streams. While banking and international financial transactions provide vital intelligence – particularly after an attack – we need to be aware of the possibility that some level of financing is being carried out through criminal activity that never shows up in any financial transaction.
    - Many attacks are perpetrated by individuals which are known to the police as gang members or former criminals and radicalisation in many cases goes unnoticed. As such, counter-terrorism police need to collaborate beyond their normal channels and liaise with colleagues in alternate policing departments to share information and intelligence that may be relevant when investigating a terrorism case.
    - It may be useful to create new coalitions between private actors, private sector companies, and local government authorities to forge public-private partnerships on the basis of information sharing.

### **The Media's Role in Tackling Terrorism**

- The expectation of media – and particularly public service broadcasters – is one of resiliency and responsibility.
  - The latter is particularly challenging to deliver in a climate where phenomena such as WikiLeaks and the Edward Snowden revelations provide knowledge to all, making licence and liberty available because authority was considered to be necessarily inimical.
  - These approaches have raised many questions about the moral and ethical role of the media.
  - In the above-ground media, there has been a lot of debate about publicity being the oxygen of terrorism.

- As a result of financial constraints within the larger information broadcasting organisations, there has been a degree of concern surrounding their level of conservatism with regards to their values, their categories and the way in which they describe terrorist organisations.
  - Coverage has been narrowed to focus on ISIS due to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the possibility of migrant/refugee routes being used as a conduit for extremists into Europe.
  - The limited nature of this coverage, however, fails to observe the constantly changing nature of the ISIS phenomenon and much of the reporting seems to suffer from cognitive dissonance.
- The dynamics of the recruiting flow out to ISIS's theatre of operations in Syria and Iraq is changing and, in linear terms, foreign recruiting appears to be reducing.
  - Siloed thinking within the media appears to overlook the mutation of extremist recruitment and much of the coverage on the issues exhibits a distinct lack of understanding.
  - Much of this stems from a media that engages in providing commentary and opinion rather than factual, forensic and investigative reporting.
- Recommendations.
  - The media has become too atomised and needs to take stock of dynamic changes that are occurring within the mechanics of terrorism.
  - The value of the media is that it is a sounding board and it needs to make sure that it reflects what is going on in society.
  - The media needs to be more discerning about the difference between investigation and analysis and commentary. It is important that it focuses on behaviours within terrorism and accurately examines the phenomena.