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Monthly Threat Update

January 2021

Threat overview

Critical:
an attack is highly likely in the near future

Severe:
an attack is highly likely

Substantial:
an attack is likely

Moderate:
an attack is possible but not likely

Low:
an attack is highly unlikely

Threat from terrorism to the UK:



Threat from Northern Ireland related terrorism to Northern Ireland:



Threat Overview

Whilst no significant terrorist attacks took place in January 2021 in the UK, the rest of Western Europe or North America, there has been a noticeable increase in counter-terrorist activity. Within the UK, counter-terrorist police disrupted two plots, one involving a far-right suspect and one involving an Islamist suspect.

In the former, the offender attempted to utilise 3D printing technology to build a firearm, underscoring the impact that emerging technologies can have in increasing terrorist threat profiles. In the other case, the Islamist plotter had built a viable explosive device, reiterating the intent by terrorist actors to conduct bombings in the UK.

Furthermore, reports by a prison watchdog highlighted the risk of further entrenching radical views in prisoners at specialist extremist units in prisons, with imprisoned terrorist offenders attacking guards and refusing to participate in deradicalisation programmes. Even with new legislation brought in to prevent the early release of terrorist offenders, attacks by former terrorist prisoners remain a possibility, as exemplified by the 2019 London Bridge attack and the 2020 Streatham attack.

In France, police arrested several members of a suspected far-left terrorist group, with sophisticated weapons in their possession. According to local sources, these individuals planned to attack military or police targets. Whilst the far-left threat in the UK is minor compared to that in mainland Europe, increasing political polarisation raises the possibility of far-left extremism spreading in the UK.



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A report by the Independent Monitoring Board of HMP Frankland indicated that a prison unit designed to house the terrorist offenders most likely to radicalise others is further entrenching extremist beliefs, with inmates refusing to participate in deradicalisation programmes. The report also revealed that a terrorist prisoner attacked a guard at HMP Frankland but did not specify when the attack took place. The unit at HMP Frankland is one of three in the country where extremist prisoners are separated from the general inmate population, to prevent extremists from radicalising other inmates.

There have long been concerns about the prison estate as a breeding

ground for terrorism and violent extremism, despite deradicalisation programmes being offered in these institutions. This is evidenced in the UK by an attack that was characterised as terrorist in nature in 2019, when two inmates at HMP Whitemoor attacked and injured a guard. The key concern for the public is whether these inmates will be released whilst still holding extremist views. Released terrorist prisoners have gone on to conduct attacks despite being monitored by police and intelligence services.

Attacks by terrorist inmates against prison guards have been classed as terrorist attacks by the Government in the past, most recently in the case of a bladed

weapon attack against a guard at HMP Whitemoor in January 2020. Whilst terrorist offenders in prisons have limited choices for targets, such attacks highlight that some terrorist prisoners do remain a threat. According to the official government statistics and academic studies, around 3.2% of terrorist offenders in England and Wales commit further terrorist acts (such as fund-raising or disseminating propaganda) upon release, exemplified by the 2019 London Bridge and 2020 Streatham attacks. Both offenders in these cases had been released from prison, one a year before the attack and the other just two weeks before the attack.

The Government took steps to address this issue



with the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill 2019-21, which increases the sentence time and conditions for release for terrorist prisoners. Whilst this may reduce the number of terrorist offenders released, it is unlikely to materially affect the numbers of paroled terrorists who conduct attacks. Determined parolees may attempt to mount an attack following release, although their capability in doing so is likely to be limited due to post-release surveillance. As such, and based on current assessments, attacks by released terrorist prisoners are likely to employ more unsophisticated methodologies, such as bladed weapons.

For more on recidivism rates by terrorist offenders, please see the [2020 Solutions Annual Review](#).

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US Department of Homeland Security warns of heightened terrorism threat until April in wake of Capitol Hill riot

On 27 January, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in the US issued a National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) Bulletin due to a heightened threat environment across the country. The DHS believes that this will persist in the coming weeks, with the bulletin expiring in April, due to violent extremists objecting to the inauguration of Joe Biden, which took place on 20 January. This warning follows the storming of the Capitol by far-right extremists on 6 January. Following the incident at the Capitol, the FBI warned of a heightened risk of militia violence in all states, and

Washington D.C., although violence failed to materialise.

Despite calls by politicians on both sides of the aisle and some members of the national security community to label the 6 January incident as terrorist in nature, this is unlikely to happen and the riot has not yet been classed as terrorism by DHS or the FBI. Nevertheless, further incidents of terrorism related to far-right militia groups are likely in the US. Prior to the 2020 Presidential election and subsequent inauguration of Joe Biden, the FBI disrupted a plot to kidnap the Democratic Governor



Trump supporters storm the US Capitol
Picture: Lev Radin/PA Images

of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer, by a far-right militia group in October 2020. Prior to this, two shootings against police and law enforcement took place by members of the 'boogaloo movement', a loose network of far-right extremists. Heightened political tensions increase the threat of far-right violence in the US, with further attacks and plots likely in the coming months.

The violent shift by the crowd on 6 January appeared to happen quickly. However, there was considerable concern amongst onlookers that there would be violence at the events for several weeks prior to the certification. Government agencies did not issue a formal intelligence bulletin, despite internal memos stating that violence may break out at the Trump rally. Advance Democracy, a US government watchdog,

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found around 1500 social media posts that referenced the 6 January certification of Biden's presidency by accounts affiliated to the QAnon conspiracy theory, many of which called for violence.

It is probable that the violence reflected underlying tensions caused by the coronavirus pandemic and the associated economic impact it has had on large portions of the population, as well as ever present and growing political polarisation. All of these issues are also present in the UK and Europe more generally. However, whilst violence as a result of underlying political and socio-economic tensions is a possibility and has been ongoing in countries such as the Netherlands, it is unlikely that violence would be directed against central government buildings or legislatures, as was the

case in the US. Rioters targeted the Capitol due to the falsehoods spread about the validity of the presidential election. However, there could be cases of mass demonstrations and civil disobedience, similar to the Poll Tax riots, if the economic circumstances worsen once schemes such as furlough are stopped and the true economic impact of the pandemic are understood. These could be exploited by extremist groups from across the terrorist spectrum.



Terrorist arrest in Surrey highlights enduring intent by extremists to develop explosive capabilities

On 8 January, police arrested a 47-year-old man in Redhill, Surrey, under charges related to the possession of explosives and propaganda materials. According to reports, the individual had a viable explosive device. The suspect, Asad Bhatti, appeared at Westminster Magistrates' Court on 23 January, and will appear at the Old Bailey on 5 February. According to court documents, Bhatti was inspired by an extremist Islamist ideology.

This arrest is quite unusual in the UK. Counter-terrorism arrests do not often result in possession of explosives charges. It is also rare that an offender has a viable explosive device in their

possession. The nature of the device is currently unknown, but it is likely that the explosives were homemade, possibly to be used as a suicide bomb. This incident highlights that, despite a tendency by terrorists towards less sophisticated methodologies in recent years, the intent to employ explosive devices endures due to the potential for causing mass casualties when compared to more rudimentary ideologies such as bladed weapons. Bombing attacks, using improvised explosive devices, by terrorist actors in the UK remain a possibility.

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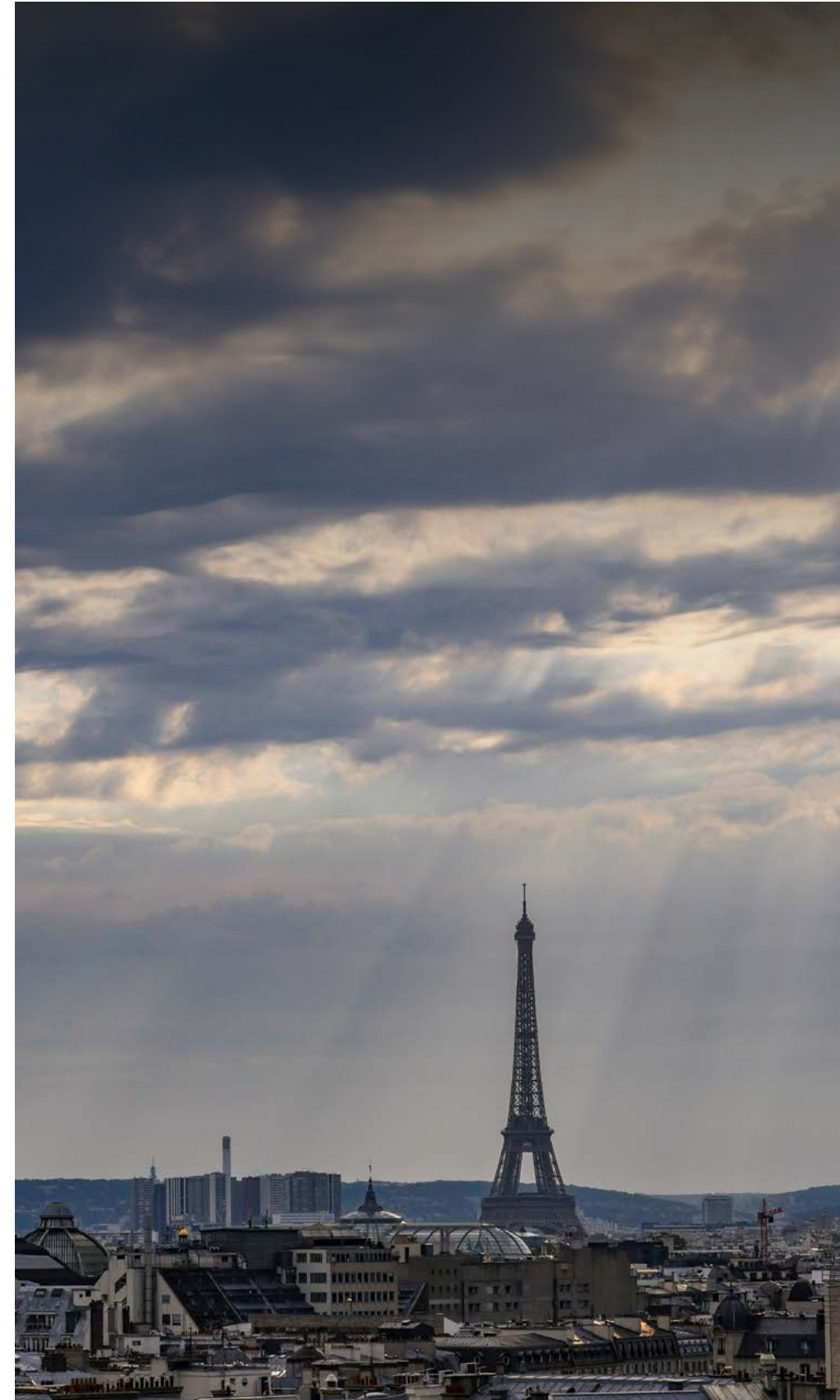
Arrests may signal growing far-left threat in France

On 8 December, police in several areas of France arrested six men and a woman, following the seizure of firearms and explosives during a large-scale counter-terrorism campaign. Five of the suspects were imprisoned on 11 December after investigators found illegally held firearms, explosives and police paraphernalia during raids on several locations. While in custody, one of the suspects confirmed that the group was planning to conduct an attack on police or military targets. On 15 January, Laurent Nuñez, the National Intelligence Coordinator, stated that the cell appears to be a sign of a re-emergence of far-left terrorism.

The group had trained in rural areas where they also built and tested explosives. One of the members had fought with Kurdish forces

in Syria in 2018 and had acquired the tradecraft to create explosive devices and train others in firearm usage. Police suspected the group of planning attacks and were under surveillance by intelligence services for nine months before the arrests. The National Intelligence Coordinator confirmed that the cell had been classified by the DGSI, the French domestic intelligence agency, as a terrorist organisation, the first time in thirteen years a left-wing group had been categorised as such.

The French National Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor's Office opened a judicial investigation into left-wing terrorism in France in April 2020 following 170 acts of left-wing sabotage in the preceding ten months, including targeted attacks on telephone masts, businesses, council buildings and arson



attacks on police stations and military barracks, carried out in part by the arrested group. Since the 1990s, left-wing terrorist groups have tended to favour explosives and acts of sabotage over mass casualty firearms attacks.

Whilst far-left violence is visible on the continent, the threat of left-wing terrorism in the UK is minor, particularly compared with Islamist and far-right terrorism. Although there remains a political reluctance to label left-wing groups as terrorists, in April 2020, MI5 created a new left-wing terrorism unit (LASIT) to investigate left-wing anarchists under suspicion of planning terrorist attacks. In June 2020, a 32-year-old was convicted in Huddersfield for crimes related to far-left terrorism. Nevertheless, it is assessed that far-left terrorism currently poses a minimal threat to the UK in terms of affecting the frequency and severity of attacks and this is unlikely to change in the medium term. If an attack did take place, the

targeting and methodologies employed by left-wing terrorist groups would remain broadly consistent with the historical precedent of targeting economic and government infrastructure, although likely with an enhanced focus on companies or industries perceived to be causing environmental damage.

Following the French National Intelligence Coordinator confirming that at least a dozen known far-left militants had fought with Kurdish forces in Syria before returning to France, with regards to the UK, the return of seasoned foreign fighters who are better trained and potentially more lethal than amateur lone operators, could potentially increase the threat of terrorism to the UK, particularly as those who fought with Kurdish groups may be subject to lower levels of scrutiny than those who fought with Islamist groups.

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Disrupted 3D weapons plot underscores the potential threat of firearms attacks in UK

On 29 December, police arrested a seventeen-year-old boy in Essex and charged him with preparing a terrorist plot involving 3D printed guns. The suspect held far-right, neo-Nazi views and faces six terrorism charges including engaging in the preparation of an act of terrorism and possessing material likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism. Police have said that the accused drew up plans for a storage bunker, provided information for the manufacture of two firearms using a 3D printer and transferred funds for the purchase of materials to manufacture the weapons. The suspect did not successfully build the firearm. The defendant will appear on trial before the Old Bailey on 7 June.



The first completely 3D-printed handgun, The Liberator,

This incident highlights the effect emerging technologies can have in increasing the sophistication of terrorist methodologies. Plans for 3D guns can be created or downloaded online, and issues have arisen in recent years over identifying those disseminating plans and manufacturing 3D printed weapons. In 2019, the UK saw its first conviction in relation to the manufacturing of a 3D printed gun. In

the same year, a far-right gunman killed two people outside a synagogue in Halle, Germany, using a 3D printed firearm.

In the UK, firearms are difficult to acquire, and as such terrorists have tended to use more readily available weapons in attacks. Whilst 3D printed weapons can be used during attacks, their lethality is significantly less than that of conventional firearms smuggled in from

outside the UK, as most are unsophisticated, single shot weapons which limits the likelihood of inflicting mass casualty attacks. Plans for 3D bombs and bunkers, however, could overcome the lower prospects of lethality. Furthermore, 3D weapons are not as simple to use when compared with conventional firearms. Once a 3D firearm has been created, would-be terrorists would need to then acquire ammunition from a separate source, increasing the likelihood of discovery by policing and intelligence agencies. Conventional firearms and ammunition are generally sold together. As 3D-printing technologies continue to evolve, improvised weapons may pose a growing threat, particularly in countries with heavily restricted access to firearms.

Interesting reads:

Terrorism and Counterterrorism Challenges for the Biden Administration

<https://ctc.usma.edu/terrorism-and-counterterrorism-challenges-for-the-biden-administration/>

The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection

<https://ctc.usma.edu/the-april-2020-islamic-state-terror-plot-against-u-s-and-nato-military-bases-in-germany-the-tajik-connection/>

Newtownbutler: Continuity IRA 'could have fired at private helicopter'

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-55718923>

AstraZeneca Welsh vaccine partner partially evacuates site after suspicious package

<https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-britain-wockhardt/astrazeneca-welsh-vaccine-partner-partially-evacuates-site-after-suspicious-package-idUSS8N2I106X>

16-year-old Singaporean detained under ISA for planning terrorist attacks on two mosques

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/16-year-old-detained-under-isa-for-planning-terrorist-attacks-at-two-mosques-in-singapore>

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Building resilience against terrorism risk



Risk Awareness



Risk Modelling



Risk Management

Understanding risk, enabling resilience

Whilst the human cost of terrorism is devastating, the financial impact an incident can have on communities, businesses and economies is generally greater than most realise.

At Pool Re we understand that terrorism is a significant multi-faceted peril that can expose businesses in a complex way. Like many other catastrophic perils, terrorism is a challenge which requires a collaborative approach.

We have been the UK's leading terrorism reinsurer for over a quarter of a century. During this time our SOLUTIONS division have developed a specialist team of

experts who can work with you to help you and your Policyholders understand and manage the terrorism threat.

We believe all organisations and businesses can benefit from a better understanding of the terrorism risk solutions available.

To find out more about Pool Re SOLUTIONS and how your organisation can take advantage of this service please contact us at: solutions@poolre.co.uk

Government advice

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