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Monthly Threat Update

April 2021

Threat Overview

A confirmed New IRA attempted bombing took place in Northern Ireland in April 2021. The group attempted to kill an off-duty police officer using a homemade improvised explosive device (IED) in Dungiven, Co. Derry/Londonderry on 19 April 2021.

Further afield on 23 April, a suspected Islamist extremist killed a police administrator in an attack approximately 60km south-west of Paris, in Rambouillet, France, highlighting the ongoing intent by Islamist extremists in Western countries to target police and security officials.

The Home Office has added the far-right Atomwaffen Division (AWD) to its list of proscribed organisations, becoming the fourth far-right group to be added to the proscribed list since the list was established in 2001. Separately, a serving Metropolitan Police officer has been found guilty this month of belonging to a proscribed organisation, the far-right National Action, highlighting growing concerns about the "insider threat" of potential extremists in the ranks of police and military personnel.

Counter Terrorism Policing's Senior National Coordinator for Protect and Prepare, Deputy Assistant Commissioner Matt Twist also urged the public and businesses to remain vigilant as the coronavirus lockdown begins to lift as he believes the easing of lockdown restrictions could provide a greater opportunity for terrorists to operate. Last month, Counter Terrorism Policing also released a toolkit for businesses to assist them in keeping customers safe as lockdown in the UK begins to lift. [The toolkit can be accessed here.](#)

Other incidents of note included a potential cyber attack on the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran, highlighting the vulnerability of critical national infrastructure (CNI) to cyber attacks. Separately, an explosive drone deployed by a cartel against Mexican police demonstrated the potential for drones to be used by threat actors to remotely target security forces and the public as well as infrastructure locations.

Pool Re also hosted a webinar on the ongoing Protect Duty consultation in conjunction with the Publicly Accessible Locations team at the Home Office on 14 April 2021. [For more on the Protect Duty consultation, please see here.](#)

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New IRA attempted bomb plot on police officer in Northern Ireland

On Monday 19 April 2021, an off-duty police officer discovered an explosive attached to a container of flammable liquid next to her car in Dungiven, Northern Ireland. Though the bomb failed to detonate, police investigations concluded that the device was viable and designed to cause a fireball, with the potential to inflict fatal injuries. According to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) the bomb was an attempt to kill the police officer and, by extension, her daughter. The New Irish Republican Army (New IRA) claimed responsibility for the attempt.

The attack followed several weeks of violence in Northern Ireland, where over 90 police officers have been injured in riots across the country since 29 March, with police using

water cannons to disperse the street violence for the first time in six years. Much of the violence appears to be divided along sectarian lines, with violent clashes between Loyalists and Republicans occurring on a near-nightly basis in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Carrickfergus, Ballymena and Newtownabbey.

The renewed engagement of violent dissident republican (VDR) and loyalist paramilitary groups within Northern Ireland, as well as the wider inter-communal violence between Loyalist and Republicans, has been attributed to simmering loyalist tensions over the Irish Sea border imposed as a result of the UK-EU Brexit deal and the uncertainty of the future of provisions made by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Loyalists



Forensic investigation officers were at the scene. Photo by Pacemaker.

have argued that the Northern Ireland Protocol trade measures threaten the country's constitutional right to remain a part of the UK whilst Republicans have retaliated to threats to destabilise the peace process. Some unionist leaders have also attributed the recent violence to the decision of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) not to prosecute leaders of the republican Sinn Féin party for breaching COVID-19 regulations at the funeral of a former IRA intelligence chief in June 2020, whilst Orange marches were banned.

The New IRA is the most prominent and active VDR group within the Province and has been linked to several high-profile attacks in recent years, including a coordinated incendiary

device campaign on the British mainland in March 2019 and a disrupted bomb plot planned for 'Brexit Day' in January 2020. However, the New IRA faced some disruption to its operations last summer when a joint MI5 and police investigation led to the arrest of ten individuals suspected of being leaders within the group. Nevertheless, the attack on 19 April suggests that the group remains a significant threat despite this operational setback. The group said in a message earlier this month that it intends to continue its armed campaign until its goal of a unified Ireland is achieved.

Bombings and attempted bombings linked to the New IRA and other VDR groups are not uncommon in Northern Ireland, occurring

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New IRA attempted bomb plot on police officer in Northern Ireland (continued):

several times a month according to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). However, a direct, targeted attempt on a serving PSNI officer, since the Good Friday Agreement, is a relatively rare occurrence, with the last confirmed attempt on a police officer occurring in March 2020. Over 200 terrorist incidents

involving the police have occurred since 1998 according to the GTD, although most of these appear to be related to riots and crimes of opportunity.

Whilst the Dungiven attempt ultimately failed, further attacks on police officers or other targets associated with the British government within Northern Ireland are

highly likely in the coming months. Successful attacks by the New IRA on the British mainland, however, are highly unlikely, given the group's limited capability in Great Britain, but ultimately this threat cannot be discounted.

The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) assesses the current threat to Northern

Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism (NIIRT) to be SEVERE, which means that an attack is highly likely to occur. It has been at this level since its first publication in 2010.

Since July 2019, the main terror alert system has been changed to encompass all threats to the entirety of the UK, irrespective of the

ideologies that drive them. The national threat level has been SUBSTANTIAL (meaning an attack is 'likely') since February this year. This suggests that there is no credible intelligence that the VDR threat to the British mainland has increased in recent months. Indeed, the ability of republican terrorist groups to operate in Great

Britain has been curtailed by decades of police and intelligence work, and most VDR groups are believed to currently have a limited appetite for attempting to mount attacks on the mainland.

Home Office adds far-right Atomwaffen Division to list of proscribed organisations

On 23 April, the Home Office added the far-right Atomwaffen Division (AWD) to its list of proscribed organisations. AWD is also known as National Socialist Order (NSO). AWD is a predominantly US-based group that was particularly active from 2015-2020, with members being tied to at least five murders of individuals belonging to minority groups, and an

attempted car-bombing at a hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, in March 2020. In March 2020, AWD claimed it had disbanded following pressure from US police and intelligence agencies. However, in July 2020, NSO established itself as the successor to AWD.

AWD/NSO is the fourth far-right extremist group to be added to the Home Office list of proscribed



organisations. In 2016, the Home Office proscribed National Action (NA) and its offshoots. In February and July 2020, the Home Office proscribed the Sonnenkrieg and Feuerkrieg Divisions (SKD/FKD), two far-right, white supremacist groups with members in the UK. SKD is allegedly affiliated with AWD and operates as its UK branch. SKD ideology has been influenced by

the Order of Nine Angles (O9A), a particularly extreme far-right group. According to a report by UK based advocacy group, Hope Not Hate, SKD is potentially more violent and extreme than NA. However, to date there has not yet been a successful SKD attack in the UK.

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Police officers secure the area where an attacker stabbed a female police administrative worker, in Rambouillet, near Paris, France, April 23, 2021. REUTERS/Gonzalo Fuentes

French police stabbing highlights concerns over security of police stations

At 14:20 on Friday, 23 April, a female police employee was fatally stabbed in a knife attack at a police station in Rambouillet, approximately 60km southwest of Paris. The administrative employee was stabbed twice in the throat in the secured entrance of the police station as she returned from her lunch break. The attacker, a Tunisian national, was heard shouting “Allahu Akbar” during the assault before being shot dead by a police officer following the attack.

According to Prime Minister Jean Castex, the attacker had been seen reconnoitring the building, walking around on his mobile phone outside the police station before

seizing the opportunity to access the station as the administrative employee entered through the security doors. The attack occurred in the secured entrance of the police station. The national anti-terrorism prosecutor’s office (PNAT) has taken over the case, opening an investigation into the murder of a person of public authority by a terrorist group due to the nature of the attack on a police official and the remarks made by the attacker during the assault. The investigation will be entrusted jointly to the Central Directorate of Judicial Police (DCPJ) and the General Directorate of Internal Security (DGSI).

The attacker, Jamel Gorchene, was given leave to remain in France in 2019 after working as a delivery driver since 2009, having arrived in the country illegally. He was not previously known to police or intelligence agencies. Three other suspected accomplices were put in police custody following the attack. Following the attack, President Macron endorsed a new law to give French security services new powers to track suspected Islamists encrypted messages through the use of algorithms that will enable police to identify people who visit extremist websites.

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French police stabbing highlights concerns over security of police stations (continued):

Following this latest attack, concerns have been raised over the security of police stations, particularly lobbies and reception areas which, despite secured access, are a vulnerable location for targeting especially as armed staff have been replaced by administrative staff following resource reallocations in recent years due to budget cuts. French law enforcement unions have criticised the shortage of manpower and equipment in police stations, as hostility towards the police has become more commonplace. Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin, said security would be stepped up at stations nationwide following the latest attack.

Social media posts by the Rambouillet assailant were reportedly often

dedicated to denunciations of Islamophobia in France and attacks on prominent right-wing commentators. As tensions with the Muslim community have also escalated following a series of controversial plans by the French government to tackle “Islamist separatism”, including the recently passed “anti-separatism bill”, the potential for these frustrations to be manipulated by violent Islamist actors, driving increased recruitment and planning, may also result in more frequent attacks over the coming months as lockdown restrictions begin to ease.



Metropolitan Police Deputy Assistant Commissioner Matt Twist

CT Police urge public to remain vigilant against possible terrorist threats

On 12 April 2021, Counter Terrorism Policing’s Senior National Coordinator for Protect and Prepare, Deputy Assistant Commissioner Matt Twist (who replaced DACSO Lucy D’Orsi last month) said that the easing of lockdown restrictions may provide a bigger opportunity for terrorists to operate as he believes the easing of lockdown restrictions could provide a greater opportunity for terrorists to operate.

DACSO Twist urged business owners and the public to remain vigilant and to support the police’s efforts to keep the country safe by reporting any activity that seems

suspicious to security staff and the police.

Terrorists may accelerate attack plots that have been planned during the coronavirus lockdown as crowds and other target rich environments begin to emerge post lockdown. Counter Terrorism Policing have also released a toolkit for businesses on 31 March to assist them in keeping customers safe as lockdown in the UK begins to lift. [The toolkit can be accessed here.](#)

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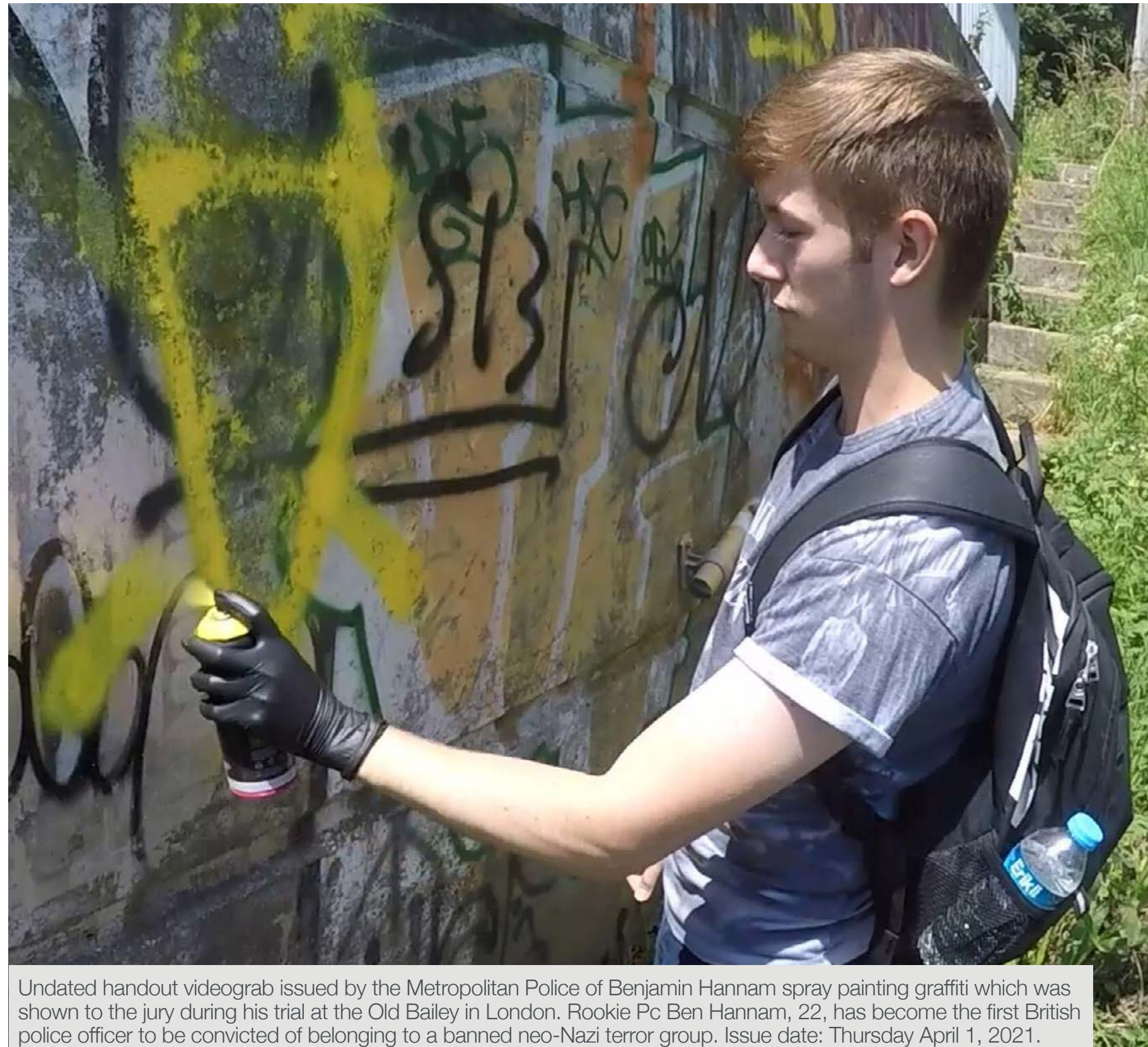
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Terrorism conviction for neo-Nazi Met officer puts spotlight on “insider threat”

A Metropolitan Police officer was found guilty on 01 April 2021 of membership of a banned neo-Nazi group, National Action (NA), and possessing terrorism material detailing knife combat and instructions for explosive devices. PC Benjamin Hannam had been working as a probationary officer for the Metropolitan Police for nearly two years before his IP address was uncovered by detectives on a leaked database of users of an extreme right-wing forum. PC Hannam was jailed for four years for membership of a proscribed organisation.

PC Hannam has become the first serving British

police officer convicted and imprisoned for a terrorist-related offence, however several serving soldiers and former servicemen have previously been identified participating on NA group chats and have been convicted for membership to the proscribed far-right group. Concerns over links between the UK’s armed forces and far-right groups escalated in 2018 after the conviction of Lance Corporal Mikko Vehvilainen, a white supremacist who was found guilty of belonging to National Action and stockpiling weapons. Vehvilainen had previously called on members to focus on gaining “military and key civil positions”. The recent



Undated handout videograb issued by the Metropolitan Police of Benjamin Hannam spray painting graffiti which was shown to the jury during his trial at the Old Bailey in London. Rookie Pc Ben Hannam, 22, has become the first British police officer to be convicted of belonging to a banned neo-Nazi terror group. Issue date: Thursday April 1, 2021.

conviction of PC Hannam revives concerns over the access for infiltrated right-wing actors to police and military training, weapons, and sensitive information.

Whilst there have been no successful insider attacks by serving police or military in the UK, there has been at least one case in France. In 2019 a police employee stabbed six colleagues at the Prefecture of Police in Paris, killing three police officers and one administrator and injuring two others. The former French prime minister, Édouard Philippe, promised a security review of staff working in counter-terrorism intelligence units after the state prosecutor announced the attacker adhered to “a radical vision of Islam”. The attack highlighted serious failings, mounting concerns over how a long-standing staff member working within a high-security police department was able to

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carry out such a violent, premeditated attack.

In November 2020, Neil Basu, the Head of Counter-Terrorism Policing noted that the far-right is the fastest growing terror facing the UK.¹ This latest terrorist conviction highlights the need for continued vigilance of the insider threat in law enforcement, intelligence, military agencies and strategic infrastructure facilities such as airports, petrochemical and energy power plants. The potential threat that insider access to training, weapons and sensitive intelligence poses to both the staff and the wider public is significant and far-right groups have displayed the intent to infiltrate and recruit within these organisations.

However, according to a 2019 report by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), the “insider” threats posed by staff vulnerable to radicalisation are overlooked by the majority of police forces.

In a further indication of the ongoing importance being placed on combating far-right extremism, the Home Office this month placed the far-right Atomwaffen Division (AWD) on its list of proscribed organisations. [A fuller assessment of this designation can be seen above.](#)

¹ <https://news.sky.com/story/right-wing-extremism-fastest-growing-threat-says-uks-top-cop-in-counter-terrorism-12135071>

Attack on Iran’s Natanz nuclear facility



July 2, 2020, Natanz, Florida, USA: This photo released on Thursday by the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, shows a building after it was damaged by a fire, at the Natanz uranium enrichment facility some 200 miles (322 kilometers) south of the capital Tehran, Iran.

On 11 April, an explosion occurred at the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran. The explosion caused an electrical blackout at the facility. According to local sources, the explosion targeted the internal power unit of the facility, which supplies power to centrifuges and enrichment processes. The attack occurred a day after Tehran said that it was launching more than 150 new uranium enrichment centrifuges in its underground facilities.

It is currently unclear what caused this explosion.

Iranian sources have said that the alleged attack was not cyber related and was a conventional explosion and have blamed an Iranian national who was reported to have left the country after the incident. Israeli and some Western media outlets have said that the explosion was the result of a cyber attack, however, this has not been confirmed by Iranian authorities. Based on prior activity within Iran, it is doubtful that the incident will be confirmed as a cyber attack. Nevertheless, the incident is

of note as it demonstrates the vulnerability of critical national infrastructure (CNI) to attack or sabotage.

There have been several high-profile cyber-attacks against the facility. In July 2020, a cyber attack, allegedly conducted by Israel, caused an explosion and fire in the facility. In 2010, a cyber attack utilising the Stuxnet virus rendered centrifuges at Natanz unusable, setting back Iran’s nuclear programme by several years. The Stuxnet attack was allegedly perpetrated by Israeli and

American intelligence agencies.

If this incident was caused by a cyber trigger, it demonstrates the increasing ability of state actors in utilising cyber attacks to target CNI within adversarial states as well as the vulnerability of some CNI to cyber-attack. However, it remains doubtful that a terrorist actor would be able to mount a similar cyber attack without the backing of a sophisticated state actor.

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Cartel use of drones highlights potential for terrorist usage

On 20 April, a cartel used two drones to drop explosive ordinance on a police convoy, injuring two officers, in Aguililla, Michocán, Mexico. Local

released about the 20 April attack. However, Mexican media outlets have suggested that the two drones had containers attached to them

that drones can be easily modified to become makeshift explosives with relative ease, either as an explosive itself or as a delivery mechanism

However, UK-based threat actors have demonstrated the intent to use drones during their attacks. In June 2018, police arrested a suspected



police believe that the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) was responsible for the attack. In August last year, two explosive laden drones were found in a car belonging to CJNG members.

Little information has been

filled with plastic explosives and ball bearings which could be remotely detonated, although it is not clear whether the devices were detonated remotely or upon impact.

Whilst this attack was not terrorist in nature, it shows

that releases an explosive payload. Terrorists in the UK have not yet utilised drones in their attacks. The most well-documented terrorist use of drones has been observed in battlefield environments in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

Islamist extremist who plotted to target the military or police in a combined drone and bladed weapon attack. [For more on the terrorist use of drones, please see page 29 of the Pool Re Threat & Mitigation Report 2019 here.](#)

Interesting reads:

A New Approach Is Necessary: The Policy Ramifications of the April 2021 Loyalist Violence in Northern Ireland, CTC Sentinel

<https://ctc.usma.edu/a-new-approach-is-necessary-the-policy-ramifications-of-the-april-2021-loyalist-violence-in-northern-ireland/>

The March 2021 Palma Attack and the Evolving Jihadi Terror Threat to Mozambique, CTC Sentinel

<https://ctc.usma.edu/the-march-2021-palma-attack-and-the-evolving-jihadi-terror-threat-to-mozambique/>

The Right's Time to Fly? Exploring the Possibility of Right-Wing Extremists' Use of UAVs, RUSI

<https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-journal/rights-time-fly-exploring-possibility-right-wing-extremists-use-uavs>

France arrests 7 Italian leftist militants it harboured for decades, Reuters

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-arrests-italians-who-had-been-run-after-terrorism-convictions-2021-04-28/>

Longer jail terms and stricter monitoring as new terror laws gain Royal Assent, UK Government

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/longer-jail-terms-and-stricter-monitoring-as-new-terror-laws-gain-royal-assent>

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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**

Threat level

	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:	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Threat from Northern Ireland related terrorism to Northern Ireland:	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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