Israel-Palestine conflict may inspire extremist violence overseas

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Monthly *Threat* Update

May 2021

Pool Re
SOLUTIONS
Building resilience against terrorism risk

Threat Overview

There were no significant terrorist attacks in the UK or Western Europe in May 2021. However, instability in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine has seemingly led to an increase in anti-Semitic hate crimes and violence in the UK and US. In response to the violence, Islamist terrorist groups have urged their supporters worldwide to mount attacks on Jewish communities and associated targets.

In the UK, the British Standards Institution (BSI) in conjunction with several government departments, has introduced new regulations for the rental of vans and commercial vehicles. The new standards require background checks to be carried out on those attempting to rent vans to mitigate against Vehicle-as-Weapon (VAW) attacks such as the 2017 London Bridge attack.

Separately, in Belgium, police are currently searching for a soldier with far-right links suspected of acquiring sophisticated munitions and making threats towards a Belgian COVID-19 expert. The incident highlights the risk of insider threats within military and security forces, as well as the use of the pandemic by far-right groups as a recruiting and propaganda tool.

A ransomware cyber-attack shut down the US's largest pipeline system, the Colonial Pipeline for six-days, causing widespread fuel shortages and price rises in several US states. The attack, one of the most significant on US critical national infrastructure, by a hacker group, resulted in the pipeline operator' paying a ransom of nearly 75 Bitcoins ($4.4m) to the DarkSide hacker group.

A new French 'Anti-Terrorism' bill has been introduced which will extend measures to strengthen the monitoring and surveillance of newly released terrorist offenders and online terrorist activities. Like many other European countries, France is preparing the release of up to 200 Islamist extremist foreign fighters over the next two years. The new all-encompassing legislation may serve as a blueprint for other neighbouring states to tackle the threat of recidivism.

Israel-Palestine conflict may inspire extremist violence overseas

From 6 – 21 May 2021, hostilities between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories escalated to the most serious levels since 2014, with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad firing rockets into Israel and the Israeli government mounting airstrikes in the Gaza Strip. The violence in the region has led to mass protests in support of Palestine worldwide, which have largely been peaceful. However, the increased violence may also serve as a recruiting tool and rallying point for extremist groups.

There has been a notable increase in anti-Semitic violence during the flare up of violence both in the UK and in other Western countries. For example, two teenagers attacked a rabbi in East London on 16 May. Furthermore, police

Thousands protesters in solidarity Palestinian people over the conflict with Israel at the Dam square May 16, 2021. Photo Paulo Amorim / VWPics / Alamy Stock Photo

in the US are investigating anti-Semitic violence in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago related to the situation in the Middle East. These incidents are unlikely to be designated as terrorist attacks but may be classified as hate crimes, highlighting the issues surrounding the definition of terrorism and the designation of certain incidents as acts of terrorism, although this is more of an issue in the US, where certain acts may be classed as 'domestic terrorism', which is a designation that is not used by the British government.

However, a terrorist attack inspired by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a realistic possibility in the coming months. Islamist groups operating internationally, such as

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Israel-Palestine conflict may inspire extremist violence overseas (continued):

Daesh, often incorporate the treatment of Palestinians by the Israeli government into their propaganda. Daesh has repeatedly called on its supporters based in the West to mount attacks against places associated with the Jewish faith, dating back as far back as its propaganda releases in 2014 and 2015.

In an indication of the value placed on symbolic targets associated with Judaism by Daesh, the Department of Justice in the US recently convicted a 23-year-old man in Holland, Ohio, for providing material support to Daesh and plotting a marauding firearm attack on a synagogue in Toledo in 2018. There has not yet been a confirmed Islamist terrorist attack or plot against synagogues or other targets associated with the Jewish communities

in the UK reported in open sources.

In its most recent Arabic-language newsletter, Al-Naba, published on 20 May, Daesh said that Palestine is an issue for all Muslims and is not a solely a local cause. It said that only by fighting Israel and its allies overseas can Jerusalem be 'liberated'. Daesh ended its editorial on Jerusalem by calling on its supporters to 'strike the allies of the Jews' outside of Israel using any means necessary.

Similarly, Al-Qaeda, in its latest issue of Nafeer published on 11 May, called on Muslims worldwide to 'wage jihad' against Israel through the targeting of American and Jewish interests worldwide, in retaliation for the ongoing Israeli action in East Jerusalem. Furthermore, the

group urged its supporters to make use of rudimentary methodologies if they do not have access to sophisticated technology. As such, inspired attacks against synagogues and other symbolic targets cannot be discounted in the coming months, particularly if violence between Israel and Palestine resumes.

Conflicts overseas have long been used as a rallying point for Islamist extremist groups in particular. For example, Islamist groups in the UK have utilised the ongoing Kashmir conflict in propaganda in the past as well as the Iraq War and the Syrian civil war. For more on the blowback that security events overseas can have of the terrorist threat in the UK, please see page 56 of the 2020 Pool Re SOLUTIONS Annual Review here.

Solidarity with Israel demonstration near the Embassy of Israel with hundreds of pro-Israelis gathered in Kensington High Street waving Israeli flags, banners and chanting loudly, while speeches were made in a show of support during Israel-Palestine conflict. Photo Guy Corbishley / Alamy Stock Photo.

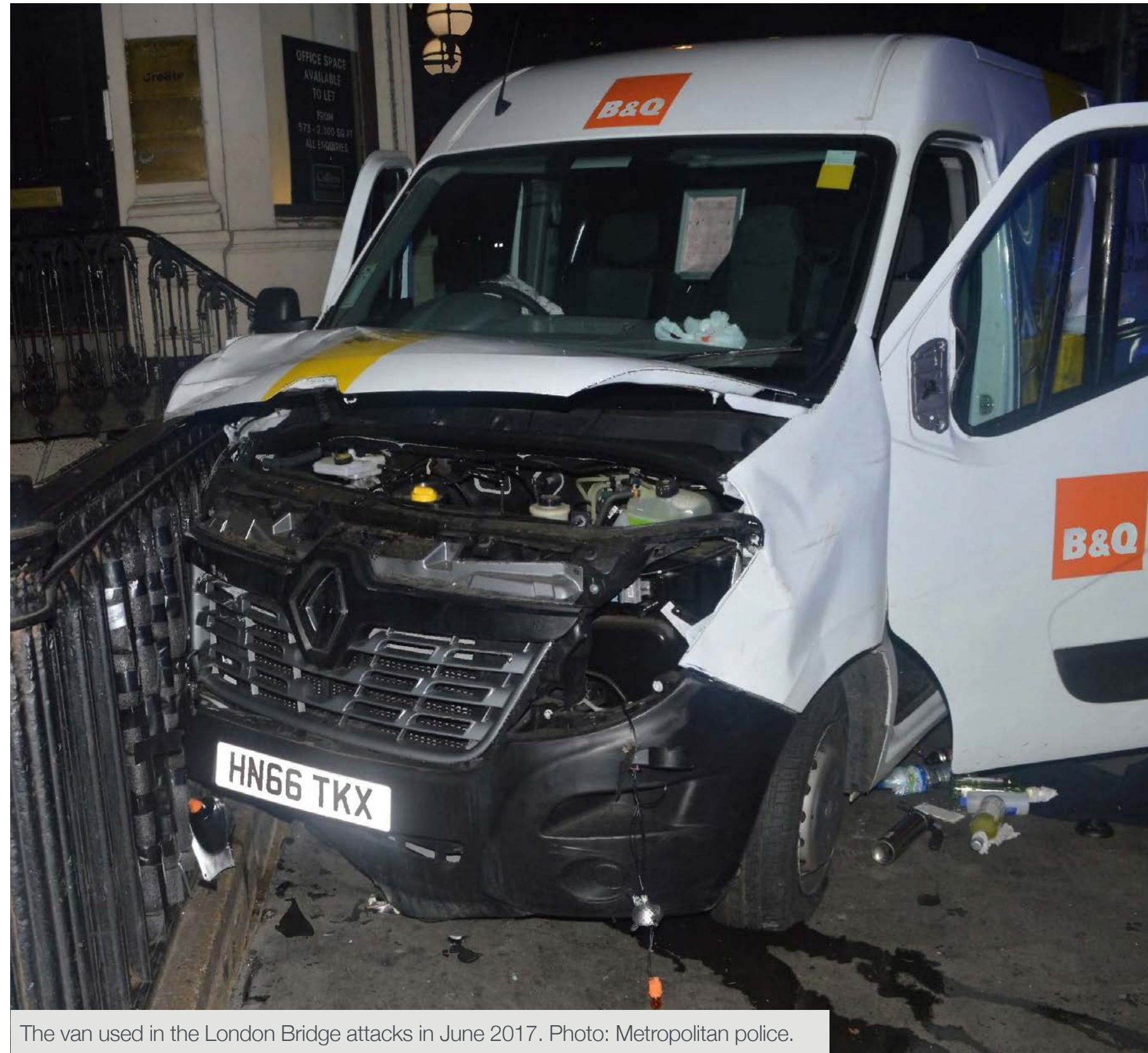# New rental checks on vans to prevent vehicle-as-weapon terrorist attacks

On 10 May, new guidance designed to prevent terrorists using vans and other commercial vehicles for terrorist attacks was published. The new standards were introduced by the British Standards Institution (BSI) and sponsored by the Department for Transport (DfT) and Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (CPNI).

The new standards include a requirement to carry out background checks on individuals hiring vans and commercial vehicles. The standard sets out the process of identifying, implementing and maintaining security measures to reduce the risk of commercially operated vehicles being used in acts of terrorism. The full standard can be found here.

VAW terrorist attacks have been used several times in the UK and Western Europe since 2015, in attacks such as the 2017 London Bridge and Westminster attacks as well as the 2016 Nice attack and Berlin Christmas market attack. Whilst these standards will assist in reducing the risk of attack from those who attempt to mount an attack using a lawfully acquired commercial vehicle (as was the case with the 2017 London Bridge attack), this will not necessarily prevent would-be terrorists from hijacking a truck (as happened in the 2016 Berlin attack), stealing a vehicle or using a non-commercial vehicle in their attack (as happened in Westminster in 2017).

The threat of VAW attacks is also mitigated by the increased amounts of hostile vehicle mitigation measures across the country, but particularly in urban areas, that have been built since 2017. However, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, many streets in urban centres have been pedestrianised to accommodate outside seating, as well as larger numbers of people queuing outside of shops, potentially presenting new target rich environments for potential terrorists. As such, the threat of VAW may be particularly acute in the coming summer months.

The van used in the London Bridge attacks in June 2017. Photo: Metropolitan police.

Belgian police search for far-right terrorist soldier

Police in Belgium are currently searching for a former soldier suspected of being a far-right extremist. According to Belgian media outlets, the soldier, Jurgen Conings, is heavily armed with firearms and had possession of anti-tank rocket launchers, although these were later recovered. Conings also made threat against Marc van Rast, a Belgian COVID-19 expert who has publicly supported vaccine programmes and social restrictions.

This case serves as a timely reminder of the potential insider threat presented by extremists operating within the police, military or government. Indeed, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo raised the question of how Conings was able to access sophisticated weapons despite being on a list of potential far-right terrorists. In the UK, police have previously arrested several serving military personnel for belonging to proscribed organisations or attempting to pass munitions to extremist groups. Most notably, L/ Cpl Mikko Vehvilainen acted as a recruiter for far-right Nation Action and Ciaran Maxwell used his position as a Royal Marine to create pipe bombs and steal ammunition for violent dissident republicans.

Whilst it is unclear how long Conings held extreme right-wing views, this incident also follows a trend of far-right extremists using the coronavirus pandemic

Belgium Army personnel search for armed soldier at Nationaal Park Hoge Kempen in Dilsen-Stokkem. Photo PA/ Alamay Stock Photography

within its propaganda and recruitment media. Since he absconded, Conings has become somewhat of a cult figure on far-right forums. Indeed, Deputy Assistant Commissioner Matt Twist of Counter-Terrorism Policing recently said that far-right extremist groups have used conspiracy theories about the pandemic to attract younger supporters. For more on conspiracy theories and terrorism, please see page 63 of the 2020 Pool Re SOLUTIONS Annual Review here. Additionally, Counter Terrorism Policing and National Counter Terrorism Security Office published guidance for business on identifying far-right terrorism on 25 May, which can be accessed here.

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Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack shuts down US fuel supply

On 7 May, a cyber organised crime group mounted a ransomware attack against the Colonial Pipeline in the USA, the country's largest pipeline system. The ransomware attack targeted computerised equipment managing the company's commercial systems, resulting in one of the most significant attacks on American critical national infrastructure (CNI) by a cybercriminal group. Nearly 100 gigabytes of data were stolen during the attack, which the DarkSide group threatened to release on the internet if the ransom was not paid. Multiple systems were taken offline to contain the threat, halting all pipeline operations over concerns that the attackers could potentially compromise operational technology

systems which govern the functioning of the pipeline.

The attack on the pipeline, which transports nearly half of the fuel supplies for the east coast of the USA, caused widespread fuel shortages and price rises across south-eastern US states. President Joe Biden declared a state of emergency on 9 May, removing limits regarding the transport of fuels by road, in an attempt to alleviate shortages, primarily caused by people panic buying gasoline.

Pipeline operations resumed on 12 May, following a six-day shutdown, after the company paid a ransom of nearly 75 Bitcoin ($4.4 million) to the attackers in exchange for a decryption tool. The decision to pay the

Holding tanks at one of Colonial Pipeline's tank farms.
Photo Xinhua / Alamy Stock Photo

ransom was made in order to restart the pipeline quickly and safely according to CEO Joseph Blouent as "tens of millions of Americans rely on Colonial: hospitals, emergency medical services, law enforcement agencies, fire departments, airports, truck drivers and the traveling public".

However, Ciaran Martin, former head of the UK National Cyber Security Centre, has warned that "paying ransoms to attackers can encourage more criminal activity and often does not lead to a restoration of systems". Moreover, paying ransoms to these groups may help to expand the criminal group's capabilities. Furthermore, CNI institutions are acutely vulnerable to ransomware attacks and often have no choice but to pay ransoms given their essential nature, leaving critical infrastructure vulnerable to repeat attacks.

The Colonial pipeline attack

was the largest cyberattack against an energy system target in the USA to date. The attack comes amid growing concerns over the vulnerability of CNI to cyberattacks after several high-profile examples, including the Oldsmar water treatment plant cyber-attack in Florida in February 2021.

Whilst the perpetrators of the attack, the Eastern European-based DarkSide group, have connections to Russia, the Russian government is not believed to be responsible for this attack. This latest incident demonstrates the sophisticated capabilities of non-state actors to target CNI vulnerabilities and cause widespread business interruption and threats to national security.

For more information on cyber ransomware, see our latest blog by Senior Cyber Advisor to Pool Re, Conrad Prince, on the topic here.

French Anti-Terrorism Bill to combat released offenders

As France prepares to release 58 Islamist extremist terrorist offenders from prisons this year, with 200 expected to be released by 2023, a new anti-terrorism bill has been introduced, set to extend measures to strengthen monitoring and surveillance of newly released and potential terrorist offenders.

This new bill aims to strengthen several measures introduced by the state of emergency in 2015. As most of the terrorist offenders currently in the French prison system were convicted for joining Islamist groups in Syria or Iraq during the peak of Daesh's so-called 'caliphate', many are now nearing the end of their sentences. France, like many Western European countries, now faces the decision of

how to manage these newly released terrorist offenders.

If the bill is passed into law, released terrorists could face restrictions on their movements, including where they can live or what public events, such as concerts or sporting events, they could attend. Measures will also be introduced to extend the period of time released terrorist offenders are under surveillance from one to two years. The courts would also have new authority to require released offenders to frequently check in with probation authorities.

The new bill also enhances surveillance and data collection methods including the increased monitoring of extremist websites and encrypted messaging providers. French Interior Minister Gerald Dalmanin

French Minister of the Interior Gerarld Darmanin and French Minister of Justice Eric Dupont Moretti , give a press conference after the Council of Ministers, at the Elysee Palace in Paris, France, on April 28, 2021. Photo by Stephane Lemouton/pool/ABACAPRESS.COM Alamy Stock Photo

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French Anti-Terrorism Bill to combat released offenders (continued):

Photo: Guy Corbishley / Alamy Stock Photo

admitted in April that French intelligence services were unable to detect messages between the militants involved in the last nine attacks in France. As each of the past eight terrorist attacks between 2020-21 in France has been carried out by individuals not previously known to intelligence services, the proposed legislation hopes to address the increasing difficulty of detecting and monitoring homegrown self-radicalised terrorists.

In France between 2004 and 2017, at least 16% of Islamist extremists sentenced either re-offended, left for jihad, attempted to kill a prison warden or breached the law against justifying terrorism.[1] Currently, more than 1,000 current inmates have been flagged as radicalised. Despite 36 attacks

interrupted by French authorities since 2017, France has experienced more Islamist attacks than any other Western European country, warranting the extra legislative means, according to French President Emmanuel Macron. The new legislation is expected to give French authorities greater powers to undertake surveillance and restrict released terrorist offenders, limiting their ability to conduct and plot future attacks, whilst also providing better capabilities to monitor threats online.

The French Anti-Terrorism bill may provide a blueprint for other European countries facing similar threats of recidivism of violent terrorist offenders and rising online radicalisation. Whilst the threat of recidivism in the UK has remained lower than France, at 3%

between 2013-2019, three recent attacks involving released terrorist offenders have renewed the debate regarding the strengthening of surveillance and licence condition measures. The recent inquest into the 2019 Fishmongers' Hall attack serves as a pertinent reminder, that whilst on licence, released terrorist offenders have demonstrated opportunistic intent to conduct attacks. Similarly, after experiencing a rise in online radicalisation during lockdown, the UK may need to follow France in implementing more robust online as well as physical monitoring of terrorist threats.

1 https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/05/08/france-worries-about-how-to-handle-released-terrorists

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Director General of MI5 and Head of CT policing give interview to Times Radio

On 21 May, Director General of MI5, Ken McCallum and the Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, the National Lead for Counter Terrorism, jointly gave an interview to Matt Chorley of Times Radio. Of particular note within the interview, McCallum highlighted that tech companies, such as Facebook, enable terrorists to plan attacks without being detected by MI5 or the Counter Terrorism Police (CTP).

McCallum argued that end-to-end encryption as the default encryption of Facebook messaging services gives terrorists and other criminals a 'free pass' to be able to plan and execute attacks. McCallum stated that when approved through judicial channels, tech companies should

Director General MI5 Ken McCallum

Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Specialist Operations Neil Basu. Photo PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

work with MI5 and CTP to allow them access to subject of interests' online communications.

McCallum and Basu also highlighted the need for greater integration between their two organisations, including colocation of resources. They argued that the sharing of information between agencies is integral to preventing terrorist attacks in the UK, particularly to interdict less sophisticated plots that are much harder to detect.

Interesting reads:

The Insider Threat: Far-Right Extremism in the German Military and Police, CTC Sentinel
https://ctc.usma.edu/the-insider-threat-far-right-extremism-in-the-german-military-and-police/

'Religious extremists' suspected in Maldives assassination bid, Seychelles News Agency
http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/14804/%27Religious+extremists%27+suspected+in+Maldives+assassination+bid

Five arrested in right-wing terror raids across England and Wales, BBC
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-56955711

Prevention of, and Preparedness for, Terrorist Attacks, ICCT
https://icct.nl/event/part-iv-of-the-handbook-of-terrorism-prevention-and-preparedness-prevention-of-and-preparedness-for-terrorist-attacks/

A New Normal: Countering the Financing of Self-Activating Terrorism in Europe, RUSI
https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/265_op_lone_actor.pdf

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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 devasting, 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:	○	○	●	○	○
Threat from Northern Ireland related terrorism to Northern Ireland:	○	●	○	○	○

Government advice

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SECURITY SERVICE MI5

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National Cyber Security Centre a part of GCHQ