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Monthly *Threat* Update

August 2021

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Threat Overview

There were no confirmed terrorist attacks in the UK, Western Europe or North America in August 2021. However, a shooting by a self-described 'incel' in Plymouth, which resulted in the deaths of five civilians and the gunman, may be reclassified as terrorism according to Devon and Cornwall police. This was the first confirmed case of incel-related violence to take place in the UK, although police have disrupted several planned attacks in recent years.

Internationally, the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, driving government forces from Kabul on 15 August. Taliban rule in Afghanistan is likely to destabilise the wider region as well as increase the terrorist threat to the West. There is a realistic possibility the Taliban will provide a haven for Islamist terrorist groups, like Al-Qaeda (AQ). Furthermore, the situation in Afghanistan will likely result in long-running instability which would likely be exploited by Islamist extremists seeking ungoverned territory from which they can plan and prepare attacks against the West. In the short-term, the perception of a Western military defeat by the Taliban is likely to embolden Islamist extremists worldwide. Consequently, threat of terrorism in the UK and elsewhere will likely increase in future.

Domestically, the inquiry into the February 2020 attack in Streatham has found that authorities had missed the opportunity to prevent the attack. Jurors found that when police identified that the attacker, Sudesh Amman, was buying material for his hoax suicide belt, he should have been recalled to prison. Jurors also determined that the killing of Amman by covert officers was lawful.

Threat forecast: Implications of NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan

Afghanistan Special Report

On 15 August, Kabul was seized by Taliban forces, completing the effective collapse of the Western-backed Afghan Government and Afghan National Army. The Taliban now exercise some level of control over almost the entire country. The withdrawal of NATO troops will undermine attempts to combat international terrorist groups based in the country, hampering intelligence collection efforts, and curtailing direct preventative action.

The Taliban's rapid gains followed the withdrawal of US forces from most of the country in July this year, in line with a peace deal between the two parties, signed in February 2020.



Convoy of Taliban fighters patrol along the streets in Kabul, Afghanistan, on August 31, 2021, after US withdrawal. Photo: DVM/ABACAPRESS.COM/Alamay Stock Photo.

While the deal stipulated that the Taliban would support international counter-terrorism efforts and not provide a haven for terrorist groups, there is considerable doubt about the Taliban's intention or ability to enforce this condition. The Taliban maintains close relations with proscribed terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Haqqani Network. The reported return of senior AQ members to Afghanistan following the fall of Kabul undermines Taliban claims that it will not provide shelter for terrorists.

The relationship between AQ and the Taliban is complex. Despite their historic alliance, the two groups often pursue divergent agendas, particularly regarding AQ's global jihadist ambitions. Nonetheless, mutual

animosity towards Daesh's Khorasan Province (ISKP) has continued to pull AQ and the Taliban together. It is unclear whether, in the wake of the fall of Kabul, the Taliban will compromise potential international recognition by actively sponsoring AQ. However, a tacit understanding between the groups will likely endure, enabling AQ to strengthen its presence in the country. Although, in the short-term, AQ will likely focus on consolidating its gains rather than directly planning high-profile attacks against the West from Afghanistan.

Similarly, ISKP will continue to focus on strengthening its own foothold in the country. Its ability to launch attacks outside the country is currently negligible. Competition with other militant groups will constrain

its freedom of action, and the affiliate is unlikely to be a significant beneficiary of the Taliban's seizure of power.

More broadly, the withdrawal of NATO troops is undoubtedly a major propaganda coup for Islamist extremists worldwide. The evacuation has already been presented as a humiliating defeat for the US, and evidence that the West can be forcibly ejected from Muslim-majority countries. In the short term, there could be a rise in "self-initiated" attacks by lone actors, in the UK and Europe, who have been emboldened by the strategic defeat of US forces. In the long-term, the withdrawal may serve as another recruiting tool for Western-based Islamist extremists, which could galvanise a wave of attack

Threat forecast: Implications of NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan (continued):

planning by domestic extremists across Europe. Lastly, there is a danger that some extremists may have been flown out with genuine entitled persons and the Home Office and CT Police will need to scrutinise the full list of new arrivals in the UK.

In the longer-term, the domestic security implications of the withdrawal may be more pronounced. The propaganda victory may contribute to the gestation of Islamist extremist cells in Western countries over time. Moreover, Afghanistan is likely to attract a variety of militant groups seeking ungoverned territory from which to operate. The Taliban's control over the country remains tenuous, and long-running violent competition between different armed groups

is likely. Such levels of instability breed extremism and create space for terrorist groups to resource and plan attacks abroad. There is a realistic possibility that in the medium-term, there will be successful attacks against Western targets by extremists operating from Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the large numbers of refugees created by the instability in Afghanistan may create domestic political and security problems for Western governments. While possible, it is unlikely that any Afghans recently evacuated from the country by Western forces will engage in terrorist activities on arrival in the West. However, large irregular population flows from Asia to Europe will present an opportunity for terrorists to

enter the European Union, as seen during the 2015 refugee crisis. Equally, such large irregular population movements can engender radicalisation among both individual refugees and members of host populations.

Overall, Taliban rule in Afghanistan presents a myriad of security risks both domestically and internationally. Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace MP, said on 19 August 2021, that the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban could lead to an "explosion" of extremism and terrorist plots against the West. Attacks attributed to Islamist actors in the West, inspired by the situation in Afghanistan, are a realistic probability in the short to medium term. Radicalisation and support



Taliban fighters patrol in the streets of a neighborhood in Kabul, Afghanistan, August. 22, 2021. Photo: UPI/Alamy Live News

for Islamist extremism in the UK will increase as a result of the 'humiliation' of the West, which could well lead to more self-initiated, low sophistication attacks in the UK. In the longer term, sophisticated attacks planned and prepared by AQ in Afghanistan cannot be discounted. The worst-case scenario is a repeat of another 9/11 type attack.

ISKP claim responsibility for suicide bombing at Kabul Airport

Afghanistan Special Report

On 26 August, a suicide bomber detonated a powerful improvised explosive device (IED) among crowds of people at the Abbey Gate entrance to Hamid Karzai International Airport, from where NATO forces were evacuating Western and allied Afghan personnel. The blast killed at least 182 people, including 13 US military personnel. Daesh's 'Khorasan Province' affiliate (ISKP) claimed responsibility for the attack the following day. The attack was the single biggest loss of life of US personnel in Afghanistan since 2011.

The attack represents a major propaganda coup for ISKP. The affiliate is a longstanding rival of the



A Taliban member is seen at the explosion site near the Kabul airport in Afghanistan, Aug. 27, 2021. Photo: Saifurahman Safi/Xinhua/Alamy Live News

Taliban in Afghanistan. It will likely use the attack to highlight both its capabilities and its anti-Western credentials among Islamist extremist audiences, in contrast to the Taliban's recent cooperation with withdrawing Western forces. In the future, ISKP will likely try to recruit disaffected elements of the Taliban in support of their efforts to consolidate control over parts of the country.

That said, the effectiveness of the attack reflects local dynamics, and does not herald a wider rival of Daesh's capabilities outside of Afghanistan. While the group's central Levantine branch continues to mount a lethal insurgency in Iraq and Syria, its power and resources remain constrained, and it has

a limited ability to incite, let alone plan and direct, complex attacks in Europe or North America.

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Shooting in Plymouth highlights concerns over incel-related violence

At 18:12 on Thursday 12 August 2021 police responded to a mass shooting in Plymouth. Over 12-minutes, 22-year-old Jake Davison carried out a firearms attack, killing five people before turning the gun on himself in the worst mass shooting in the UK in over a decade. Devon and Cornwall Police chief constable Shaun Sawyer, and Defence Secretary Ben Wallace both ruled out terrorism in the immediate aftermath of the incident. However, on 17 August, Devon and Cornwall police released another statement suggesting the shooting may be reclassified as a terror attack following investigations into the role of the incel movement and its ideologies in the attack, something Neil Basu, Assistant Commissioner for Specialist Operations,



Police outside 17 Biddick Drive, Keyham in Plymouth, Devon, where five people were killed by gunman Jake Davison. Photo PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

had warned MPs about last year. He highlighted an increase in young people being groomed into extremist ideologies online, including the incel ideologies which may have influenced Davison's Plymouth attack.

Involuntary celibates, or incels, is an idea that dates back decades. However, over the years, the ideologies of incel communities, mainly operating on online forums such as 8chan, have morphed and some of those involved in this community now present with an unfilled sense of entitlement to something they believe women are deliberately denying them. Whilst a large majority of those involved in online incel communities are unlikely to take a violent approach, there are a number of smaller groups

Shooting in Plymouth highlights concerns over incel-related violence (continued):

who have become more hostile to women and it is these views that have led to some members of the community to advocate for violence against both women, and other men in stable, happy relationships.

Whilst not in the UK, one notable attack attributed to incel ideologies was the 2018 Toronto van attack by Alek Minassian in Canada, a turning point for Canadian counter-terrorism. Whilst Minassian was not charged with terrorism related offences, this incident led to a policy change by the Canadian government, who moved to acknowledge incel movements as a form of violent extremism. After this change, in 2020, Canadian police formally charged a 17-year-old boy with plotting to carry out an incel inspired terrorist attack in the first

prosecution of incel related terrorism.

Whilst there have been no successful incidents of incel violence in the UK, or terrorism violence linked with the incel ideology, there have been a number of arrests in recent years. Gabrielle Friel was arrested in Edinburgh, accused of researching mass killings linked to incel supporters, including the 2014 shootings in Isla Vista, California, carried out by Elliot Rodger. He was charged with two offences under terrorism legislation. The arrest of Anwar Driouich is another example of violence in the UK linked with the incel community. Driouich was also accused of researching incel violence carried out in the US, and these two incidents involving incel ideologies as motivation were a sign that

the ideology was spreading beyond North America.

Within the UK, however, incel ideologies are not currently recognised as terrorism, although under UK law, the definition of terrorism includes use or threat of action, designed to influence government, or intimidate the public and must be with an intent to advance political, racial, ideological, or religious causes. In response to the Plymouth shootings, Jonathon Hall QC, Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, stated that incel ideology “fits rather uneasily into the way the authorities understand ideologies”. Hall stated that whilst it might feel like a part of right-wing ideology, it is a separate and different form of ideology completely, however, to classify incel

violence as terrorism really comes down to a matter of scale.

A government advisor was quoted in the news in the days after the Plymouth incident saying that violent attacks by incels in the future could be classed as terrorism, if the movement grows in prominence. Future designations as terrorism will come down to whether this is an isolated incident of incel violence, to which diverting a large number of resources to counter it as a terrorism threat seems to make no sense, or whether there is potential for the threat to reach a level where it poses a serious risk to the overall sense of security in the country and for the population. If it reaches this point, then Jonathon Hall believes this is when classifying the incel

movement as a form of violent extremism would be given more consideration under the UK’s definition of terrorism.

What is unusual about the Plymouth attack is the methodology used. Mass shootings in the UK are rare, but gun related terrorism is rarer still, something usually attributed to tight gun laws in the UK. In the case of Davison however, the gun used was licenced and legally owned as a sporting weapon, highlighting a range of questions police now face around UK firearms licencing laws. Should this incident be designated terrorism in regard to incel ideology, this would be the first terrorism attack involving firearms since the 2016 murder of Jo Cox by right-wing extremist Thomas Mair and whilst the Plymouth incident does

suggest the threat of incel related violence, whether classified as terrorism or not, is a realistic possibility in the future, the risk of firearms related terrorism remains unlikely, particularly with a review of firearms licensing procedures imminent

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Streatham Inquiry finds authorities could have prevented attack

The ongoing Streatham Inquiry has found that authorities could have prevented the February 2020 bladed weapon attack, where Islamist extremist Sudesh Amman stabbed and wounded two people on Streatham High Road, south London, before being shot and killed by undercover police officers. Amman had been released from prison a week before the attack. Jurors at the Royal Courts of Justice determined on 20 August 2021 that Amman was lawfully killed by the covert officers who were tracking him.

However, jurors also found that the authorities missed an earlier opportunity to prevent the attack. The attack could have been prevented had Amman been taken into custody after buying items used in his fake suicide belt. Amman was released from



prison despite concerns from police and MI5 that he was one of 'the most dangerous individuals' in the UK and

was likely to undertake the attack. Two days before the attack, Amman was seen buying four bottles of soft

drink, parcel tape and tinfoil, leading police to believe that he was planning on making a hoax suicide belt and at

this point should have been recalled to prison.

The Inquiry is likely to highlight errors made during the decision-making process leading to the release of Amman from prison. However, given the passage of the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act (2021) in April 2021, which ended automatic early release for terrorists and mandated tougher monitoring for terrorists released on license, it appears that the government has taken the necessary steps to prevent a similar situation.

Interesting reads:

Afghanistan and the UK's Illusion of Strategy, RUSI
<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/afghanistan-and-uks-illusion-strategy/>

Twelve Dilemmas Behind the UK's Afghan Defeat, RUSI
<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/twelve-dilemmas-behind-uks-afghan-defeat/>

Understanding the Taliban's military victory, IISS
<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/08/taliban-military-victory/>

Adapting to a new reality in Afghanistan, IISS
<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/08/afghanistan-taliban-region-response/>

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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.

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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"/>

Government advice

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