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## Monthly Threat Update August 2022

### Threat Overview

This month we take a look at the assassination of former Al Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and consider what this might mean for the future of the group.

We examine conviction and sentencing data from June and July for terrorism charges in Great Britain to help identify some common drivers relating to the ideologies of those charged.

Finally, we roundup the most significant terrorism-related news across advanced market countries throughout July. This includes:

- The arrest of former Islamic State member Aine Davis in the UK.
- Concerns over children being targeted by far-right actors online.
- The attempted assassination of author Sir Salman Rushdie in New York.
- The arrest of a gunman at Australia's Canberra airport.



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# Al-Zawahiri's death: What's next for Al Qaeda?

On 31 July 2022, Al Qaeda (AQ) leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed on a balcony in Kabul in a US drone strike. Following the death of AQ founder Osama bin Laden in 2011, Zawahiri, bin Laden's mentor and a co-conspirator in the 9/11 attacks, had taken over leadership of the terrorist group.

The strategic impact of this strike is unlikely to be significant due to the reduced activity from central AQ in recent years. Of more concern is that Zawahiri had been hiding in a Kabul safehouse owned by a former Taliban leader. One year on from the August 2021 NATO troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the successful drone strike provides initial confirmation that AQ and the Taliban are once again co-existing. The 2020 Doha agreement between the US and the Taliban forbid the presence of terrorist groups



UNDATED PHOTO Osama bin Laden (L) sits with his adviser Ayman al-Zawahiri. Photo by Visual News/Getty Images

like AQ within the country. Therefore, Zawahiri's presence and safety in Afghanistan is a clear breach of the agreement.

## What does this mean for the future of Al Qaeda?

Since the death of Osama bin Laden and the foundation of Islamic State, AQ has slipped into the background of the Islamist terrorism landscape. AQ splinter groups and affiliates such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Islamic State, formerly Al Qaeda in Iraq, have dominated global Islamist terrorism. With a new leader set to be announced, and the propensity for spectacular attacks against the West remaining, it is possible that AQ may once again resurge.

Zawahiri's death has prompted the US State Department to issue a warning cautioning



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American citizens travelling abroad of an increased threat of violent retaliation by members and supporters of AQ to avenge the death of their leader.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the present retaliatory threat remains mostly directed towards Western interests abroad, it is a realistic possibility that in the medium term the threat of violence from AQ could be seen on Western soil once again.

A change in leadership could provide a catalyst for an AQ revival with a new strategy to unite and inspire a new generation of violent Jihadists. The new leader will enter a very different AQ to the one founded by bin Laden. Most importantly, Islamist groups have become increasingly decentralised in recent years, hardly resembling the top-down command structure of earlier generations.<sup>2</sup> Depending on who is chosen as leader, their success will largely be dependent upon their ability to adjust to AQ's decentralised structure and affiliated groups throughout the world.

### Who will be the next leader?

Early chatter indicates a potential successor in former Egyptian army colonel Saif al-Adel. Adel is currently the AQ second-in-command and would be an obvious choice to take over, particularly due to his explosives specialism and frontline warfighting experience. If Adel does succeed Zawahiri, it is possible he will be a more proactively violent leader with a dynamic approach to commanding AQ than his predecessor.<sup>3</sup>

Intelligence suggests Adel has spent most of the past 20 years living in Iran and has close ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>4</sup> There has previously been a mutually beneficial collaboration between Iran and AQ with Iran enabling the group to continue their activity, in turn encouraging AQ to refrain from attacking Iran's Shiite populations.<sup>5</sup> This connection to the IRGC may act as a deterrent against Adel being chosen as



A view of Sherpur neighborhood where al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri killed by US Drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 02, 2022. Photo by Sayed Khodaiberdi Sadat/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

AQ's new leader for fear of being controlled by the IRGC; or it could work in Adel's favour with the potential for AQ to continue the Iran/AQ relationship and collaborate in their plots against the West, potentially gaining access to Iran's nuclear power.

### Outlook

The consequences of the death of Zawahiri remain unclear.

Assessments from US intelligence agencies suggest that AQ have not re-established their presence within Afghanistan and only a small number of longstanding members remain within the country.<sup>6</sup> However, of the dozens of AQ leaders released from Afghan prisons in 2021, it would be naive to assume all have left Afghanistan or renounced terrorism: an opinion echoed by Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations.<sup>7</sup>

The assessments conclude that the core AQ group do not currently have the capability



## Al-Zawahiri's death: What's next for Al Qaeda? (continued)

to conduct large-scale attacks and at present continue to rely on other branches and affiliate groups to plot against the West. A former U.N. counterterrorism official, Edmund Fitton-Brown, deemed this assessment to be "the most positive outlook on a threat picture that is still quite fluid."<sup>8</sup>

Al Qaeda and associated groups have been responsible for some of the most lethal and damaging terrorist attacks on the UK and Europe in the 21st century. These include:

- The 9/11 attacks on the twin towers in New York, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon
- The Madrid train bombings
- The 7/7 bombings targeting transport in London
- The Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, and
- The 2017 attacks at the Bataclan theatre and various other locations in Paris

Despite recent Islamic State attacks having typically been carried out by lone actors using low complexity methods, AQ's history of multi-operator attacks in crowded places using firearms and explosives poses a significant threat should they decide to pursue these tactics once again.

Strict UK's firearms regulations mean guns are less likely to be used in an attack here. However, they may be used again to target mainland Europe. Explosives have been a favoured method of attack from AQ targeting the UK. If Saif al-Adel (a former explosives expert in the Egyptian army) becomes the group's new leader, there is a realistic possibility we may see explosives being used again.

It is too soon to see the full impact of the death of Zawahiri. The evolution of AQ remains somewhat dependent on Zawahiri's successor, and whether they will want to prove themselves and their

authority immediately by plotting a spectacular attack to initiate their reign. It is likely AQ will continue to be a decentralised organisation with splinter groups engaging in significant case-specific violence within their individual areas of operation. The desire to target the West will likely always remain for AQ, but whether this will materialise into attacks or late-stage plots is unclear.

What appears evident is the Taliban's promise not to harbour terrorists such as AQ is not being kept. Zawahiri's presence in Kabul has heightened concerns that following NATO's withdrawal, Afghanistan is once again at risk of becoming a haven for terrorists.

Western security services will most likely remain cautious over the next six months as they come to understand what threat a change in command for AQ will have on the Middle East and the Islamist terrorism threat landscape.



- 1 [Ayman al-Zawahiri: US warns of possible retaliation over al-Qaeda death - BBC News](#)
- 2 [Ties Between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban... Will ISIS benefit from the Rupture? | Asharq AL-awsat \(aawsat.com\)](#)
- 3 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dc1c285c-129f-11ed-b7ce-9b24bf628db2?shareToken=adec506e417d7c3c8432343ff072d71c>
- 4 [Is Iran Supporting Al Qaeda? - ABC News \(go.com\)](#)
- 5 [Making Sense of Iran and al-Qaeda's Relationship - Lawfare \(lawfareblog.com\)](#)
- 6 [U.S. Says Al Qaeda Has Not Regrouped in Afghanistan - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.

# UK Terrorism Offence Data: August Update

In July 2022, authorities charged two individuals for terrorism offences, convicted three others, and sentenced a further individual in relation to terrorist activity. This is similar to May, during which two individuals were charged, and five others sentenced regarding terrorism offences.

Of note in July, we saw a teenager charged with preparation of terrorist acts in relation to a plot to attack the Isle of Wight festival.<sup>9</sup> This case follows the trend in 2022 of younger individuals being arrested, charged and convicted for terrorism. Most teenagers arrested in 2022 for terrorism were associated with right wing ideologies, whereas the individual charged in July was inspired by Islamist extremism. This indicates that whilst there is an increasing

level of right wing extremism within the UK, the Islamist threat still remains.

Arrests, charges and conviction rates for terrorism offences will likely remain relatively stable throughout the rest of the year. This does not mean the threat is diminished as there is a realistic possibility the UK could face an attack from one of a number of ideological groups or individuals within the next year. The UK's Threat Level remains SUBSTANTIAL meaning an attack is likely.



<sup>9</sup> You can read more about this in our July monthly: Monthly Threat Update July 2022 - Pool Reinsurance



## News Roundup

### UK: Children are increasingly being targeted by far-right groups online

An investigation by the Guardian has revealed that children are increasingly being targeted by "far-right ecosystems" online.<sup>10</sup> Teachers, police officers and community leaders have been warned that longer periods of unsupervised online access may result in children increasingly encountering far-right groups online. Through gaming tournaments, "virtual hangouts", and online-leafleting, children and teenagers are becoming introduced to white supremacist, racist, and neo-Nazi ideologies.

The age profile of those arrested in connection with far-right extremism in the UK has also lowered. Recent Home Office figures reveal that there has been an upward trend in terrorism-related



youth arrests, with 15% of those arrested for terrorist-related activity being aged 18 or under from March 2021 to 2022.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in January, MI5 revealed that they had investigated a 13-year-old neo-Nazi terror suspect who had downloaded bomb-making instructions from his grandmother's house in Cornwall. As the director general of MI5 warned, children and teenagers are increasingly being swept up by "online extremists and echo chambers", posing an "emerging threat" to the UK.<sup>12</sup>

The investigation comes amidst allegations by William Shawcross – Independent Reviewer of Prevent – that the government's current Prevent programme has disproportionately focused on right-wing extremism

compared to Islamist extremism. While limited evidence exists of the capability and/or intent of right wing actors to carry out violent attacks in the UK, it is likely that children will continue to be influenced by right-wing actors, both online and offline, in the near future. Although their intended targets cannot accurately be predicted, there is a possibility that these same children could mature into violence based upon the progression of the UK's far right movement in the near future.

<sup>10</sup> Revealed: UK children being ensnared by 'far-right ecosystem' online | Far right | The Guardian

<sup>11</sup> Upward trend in children arrested for terrorism offences | Counter Terrorism Policing

<sup>12</sup> MI5 investigated far-right terror suspect who was 13 years old | Far right | The Guardian



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## News Roundup

### UK: Former Islamic State member arrested on terror charges at Luton Airport

On 10 August, a man alleged to be a member of an Islamic State (IS) terror cell nicknamed "the Beatles" was charged with terrorism offences. Aine Davis, 38, was arrested at Luton Airport on 9 August following his return from Turkey where he had served a seven-and-a-half-year sentence for senior membership within the terrorist group. The terror cell first became infamous for torturing and beheading American journalists and British aid workers in Syria and Iraq. The leader of the cell, Mohammed Emwazi, known as Jihadi John, was killed in an airstrike in 2015 whilst the other two members have since been jailed in the US.

Davis' arrest has added to mounting concerns over the legal barriers faced when prosecuting former members of Islamic State, as well as the difficulty of providing evidence of what foreign fighters did during their time abroad. Evidence gathered by British security services, or interviews in custody

abroad, are not admissible in UK courts. Whilst the government has previously used citizenship deprivation measures – most notably in the case of Shemima Begum – to prevent the return of Britons who travelled to join IS, such measures can only be used if a Briton has citizenship of another country and are therefore not applicable to London-born Aine Davis.

Following his arrest, the Metropolitan Police and MI5 have been assessing the threat posed to the UK by Davis and a file of evidence is understood to have been put together for review by prosecutors. However, the arrest and charges also raise questions as to the threat posed by returning Islamic State fighters to the UK more generally. If former-ISIS fighters are granted re-entry into the UK, it is possible that certain actors could utilise the expertise gathered whilst fighting for ISIS in order to carry out attacks at home.



### UK: "Extreme hatred of Britain" could be defined as extremism

Conservative leadership candidate Rishi Sunak has proposed that those who "vilify" Britain could be treated as extremists and referred to the government's Prevent programme if he becomes Britain's next Prime Minister. Sunak's proposals aim to strengthen the government's anti-terrorism programme by ensuring that those with extreme hatred of the UK are "identified and diverted" from the violent path they are on. As part of his plans, Sunak also revealed that he would refocus the Prevent programme to tackle Islamist extremism – which he believes to be "by far and away the single largest terror threat to the UK" – following criticism that the programme has focused too much on right-wing threats.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Rishi Sunak would add 'vilification of UK' to extremism definition if he becomes prime minister | Politics News | Sky News



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### US: Author Salman Rushdie stabbed at New York event

On 12 August, Sir Salman Rushdie was attacked on stage at an event in New York and stabbed in the face, neck and abdomen. Rushdie has suffered years of Islamist death threats and was forced into hiding after his 1988 book, *The Satanic Verses*, sparked outrage among some Muslim communities who considered its content to be blasphemous in its portrayal of the Prophet Muhammed. A year after the book's release, Iran's Supreme Leader – Ayatollah Khomeini – called for Mr Rushdie's execution in a fatwa; a legal decree issued by an Islamic religious leader. Although Rushdie had escaped physical harm until now, the book's Norwegian publisher was shot in 1993 and its Japanese translator was stabbed to death in 1991.<sup>14</sup>

The attacker, Hadi Matar's, social media accounts indicate sympathy for Shiite extremism and Iran's Revolutionary



People hold up signs as they gather at the steps of the New York Public Library to show support for Salman Rushdie a week after he was attacked and stabbed multiple times while giving a talk. Photo by Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

Guards. In an interview with the New York post on 17 August, Matar claimed that Salman was "someone who

attacked Islam."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, hardliners in Iran continue to encourage Khomeini's fatwa. Since 2020, hardliners have

gained control of all three of Iran's branches of government and have controlled the military and media.<sup>16</sup> On 7 August, an Iranian state-controlled website republished the fatwa, leading many to allege that the attack was Iranian-ordered or inspired.

Matar may have become radicalised over the internet with no known contact with Iranian officials. However, following a trip to Lebanon to see his father, his mother claimed he had "changed", becoming more introverted and focused on the study of Islam.<sup>17</sup> The assassination attempt follows a series of foiled Iranian terrorist plots in the United States. For example, Shahram Poursafi, a member of the Revolutionary Guards, has since been charged for plotting to murder the national security advisor to former President Donald Trump, John Bolton. The attack on Rushdie is therefore not an isolated

event and is illustrative of the threat posed by malicious actors working on behalf of, or those inspired by, state-actors or extremist organisations. In Britain, Rishi Sunak has called for Iran's Revolutionary Guard to be officially designated a terrorist organisation as officials seek to investigate any possible links between the group and the attack.<sup>18</sup> There is a possibility that the attack may inspire other malicious actors to carry out copy-cat fatwa-inspired attacks in the near future.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-khomeinis-fatwa-rushdie>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://nypost.com/2022/08/17/alleged-salman-rushdie-attacker-didnt-think-author-would-survive/>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-khomeinis-fatwa-rushdie>.

<sup>17</sup> Salman Rushdie attack suspect 'changed' by Lebanon visit: Mother - Times of India ([indiatimes.com](https://www.indiatimes.com))

<sup>18</sup> <https://news.sky.com/story/sir-salman-rushdie-stabbed-12-times-including-in-face-and-neck-district-attorneys-office-says-12672711>.



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## News Roundup

### **AUS:** Gunman charged following Canberra airport shooting

On 15 August, a man was charged with firearm offences after discharging a gun inside Australia's Canberra airport. Police say that the 63-year-old man sat on seats in the airport's check-in area before shooting several times into the building's windows. The individual was later detained, and no one was injured. The capital's airport was evacuated as a precaution, with several flights being rescheduled or cancelled. Whilst the motives for the incident are still unclear, witnesses described scenes of chaos and confusion at the airport.

The shooting inside Canberra airport's check-in area proves that airports' landside areas



Police speak with witnesses after a gunman opened fire at the airport in Canberra on August 14, 2022. Photo by STR/AFP via Getty Images.

remain vulnerable to attacks by malicious actors. As vital aspects of the UK's Critical National Infrastructure and economy, airports are likely to remain high value targets for terrorist attacks in the near future. Despite strict airside security measures, landside areas at UK airports are currently at risk due to increased crowding resulting from the current staffing crisis.<sup>19</sup> For more on the risk posed to airports in the UK, please see Pool Re's recent Airport Sector Risk Report linked below.

[19 Sector Risk Report: Airports - Pool Reinsurance](#)



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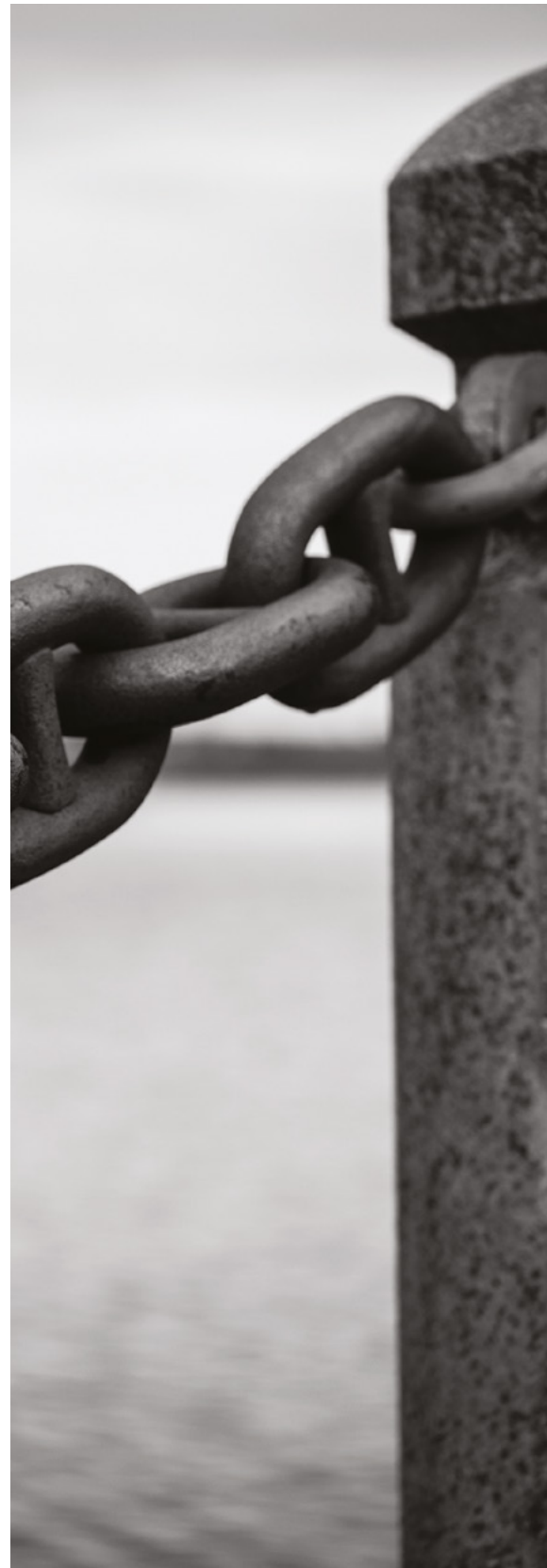
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# POOL<sup>Re</sup> SOLUTIONS

 **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](mailto: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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