

# Large football stadiums



# Terrorism threat to large football stadiums

## Minimum capacity 3,000

- It is almost certain that terrorist actors in the UK would have the intent to conduct attacks against large football stadiums due to the routine gathering of large crowds and mass media coverage of events held at such sites.<sup>1</sup>
- It is highly likely that any terrorist attack conducted against a large football stadium in the UK would be conducted by an individual or small cell using a low sophistication methodology. E.g., Bladed or Blunt Force Weapons, Vehicle as a Weapon, or Fire as a Weapon.
- There is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors in the UK could have the capability to conduct a high-sophistication attack at a large football stadium in the UK. E.g., Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), Person Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (PBIED), or Firearms attack. The complicated nature of plotting a high-sophistication terrorist attack makes it highly likely that there will be greater opportunity for UK police and security services to disrupt potential attacks.
- Islamist terrorist actors have previously demonstrated the intent and capability to conduct attacks against football stadiums in Europe and the UK. The large crowds that gather at large football stadiums almost certainly provide an attractive target for indiscriminate terrorist attacks. As such, it is likely that any terrorist attack against a large football stadium in the UK would be conducted by an Islamist inspired individual due to the ideologically driven intent to conduct indiscriminate attacks against members of the public.
- The assessments in this report were made using the PHIA Probability Yardstick, for further information please see the Assessment Methodology [section below](#).

## Location based threats to large football stadiums in the UK

- It is highly likely that there is an increased terrorism threat to large football stadiums in major cities and those in proximity to iconic sites and/or major transport hubs. There is a realistic possibility that large football stadiums located in proximity to iconic sites and/or busy public spaces could be impacted by a Marauding Terrorist Attack in proximity to their site.
- There is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors in the UK could seek to conduct an attack against large football stadiums that are located in smaller towns and cities in the UK due to the lack of other suitable targets in the nearby area compared to more urban environments.

## Previous terrorist incidents related to large football stadiums in the UK and overseas

- Terrorist actors have previously demonstrated the intent to conduct attacks against football stadiums in the UK, including:
  - **2018 Cardiff**; An individual was sentenced to life imprisonment for plotting to conduct an Islamic State-inspired terrorist attack against a Justin Bieber concert at the Principality Stadium in Cardiff, Wales. Reporting suggests that the individual planned to conduct a Marauding Terrorist Attack using a low sophistication methodology.<sup>2</sup>
  - **2018 UK**; An individual was convicted of terrorism offences for encouraging the targeting of football stadiums in the UK after a terrorist attack against a football stadium in Besiktas, Turkey. The individual allegedly published a list of UK football stadiums that could be targeted and was a supporter of Islamic State.<sup>3</sup>
- Terrorist actors have previously demonstrated the intent to conduct attacks against football stadiums globally, including:
  - **2023 Belgium**; An Islamist terrorist conducted a marauding firearms attack against two Swedish nationals in proximity to the King Baudoin Stadium. The Belgium-Sweden Euro 2024 qualifier football match being played at the time was abandoned. The individual reportedly claimed he had been inspired by Islamic State. There were two fatalities and one other was injured.<sup>4</sup>
  - **2016 Turkey**; Terrorists conducted an attack against the football stadium of the Besiktas team in Turkey, two hours after a game. The perpetrators conducted a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) attack, driving directly into a police vehicle before detonation. An individual then conducted a Person Borne Improvised Explosive Device (PBIED) attack shortly afterwards. There were 38 fatalities.<sup>5</sup>
  - **2015 France**; Three individuals conducted separate Person Borne Improvised Explosive Device (PBIED) attacks at the Stade De France during an international football game. The attacks were part of a much larger terrorist attack conducted across multiple sites simultaneously in Paris. There was one fatality as a result of the stadium attack. There were 130 fatalities in total.<sup>6</sup>

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Other potential threats to large football stadiums in the UK

- It is almost certain that the regularity of football match scheduling and repetition of similar matchday security protocols would allow any individual with the intent to conduct terrorist attacks against large football grounds to conduct regular undetected hostile reconnaissance and develop a good awareness of the security mitigations in place on a match day.
- Due to the sophisticated search and screening procedures at large football stadiums in the UK, there is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors could prioritise attacks against a stadium's external spaces, proximal locations, or at points of security challenge. E.g., Approaches to the stadium, external concourses, transport hubs, security checkpoints, etc.
- It is highly likely that the threat posed to any football stadium in the UK would be dynamic and dependent on the profile and attendance of the stadium and/or the nature of the event hosted at the site.
  - E.g., It is almost certain that terrorist actors would prioritise attacks against major stadiums such as Wembley and/or Premier League stadiums, compared to smaller, lesser-known stadiums.
  - E.g., It is almost certain that terrorist actors would prioritise attacks against events with major TV coverage. For example, it is almost certain that high-profile musical performances held at large football stadiums (E.g., Beyonce performing at the Tottenham Hotspur's Stadium) would attract more attention from terrorist actors than low-level, non-televised, football fixtures.
- There is a realistic possibility that there could be a heightened threat to large football stadiums in the UK hosting high-profile individuals. E.g. Celebrities, politicians, influencers, etc.
- It is almost certain that there is a link between extreme right-wing ideology and a small portion of football supporters in the UK. Extreme right-wing groups such as the Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA) have previously held large protests across the UK that have featured: extreme right-wing rhetoric; clashes with police; and death threats being issued to police officers. There is a realistic possibility that these types of individuals could seek to radicalise vulnerable attendees at large football stadiums in the UK. However, it is highly likely that any violence linked to this type of individual would be linked to football hooliganism rather than terrorism.
  - **2022 Manchester**; A banner reading "British to be minority by 2066" was flown over Manchester City F.C.'s stadium during a Premier League game. The fly-over was later linked to a far-right nationalist group, Patriotic Alternative. Media reporting suggests the group had posted leaflets titled "White's to be a minority by the year 2066 or sooner" over the same weekend.<sup>7</sup>
- There is a realistic possibility that staff employed at large football stadiums could pose an insider threat in several ways, including:
  - Temporary event staff, in-house staff, and/or third party providers could enable terrorist actors in the UK to access the site with malicious items by allowing such individuals to bypass security mitigations and vetting procedures in place.
  - Temporary event staff, in-house staff, and/or third party providers could grant terrorist actors access to high-profile players, guests or performers in the back-stage areas of a large football stadium.
- Although it is unlikely that any such event would be designated as terrorism, it is highly likely that Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA) Protest groups would have the intent to stage protests at large football stadiums in the UK. NVDA Protest groups have previously demonstrated the intent and capability to target football stadiums in the UK, including:
  - **2023 Liverpool**; Everton F.C.'s board of directors missed a Premier League game due to what the club described as "a real and credible threat to their safety and security". Fans of the football club later performed a sit-in demonstration against the board.<sup>8</sup>
  - **2023 Liverpool**; Media reporting suggests that "thousands" of Everton fans conducted a mass protest in proximity to Everton F.C.'s stadium. A plane later allegedly flew over the stadium with a banner saying "league's worst run club #time2gobill".<sup>9</sup>
  - **2022 Liverpool**; A Just Stop Oil protester tied himself to a goalpost during a game between Everton and Newcastle. The individual was later charged with pitch encroachment and aggravated trespass.<sup>10</sup> In the same month, two Just Stop Oil protesters interrupted a game between Tottenham and West Ham after trying to tie themselves to a goalpost.<sup>11</sup>
- There is a realistic possibility that instances of overcrowding and/or over attendance could be exploited by terrorist actors in order to conduct mass-casualty attacks against publicly accessible locations or to gain unauthorised access to football stadiums. For example, overcrowding and anti-social behaviour prior to the Euro 2020 final at Wembley enabled more than 2,000 people to gain access to Wembley without tickets, with 17 mass breaches of security, and a systematic targeting of disabled entrances as means of access.<sup>12</sup>

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- There is a realistic possibility that drones could pose an emerging threat to large football stadiums in the long term. Although it is currently unclear if terrorist actors in the UK would have the intent or capability to conduct a drone attack against a large football stadium, experts have previously warned that large-scale events are vulnerable to drone attacks.<sup>13</sup> Large football stadiums have previously been impacted by drones in the UK and globally, including:
  - **2022 Spain:** Media reporting suggests an Islamist-inspired individual was sentenced to three years in prison for plotting a drone terror attack against Barcelona F.C.'s stadium during a game against Real Madrid.<sup>14</sup>
  - **2022 UK:** A Premier League game between Brentford and Wolves was stopped for approximately 20 minutes due to an "unofficial drone" flying above the Brentford Community Stadium.<sup>15</sup>

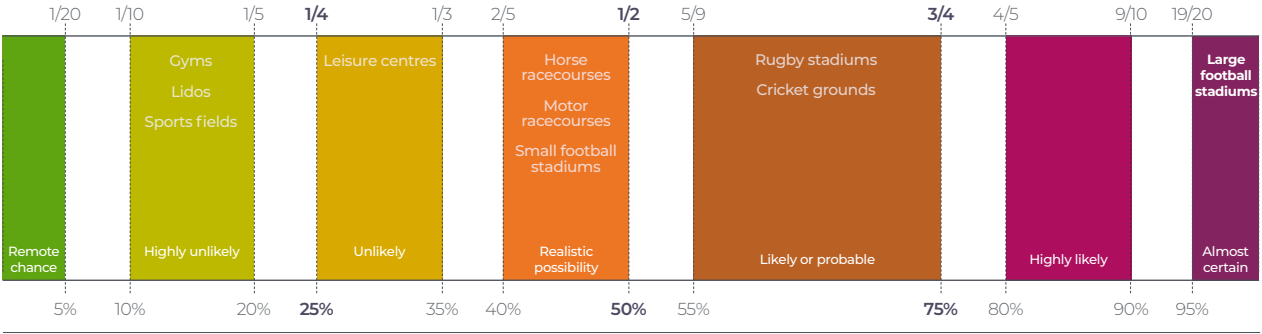
Threat visualisation

The diagram below outlines the intent of terrorist actors in the UK to conduct attacks against large football stadiums within the arts, culture and entertainment sector.

Terrorist intent can be defined as the desire and/or determination of an individual to conduct an attack against any given site.

The intent of terrorist actors to conduct an attack against the arts, culture and entertainment sector in the UK is subject to change based on the assessments outlined in this report.

**Note:** The terrorism threat to any given site is not based solely on intent, but also the capability of terrorist actors in the UK as outlined in this report. Terrorism threat is also mitigated by the UK's countrywide terrorism risk mitigation infrastructure including both public and private security and safety capabilities.



Assessment Methodology

The assessments made in this report have been made using the Professional Head of Intelligence's "Probability Yardstick" (above). The Probability Yardstick is a standardised instrument used to provide a professional standard for intelligence assessment.

- **Almost certain:** An event has a greater than 90% chance of occurring.
- **Highly likely:** An event has a 76% to 90% chance of occurring.
- **Likely:** An event has a 55% to 75% chance of occurring.
- **Realistic possibility:** An event has a 40% to 54% chance of occurring.
- **Unlikely:** An event has a 25% to 39% chance of occurring.
- **Highly unlikely:** An event has an 10% to 24% chance of occurring.
- **Remote chance:** An event has a less than 10% chance of occurring.

Time spans

- **Short Term:** 0 – 6 Months.
- **In the next 12 months.**
- **Medium Term:** 12 months – 5 Years.
- **Long Term:** 5+ Years.

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# Bibliography

1. Large Football Stadium is defined within this report in line with The Football Association (FA) Ground-Grading Guidance for FA National League System. Large Football Stadiums are considered as Grade 1 and Grade 2 stadiums. I.e., Those with a minimum of three-sides and a minimum capacity of 3000 people.  
Further information can be found here: [tm0273-ground-grading-handbook-v18\\_lo-res.pdf](#)
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Teenager given life sentence for planned Justin Bieber gig attack; UK security and counter-terrorism - The Guardian
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