

Churches



Terrorism threat to churches

- It is likely that terrorist actors in the UK would have the intent to conduct attacks against churches as publicly accessible and highly visible symbols of the Christian faith.
- It is highly likely that any terrorist attack conducted against a church 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 church in the UK. E.g., Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), Person Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (PBIED) or a marauding attack with Firearms. 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.
- 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 churches in the UK

- It is highly likely that there would be an increased terrorism threat to churches in major cities and urban areas due to the likely proximity of other attractive targets for terrorist actors surrounding the church. There is a realistic possibility that a church located within a major city could be impacted by a Marauding Terrorist Attack targeting an iconic site or busy public space in proximity to its location.
- Whilst it is highly likely that there would be an increased terrorism threat to sites located within large urban locations, there is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors in the UK could seek to conduct an attack against churches that are located in smaller towns or rural areas in the UK due to the lack of other suitable targets in the nearby area.

Previous terrorist incidents related to churches in the UK and overseas

- Terrorist actors have previously demonstrated the intent to conduct attacks against churches in the UK, including:
 - **2020 London:** An Islamist terrorist admitted to plotting a Person-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (PBIED) attack against St. Paul's Cathedral. The individual was reportedly the administrator for a significant pro-Islamic State social media channel and had urged attacks on targets across Europe. The individual was later sentenced to life imprisonment.¹
- Terrorist actors have previously demonstrated the intent and capability to conduct attacks against churches globally, including:
 - **2024 Australia:** An individual conducted a Bladed Weapons attack at a Sydney Church. The perpetrator targeted a bishop, a priest, and churchgoers during Mass. Australian police stated that the attack was a religiously motivated "terrorist act", however, they did not state the religion of the attacker. At least four people were injured, in addition to the perpetrator who was later arrested.²
 - **2023 Germany:** Three individuals were arrested for plotting a New Year's Eve terrorist attack against Cologne Cathedral. Reporting suggests that the alleged perpetrators intended to use a car to conduct an attack on behalf of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). The precise nature of the proposed attack remains unclear.³
 - **2023 Spain:** An individual conducted a Bladed Weapons attack against two churches in Southern Spain. A church worker was killed, and several others injured. It remains unclear whether the incident has been designated as terrorism.⁴
 - **2023 Austria:** Austrian police warned of a possible "Islamist-motivated attack" against churches and other houses of worship in Vienna after intelligence services reportedly received information suggesting an attack was expected in the near future.⁵
 - **2020 France:** An Islamist terrorist conducted a Bladed Weapons attack inside the Notre-Dame Basilica in Nice, France. There were three fatalities.⁶
 - **2019 Sri Lanka:** Eight Islamist terrorists conducted Person-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (PBIED) attacks against churches and luxury hotels in Sri Lanka. There were 269 fatalities and over 500 were injured. Islamic State later claimed responsibility for the attack.⁷
 - **2016 France:** An 84-year-old priest was killed, and four other people were taken hostage by two Islamist terrorists in Normandy, France. The perpetrators conducted a Bladed Weapons attack and were adherents of Islamic State. Islamic State later claimed responsibility for the attack.⁸

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Other potential threats to churches in the UK

- It is highly likely that the threat posed to churches in the UK would be dependent on the size and reputation of any given church. E.g., Larger churches such as St. Paul's Cathedral would almost certainly be at a greater risk of a terrorism-related incident than a rural village church.
- There is a realistic possibility that the presence of high-profile visitors, members of the congregation, or contentious guest speakers could increase the threat posed to any church in the UK. Terrorist actors in the UK have previously demonstrated the intent to target Christian preachers:
 - **2022 London:** An Islamist terrorist was intercepted whilst in a taxi from Brighton to Lewisham, South London, on the way to buy a firearm. The perpetrator had intended to target a Christian speaker at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park using the firearm. The individual was later sentenced to at least 16 years in prison.⁹
- It is likely that the threat posed to churches in the UK would be subject to change during Christian festive periods. For example, any church in the UK would likely have greater attendance during the Christmas or Easter period, increasing the attractiveness of any given Church to individuals with terrorist intent.
- There is a realistic possibility that specific events hosted at any given church in the UK could alter the intent of terrorist actors to target that site. For example, a high-profile wedding or funeral, involving a celebrity, politician, influencer, etc. could present terrorist actors in the UK with an attractive, publicly accessible target.
- It is highly likely that any terrorist actor with the intent to conduct an attack against a church in the UK would have open access to the site and the capability to conduct uninterrupted hostile reconnaissance due to the relaxed security posture and publicly accessible nature of churches in the UK.

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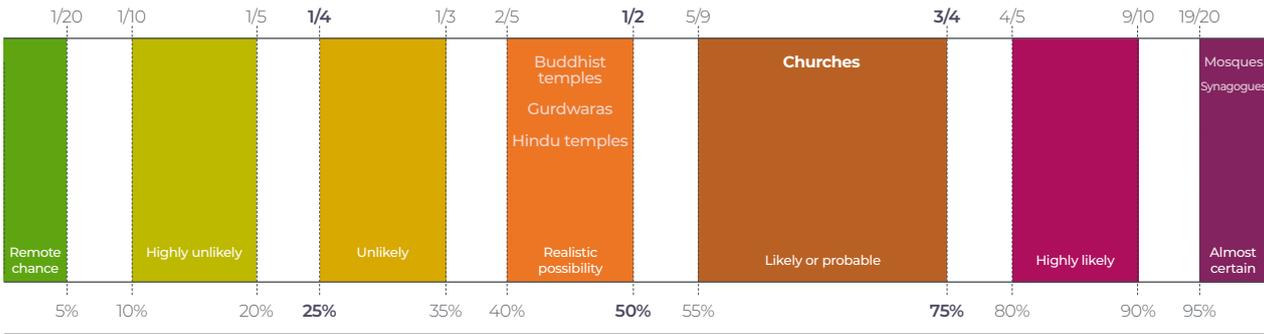
Threat visualisation

The diagram below outlines the intent of terrorist actors in the UK to conduct attacks against churches within the religious sites 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 religious sites 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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Intelligence cut-off date: 17 April 2024

For more information please contact solutions@poolre.co.uk

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