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# JIHADIST TERRORISM

**IN** JIHADISM IN THE  
UNITED KINGDOM

# EUROPE

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Raffaello Pantucci

## Imprint

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# **JIHADISM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**



**A Threat Picture since the Fall  
of the Caliphate's Capitals**

Raffaello Pantucci

# AT A GLANCE



The UK's jihadist terror threat picture has evolved compared to the 2000s, when the UK was a key target of al-Qaeda, and even more since the collapse of ISIS's caliphate in 2017. That year, in fact, marked something of a recent apex which has heralded a period of regular lone actor plots – some of which demonstrate an inspiration from ISIS, but others where it is unclear. This paper seeks to better understand this transformation and the evolution of the threat in the UK, as part of the “Jihadist Terrorism in Europe” series published by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in which renowned experts analyse the current state of the jihadist threat in various countries, as well as the related counter-terrorism strategies and political debates.

In the present study, Raffaello Pantucci looks at the UK, which most recently in January 2022 saw a radicalised British national launch an attack against a synagogue in Texas in advance of the attempted liberation of Dr Aafia Siddiqui, the long-jailed female al-Qaeda member serving a lengthy sentence in a nearby jail.

- › Although the UK jihadist threat has not produced any large-scale attacks recently, it has consistently produced lone actor plots.
- › The paper outlines how the current threat links back to the past, and in particular the dangers posed to the UK by the reemergence of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.
- › The UK also still has a lingering problem of foreign fighters who went to Syria and Iraq. Passport deprivation – a preferred Home Office method of dealing with such cases – has not eliminated the problem but simply displaced it. Some individuals are still trying to return home, while others remain in Turkish or insecure Levantine jails.
- › Authorities in the UK have consistently focused on trying to manage the threat through greater internal coordination.
- › Larger problems around extremism continue to fester, though the degree to which they are linked to the jihadist threat remains unclear.
- › The biggest problem for the UK is managing a problem which never seems to be entirely resolved, but only seems to grow in unpredictable and confusing ways, creating new cohorts of problems for authorities to manage. This, along with the growing problem of the extreme right wing, as well as sectarianism amongst South Asian communities points to a set of issues which will continue to trouble the UK.

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The year 2017 marked a turning point in the conflict against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as well as a shift in the UK's violent Islamist terrorist threat. The fall of Mosul and Raqqa in July and October 2017 respectively marked the effective end of ISIS' physical caliphate, while in the same year the UK was hit by five separate violent Islamist attacks after years of relative peace. This set the stage for the current phase of the UK's violent Islamist threat, which is characterised by a threat picture dominated by lone actor terrorists. As Home Secretary Priti Patel put it in the wake of the June 2020 attack in Reading when a solo violent Islamist attacker murdered three men, "it is clear that the threat posed by lone actors is growing"<sup>1</sup>. This trend has developed over some time, but 2017 marked a particular apex of the problem, that has sadly continued with a number of subsequent incidents including the murder of Member of Parliament Sir David Amess, the as of still unclear incident that took place in Liverpool in early November 2021, and the more recent attack on a synagogue in Texas, which was undertaken by a radicalised Briton, who was seeking the release of al-Qaeda prisoner Aafia Siddiqui. None of these plots were clearly linked to any known networks or plots, though there were apparently varying degrees of prior contact with authorities. This very much encapsulates the threat that is visible in the UK, with a resulting counter-terrorism strategy that tried to detect and prevent the increasingly complicated terrorist threat picture dominated by lone actors.

This paper will seek to outline the nature of the threat and response to it since 2017, trying to understand how the situation has evolved and what the next stages of a violent Islamist threat might look like. While events will naturally be impacted by incidents outside the UK, in the interests of brevity the focus of this article lies on events, trends, and capability within the UK. The story is one of a threat, which is growing more complicated and diffuse, creating an ever more challenging picture for security and intelligence services to manage. At the same time, however, it becomes clear that groups are no longer able to carry out large-scale terrorist attacks, raising a long-term question about whether security pressure is leading to slow eradication of threats or whether the new threat dynamic was successfully designed and implemented by terrorist groups.

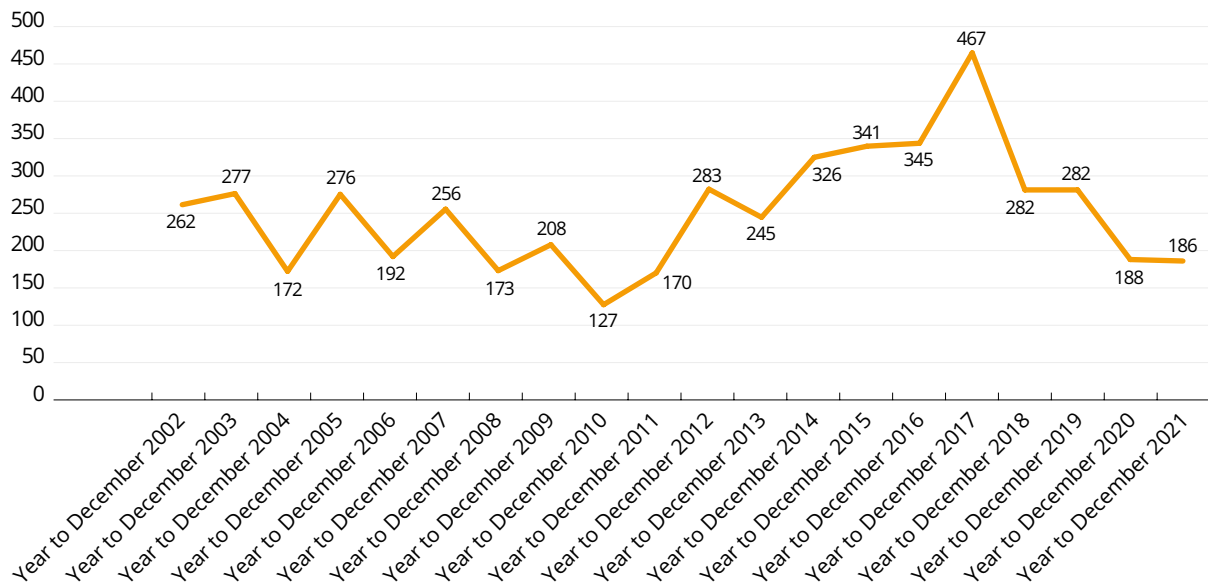
# 1. ATTACKS AND OFFENDERS

Since the beginning of 2017, the UK has faced 12 incidents involving individuals of a violent Islamist mindset launching attacks (this does not include the early November 2021 Liverpool car bombing, which had not definitively been linked to a violent Islamist threat at time of writing, nor does it include the January 2022 hostage taking at a synagogue in Texas by a radicalised Briton, who sought the release of an al-Qaeda prisoner). Further, there have been at least 20 known disruptions by authorities of plots in which individuals have been stopped and charged with offenses linked to an attempted attack (what security forces classify as “late-stage attack planning”). These plots involved a total of almost 50 people out of a broader pool of some 1,266 people<sup>2</sup> who are reported to have been arrested by the UK Home Office for terrorism offences during the same time period. In fact, of that initial group of 1,266 only 377 people were charged with terrorism offences, with no further action or other non-terrorism charges pursued in other cases. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the rest of them did not remain of terrorist concern, but the conclusion by authorities was that either no charges could be pressed or that non-terrorism charges stood a better chance in a court of law.

While this breakdown illustrates the high proportion of cases prosecuted as terrorist behavior that involved attack planning, it is impossible to know, based on open information, how many of the other cases that were not pursued on terrorism charges were involved in what security forces considered to be nascent terrorist plots. Nor is it possible to know exactly how many of the overall number were violent Islamist versus other ideologies.<sup>3</sup> Measured against historical numbers, the number of attacks is high, and senior security officials regularly talk about the unprecedented threat level they are facing.<sup>4</sup>

It is hard to pry too deeply into officially published UK terrorism data, given the broad anonymity that is applied to information released by the Home Office, and a legal process which keeps cases from public view. However, digging into what data is available does reveal some broader trends. For example, during the period from 2017 to today, terrorism arrests and charges in general are in decline, with 2017 in fact presenting itself as something of a spike since 2001.

#### UK Terrorism Related Arrest since 2001



Own Presentation – Statistics on the operation of police powers under the Terrorism Act 2000 and subsequent legislation. Year to December 2021: Annual Data Tables.

Within the data, some further interesting micro trends can be observed. In particular, the growth in the very young being arrested for terrorism offences. Those arrested and charged who were under 18 has increased dramatically. In both 2017 and 2018, police arrested and charged 10 minors for terrorism offences, a figure that is an all-time high.<sup>5</sup> In 2021 they initially arrested some 25 under 18-year-olds (an all-time high), though ultimately charges were only pressed in 6 cases. While the absolute numbers remain low, this needs to be kept in mind against the broader downward trajectory in terrorism arrests, meaning that the higher number of under 18 arrests accounts for a higher proportion of overall arrests. It is not entirely clear how many of these are of a violent Islamist nature, with many appearing to be young white teenagers (boys and girls) who appear to be drawn to extreme right-wing ideologies. UK Home Office data does not distinguish ideologies in its arrest and charge data.

#### Home Office data

Looking instead at nationality and ethnicity, it is difficult to again draw any clear conclusions aside from the fact that the overwhelming majority (70 per cent) of those arrested identified themselves as being UK nationals. When looking at their ethnic appearance as recorded by the police at the time of their arrest, however, around 40 per cent were identified as being of “White” appearance, and further 40 per cent of “Asian” appearance (the rest is made up roughly evenly of those of “Black” or “Other” appearance). These propor-



tions do not change between arrest and charge data. It is difficult to interpret this, except to say that the previous belief that the majority of those being arrested and charged for terrorism offences in the UK were of ethnic South Asian origin (which would be captured under the “Asian” descriptor in Home Office data) appears no longer to be the case. This suggests that the classic UK terror connection to South Asia through diaspora is losing some of its salience.

### 1.1 Lone Actors – Connected by Ideology

With a few exceptions, it is almost impossible to establish a link showing clear and specific direction between any of the plots seen in the UK and ISIS or al-Qaeda, though individuals have been inspired by the groups’ ideology. This makes the exact impact of the end of ISIS’ caliphate on this threat picture difficult to trace. 2017 marked something of a spike in terms of the UK threat picture with five Islamist attacks (and nine disrupted plots), but the directional links from ISIS are difficult to identify based on public information in many of the plots. There is only unmistakable evidence in one plot of an individual claiming allegiance to al-Qaeda.



*Armed police officers stand near the Manchester Arena, where U.S. singer Ariana Grande had been performing, in Manchester, in northern England, Britain, May 23, 2017. REUTERS/Andrew Yates*

Even though no direct instructions were made by either of the two big terrorist organisations regarding to attacks since 2017, there are clear and worrying connections in some cases. Hashem and Salman Abeidi, two brothers responsible for the murder of 22 people leaving an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, were clearly connected to al-Qaeda and more recently ISIS groups in Libya. During the still ongoing inquest into the attack, photos revealed that both brothers were training and possibly fighting alongside the February 17<sup>th</sup> Martyrs Brigade in Libya. At least one other British-Libyan individual associated

with this group, Ibrahim al-Mazwagi, was killed in Syria where he was fighting alongside groups that would ultimately break away to form ISIS.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, during the course of the inquiry, it was revealed that ample electronic evidence was uncovered to show that Salman and Hashem Abeidi (and their older brother who has not been prosecuted in connection to the bombing) had an interest in ISIS. Moreover, they were linked to UK networks in Manchester that were helping individuals go and fight alongside ISIS in Syria and Libya.<sup>7</sup> Hashem Abeidi was also believed to know Reeyad Khan, a British ISIS fighter in Syria who was killed by a drone strike on 21 August 2015, and known to be a prolific remote director of terrorist attacks.<sup>8</sup> However, so far, no evidence has been produced in the public domain that shows clear direction by ISIS in conducting their murderous attack against children leaving an Ariana Grande concert. ISIS did claim the incident though demonstrated no evidence of having prior knowledge of what was going to take place.

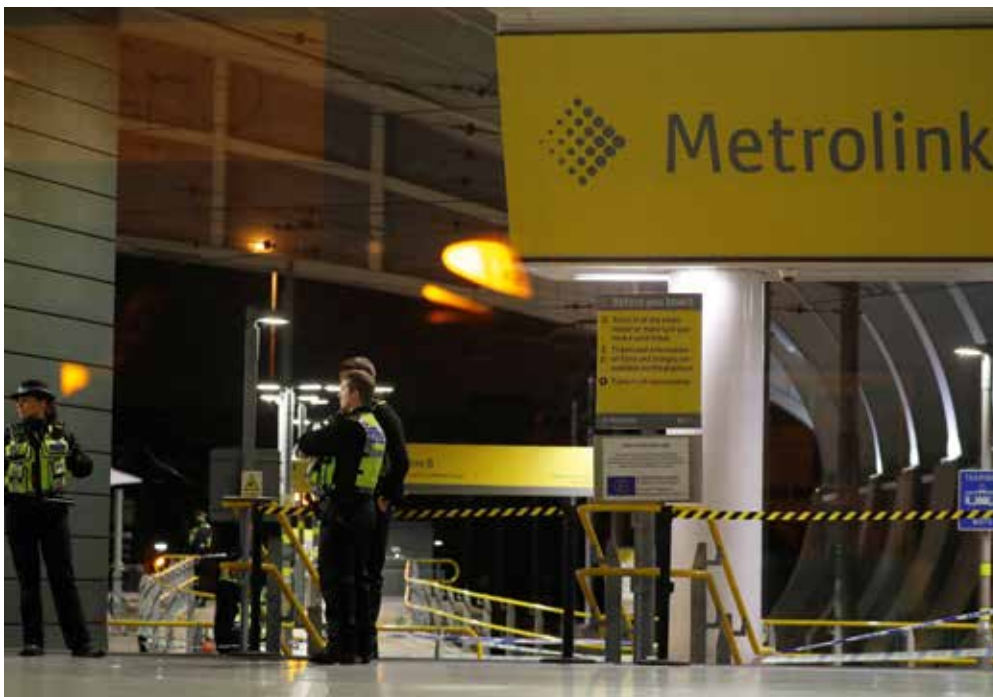
The other attack to take place in 2017 which demonstrated some connection to ISIS, is Ahmed Hassan's attempted bombing of a London underground train during rush hour at Parsons Green. Convicted at age 18 (though his exact age has been the source of some doubt), Hassan had entered the UK clandestinely in the back of a lorry in October 2015 claiming to be a 16-year-old Iraqi orphan. When later questioned, he claimed that he had been abducted by ISIS and forced to train in one of their camps for three months. During the investigation after his attempted bombing, it was revealed that at one point a teacher observed Hassan receiving a message on his phone, which said, "Islamic State has accepted your donation."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, no unmistakable evidence was provided that showed Hassan had received clear direction by ISIS to launch his attack. Like Manchester, ISIS claimed the incident though no evidence was produced by the group substantiating this link.

Two of the other attacks that took place in 2017 show evidence of links to violent Islamist networks, though again, no evidence has been presented demonstrating direction by a terrorist organisation into the prosecution of the attack. In these cases, the overt and known connections were local. In the first attack of the year, culprit Khalid Masood was identified as having historical links to al-Muhajiroun, a now proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK whose members have been repeatedly linked to ISIS and al-Qaeda. Similarly, Khurram Butt, the leader of a cell of three who launched an attack on 7 June 2017 near London Bridge, was also linked to the organisation, while one of his co-conspirators, Youssef Zaghba, was stopped by Italian authorities in March 2016 at Bologna airport on a one-way ticket to Turkey. When questioned by authorities he initially claimed he was heading to Turkey as a terrorist, though he quickly changed this to tourist.<sup>10</sup> He was found in possession of material showing an interest in ISIS, while Khurram Butt was reported by his wife to have expressed an interest in the group.<sup>11</sup>

The final attack recorded in 2017 was confusing as initially the accused was acquitted for his attack, though he was subsequently rearrested and jailed for another attack at which point his culpability for the first attack was confirmed. Mohiussunnath Chowdhury was first arrested in August 2017 when he was confronted by the police outside Buckingham Palace and assaulted them with a samurai sword he had in the car with him.<sup>12</sup> He was able, however, to avoid conviction for that incident he claimed that he was trying to commit suicide at the time. He was subsequently rearrested (alongside his sister) in July 2019. This followed a long investigation by police including the use of undercover officers who developed a close relationship with Chowdhury. Chowdhury boasted to the undercover officers of his desire to launch an attack and how he had fooled a jury the first time

he had been arrested for attempting one. Separately, he also told his sister about his planned offensive.<sup>13</sup> Both brother and sister were found guilty of the second plot.

Crucial to the current discussion, however, is the fact that again there was no evidence presented that Chowdhury was directed to launch his attacks. Rather, his planned offensives are similar to all subsequent plots that took place in the UK where individuals have launched terrorist attacks using bladed weapons, in some cases wearing fake suicide vests, against low-level targets in their immediate vicinity. Almost all perpetrators had links to other terrorist offenders and in all but two cases, were individuals with prior criminal records (more often than not for terrorism offences).



*Police officers stand at the end of a tram platform following a stabbing at Victoria Station in Manchester, Britain, January 1, 2019. REUTERS/Phil Noble*

To quickly cover the cases in question: Mahdi Mohamoud launched a one-man knife attack on New Year's revellers in Manchester on 31 December 2018. Usman Khan used a blade and a fake bomb vest to attack mentors working on a programme to help him de-radicalise in late November 2019 at Fishmongers' Hall in London. In January 2020, converts Brutschom Ziamani and "Baz" Hockton launched an attack on prison guards using bladed weapons and fake suicide vests inside Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) White-moor, where Ziamani was serving time for terrorism offences (and Hockton for other crimes). In February 2020, Suddesh Amman was shot in the street as he exited a shop where he had purchased knives to carry out a terrorist attack (it was later revealed that he also wears a fake suicide vest), while Khairi Saadallah used knives to murder three men as they enjoyed a drink in a park in Reading in June 2020.

Most recently, Ali Harbi Ali's brutal murder of MP Sir David Amess using a knife was accused of being inspired by ISIS.<sup>14</sup> The final incident that is worth mentioning in this context is an assault in May 2020 at HMP Belmarsh, a prison, that was undertaken by



*Floral tributes to British MP David Amess, who was stabbed to death during a meeting with constituents, lay outside the Houses of Parliament, in London, Britain, October 19, 2021. REUTERS/Hannah McKay*

Ahmed Hassan, Hashem Abeidi and Mohammed Saeed – Hassan and Abeidi have both been mentioned earlier, and Saeed pled guilty to separate terrorism offences.<sup>15</sup> It is still unclear whether this final incident is a violent Islamist inspired attack, but considering the perpetrators, it is likely worth including it as it highlights the continued and growing danger of terrorism offenders in prisons (and there have been other cases of terrorist offenders being linked to violence against guards in prison). Also relevant to this discussion is the case of Malik Faisal Akram, the Blackburn native who in mid-January 2022 took a group of celebrants hostage at a Texas synagogue while calling for the release of jailed al-Qaeda figure Aafia Siddiqui. He had a criminal past and had been referred to the Prevent counter-extremism programme, though there were some questions raised by his family about his mental health.

Except for Mahdi Mohamoud (who was identified as a man with serious mental health issues), and Malik Faisal Akram all of these incidents involved individuals who had a history of links to terrorist groups and networks. And in fact, in all other cases, the individuals had been engaged with as part of counter-terrorism investigations (Akram was in fact also investigated for some time by MI5). Khan, Amman, Ziamani, as well as the three HMP Belmarsh attackers had been charged and prosecuted for terrorism offences, while Saadallah and Ali Harbi Ali had been investigated by MI5 as potential Syria travellers and had been flagged up to authorities as individuals who might be at risk for radicalisation or launching a terrorist attack. In retrospect, Saadallah should have been of higher concern: A man with a history of violence in the UK, involvement in fighting alongside Ansar al-Shariah in Libya, and prior terms in prison during which he most likely associated with terrorist offenders.<sup>16</sup> His brother was concerned about his mental health, and had called the police the night before his attack, leading them to visit Saadallah to see how he was.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, he slipped through the net.

## 1.2 External Direction after the Caliphate

In none of these attacks clear evidence showed that the individuals involved had been directed by terrorist groups to launch their attacks. Seemingly, they are more in the lone actor (or small cell) range of attacks in which individuals have drawn together a plot based on their understanding of current terrorist activity while their actual motivations are more likely a mixture of personal and ideological motives. Of all attacks highlighted, only the Manchester bombing shows the highest potential for having some directional link that has not yet been revealed (though an ongoing, very thorough inquest has not revealed anything yet aside from a larger community of possible individuals involved in the attack).<sup>18</sup> All of the others have had no such evidence presented. The lack of clear claims by ISIS (or al-Qaeda) that demonstrate prior knowledge of the incident or attacker suggests any connection to either group might be inspirational at best. This in turn raises questions about the capability of groups to direct attacks in a targeted fashion, rather than simply pushing ideological material into the public domain, which is then latched on to by angry individuals and ultimately express itself in attacks, which the group can claim responsibility for afterwards. The distinction between these two patterns is relevant, and is different to what happened previously.

External direction was clearer in the plots that were disrupted prior to 2017, where there were repeated cases in which individuals in the UK were talking to remote British ISIS terrorist planners like Junaid Hussain or Reeyadh Khan. In August 2015, both men were killed in separate drone strikes, having been repeatedly associated with a worldwide attack planning including in the UK.<sup>19</sup> In the period since the beginning of 2017, there have been at least seven plots where individuals were talking to people associated with ISIS somewhere around the world. In some cases, like Safaa Boular, a young Moroccan girl who married an ISIS member on Skype and then, following his death, sought to launch a terrorist attack,<sup>20</sup> there was evidence of them seeking direction. In the case of Lewis Ludlow, he appeared to be in contact with someone associated with ISIS in Southeast Asia, who was trying to steer him toward launching an attack, though Ludlow appeared to want to travel to the Philippines.<sup>21</sup> In most of the cases, however, the individuals had links through family or some other connection to the battlefield, which in some cases produced an incentive for them to try to launch an attack when their relation was killed. Clear evidence of operational direction in the ultimate act the individuals were convicted of is scarce.

It is possible that part of the reason for this drop of external direction is ISIS' loss of territory, though logically it is not clear why this would be the case. The nature of external plotting by ISIS that has culminated in plots in the UK has mostly been through remote direction. This, in essence, simply involves individuals being spurred into action by an individual at the end of a messenger application pointing them in the direction of things to do – something for which an internet connection is more important than territory. At the same time, it is possible that ISIS followers in Syria or Iraq are more preoccupied with survival or fighting on the ground than spending their time talking to aspiring followers outside the country. A final element could be the fact that many of the more active British virtual planners are now dead and more generally, what UK fighters remain active on the battlefield appear to be keeping a lower profile than before. It is likely the case that for virtual direction to function effectively, the individual talking from the battlefield must know or be able to communicate in a mutually intelligible fashion with the individ-

ual in the west. In other words, without ISIS fighters they can easily communicate within a mutual language and set of cultural references, UK nationals eager to connect with people on the battlefield will develop a different sort of remote relationship.

From an external direction context, the only other case since 2017 which merits specific discussion, is that of Khalid Ali, a young man who was arrested on Whitehall in April 2017 near the center of government with a bag full of knives reportedly on his way to try to launch a stabbing attack of some sort. While little evidence of direction was presented in his case, Khalid Ali was subsequently linked through his fingerprints to Taliban bombs in Afghanistan targeting US forces. He stated to authorities that he had returned to the UK to deliver a “message” to authorities and he pledged allegiance to the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership. He was apparently trying to launch his attack by himself after returning to the UK from a long period abroad where he was involved in combat in Afghanistan. At one point, he claimed to be involved in detonating around 300 bombs in that country.<sup>22</sup> His case is interesting because of the al-Qaeda links, though the methodology and targeting he was going for are closer to the many ISIS inspired plots that have been seen. Additionally, al-Qaeda never publicly claimed the attack, and nothing was presented in court that demonstrated direction.

In terms of weapons deployed, bombs, knives, and cars are repeatedly become the preferred choice of those seeking to launch attacks. Whilst in three cases there was evidence that they had wanted to try to obtain guns, any effort was nascent and aspirational at best, a reflection of the general difficulty in obtaining firearms in the UK. In terms of the bomb-makers, the two most dangerous ones (the Manchester bombing and Ahmed Hassan’s London underground device) appear to be learned on websites, although in both cases the individuals involved had links to ISIS camps suggesting another possible avenue for learning. The November 2021 Liverpool bombing of a women’s hospital remains unclear, though the device appears to be one the bomber developed himself through online learning. One observation is that the influence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s infamous *Inspire* magazine with its bomb-making instructions appears to be reduced, with limited evidence of the various bomb-makers detained during this period as being influenced by the particular recipe.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, however, the instructions continue to resonate amongst the non-Islamist community, with cases emerging of individuals inspired by extreme right-wing or Incel ideologies seemingly using *Inspire* magazine’s bomb making plans.<sup>24</sup>

The bigger strategic question which remains unanswered is the degree to which this threat picture by ISIS against the UK is a result of a conscious effort by the group showing the success or failure of the terrorist organisation. Prior to 2017, there had not been any successful terrorist incidents in the UK linked to ISIS, though there had been numerous disruptions. Since then, there have been repeated attacks carried through to conclusion. Taken by this metric, the group could be said to be succeeding. At the same time, the paucity in links to successful plots and the fact that claims issued by ISIS tend to be generic, which demonstrate no prior knowledge, suggests something that is happening without any ISIS control. In more recent incidents, like the murder of Sir David Amess, the group did not even bother to mention the incident. The difficulty is concluding whether ISIS propaganda is highly effective or whether some other factor is at play. It is certainly interesting to observe that even in the absence of the most prolific UK-linked virtual planners, the group is still able to inspire individuals to launch attacks in advance of the group’s ideology using a methodology they mastered (and seem to no longer even claim).

What is equally difficult to know is the degree to which ISIS and al-Qaeda have been trying and failing to send large-scale sophisticated plots toward the UK. While there is very little evidence of such plotting in the arrest (and subsequent trials) and attack record, it is possible that individuals involved in such plots were stopped through action outside the country, they were charged with other offenses or ultimately were handled by authorities in a way to avoid court exposure. Certainly, it is notable that only 30 per cent of those arrested for terrorism offences are ultimately prosecuted on terrorism charges. Unless one presumes an overly zealous police force, one can only conclude that the threat picture security forces see is different to that ultimately appearing in courts. Nevertheless, the qualitative reduction in types of plots being attempted alongside the overall decrease in numbers does suggest a declining threat picture. This is likely a combination of lower group capability (suggested by lack of obvious direction and subsequent claims), and a more effective security response (suggested by the over-representation of disconnected individuals at the sharp end of the threat – plots that are inherently difficult to stop). Neither of these, however, suggests the elimination of the threat, with ISIS and al-Qaeda continuing to feature the UK in their roster of potential targets. In fact, the increase in successful attacks since 2017 suggests something essential has changed in the threat picture, which is still not entirely understood.

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  - 3 National Statistics: Operation of police powers under the Terrorism Act 2000, quarterly update to September 2020, Last updated 6 January 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-quarterly-update-to-september-2020> [13.02.2021]. Some assessment of proportions, however, is suggested by the volume of prisoners serving time for terrorism offences who are broken down by ideology. From June 2017 to June 2020 (available figures), the proportion of terrorism offenders in custody identified as 'Islamist extremist' stays between 75 to 90 per cent per year, highlighting that at least three quarters of offenders are of that ideological persuasion.
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# 2.

# POTENTIAL TERRORIST THREAT

## 2.1 The UK's Constant South Asia Connection

Notwithstanding the over-representation of lone actors in the attack picture, the overall UK threat landscape remains complicated and connected to many different foreign battlefields. For example, to look at the specific plots highlighted earlier, the attack in Manchester and the attempted attack by Khalid Ali in London were undertaken by individuals who had some experience on the battlefield in Libya and Afghanistan respectively. As has been shown, little public evidence was presented that the attacks were directed from these battlefields, but both cases highlight the potential links and dangers that exist from Britons active in foreign battlefields. Links are also visible elsewhere – for example in Somalia where a substantial cadre of young Britons went to fight and the leader of ISIS in the country, Abdul Qadir Mumin, was a long-time London resident whose wife has now moved back to the UK.<sup>25</sup> On the Northern shores of Africa, the UK's Libyan community came into the spotlight as a result of the Manchester terrorist attack in 2017, highlighting the long history Libyan jihadist groups have in the UK, and the dangers in those connections. Online contacts also provide links between the UK and jihadist networks in South-east Asia (a connection that was key in the jailing of prominent British jihadist preacher Anjem Choudary),<sup>26</sup> while South Asia continues to have a strong historical and human connection with the UK unfortunately also extending to violent Islamism.

The depth and history of the connection with Pakistan is particularly evident through recent media attention regarding the case of Omar Saeed Sheikh, a prominent British jihadist who has sat in Pakistani jails for many years now charged with the murder

of a *Wall Street Journal* reporter. Part of an earlier generation of British jihadists, Sheikh has been reported as having links with al-Qaeda as well as Kashmir focused groups like Jaish-e Mohammed. Present in the 1990s fighting in Bosnia, he made his way to Pakistan where he became a key point of contact between British jihadists and Kashmiri, and then later, al-Qaeda linked networks.<sup>27</sup> Pakistani authorities are currently fighting to keep him incarcerated. A number of British-Pakistanis went to fight alongside Kashmiri groups, and the 7 July 2005 bombers who launched an attack in al-Qaeda's name on London's public transport system, started their journey to al-Qaeda in Kashmir oriented training camps.<sup>28</sup> Sheikh's case highlights how long-standing the risk of well-connected jihadists is and the July 7 bombings illustrate what it can produce. That attack was one of a number of plots emerging from this connection in the 2000s – including the infamous 2006 Transatlantic Airlines plot which, using liquid explosives, had the destructive potential to kill more innocent people than the September 11 attacks.

The other side to the South Asian link can be found amongst the sectarian and other tensions from the region, which have sometimes spilled over into the UK. Historically, there has been some link between violence and militancy in South Asia and in the UK. This goes back to 1984 when a pair of Kashmiris living in Birmingham kidnapped and murdered Ravindra Mhatre, the Deputy Consul General of the Indian Consulate in the city in the name of the Kashmir Liberation Army (KLA).<sup>29</sup> The incident was later claimed by the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), a prominent Kashmiri organisation that was founded in the UK and was active fighting against India in Kashmir.<sup>30</sup> British authorities regularly warn Balochi dissidents living in the UK that they are being targeted by potential Pakistani government agents, while a British-Pakistani man was recently jailed for accepting a 100,000 pound contract to murder a Balochi dissident in the Netherlands.<sup>31</sup>

This link has also spilled into sectarian anger echoing the dynamics seen in South Asia. In 2016, a pair of murders illustrated the fact that sectarian or religious hatred within the South Asian community could connect with violence linked to terrorism. In February 2016, Jalal Uddin, an elderly imam in Rochdale was bludgeoned to death by two young men, who thought the imam was practicing "black magic". One was arrested while the other fled last known to have gone to Turkey where he was believed to have joined ISIS.<sup>32</sup> A month after Uddin's murder, Tanveer Ahmed, a Bradford taxi driver, went to Glasgow where he murdered Asad Shah, a shopkeeper of the Ahmaddiya faith. Shah had been publishing videos online which Ahmed believed were blasphemous and felt what he was doing was to defend the prophet. It was later revealed that Ahmed was a fervent supporter of Mumtaz Qadri, a Pakistani man hanged for the murder of Salman Taseer, the former governor of Punjab who had spoken out against Pakistan's blasphemy laws.<sup>33</sup>

While in the last few years, these issues have stayed below the surface, the context exists for them to return. In 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May blocked the requested asylum claim by Asia Bibi, a Catholic Pakistani woman who was threatened with hanging on religious grounds.<sup>34</sup> The reported logic for the refusal was out of fear that her arrival in the UK would stoke inter-communal violence.<sup>35</sup> In October 2020, as tensions swirled around Europe in the wake of the beheading of the French teacher Samuel Paty, British Pakistani communities were at the forefront of protests outside the French Embassy in London in the face of COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>36</sup> The precise organisers of the protests remain unknown, but it is noticeable that a number of Pakistani Barelwi and Kashmiri flags and logos were on display amongst the crowd. Soon afterwards, as relations between the

government in Pakistan and the hardline Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) deteriorated, protests by the group were observed outside the Pakistani High Commission (Embassy) in London.

The particular risk with South Asia has been sharpened recently with the change in government in Afghanistan. The long history the UK has with jihad in Afghanistan and militant groups in neighboring Pakistan who are intimately linked to Afghanistan, all suggest that the return of a Taliban government poses a particular risk to the UK. However, how that will materialise is unclear. Two ethnic Afghans with British travel documents, military gear, and considerable currency were stopped trying to cross the border from Uzbekistan into Afghanistan in autumn last year. They were suspected by the Taliban authorities of being members of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) though their ultimate aims and identities were not revealed.<sup>37</sup> What is obvious is that it is of concern to UK security planners, with the head of UK's MI6 making an early visit to Pakistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover, and regular contact between the Prime Minister's Special Representative for Afghanistan Sir Simon Gass and the new Taliban authorities. Current assessments suggest that any potential backlash or threat to the UK is unlikely to emerge for at least the next six months.

## 2.2 Foreign Terrorist Fighters

While the potential threat from South Asia remains constant in the backdrop of the UK threat picture, British nationals pose the more urgent threat reportedly fighting alongside ISIS and other groups in Syria and Iraq. The exact number of British nationals or individuals with links to the UK who went to the Levant since the war in Syria erupted has been estimated between 800 and 1,000. Officials usually state that approximately 20 per cent of those who went out were killed on the battlefield, around 40 per cent have returned, leaving some 40 per cent still free.<sup>38</sup> According to a statement in the House of Lords in February 2020, 40 individuals have been convicted following their return from Syria for a variety of offences.<sup>39</sup>

The UK has taken a hard line in terms of allowing people still stuck in Syria or Iraqi detention. Over 100 nationals had their nationalities removed (one newspaper report in July 2017 said the number was as high as 152) – in all cases, they were dual nationals or only residents in the UK.<sup>40</sup> The complexity of this approach is illustrated by the case of Shamima Begum, a young woman from London who left the UK at age 15 to join ISIS with two of her close friends. She was discovered by journalists in February 2019 in Kurdish detention from where she has made repeated appeals to come home. Soon after her discovery, the British government deprived her of her nationality, claiming that she had not been left stateless as she was entitled to a Bangladeshi passport by dint of her heritage.<sup>41</sup> She has never visited Bangladesh, and the Bangladeshi government has stated it does not want her “back”.<sup>42</sup>

Her case has become something of a *cause célèbre*, but it is merely the tip of a problem the UK (like many other European countries) faces from the community of young nationals who went to fight alongside ISIS and other groups in Syria. These are clearly individuals of concern, who made an active choice to join terrorist groups that have repeatedly threatened their home countries, and yet now they are stuck in Syria seeing the

group they joined collapse, leaving them either still fighting or in captivity. The decision to deprive many of them of their citizenship does not deal with the issue, but merely displaces the problem elsewhere. There is a mixed volume of unclear information in the public domain about where they all are. Reprieve, a human rights organisation, has estimated that 9 men, 16 women, and 33 children are in situations similar to Begum's in North-eastern Syria.<sup>43</sup> In December 2019, a report emerged that there were at least 30 British men in Kurdish custody North-eastern Syria.<sup>44</sup> One of these individuals may have been Ishak Mostefaoui, a British-Algerian who had his passport removed and was in Kurdish custody until he was reported to have died violently in July 2020 in prison.<sup>45</sup> Others, like the prominent "Beatles" Alexandra Kotey and Elshafee Elsheikh, have been deported to the United States where they have been convicted for the murder of a number of American hostages killed on camera by ISIS.<sup>46</sup> Very few have been brought back to the UK by the government, with currently only a few orphans or unaccompanied children (4) brought back in two journeys in November 2019 and September 2020.<sup>47</sup>

This refusal to repatriate did not neutralise the threat. In April 2020, Spanish police in Almeria arrested a British-Egyptian jihadist, Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary, alongside two other Algerian extremists who were living in a shared property having snuck into the country with electronic hardware and cash. The men's destination was unknown, as was their ultimate goal, but the concern was they were heading back to Europe to launch terrorist attacks.<sup>48</sup> Another source of concern is those sitting in jail elsewhere. In 2017, authorities in Turkey jailed Aine Davis for planning a terrorist attack in Turkey. Identified as one of the notorious "Beatles", Davis was a small-time gangster in the UK who had turned to jihadism. His sentence is due to end soon, and presumably, he will be repatriated to the UK.<sup>49</sup> Others who had been caught in Turkey and were repatriated were jailed in the UK once again on more limited charges – like Stefan Aristidou who was arrested at Heathrow in February 2021 having been sent back by Turkish authorities.<sup>50</sup> Managing cases like these will consume authorities' attention in the medium to longer term.

Others have instead stayed in Turkey and caused problems from there. In late November 2020, a British convert known as Sumaya Holmes was identified as being at the centre of an online fundraising network, which was seeking to get money to help British women flee Kurdish custody.<sup>51</sup> Based in Turkey, she had reportedly been married to a British convert who had died fighting in Syria, and then remarried to a Bosnian fighter who was incarcerated in the Balkans. One of the most disturbing aspects of the case was the fact that there was an active support network in the UK, which was able to collaborate with her to get money from supporters in the UK out to the battlefield, suggesting a still active pool of ISIS supporters in the country.

Whether this pool of supporters is in addition or different to the pool of individuals who authorities believe have returned home to the UK from fighting in Syria and Iraq is unknown. As was highlighted earlier, only 40 people have been officially confirmed as having been convicted upon return from Syria, suggesting hundreds in circulation (assuming that as stated in official declarations around 400 in total have returned home). However, very few of those who returned appear to have ended up posing a direct threat, with very few appearing to become involved in terrorist plotting.<sup>52</sup> During the period covered by this paper, the only plot involving individuals who are believed to have actually made it to Syria and returned is the Manchester bombing (and even there it is unclear). Two others involve individuals who travelled to South Asia in the past. But the

larger cohort of Britons who went to Syria and Iraq and then returned to the UK appear to have passed unremarked in plots and have not featured prominently in the court system. One convert who managed to sneak back into the country after her husband perished fighting with ISIS, Natalie Bracht, was in fact arrested for her involvement alongside the eco-warriors of Extinction Rebellion.<sup>53</sup> Suffice to say, the problem of radicalised Britons linked to the conflict in Syria and Iraq is not resolved and likely to be a feature of the threat picture for some time to come.

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# 3. STATE ROLE AND RESPONSE

The UK's counter-terrorism strategy since 11 September 2001 has been built around four key pillars, in a structure called CONTEST:

- › Prevent: to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism
- › Pursue: to stop terrorist attacks
- › Protect: to strengthen our protection against a terrorist attack
- › Prepare: to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack<sup>54</sup>

The purpose of this framework is to capture within the broad thrust of a vision which seeks to address the threat of terrorism through an all-of-government approach. This has been replicated in the various structures which have been developed to strengthen the UK's counter-terrorism apparatus: Starting with the creation of the Joint Terrorism Analysis Center (JTAC) in 2002, the Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) in 2005, the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) in 2007, and most recently with the Joint International Counter-Terrorism Unit (JICTU) in 2016 (which has now further transformed). In all of these cases, functions from other departments that might have dealt with aspects of the counter-terrorism strategy are transferred to the remit of the new unit, which in most cases is housed within the Home Office. The exception to this is JTAC, which sets the UK's threat levels and draws on analysts from 16 different government departments and agencies. It is housed within Thames House, the home

of the Security Service (MI5), the UK's domestic intelligence service (which admittedly sits under the Home Office in the British system).

This jointness is something that was strengthened again recently with the establishment of a Counter-Terrorism Operations Centre (CTOC) within London police headquarters of New Scotland Yard. Announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer (the UK's Finance Minister) in November 2020, the decision to spend tens of millions of pounds on a new fusion center for police, intelligence, and other agencies focused on counter-terrorism, at a time when the UK's economy was reeling from the impact of COVID-19, was a reflection of the continued seriousness with which the terrorist threat in the UK is perceived.<sup>55</sup>

The decision to establish CTOC was born out of the spate of attacks in 2017, which illustrated to security authorities the need to create even greater coordination and cooperation between the various agencies to counter the threat. Amongst the many post-incident investigations and inquiries that took place (and are still ongoing), numerous recommendations emerged. One of the most prominent to emerge from an Operational Improvement Review (OIR) commissioned by the head of MI5 and Chief of Metropolitan Police, was that greater coordination was needed between agencies, and intelligence must be shared more widely to try to manage the threat posed by certain individuals.<sup>56</sup>

As the investigations into the three major Islamist attacks to take place in 2017 (the Westminster Bridge, London Bridge and Manchester attacks) were undertaken, information was uncovered which revealed that key figures in all of the plots were well-known individuals to MI5 and had (in some cases) been deeply investigated as priority targets at one time or another. The implication was that information might not have been handled correctly, even though the numerous inquiries highlighted those processes had worked as they were supposed to. This finding suggested a larger overhaul was needed: not just of the current caseload security forces were looking at, but also historical cases as well as consideration of how to manage cases over long periods of time going forward. This led to a review by the security services of many thousands of cases that they had worked on over almost two decades previously to understand better whether they had accurately assessed the risk that former targets of investigation might still pose. The Home Secretary at the time, Amber Rudd, commented on the scale of the problem faced by security services when she said, "there are over 20,000 further individuals – or closed subjects of interest – who have previously been investigated, and may again pose a threat"<sup>57</sup>.

The highlighting of this number generated a vast amount of work within the security forces as cases were reopened and reinvestigated. Yet, looking at the roster of terrorist plots that were subsequently disrupted over the next three years, it is not clear how many cases reemerged from that pool. In part, this is a product of not knowing exactly what constitutes membership of it. While a number of subsequent plots took place involving individuals who had been previously convicted of offences, it is not clear which part of that broader previous pool of cases they might come from. Similarly, cases where people had contact with the Prevent part of the UK counter-terrorism apparatus – which tries to identify people before they become a focus of investigation, and steer them off the path – a number have subsequently become active plotters, though it is not clear whether they would have been considered part of the pool being investigated by intelligence agencies.





*Forensic officers work at the scene of a stabbing on London Bridge, in which two people were killed, in London, Britain, November 30, 2019. REUTERS/Simon Dawson*

The threat that did emerge subsequently was a growing number of cases involving individuals who had been arrested and served time in prison for terrorism offences and then went on to launch attacks. In November 2019, Usman Khan murdered two people at an event in London run by an organisation which had sought to deradicalise him. He had previously been incarcerated as part of a network that had included individuals traveling to try to join al-Qaeda in Pakistan.<sup>58</sup> In January 2020, Suddesh Amman, a recently released terrorism offender was shot in the street in Streatham, London as he tried to launch a knife and fake suicide bomb attack.<sup>59</sup> In addition, earlier in January a terrorist offender and his friend launched a similar attack on prison guards, while in May 2020, another group of three prisoners serving sentences for serious terrorist offences attacked prison guards.<sup>60</sup> Finally, in June 2020, Khairi Saadallah, a disturbed young man who had been arrested a number of times for violent offences, was detained again after murdering three men drinking in a park. He had been investigated by the security services for possible terrorist links and had come to the UK from Libya where he had been involved fighting alongside various groups. While in prison on other charges, Saadallah had fraternised with serious terror offenders.<sup>61</sup> Most recently, Malik Akram, who had previously come to the attention of the police, been arrested (though it was not clear that he had served a custodial sentence) and had been investigated by MI5 for possible radicalisation<sup>62</sup>, attacked a synagogue in Texas.

This pattern highlighted a clear problem in the UK's response to terrorism. Offenders are being incarcerated and it is not clear that their period in jail is reducing the threat that they pose. The Desistance and Disengagement Programme (DDP), a Home Office program, which sought to develop an individual tailored response to each offender, came under scrutiny and one of the government program's main providers decided to stop working with the Home Office.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, it was revealed that of three "separation units" which had been established across the UK's prison estate to isolate terrorist prisoners from the general population, only one actually remained active.<sup>64</sup> The picture reached a level of seriousness that the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Jonathan Hall, decided to launch an inquiry into prison radicalisation.<sup>65</sup>

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# 4.

# FUTURE THREAT PICTURE

In the wake of the Liverpool bombing on 14 November 2021, JTAC raised the UK's terrorist threat level from "Substantial" to "Severe".<sup>66</sup> This means that the expectation of an attack has gone from "likely" to "highly likely". This was in direct response to the attack and the earlier murder of Sir David Amess, a set of events which had thrown previous JTAC calculations. As they stated in their official release: "The decision has been driven by two terrorist incidents in the past month, reflecting the diverse, complex and volatile nature of the terrorist threat in the UK."<sup>67</sup> This elevation of the threat level followed a lowering earlier in the year. On 8 February 2021, the Home Secretary announced that JTAC was lowering the UK's terrorist threat level from "Severe" to "Substantial".<sup>68</sup> The lowering of the threat brought it down from the level it had been raised to in November 2020 in response to the pattern of violence that was taking place across Europe with the attacks in Germany, France, and Austria. Prior to this, the threat level had been placed at "Substantial" since November 2019 when a calculation had been made that the threat that had peaked in 2017 appeared to be on a downward trajectory.<sup>69</sup> The previous calculation that the spate of copycat terrorism and inflammatory violence sparked off in 2020 appeared to have peaked was reversed in the wake of the late 2021 attacks, though this was again brought back down in early February 2022.<sup>70</sup> This see-sawing of the threat levels highlights the volatility of the terrorist threat picture that is currently seen in the UK.

Notwithstanding where the threat levels lie, concerns remain high. Before the raising of the threat level in October 2020, the new head of MI5 gave his inaugural address to the media in which he highlighted: "Islamist extremist terrorism, [...] by volume remains our largest threat. It is still the case that tens of thousands of individuals are committed to

this ideology.<sup>71</sup> He also, however, spoke of the growing menace of the extreme right-wing, as well as the persistent problems posed by Northern Irish related terrorism. This echoes what other security officials have repeatedly said over the past years, indicating a persistent priority concern with violent Islamists, but a growing problem from the extreme right-wing.

Looking forward, however, the growing concern is around how the violent Islamist picture is in some places merging with other threats or societal problems. While there remain numerous issues around radicalised prisoners, former terrorist offenders, and the still substantial community of radicalised individuals at large, there is now a growing concern about other risks, which appear to show similarities to the violent Islamist threat picture. For example, there has been a noticeable growth in individuals suffering from serious mental health issues showing up as terrorism offenders. This confronts police and security services with a new and highly volatile community of potential offenders. In addition, there are increasing numbers of individuals who are being attracted to blends of terrorist ideologies, where the violent Islamist identity might simply be a part of the broader ideology the individual is identifying with. Currently, such individuals are classified as being of “mixed, unstable or unclear” ideology. In part this could be a product of a disorganised, unhealthy or young mind, but it could also be a reflection of the fact that the main medium of radicalisation, the internet, offers such a wide and rich range of ideologies that individuals seeking to answers online will simply fish from a number of different ideas to assemble their own. This aspect of the threat picture is only likely to increase given the continuing digital transformation of our daily lives and is likely to continue to complicate not only the violent Islamist risk assessment, but that of other terrorism motivators as well.

This leaves the UK’s terrorist threat picture in a highly confused space. Attacks continue, and in some cases – like the murder of Sir David Amess – achieve considerable attention. But the constant appearance of lone actors, often with messy personal and health-care histories, also shows how things have developed since the spike in 2017. Prior to 2017, there was already some evidence emerging of the threat picture developing in the direction of a greater lone actor threat, and subsequent events appear to have simply pushed things further along. The degree to which any of this can be directly linked to terrorist organisations like ISIS or al-Qaeda is very difficult to draw. As Counter-Terrorism Police Chief Neil Basu put it in February 2018 commenting on how the threat picture had changed since the fall of Raqqa:

*“What we’ve seen is a lot more chatter, a lot more people thinking that they have a chance of successfully carrying out attacks. So the pace and tempo, the number of leads that we think are concerning, the pace has gone up. Whether or not this is linked to the push in Raqqa is hard to tell. In terms of plots, the trend is towards less sophistication, more amateurism. We’ve not seen a growth of extremists. We’ve seen more conversations among extremists expressing the belief they can launch successful attacks here. So definitely the pace of plotting activity we’re looking at has gone up. But then that was predictable as well. I don’t think anyone thought the military defeat of the group in Syria and Iraq was going to be the end of this. We are dealing with an ideology, which is being spread online and has global reach, and we to need to confront this by clamping down on what’s being spread through the internet and better engaging with people who are vulnerable to the extremist message.”<sup>72</sup>*

Since this comment, the security forces in the UK have seen at least 11 disrupted plots, and 11 or 12 attacks of varying size. Amongst these has been the murder of a prominent politician and a number of plots from individuals who were well-known to security services and had been in some cases involved in programs that had supposedly turned them around. This, alongside the growing threat posed by the extreme right-wing and other ideologies, next to the potential risks that are still posed by the many radicalised Britons who went to fight alongside ISIS or other groups in Syria, a worrying threat picture in South Asia, all highlights the persistent and chronic threat that the UK continues to face.

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The UK remains a key target of violent jihadist terrorists. The murder of an Member of Parliament in late 2021 was followed by an attack on a synagogue in Texas by a radicalised Briton. Alongside the close links the UK has historically to South Asia, it is unlikely that the UK has entirely seen the end of its violent jihadist threat. However, there is no denying the picture has changed, filled less with large-scale directed plots and instead exchanged with a regular pattern of undirected lone actor plots.