



## ARTICLE

# London and anti-terrorism in Europe

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**Abstract** Urban terrorist attacks have become increasingly frequent in Europe in recent years. The review conducted during 2016 into London's preparedness to respond to a major terrorist incident found that London's emergency services had improved their ability to respond quickly to such incidents. However, the safety of citizens from such events can never be guaranteed. Preparation is nevertheless essential, and emergency services need to adjust their tactics and plans in response to terrorist incidents that occur anywhere in the world as attack methodologies spread very rapidly through the Internet. The safety of all public spaces needs to be kept under review. There is a role for commercial businesses in enhancing security, and each individual has a part to play in building a culture of security and resilience.

**Keywords** Counterterrorism | Preparedness | Resilience | Emergency services

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## Introduction

During 2017 there have been a series of terrorist incidents in the UK that have led to multiple fatalities—the first for a number of years. Prior to this, in 2016, the mayor of London had commissioned an independent review of London’s preparedness to respond to a major terrorist incident. It found that, while the response times of the emergency services have improved significantly in recent years, it is never possible to guarantee safety. Indeed, further improvements in response times would change the look and feel of a city such as London, with far more armed police on the streets.

In the UK the threat from terrorism is adjudged as ‘severe’, meaning that an attack is regarded as ‘highly likely’. Developing threats and attack methodologies from around the world need to be fed into the response tactics that are planned and exercised by the emergency services. It is important that there is no complacency and that the emergency services are prepared to ‘expect the unexpected’.

There are physical security measures that should be adopted, but the security of all spaces to which the public has access should be kept under review. The aim should be to develop a culture of security, not just among public authorities, but also in the business and commercial sectors. Indeed the whole population should be encouraged to be vigilant and prepared.

## Understanding the context of the attacks

The UK is by no means unique in Europe in having suffered a number of major terrorist attacks with multiple fatalities in 2017. These attacks include:

1. On 22 March, an individual driving his car into tourists and others, killing four people, and then stabbing a police officer to death within the precincts of the Houses of Parliament, before being shot dead by another police officer.
2. Exactly two months later on 22 May, a suicide bomber blowing himself up in the foyer of Manchester Arena at the end of an Ariana Grande concert, killing another 22 people and seriously injuring many more.
3. On 3 June, three terrorists driving a van into pedestrians on London Bridge and then, armed with 30 cm-long ceramic knives, running into the Borough Market area and attacking and stabbing people in the cluster of bars and restaurants there. As a result, 8 people were killed and 48 were seriously injured before the police shot the 3 perpetrators dead.

Other attacks have included an apparently Islamophobic attack close to Finsbury Park Mosque at the close of Friday night prayers on 19 June, in which a van was driven into the crowd, with one elderly man dying at the scene. In addition, a number of other attacks have been thwarted and disrupted by the security and intelligence agencies and

the counterterrorist police. These incidents led to the first deaths from terrorism on the British mainland since the bombings on the London transport network in July 2005, in which 52 people were murdered, and the fatal attack on Trooper Lee Rigby in May 2013 near the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich.

The most recent attacks have occurred in the context of a series of murderous terrorist incidents across Western Europe, starting with the assault on Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 and including—amongst others—the attacks on the Bataclan concert hall and other targets in Paris, the Brussels bombings, the heavy lorry driven through the crowds celebrating Bastille Day on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, the Berlin Christmas market attack, the hijacked truck crashed into a department store in Stockholm, and, in August, the attacks in and around Barcelona.

## Counterterrorism strategy: the case of London

It was against this background that, shortly after his election in May 2016, Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, instituted an independent review of London's preparedness to respond to a major terrorist incident. The review report (Harris 2016) was published in October of last year and many of its 127 recommendations are currently being implemented. The British counterterrorism strategy, 'Contest' (UK, HM Government 2011) (which is currently being reviewed and updated by the Home Office), has four strands:

- 'Pursue': the investigation and disruption of terrorist attacks;
- 'Prevent': working to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism;
- 'Protect': improving our protective security to stop a terrorist attack; and
- 'Prepare': working to minimise the impact of an attack and to recover as quickly as possible.

This article will focus on the Prepare strand of the strategy, although inevitably my conclusions touch on the other elements. The immediate focus of the review of the Prepare strategy was on the city's ability to respond speedily and effectively to a 'marauding terrorist firearms attack', with the Paris attacks of November 2015 in mind. However, the review looked at a range of possible attack scenarios, including where vehicles could be used as a weapon (as in the Nice and Berlin attacks), as subsequently seen on Westminster Bridge, on London Bridge, in Finsbury Park and, of course, in Barcelona.

As the reviewer, I had previously been heavily involved in this field, when, on behalf of successive home secretaries, I had oversight of policing work on counterterrorism and security from 2004 until early 2012. The headline conclusion was that preparedness had improved substantially compared with four or five years earlier. In particular, based on personal observation, the emergency service response would now be much faster than it would—or could—have been in 2011. This was demonstrated by a stabbing incident in Russell Square in August 2016. This event turned out not to be a terrorist incident, although the response was triggered as if it was. An individual, whom the court was subsequently told was suffering from 'an acute episode of paranoid schizophrenia'

(Dixon 2017), attacked passers-by, tragically killing an American tourist. The length of time that elapsed from when the first (of many) emergency calls was received, to the control room being informed that an individual had been subdued and arrested (and not shot dead, which might have been the outcome elsewhere) was just over five minutes. This was a fast response by any standard.

In March 2017, the police and ambulance response was also rapid. However, that incident lasted precisely 82 seconds from the point at which the terrorist drove his vehicle onto the pavement and into the crowds, to him crashing into the barriers, leaping from the car, running around a corner into the gates of Parliament and stabbing to death a police officer, before being shot dead himself. Just 82 seconds from start to finish. Obviously, this took place in what is admittedly one of the most heavily policed areas of the city. Whilst the incident itself was swift, the subsequent lock-down of the building lasted for nearly five hours while the possibility of there being a second attacker was eliminated. And in the London Bridge/Borough Market attack in June 2017, the police were on the scene within two minutes and paramedics from the London Ambulance Service within six. The three terrorists were shot dead just eight minutes after the first emergency call was received.

In all of those incidents the emergency response was rapid. However, it is an important and salutary lesson that even those fast response times would have appeared far too slow to those caught up in the events. Moreover, the London incidents involved individuals carrying knives rather than guns or bombs. Had the incidents involved multiple assailants armed with automatic weapons or explosive devices, the death tolls in such crowded places would have been far higher. It would, of course, be theoretically possible to further increase the armed police presence and so further reduce those response times. However, this would not eliminate the risk or necessarily prevent fatalities. It is the work of a moment for a suicide bomber to blow himself up and people armed with powerful guns could still kill a lot of people, even if the emergency response time was much shorter.

## Understanding the challenges of the terror threat

So the decision for politicians, including the mayor of London, is what level of risk is acceptable? Doubling or quadrupling the armed police presence obviously has a financial cost (even if it were practically possible to recruit, train and equip the officers required), but it would also have a profound impact on our way of life. How far are we prepared to go in changing the look and feel of our cities to reduce—perhaps only slightly—the number who might be killed in such an attack? That is the dilemma: whatever we do, we can never *guarantee* safety. Thus, whilst it is right to be better prepared, other steps are necessary to make us safer and more secure. The UK's security and intelligence agencies judge the risk of attack as being 'severe' (the second highest of

five levels), meaning that an attack is regarded as highly likely. There can, therefore, be no complacency.

The review showed that an impressive amount of thought and analysis had gone into planning and practising for a wide variety of attack scenarios. There is necessarily a constant need to consider developing threats and evolving attack methodologies. Thus a Security Review Committee, on which all the relevant agencies are represented, meets on a fortnightly basis to review terrorist-related incidents in the UK and elsewhere in the world. This sort of preparation is essential. It has to be remembered that new attack methodologies can be spread via the Internet within seconds, and it is imperative to have as good an intelligence picture as you can. However, planning should also be on the basis of expecting the unexpected. Because something has never happened before does not mean that it might not happen tomorrow. Similarly, if a particular methodology has not been used for several years, it may still be brought back into play without prior warning or indication.

In a number of areas the current intelligence assessment is that particular threats are considerably less likely than they were thought to be a few years ago. That should not mean that measures previously taken to address such threats should be abandoned, merely that they might perhaps be reduced—and even then with caution. In some fields the response of national government has not been as timely or as sharp as it should be. The first of these relates to the availability of guns. The UK benefits from the fact that firearms are more difficult to acquire here than elsewhere in the world. However, there is almost a complacency about this, with the assumption made that marauding terrorist firearms attacks, such as those that occurred in Paris in 2015, would not happen to us. However, London is not firearms free. During July and August 2016 the Metropolitan Police recorded 202 firearms discharges, compared to 87 in the same months of the previous year. These were criminal rather than terrorist incidents, but there is evidence that some convicted terrorists have tried to obtain arms from organised crime groups or from other sources.

Moreover, the review noted that our borders are not as secure as they should be: we have far-from-adequate coverage of our coastline by air and sea patrols, only a tiny proportion of vehicles crossing into the country via the Channel Tunnel or on ferries are ever searched, and the same is true for crates of goods arriving through our ports. The resources available to address this have declined in the last six or seven years. If there is complacency, it has been misplaced and it is only a matter of time before we see a significant gun-related terrorist incident in the UK. Similarly, there has been a dilatory response to the use of unmanned aerial vehicles or drones for terrorist purposes—something which is increasingly being reported in overseas theatres—either for reconnaissance or for delivering a payload.

More work is also needed on the interrelationship between mental health and those who commit terrorist attacks. In Israel, it has been reported that many of the Palestinian lone attacks have been precipitated by mental health crises in the individuals concerned. I referred earlier to the mentally deranged knife attacker in Russell

Square in July 2016. As it happens, he was a Muslim. There is no evidence that he was inspired by any jihadist propaganda to carry out his attack, but it is a reminder that the dividing line between mental health and terrorism is perhaps a narrow one.

## Taking preparatory measures against terrorism

In the meantime the threat remains severe, so what else could be done to make London more secure? Once it has been recognised that you can never guarantee safety and security, what is important is to try and build a culture of resilience into the fabric of the city so that risks can be mitigated. One aspect of this is about taking physical measures: inserting bollards and barriers to limit the scope for vehicle-based attacks, having the capacity to close off roads and prevent cars and trucks from entering areas where large numbers are gathered, and ensuring that closed-circuit TV is used more widely as both a preventative and investigative resource.

We should use design to make new buildings harder for terrorists to attack and require that certain physical standards be incorporated to make such attacks more difficult to implement. When premises require licensing for public use or for specific events, there should be expectations set as to their emergency plans and the extent to which their staff must be trained to manage certain types of incident. It should be an obligation to have police counterterrorism security advisers inspect premises and that their advice be acted upon. This is already standard for fire safety, so it should be the same for counterterrorism. The aim should be that a culture of security is developed in all spaces to which the public has access. The variability of security in such public spaces is striking. Some places of worship have given a great deal of thought to this; others have given none and seem to assume that nobody would bear them ill-will. The situation in schools is particularly concerning. Most schools have plans for evacuation in the event of fire. Very few have even thought about the need for an in-vacuation plan in the event of the school being under attack—what teachers should do and how pupils ought to be drilled. Most have some sort of rudimentary perimeter-control system, designed to keep out predatory paedophiles, but are less well-equipped to deal with a heavily armed marauder.

London is home to half a million businesses, all of which have a strong interest in ensuring London is a safe and secure place to invest and trade. So they too have to take on some responsibility for security. They have a duty of care not only to those who work for them, but also to their customers and perhaps also to those simply passing by. At the height of the London Bridge incident in June 2017, there were contrasting tales of those bars and restaurants which, on the one hand, ushered the people on the street inside to safety, and those, on the other, which barred access to those outside.

Many offices and businesses in London have trained security personnel. These personnel are regulated by the Security Industry Authority (SIA) and there are estimated to be some 100,000 operatives licensed by the SIA in London (SIA 2001)—roughly three times the total number of police officers. In the event of an attack, depending on the

location, it is those security guards who may be first on the scene and, as uniformed members of staff, the public may look to them for advice and protection. At the very least, they need to be adequately trained on how to respond in the event of a terrorist incident and, at best, they are a massive resource to help protect the public.

Communication is key to all of this. During the recent attacks the Metropolitan Police used its Twitter feed to provide frequent authoritative updates to counter what might otherwise have been misleading material on social media. However, there is much more that should be done in terms of the development of alerts that are sent directly to people's mobile phones—as has happened in a number of other cities. In time, the capacity to provide cogent real-time advice targeted at different cellular-sites or at different types of recipient should be developed. This must all be part of a process of enabling all of us to respond in the most appropriate way to any incident that may happen. The current mantra in the UK is 'run', 'hide', 'tell':

- 'run'—to a place of safety. If there is nowhere to go then . . .
- 'hide'—turn your phone to silent and barricade yourself in if you can . . .
- 'tell'—the police by calling 999 when it is safe to do so.

This was the message being put out on social media during the London Bridge attack, but the aim must be for every citizen to have it engrained in their psyche, in the same way that as children we all learned the road-safety mantra of (in a UK context at least) look right, look left, look right again when crossing a road.

## Conclusion

What are the general lessons for the rest of Europe from the experience of London? The first is that it is not possible to guarantee the public's safety against terrorist attacks. Politicians, the police and the security agencies have to be open with the public about this. This, of course, still means that every effort should be made to improve the speed and effectiveness of the response to an incident. This will require not only appropriate and proportionate resources to be made available to the emergency services, but also a willingness to practise for all scenarios, including those that have never been seen before or have not been seen for some time. Planning should be robust and flexible, and rapidly take into account terrorist attacks occurring elsewhere in the world.

Physical measures can make attacks more difficult or mitigate their effects—especially where vehicles are used. Such measures can be designed so as to blend into the existing street scene and architecture (as, for example, in Whitehall—the road on which most British government ministries are located).

More work is needed to prevent and safeguard those who may become terrorists from going down the road of violent extremism. In particular, more work is needed to support individuals who are going through mental health crises. This is not to say that all terrorists have mental health histories, or that all those who are mentally ill are likely to

become terrorists. Far from it. However, this is one of the areas where more proactive intervention is needed. Finally, the role of business, and—more widely—the need to involve the whole population in being vigilant and prepared for a terrorist incident, cannot be emphasised enough.

Preparedness has to be proactive and it has to be flexible enough to be relevant whatever the form of an attack. The responses encouraged have to enable all the relevant organisations—including the business community and the public—to react seamlessly and effectively, whatever the nature of the incident. This means that all of us must acquire a mindset of community security and resilience. It should also mean that our cities have security and resilience designed in and that they are part of our society's fabric. Ultimately, it means that everyone who lives and works in our cities needs to see security and resilience as their responsibility, just as much as it is the responsibility of the emergency services and the civic authorities.

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