

DAESH 2.0: WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE UK?



The terrorist threat to the UK comes from three types of threat actor. The most capable and determined are violent Islamists, principally Daesh, AQ, and their various franchises and affiliates, together with individuals or networks inspired by their ideology. Second are XRW groups and individuals, generally viewed as being less capable, but surprisingly numerous in counter-terrorism casework. The third set comprises a wide range of nationalist-separatist groups, the most significant being dissident republican groups in Northern Ireland. Other nationalist or separatist groups (such as Sikh extremists, Palestinian nationalists, Kurdish separatists) have been quiescent for many years.

Daesh is down but not out, and it will remain the greatest terrorist threat to the UK for some time to come.

It almost goes without saying that Daesh is the major threat to the UK and its interests and has been since it emerged in 2013. While celebrations of its imminent demise have been premature, it has undeniably lost most of its territory in Syria and Iraq under military pressure from the Global Coalition. This fact changes but does not eliminate the threat of Daesh-directed attacks against Western targets.

Territory is important as it has provided Daesh with resources as well as space in which to plan and operate. However, it is the loss of territory that may be the greatest determinant of intent to mount external attacks. After Daesh started to come under territorial and military pressure from 2014, its declared strategy changed to embrace attacks in the West in addition to state building and expansion within its Middle Eastern heartlands. As Daesh's territory continued to shrink in 2015-17, the tempo and severity of Daesh-linked attacks in the West (and against Western interests) increased.

But Daesh-directed attacks in Europe have tailed off in 2018, so are we — as some analysts have asserted — over the worst? Not necessarily. In July 2018, Daesh South Asian franchise ISKP claimed one of the deadliest attacks in Pakistan's history, which killed over 130 people in Baluchistan. Daesh affiliates are active in regions extending from West Africa to the Philippines. Moreover, there are reasons to be fearful about the threat in the longer term. Daesh is a product of many factors but governance failures and political and economic grievances are among the most important. These are getting worse, not better, in most of the countries that have fed Daesh recruitment, including Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sinai and Yemen. Then there are the thousands of Daesh recruits, including the so-called foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), who remain unaccounted for.

Since 2013, over 40,000 men, women and children from 80 countries are estimated to have travelled to Iraq and Syria to connect with Daesh. Around 5,000 are estimated to have come from Europe, and only 1,500 of these are believed to have returned. 900 individuals of security concern are estimated to have travelled from the UK, of whom around 40% have returned, with 20% estimated killed, leaving around 360 presumably at large.¹

¹ The UK estimates come from CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Counter-Terrorism (HMSO, 2018), p. 18. For other estimates, see Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018, pp. 14-19.

ANALYSIS BY DR ANDREW GLAZZARD

“To what extent will the current components which make up the UK terrorist threat change over the next three years?”



Dr Andrew Glazzard
Senior Research Fellow;
Director National Security
and Resilience Studies

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continued

Fears of foreign fighters are not misplaced but they are probably exaggerated.

Since 2014, a major concern has been that these foreign fighters, radicalised and motivated, armed with battlefield skills and linked to new extremist networks, will return home and mount terrorist attacks. Empirical research suggests that a very small proportion of returnees go on to attempt terrorist attacks, and most of these take place in the first 12 months after return.² Thomas Hegghammer estimated that up to one in nine returnees might become terrorists, but his more recent data-driven research with Peter Nesser suggests that, in the Daesh era, the figure is closer to one in 360.³

Nevertheless, given the numbers who travelled in the first place, such figures may give little comfort, especially when the risk tolerance for terrorism is so low in the UK. And if Daesh planners are determined to use Western fighters to mount attacks in their home countries, as happened with the attacks in France and Belgium in 2015 masterminded by Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who had travelled to Syria in 2013, they have plenty of personnel to draw upon.

'Homegrown' terrorists, inspired but not necessarily directed by Daesh or AQ, will remain the biggest problem.

The low conversion rate from foreign fighters to domestic terrorists suggests that we should be more concerned about those who never went to Syria and Iraq. Indeed, experience suggests we should be at least as concerned about individuals who were prevented from travelling to conflict zones as those returning from them: Michael Adebolajo, one of the murderers of Fusilier Lee Rigby in 2013, was arrested in Kenya in 2010 and was believed to be travelling to join al Shabaab, an AQ-affiliated group, in Somalia. Chérif Kouachi, one of the brothers responsible for the 'Charlie Hebdo' attacks in Paris in January 2015, had been prevented from travelling to Iraq in 2005.

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The widely-cited statistics of terrorist suspects in the UK are headline-grabbing but are not quite as alarming as they might appear. The 20,000 'closed subjects of interest' to MI5 are closed cases which pose a residual risk: they have appeared on the security radar, but there is nothing to suggest they are actively involved.⁴ From the Government's perspective, these individuals pose a political or reputational risk, as much as a security one. However, as the UK's senior counter-terrorism police officer ACSO Neil Basu has pointed out, it is more important to focus on the 3,000 active subjects of interest.⁵ These are individuals believed to be linked to terrorist investigations, and therefore they pose a higher risk. But this figure is also, in part, a measure of police and MI5 capacity: in 2004-5, when AQ was planning major attacks against

the UK and the US, the number of international terrorist suspects was much lower, at 500-800.⁶ And police and intelligence service successes mean that Islamist terrorists are less strategically ambitious, and so more inclined to use weapons at hand, such as knives and cars. We should expect this to remain the case.

In risk management terms, this means we will see a greater threat in terms of volume, but lower impact in terms of each incident, even if Islamist terrorists have found that a small-scale, low-fatality attack can still generate exceptionally good returns in terms of publicity.

One source of concern is the number of offenders being released from prison. Analysis by the Guardian newspaper shows that at least half of the 195 convicted for terrorism offences in the 2007-16 period will be free by the end of 2018; by the end of 2021 only around 40 will still be in jail.⁷ Fortunately, research shows that, at around 10-20%, rates of recidivism are much lower in terrorism cases than other forms of crime, where it is generally 50%.⁸ Also, many of those due to be released would have been convicted for relatively minor offences. But it is another piece of evidence suggesting that the CT authorities will have more, not less work to do over the next three years.

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Right-wing extremists are less capable but are growing in number and pose an increasing threat.

Right-wing extremists have carried out a small number of fatal attacks, the most prominent being the murder of Mohammed Saleem in Birmingham by the Ukrainian Pavlo Lapshyn in 2013, the murder of Jo Cox MP by Thomas Mair in 2016, and Darren Osborne's attack against Muslim worshippers outside the Muslim Welfare House in North London in 2017. For the first time since the Second World War, in 2017 the Government proscribed a right-wing group — National Action — suggesting that the extreme right-wing may be becoming more organised. Moreover, lone actors are able to mount very significant terrorist attacks, as demonstrated by Anders Behring Breivik in 2011; using only the internet and self-purchased resources in an isolated farmhouse, Breivik built a large explosive device and acquired enough firepower to murder 77 people in Oslo and Utøya. In the US, extreme right-wing groups and individuals were estimated to have committed 59% of extremist murders in 2017.⁹

The UK has a long way to go before it can match the US in XRW violence. But there is good reason to expect an incremental increase in threat, as cases in the Government's Channel intervention (under its Prevent Programme) may be something of a leading indicator.

Channel is a voluntary intervention to support individuals judged to be at risk of being drawn into terrorism. 37% of those receiving Channel support in 2016-17 were XRW cases.¹⁰ And in the UK's uncertain political environment, there is a possibility that a significant political event will mobilise right-wing extremists further.

Dissident republicans will remain active in Northern Ireland, and occasionally on the mainland.

Most terrorist attacks in the UK take place in Northern Ireland. Although terrorism related to Northern Ireland remains at historically low levels, dissident republican groups such as the so-called New Irish Republican Army (NIRA) have continued to mount attacks against security forces alongside vigilantism and feuding with organised crime groups. In 2017, Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee reported an MI5 assessment that Northern Ireland is the "most concentrated area of terrorist activity probably anywhere in Europe".¹¹

Although one Real IRA (RIRA) splinter group declared a ceasefire in 2017, it seems likely that groups like NIRA will continue to attempt attacks against security forces in NI and potentially on the mainland. And uncertain politics may change things for the worse: the contested status of the Irish border in the Brexit negotiations could mobilise republicans (and hence loyalists) if a hard border is put in place, or if NI emerges with a different status from the rest of the UK.

The likeliest scenario for the UK threat is more of the same – an incremental increase in existing threats.

This would mean a persistent and possibly increased threat from Daesh and AQ globally, continued attacks by individuals and networks inspired by global jihadism, some of which could be on a larger scale than seen in 2017, an increased frequency of attempted attacks by right-wing extremists, and a continued threat from groups like the New IRA.

2 David Malet & Rachel Hayes, Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Indefinite Threat? Terrorism and Political Violence, July 2018.

3 Thomas Hegghammer and Peter Nesser, Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West, Perspectives on Terrorism, 2015.

4 See David Anderson, Attacks in London and Manchester, March-June 2017: Independent Assessment of MI5 and Police Internal Reviews, December 2017, p. 8.

5 Raffaello Pantucci, A View from the CT Foxhole: Neil Basu, Senior National Coordinator for Counterterrorism Policing in the United Kingdom, Combatting Terrorism Center, February 2018. Available at <https://ctc.usma.edu/view-ct-foxhole-neil-basu-senior-national-coordinator-counterterrorism-policing-united-kingdom/>

6 Evidence provided by Security Service (MI5) to 7 July Inquest Main Hearing, 21 February 2011. Transcript available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120216080050/http://7julyinquests.independent.gov.uk/evidence/fullday/210211fullday.pdf>

7 Jamie Grierson and Caelainn Barr, 'Police facing surge in extremists released from jail, analysis finds', *The Guardian*, 3 June 2018.

8 Malet And Hayes, Foreign Fighter Returnees.

9 Report available at: <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/murder-and-extremism-in-the-united-states-in-2017#the-incidents>

10 Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2016 to March 2017: Statistical Bulletin 06/18, 27 March 2018 (Home Office, 2018).

11 Intelligence and Security Committee Annual Report 2016-17 (HMSO, 2017), p. 27.