Airports

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Terrorism threat to airports

- It is almost certain that terrorist actors in the UK would have the intent to conduct attacks against airports due to their high-profile status and the possibility of causing significant disruption and mass casualties at such sites.

- It is highly likely that any attack conducted against an airport in the UK would be conducted by a lone individual or small cell using a low sophistication methodology. E.g., Bladed or Blunt Force Weapons, Vehicle as a Weapon, Fire as a Weapon, Fake Suicide Vest, etc.

- There is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors could have the capability to conduct a high sophistication attack against an airport in the UK. E.g., Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) or Firearms Attack. The complicated nature of plotting a high-sophistication terrorist attack makes it highly likely that there will be greater opportunity for UK police and security services to disrupt potential attacks.

- It is highly likely that any terrorist attack conducted against an airport in the UK would be conducted by an Islamist inspired individual due to the ideologically driven intent to conduct indiscriminate attacks against members of the public in the UK.

- Due to the sophisticated search and screening procedures at airports in the UK, it is highly likely that terrorist actors would prioritise attacks against an airport's landside areas, including external spaces, proximal locations, or at points of security challenge. E.g., Approaches to the airport, external concourses, arrival terminals, transport hubs, security checkpoints, etc.

- It is highly likely that the threat posed to any airport in the UK would be dynamic and dependent on the profile and footfall generated by the airport. It is highly likely that terrorist actors would prioritise attacks against major UK airports. E.g., Heathrow Airport, Manchester Airport, Gatwick Airport, etc.

- The assessments in this report were made using the PHIA Probability Yardstick, for further information please see the Assessment Methodology .

Landside threat

- It is almost certain that terrorist actors would have the intent to conduct attacks against the landside areas of any UK airport in order to target large crowds of people and to avoid sophisticated search and screening procedures necessary to access airside areas of any site. E.g., Approaches to the airport, external concourses, arrival lounges, transport hubs, security checkpoints, etc.

- Due to the crowded and publicly accessible nature of any airport landside area, it is likely that potential terrorist actors would be able to conduct hostile reconnaissance without detection and to develop an understanding of the security mitigations, best access points, and most suitable areas to target at any given site.

- It is highly likely that vehicular access routes in proximity to airports would attract high footfall from incoming and outgoing passengers. There is a realistic possibility that certain landside areas could be at a heightened threat from Vehicle as a Weapon (VAW) attacks if not adequately protected.

- There is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors with the intent to travel by aircraft to conduct a terrorist attack, or the intent to target aircraft directly, could accidently trigger sensitive Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) whilst moving through landside areas of any UK airport. Similarly, if challenged by police, security, or members of the public whilst in the airport, there is a realistic possibility that actors could deliberately or unintentionally advance their attack plans when seeking to gain access to airside areas and/or if met with resistance.

- There is a realistic possibility that external transport infrastructure at airports could be impacted, either directly or indirectly, by attacks targeting the main site. For example, a train station connected to an airport's arrivals lounge could be impacted during an attack on the airport terminal due to their proximity.

Airside threat

- It is almost certain that terrorist actors in the UK would have the intent to target aircraft that are on the ground or airborne as well as other airside areas at any UK airport due to the possibility of causing significant disruption and mass casualties at such sites.

- There is a realistic possibility that any terrorism-related incident within the airside area of a UK airport could feature an attempt to hijack an aircraft in order to conduct an Aircraft as a Weapon attack against a nearby location. However, it is almost certain that sophisticated search and screening processes at UK airports, as well as onboard security procedures, have significantly reduced the ability of terrorist actors to successfully hijack aircraft.

- Although it is highly unlikely that any terrorist actor in the UK would currently have the capability to successfully hijack an aircraft, there is a realistic possibility that a successfully hijacked aircraft could be used by terrorist actors to target the site; whether unintentionally as their plans to target other sites are met with resistance, or as part of an intended attack.

- There is a realistic possibility that staff employed at UK airports could pose an Insider Threat to the airside areas of airports across the UK:

  - E.g., Staff employed at UK airports could allow individuals with terrorist intent to gain access to airside areas of any airport in the UK.

  - E.g., Members of staff could gain or grant access to aircraft for malicious purposes.

  - E.g., Staff employed at airlines operating out of any UK airport could be impressionable and willing to share inside information with hostile actors or sabotage radio control centres in exchange for monetary rewards.

    2011 London; An Islamist terrorist was convicted of four counts of preparing acts of terrorism. The individual had previously worked for British Airways as a software engineer. He was reportedly acting under orders from Anwar Al-Awlaki, a senior al Qa'ida member, and had discussed plans to erase British Airways data, or facilitate an Improvised Explosive Device onto a US-bound flight. [1]

Surrounding area threat

- It is unlikely that terrorist actors in the UK would have the intent to target surrounding infrastructure at UK airports. At this time, it is almost certain that terrorist actors in the UK would have the intent to prioritise attacks against members of the public to create fear and gain publicity, rather than damaging infrastructure.

- There is a realistic possibility that staff employed within the surrounding infrastructure of any UK airport could pose an Insider Threat to the main airport. For example, directly engaged staff could exploit their access to warehousing and/or flight-related infrastructure in order to advance the theft of materials, planting of malicious devices, or to grant access to an individual with terrorist intent to high-security areas of the airport.

Previous terrorist incidents related to airports in the UK and overseas

- Terrorist actors have previously demonstrated the intent and capability to conduct attacks against airports in the UK, including:

  - **2007 Glasgow**; Two Islamist terrorists conducted a Vehicle as a Weapon and Fire as a Weapon attack against Glasgow Airport's departure lounge. The vehicle was laden with propane gas cylinders and petrol cans. There were no fatalities. [2]

- Terrorist actors have previously demonstrated the intent and capability to conduct attacks against airports and/or use aircraft to conduct attacks globally, including:

  - **2023 France and Belgium**; Although not officially designated as terrorism, several regional airports in France and Belgium were evacuated after threats of attack. The Lille, Lyon-Bron, Nice, Nantes, Biarritz, Toulouse and Paris Beauvais airports and the Ostend-Bruges airports were evacuated. [3]

  - **2021 Yemen**; There were nine fatalities following a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) attack in proximity to an airport in Yemen's temporary capital, Aden. 12 others were injured in what was described as a "terrorist bombing". [4]

  - **2017 France**; An individual was shot dead by police after attacking a solider at Orly airport in Paris. Reporting suggests the individual had previously been radicalised while serving time in jail but was not considered to pose a high risk. [5]

  - **2016 Turkey**; Three Islamist terrorists conducted a Person Borne Improvised Explosive Device (PBIED) and Firearms attack against Ataturk Airport. The perpetrators conducted their attack at a terminal entrance after an exchange with police. There were 42 fatalities and 239 were injured. [6]

  - **2016 Belgium**; Islamic State claimed responsibility for a complex, high-sophistication Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attack at Brussels airport and on a metro train passing through the city. There were 32 fatalities and more than 300 people were injured. [7]

  - **2015 Turkey**; The Freedom Falcons of Kurdistan claimed responsibility for a "mortar attack" on Istanbul's Sabinha Gokcen airport. There was one fatality, and one other was injured. [8]

  - **2014 Pakistan**; The Islamic Movement for Uzbekistan claimed responsibility for a marauding Firearms attack conducted against Karachi International Airport. There were 39 fatalities, including all 10 gunmen. [9]

  - **2007 USA**; Four individuals were charged with conspiring to attack John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) by planting explosives to blow up the airport's major jet-fuel tanks and pipeline. [10] Media reporting suggests that the accused had contacted Islamist terrorists for help with the plan. [11]

  - **2002 USA**; An individual conducted a Firearms attack at Los Angeles International Airport while standing in line at the ticket counter of Israel's El Al Airlines. There were two fatalities, and four others were injured. Media reporting suggests that the attack was motivated by the Israel-Palestine conflict and was later designated as terrorism. [12]

  - **2001 USA**; Members of al-Qa'ida hijacked four aircraft in the US and conducted Aircraft as a Weapon attacks against iconic sites. Two aircraft targeted the World Trade Centre in New York. Another aircraft targeted the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The fourth hijacking was disrupted by passengers onboard the aircraft and crashed into an empty field in Pennsylvania. There were 2,977 fatalities. [13]

Other potential threats to UK airports

- Although it is unlikely that any such event would be designated as terrorism, Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA) protest groups have previously conducted protests at UK airports. It is highly likely that protest groups would maintain the intent and capability to protest at UK airports. It is highly likely that all protest action conducted at UK airports would seek to disrupt the infrastructure and business operations of the site; it is highly unlikely that people would be targeted as part of any protest.

- There is a realistic possibility that the threat to UK airports could be heightened due to the presence of high-profile individuals. E.g., Individuals with terrorist intent could seek to target high-profile individuals as they enter or leave the UK, such as politicians, celebrities, influencers, etc.

- At this time, there is a realistic possibility that there could be a heightened threat to any UK airport facilitating the arrival or departure of migrants to the UK. It is almost certain that the migrant crisis will continue to emerge as a driver of UK terrorism threat in the long term. It is highly likely that any terrorism incident conducted at a UK airport and related to the arrival or departure of migrants would be conducted by individuals adhering to either an Extreme Right-Wing or Islamist ideology.

- There is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors could seek to cause disruption to airports in the UK through physical or cyber means in order to increase the build-up of crowds and amplify the impact of any attack.

- There is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors in the UK could have the intent to use drones in order to attack or significantly disrupt UK airports. However, it is unlikely that terrorist actors in the UK currently have the capability to weaponize commercially available drones. Instead, it is likely that drones would be used non-violently to disrupt business continuity at UK airports.
  - E.g., Although not designated an act of terrorism, in 2018, Gatwick Airport was closed for two days following reports of drone sightings close to the runway causing estimated losses of over £100 million. The motivation and origin of the disruption remain unclear.[14]
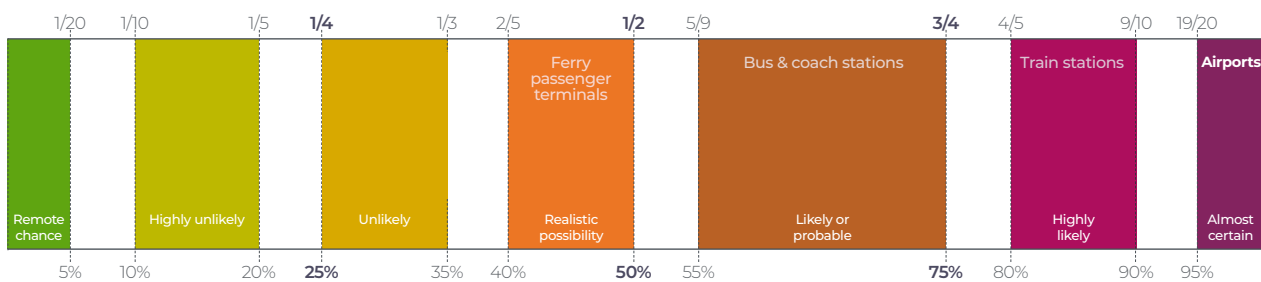
Threat visualisation

The diagram below outlines the intent of terrorist actors in the UK to conduct attacks against airports within the transport sector.

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

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

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

1/20	1/10	1/5	**1/4**	1/3	2/5	**1/2**	5/9		**3/4**	4/5	9/10	19/20
						Ferry passenger terminals		Bus & coach stations		Train stations		**Airports**
Remote chance	Highly unlikely		Unlikely			Realistic possibility		Likely or probable		Highly likely		Almost certain
5%	10%	20%	**25%**	35%	40%	**50%**	55%		**75%**	80%	90%	95%

Assessment Methodology

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

- **Almost certain:** An event has a greater than 90% chance of occurring.
- **Highly likely:** An event has a 76% to 90% chance of occurring.
- **Likely:** An event has a 55% to 75% chance of occurring.
- **Realistic possibility:** An event has a 40% to 54% chance of occurring.

- **Unlikely:** An event has a 25% to 39% chance of occurring.
- **Highly unlikely:** An event has an 10% to 24% chance of occurring.
- **Remote chance:** An event has a less than 10% chance of occurring.

Time spans

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

Intelligence cut-off date: 25 March 2024

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

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