



**Policy Brief**

# **Current counter terrorism situation in the United Kingdom**

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# Current counter terrorism situation in the United Kingdom



## 1. Current counter terrorism situation in the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>

The main UK strategy for countering terrorism is known as CONTEST.<sup>2</sup> The updated fourth version of CONTEST came into being following a review of the London and Manchester attacks in 2017. It covers all aspects of counter-terrorism and aims to ensure that the UK has the best response to current and future threats coming from different ideologies and countries.

The strategic framework is based on four 'P' work strands:

- >> **Prevent:** to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism.
- >> **Pursue:** to stop terrorist attacks.
- >> **Protect:** to strengthen UK protection against a terrorist attack.
- >> **Prepare:** to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack.

Within the UK the Security Service (MI5)<sup>3</sup> is responsible for protecting the UK against threats to national security. The Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism<sup>4</sup> coordinates the government's response in the case of a terrorist incident. Counter-terrorism laws are enforced by all the police services throughout the UK and Northern Ireland.

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## 2. Historical data on arrests under the Terrorism Act

The graph below shows the number of terrorism-related arrests that have been recorded from 2002. As we can see, the numbers have remained stable for the last 2 years and the number of recorded events has dropped considerably since 2017 when the CONTEST legislation and protocols were put in place.

There were 190 terrorism-related arrests in the year ending 30th September 2022, the same as the previous 12-month period. At the time of data provision, of the 190 arrests:

- >> 54 (28%) resulted in charges, of which 52 were for terrorism-related offences
- >> 67 (35%) persons were release under investigation
- >> 61 people (32%) were released without charge
- >> 8 (4%) faced alternative action, for example receiving a caution or recalled to prison

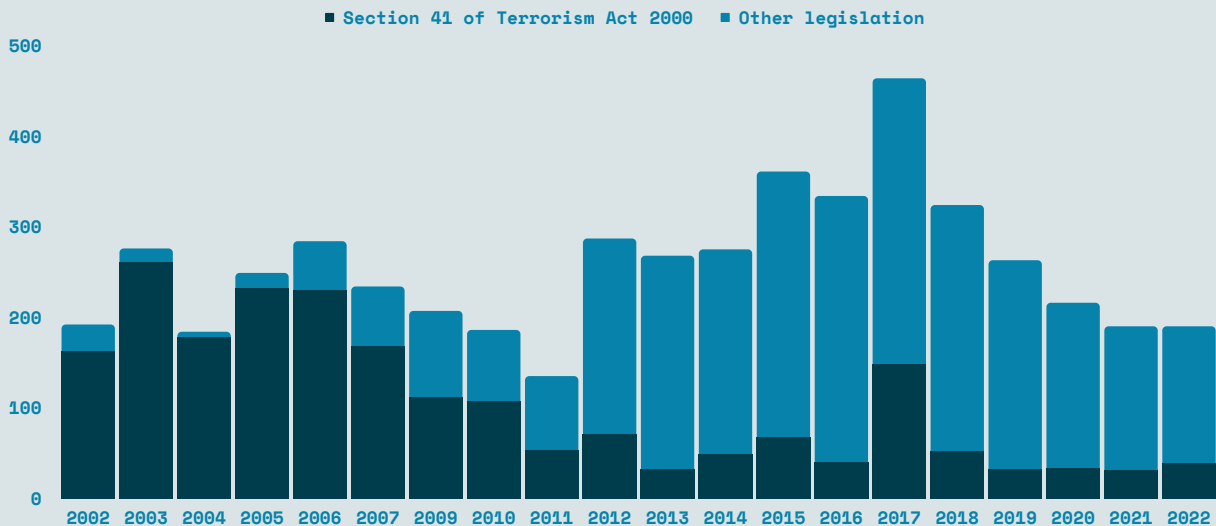


Figure 1: UK terrorism-related arrests 2002-2022<sup>5</sup>

The Prevent strategy is the first strand of the CONTEST strategy. Referrals to the programme are made from a variety of sources which include local authorities, education, health bodies, prisons and police services. These bodies are compelled by statutory obligation set down by the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 to safeguard individuals they may see drawn towards terrorism.

The most recent referral figures (2022) identified the following areas of concern:

- >> 33% Individuals who are deemed as presenting with a vulnerability but display no ideology or counterterrorism risk
- >> 20% Extreme right-wing
- >> 16% Islamic radicalisation
- >> 2% to concerns regarding school massacres
- >> 1% of concerns were Incel related

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## 3. Islamic extremist plots

In MI5 Director General, Ken McCallum's annual public update in November 2022 he reported that of the recently disrupted late stage attacks the most active area is still Islamist terrorism, which accounts for approximately three quarters of their caseload.

Islamist terrorism is defined as acts of terrorism perpetrated or inspired by politico-religiously motivated groups or individuals who support and use violence as means to establish their interpretation of an Islamic society.

He notes that, "MI5 has been focused primarily on Islamist-linked terrorism for the past 20 years since the attacks of 11 September 2001, launched by al-Qaeda from its base in Afghanistan.

*Years of pressure by the military and security organisations against Al Qaeda and Islamic State means neither wields a centralised operational structure comparable to their respective heydays.*

*Pressure has forced both Al Qaeda and Islamic State to adapt and expand into unstable regions and failing states through affiliated groups. This provides them with strength in depth, as decentralised movement's more than hierarchical organisations. If pockets of ungoverned space open up, some terrorist groups might, for example, try to re-establish some training facilities there as we've seen in the past".*



The Director General further acknowledged that "with the Western troops having now left Afghanistan, there is a potential danger of Islamist terrorist groups trying to rebuild their capabilities within the country.

*Intent and capability varies of new groups, but the enduring risk is that in these strengthened global networks, affiliates work together to direct activity in the UK and in other western countries. A risk not to be underestimated. Though certainly preferable to what we faced from overseas just a few years ago. It doesn't automatically follow that they would then build from there to try to direct terrorist attacks against the UK, for example, [but] that is clearly a possibility to which we must be alert."*<sup>6</sup>

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In the UK, the Islamist terrorist threat comes mainly from Salafi-Jihadi movements, which are inherently violent. The UK government and society recognise that Islamism describes a spectrum of movements that hold a variety of views both on the use of violence and many others who are explicit in their rejection of it. This makes it very difficult to label an incident without introducing bias or prejudice as actors can and do have a singular objective not based in Islam.

The MI5 Director General explained that, “linking crimes to Islamic extremist is difficult as there are a number of differing groups and ideologies. These terms are too broad a definition as often the attacks are initiated by self- radicalised terrorists who are seeking to conduct low- sophistication attacks and low sophistication does not mean low impact”. Here he references the murder of Sir David Amess MP who was fatally stabbed at an open constituency surgery where voters come to meet with their MPs and discuss local politics and issues. The post-incident review identified that the offender had become self-radicalised some years earlier and had no affiliation to a proscribed organisation.<sup>8</sup>

Attacks in public spaces have increased and the security services secured a conviction in 2020 when a female convert was sentenced to at least 14 years in prison for planning to initiate a victim-operated device in St. Pauls Cathedral during a significant Christian holiday even though she had no access to explosives. She had been referred to the government sponsored PREVENT scheme a number of years earlier and was known to the security services. They engaged with the subject online and put a sting operation in place. Her charges included preparing terrorist acts, disseminating terrorist publications and encouraging others to launch similar attacks.<sup>9</sup>

## 4. Right-wing terrorism

The second most common form of terrorism within the UK comes from right-wing extremism. With the ongoing issues of a long, and at times, difficult exit from the European Union, the fall in the economy and periods of isolation during the pandemic many people have been manipulated into the right-wing narrative with recruitment figures high in young people and those identified as vulnerable. Figures of racially motivated Hate Crimes recorded by the Stop Hate organisation showed a 19% increase in the years 2021/2022.<sup>10</sup>

In response to questions about the increase in teenage radicalisation online Matt Jukes, Assistant Commissioner, said that 19 of 20 children arrested in last 12 months for terrorism offences were linked to an extreme right-wing ideology.<sup>11</sup>

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An inherent problem in the UK shows that teenagers are proportionally more likely to engage with online forums and social network channels containing right-wing information than any other demographic. This may have been exacerbated during periods of social isolation during the covid-19 pandemic where young people may have been online more often and also perhaps less in the company of authority figures due to home schooling and suspension of leisure facilities. However, the extreme right-wing landscape has continued to evolve away from structured, real-world groups to a diffuse online threat.

The MI5 Director General, Ken McCallum noted that; *"We are seeing growing numbers of right-wing extremist influencers, operating globally, fuel grievances and amplify conspiracy theories. From the comfort of their bedrooms, individuals are easily able to access right-wing extremist spaces, network with each other and move towards a radical mind-set"*.<sup>12</sup> He noted in this speech that this trend was likely to endure and we would be facing it more often in the future.

The youngest person to come to the attention of the security services in 2022 was just 13 years old. In court they pleaded guilty to 12 offences including two for the dissemination of terrorist literature and ten of possession of terrorist material.<sup>13</sup>

In November 2020, a seventeen year old man was found guilty of being a member of the proscribed neo-Nazi terrorist organisation, Feuerkrieg Division, (FDK)<sup>14</sup> was jailed for five and a half years for preparing acts of terrorism. The FDK were designated as a terrorist organisation by the United Kingdom in July 2020.

In November 2022 net migration into the UK topped its highest number to date and this is partly driven by the conflict in Europe, those fleeing alleged persecution in Hong Kong and the resettlement of Afghan refugees. Immigration processing post Brexit and an emergence of more overt right-wing rhetoric in UK society has led to a 19% increase in reported racial abuse in the last year.

MI5 Director General Ken McCallum noted that *"racism is a toxic issue that MI5 confronts every day, most visibly in our work to deal with extreme right-wing terrorism."*<sup>15</sup>

One male who admitted to holding "fascist and neo-Nazi views" was found guilty of two counts of having an explosive substance and three counts of disseminating terrorist publication along with an instruction manual to create a firearm on a 3D printer last year. During the trial the prosecutor gave details of how his social media channel *"unapologetically, unambiguously pumped out neo-Nazi propaganda which encouraged killing of non-whites and Jewish people"*. This channel had 720 subscribers.<sup>16</sup>

Extreme right-wing organisations such as National Action are still in operation and national attention was focused on this group when in April 2021 when a serving member of the Metropolitan Police Service was found guilty of being a member of the proscribed neo-Nazi terrorist organisation and jailed for a total of four years and four months.<sup>17</sup>

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The Director General explained that *"this extremist ideology coupled with personal grievance and individual vulnerability such as mental ill-health is strongly present in the counter-terrorist caseload of extreme Right Wing Terrorism. The Director General explained that "detecting self-initiated terrorists – who often don't reveal their plans to anyone, and can move quickly and sometimes spontaneously from intent to violence is an inherently hard challenge."*

He also noted that *"it is not always straightforward to draw lines demarcating what is and is not terrorism. In cases of previously-unknown attackers, who make no claim of responsibility, it takes time to assemble the facts – and even once they are assembled, they are often a confused mix of factors".<sup>18</sup>*

Currently Muslims were still the most targeted group in England and Wales and account for every 2 in 5 religious hate crimes in figures cited by the Home office in 2022.<sup>19</sup>

On the 22nd of August 2022, 1,300 people crossed the channel in 27 separate boats making this a new record for crossings in one day. As the conflict in Europe continues this trend shows no signs of abating. The Conservative Government's proposal to fly asylum seekers to Rwanda after they have crossed the channel in boats and Lorries to await processing has led to widespread protest from within the UK and beyond. In April the United Nations Refugee Agency deemed the plan to be both "illegal and discriminatory under international law". In spite of several legal challenges put forward by the opposition and the ECHR in December the High Court ruled that it remained lawful to proceed with this course of action while the legal application is being debated.

An attack carried out at an immigration centre in November 2022, where an individual threw up to three incendiary devices at the processing centre causing minor damage and fortunately no injuries. The attacker subsequently took his own life post incident but during the incident review it was noted that although his mental health status may have played the main role in this action that on investigation into his social medial history there was extremist right-wing views relating to both migrants and Muslims.<sup>20</sup>

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## 5. Left-wing, Anarchist and Single Issue Terrorism

Left-wing, Anarchist and Single Issue Terrorism (LASIT) has seen some traction in the last few years but thankfully remains primarily based in protest action rather than direct terrorism. This has been witnessed in the form of protests over the pandemic restrictions and the introduction of vaccines. Due to the complexities of identifying just what constitutes as the definition of LASIT ideology it may make it a difficult movement to analysis and measure. The Terrorism Act of 2000 states that any action of violence that is intended or used to influence governments or intimidate the population into supporting an ideology meets the definition of terrorism threshold.

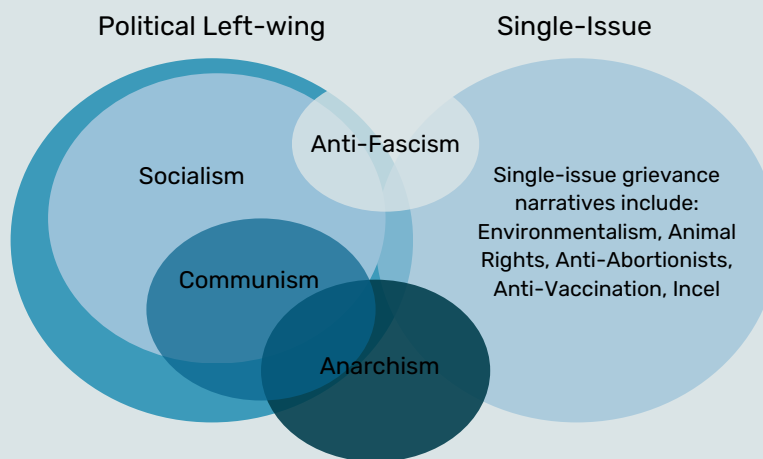


Figure 2: Protect UK<sup>21</sup>

Protect UK is a joint partnership organisation comprising of the National Counter Terrorism Security Office, (NaCTS0) Home Office and Pool Reinsurance. Their current assessment predicts that LASIT ideology will not result in many terror attacks but that position is under constant review. Although Prevent UK has noticed an increase in the number of Incel forums which appear to be engaging younger teenagers to their sites. This may be due to the same reasons as sited in the previous section.

The rise of this ideology is a common picture across Europe and beyond and has been exacerbated by frequent misinformation online.

One incident of note took place in August 2021 when a man killed five seemingly random people following a confrontation with his mother at their home where he shot her dead with his legally held firearm. He then entered the streets around his home and killed four others. The whole attack lasted just 6 minutes and one of the victims was a three year old child. During the subsequent investigation the police revealed that although he had no know links to right-wing extremism or terrorism his social media accounts displayed extreme misogynist and homophobic views and he would post on Incel, (“involuntary celibate”) forums.<sup>22</sup>

The rise of this ideology is a common picture across Europe and beyond and has been exacerbated by frequent misinformation online.

In 2023, counter-extremism workers have warned of a rapid rise in referrals from schools following the arrest of the misogynist influencer Andrew Tate. Tate was arrested in Romania in December 2022 on suspicion of human trafficking, rape and organised crime to exploit women. The Guardian newspaper reported that this toxic masculinity appears to be gaining traction with young men from many different backgrounds and is making its way onto other extremist’s platforms.<sup>23</sup>



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## 6. Ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorism - Northern Ireland

Within the UK there are 4 devolved nations, and terrorism is still prevalent in Northern Ireland although thankfully at a much reduced rate and capacity. For the first time in 12 years the terrorist threat level was reduced by MI5 from SEVERE to SUBSTANTIAL. To put this in context SUBSTANTIAL means that “a terrorist attack is likely and might well occur without further warning”.

The Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis noted that, “despite the change in the threat level, terrorism remains one of the most direct and immediate risks to our National Security and to the communities in Northern Ireland”.<sup>24</sup>

Some frustration over the ability of the UK government to find an agreed solution to the goods border issue between EU and the UK, (effectively the Irish border) has led to tensions along old political divides. On the 31st January 2020, the day that the United Kingdom left the EU a bomb was planted on a lorry destined to join the ferry heading from Belfast Harbour to Scotland. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was given two anonymous tips that a bomb was inside a lorry. The investigation afterwards led the authorities to believe this act was attributed to dissent republican groups.<sup>25</sup>

In the spring of 2022, further tensions regarding the Northern Ireland protocol and the collapse of the power sharing government led to some of the worst civil disturbance in almost a decade.



Image 1: Hijacked bus Belfast<sup>26</sup>

This issue still remains unresolved and there currently is no sitting government. Two attacks on police occurred in November 2022 when a delivery driver was forced, at gunpoint to drive an improvised explosive device to a local police station and at another location an improvised explosive device was thrown at police patrol car.

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## 7. Future Counter terrorism policing

Looking forward, the MI5 Director General has set out a vision for the future operational priorities which include the following points:

- >> *The UK government will carry out a wholesale refresh of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy during 2023, to protect its citizens from new, emerging and persistent threats.*
- >> *As terrorism in its various forms continues to evolve, MI5 continually looks to adapt the counter-terrorist system. The Operational Improvement Review conducted with the police following the awful attacks of 2017 made 104 recommendations – 102 have implemented.*
- >> *A massive milestone is the creation of the Counter-Terrorism Operations Centre, in which MI5 staff are now working alongside the police. CTOC is a purpose-designed operational hub that enables minute-by-minute connection between the many teams working on counter-terrorism. Progressively co-locating policing, the intelligence agencies and other parts of government will significantly improve the effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness of the counter terrorism mission.*
- >> *Taking that same approach further, just as on state threats MI5 are working to build a wider response, going beyond traditional security agencies to connect with expertise in healthcare, education, social services and the criminal justice system, to respond to the complexity of modern terrorism faced by the UK.*
- >> *One other objective is to constantly improve the way data is obtained and analysed. That means MI5 forming cutting-edge partnerships such as with The Alan Turing Institute, and valuing data scientists and engineers just as highly as agent runners and investigators.*
- >> *The nature of terrorism, especially self-initiated terrorism, is such that MI5 know it won't be possible to find and stop every single developing plot, but they will, continually striving to tilt the odds in their favour, knowing that every act of terrorism is shattering for its victims.<sup>27</sup>*

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## 8. Conclusions

The UK government will carry out a wholesale refresh of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy during 2023, to protect its citizens from new, emerging and persistent threats.

In the UK and overseas, there has been a shift towards self-initiated terrorists operating independently from organised groups with increasingly personal ideologies and warped views used to justify violence. The tactics and methodologies used by terrorists are diversifying and becoming increasingly fragmented. To meet those threats, the counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) will be updated to reflect these new challenges. This will involve seeking a diverse range of views and engaging security experts from across the UK and overseas, so that CONTEST continues to robustly protect the British public from terrorist threats. During 2022 the Security Minister, Tom Tugendhat, said *"Terrorists seek to divide us and sow hatred. We will not let them. Our commitment to the values we cherish is too strong. But as the nature of terrorism continues to evolve and endure, so must we. We will ensure that our response to the terror threat continues to be world-leading and ensure we have a strategy that allows people to go about their lives freely and with confidence."*<sup>28</sup>

The update will take into account a series of important reviews, including the second volume of the Manchester Arena Inquiry. In addition, the findings from the Independent Review of Prevent, led by William Shawcross, will strengthen the government's ability to stop individuals being drawn into terrorism in the first place. The government will do everything possible to strengthen the UK's protection against terrorist attacks. This includes a renewed commitment to introduce the Protect Duty, which will enhance the safety of public venues while avoiding placing additional burden on small businesses. The UK counter-terror system already encompasses the efforts of more than 20 government departments and agencies. Since 2017 alone, more than 200 recommendations have been implemented in response to terrorist attacks, including the creation of the world's first multi-organisational Counter Terrorism Operations Centre, in London in June 2021.

Head of Counter Terrorism Policing, Matt Jukes stated *"Since its launch in 2003, CONTEST has proved to be an enduring and effective strategic framework for the UK's counter-terrorism response, but it shouldn't stand still. Today's threat is dominated by increasingly fragmented ideologies, self-initiated terrorism, and the reach of hateful online ideologies into the lives of the young people. It is vital that any future strategy reflects these learnings and also looks forward to the collaborations we will need in the future to keep people safe. Counter-Terrorism Policing, uniquely, has made an evolving contribution to all 4 pillars of the CONTEST strategy and will continue to be at the heart of our preparedness for the terrible moments when attacks happen. The government expects to publish an updated and enhanced version of CONTEST during 2023. In the meantime, it will continue to deliver a counter-terror strategy to keep the public safe."*<sup>29</sup>

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