

## LONDON'S PREPAREDNESS TO RESPOND TO A MAJOR TERRORIST INCIDENT

---

### Lord Toby Harris

*Independent Reviewer for the Mayor of London  
on Preparedness for a Major Terrorist Incident  
Member, Joint Committee on National Security Strategy, UK Parliament*

The United Kingdom has suffered three major terrorist attacks with multiple fatalities since the beginning of 2017:

- on 22<sup>nd</sup> March an individual drove his car into tourists and others, killing four people, and then went on to stab a police officer to death within the precincts of the Houses of Parliament before himself being shot dead by another police officer;
- exactly two months later on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, a suicide bomber blew himself up in the foyer of Manchester Arena at the end of the Ariana Grande concert killing another 22 people and seriously injuring many more; and
- on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> June, three terrorists drove a van into pedestrians on London Bridge and then ran armed with 30cm-long ceramic knives into the Borough Market area where they attacked and stabbed people in the cluster of bars and restaurants there. As a result, eight people were killed and 48 seriously injured before the police shot the three perpetrators dead.

In addition, five other attacks have been thwarted and disrupted by the security and intelligence agencies and the counter-terrorist police over the same period.

The three incidents that were not interdicted led to the first deaths from terrorism on the mainland of the United Kingdom since the bombings on the London transport network on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005, in which 52 people were murdered, and the fatal attack on Trooper Lee Rigby on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2013 near the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich.

The most recent attacks were 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 night club 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 and the hijacked truck crashed into a department store in Stockholm.

It was against this background that Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, shortly after his election in May 2016, asked me to conduct an independent review

of London's preparedness to respond to a major terrorist incident. My report was published in October of last year and most of its 127 recommendations have been accepted and are currently being implemented. The remit related not just to those agencies for which the mayor is directly responsible, such as the Metropolitan Police, the Fire Service and Transport for London, but also other bodies including the London Ambulance Service, the British Transport Police, the 33 local councils in Greater London, the Port of London Authority, community organisations, faith groups and business organisations.

It is worth stressing that the British counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, which is currently being reviewed and updated by the Home Office, has four strands:

- PURSUE: the investigation and disruption of terrorist attacks;
- PREVENT: work 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.

My review was primarily concerned with the PREPARE strand of the strategy, although inevitably my conclusions touched on the other elements.

The immediate focus was the city's ability to respond speedily and effectively to a marauding terrorist firearms attack (or an MTFAs as it is known in the jargon) with the Paris attacks of November 2015 in mind. However, the review looked at a range of possible attack scenarios, including vehicles used as weapons (as in the Nice and Berlin attacks) and subsequently seen on Westminster Bridge and on London Bridge.

I had previously been heavily involved in this field, when, on behalf of successive home secretaries, I had oversight of policing work on counter-terrorism and security from 2004 until early-2012. And the headline conclusion of my review was that preparedness had improved substantially compared with four or five years earlier. In particular, the emergency service response would now be much faster than it would – or could – have been in 2011.

This was demonstrated, during the course of the review, by a stabbing incident in Russell Square on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2016. This turned out not to be a terrorist incident, although the response was triggered as though it might have been. An individual, whom the court was subsequently told was suffering from "an acute episode of paranoid schizophrenia", attacked passers-by, tragically killing an American tourist. The length of time that elapsed from when the first (of many) emergency calls were 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 less than six minutes. This was a fast response by any standard.

In March this year, from my vantage point overlooking Westminster Bridge in the room in which I was barricaded with colleagues, I saw the speed of

the police and ambulance response. However, that was an incident that lasted precisely 82 seconds from the point at which the terrorist drove his vehicle on to the pavement and into the crowds, through him crashing into the barriers, leaping from the car, running round 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. And 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 on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 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.

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 them. 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 is, of course, theoretically possible to further increase the armed police presence so that those response times could have been shorter. However, that 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 can kill a lot of people even if the emergency response time is much less.

So the decision for politicians like the mayor of London, or indeed perhaps for all of us, is what level of risk is acceptable? Doubling or quadrupling that 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 to change 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 United Kingdom prides itself - rightly or wrongly - on the belief that our security and intelligence agencies and our counter-terrorist police are amongst the best in the world. However, those agencies still judge the risk of attack as being SEVERE (the second highest of five levels), meaning that an attack is regarded as "highly likely". (The threat level briefly went to CRITICAL - the highest level - in the immediate aftermath of the Manchester Arena attack, when it was feared that a wider network was involved and had not yet been apprehended.) Even if we are right about the effectiveness of our investigative agencies (and - inevitably - in the latest two attacks there are reports that warnings had been given to the authorities about some or all of the perpetrators but not acted upon), the judgement is - and we have to work on the basis - that an attack is highly likely. There can therefore be no complacency.

During the review, I was impressed at the huge amount of thought and analysis that has gone into planning and exercising for a wide variety of attack scenarios. There is necessarily a constant need to consider developing threats and evolving attack methodologies and I watched this in action by sitting in on a meeting of the fortnightly Security Review Committee when amongst other things the implications of the Nice attack and an incident at RAF Marham were being considered.

However, whilst this sort of preparation is essential and it has to be remembered that new attack methodologies can be spread via the internet within seconds, and whilst it is imperative to have as good an intelligence picture as you can, 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.

During my review, I came across a number of areas where the current intelligence assessment was that particular threats were considerably less 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 perhaps they might be reduced – and even then with caution.

In some instances I remain disturbed that the response of the national government has not been as timely or as sharp as it should be. The first of these relates to be the availability of guns in the UK. The UK in my view benefits from the fact that firearms are more difficult to acquire in my country than elsewhere in the world. However, there is almost a complacency about this with an assumption that MTFAs like those that occurred in Paris in 2015 would not happen to us.

London is not firearms free. During the July and August of my review, 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. However, there is also clear evidence that some convicted terrorists have tried to obtain arms from organised crime groups or from other sources.

Moreover, 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 I fear 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 (UAVs) or drones for terrorist purposes – something which is increasingly reported from overseas theatres – either for reconnaissance or for delivering a payload. The UK Department for Transport has been conducting – at a slow pace – a review of policy on the regulation and control of UAVs, despite widespread concerns being raised not just from a counter-terrorist perspective, but also in respect of air traffic control, privacy and the delivery of contraband into prisons.

More work is also needed on the inter-relationship between mental health and those who commit terrorist attacks. In Israel, it is 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 last summer. 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 borderline is perhaps a narrow one. In the UK, our community mental health services are inadequate – the poor relation of the rest of the National Health Service – but we need to do more to bring those mental health professionals that there are much closer to the work being done to try and prevent individuals carrying out violent extremist acts.

More generally there remains in the UK a general belief that the PREVENT strand of the CONTEST strategy requires reinvigoration and refocussing.

In the meantime the threat remains SEVERE, so what else did my review suggest could be done to make London more secure? Once it is 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.

Some of that is about taking physical measures: bollards and barriers to limit the scope for vehicle-based attacks; the capacity to close off roads and prevent cars and trucks 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 and require that certain physical standards be incorporated to make attacks more difficult. 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 counter-terrorism security advisors inspect premises and that their advice be acted upon. This is already standard for fire safety and so should it be for counter-terrorism.

The aim should be that a culture of security is developed in all spaces where the public have access. During the review process, I was struck by how variable this was. Some places of worship have given a great deal of thought to this, others had given none and seemed to be assuming that nobody might bear them ill-will.

I was particularly concerned about schools. Most schools have plans for evacuation in the event of fire. Very few had 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 had some sort of rudimentary perimeter control system designed to keep out predatory paedophiles, but were less well-equipped to deal with a heavily armed marauder and in any event door-entry systems were often left open at the time when pupils were arriving at the beginning of the school day or leaving at the end. I specifically recommended that each school should have a governor responsible for thinking about these issues and devising arrangements appropriate and proportionate for that school.

London is home to half a million businesses, all of whom 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 incident on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> June, there are contrasting tales of those bars and restaurants who on the one hand ushered those on the street inside to safety and on the other those who barred access to those from outside.

Many offices and businesses in London have trained security personnel. These personnel are regulated by the Security Industry Authority and there are estimated to be some 100,000 operatives licensed by the SIA in London – 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 in 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. In the recent attacks the Metropolitan Police used their 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 with the development – as has happened in a number of other cities – of alerts directly to people's mobile phones. In time, the capacity to provide cogent real-time advice targeted at different cell-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.

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

Preparedness has to be pro-active. And preparedness 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 mind-set of community security and resilience. It should also mean that our cities have security and resilience designed in and it is part of our society's fabric. Ultimately, it means that everyone who lives and works in our cities sees security and resilience as their responsibility just as much as it is the responsibility of the emergency services and the civic authorities.

## References

HARRIS, Lord Toby. *An Independent Review of London's Preparedness to Respond to a Major Terrorist Incident*. London: Greater London Authority, 2017. <https://www.london.gov.uk/mopac-publications/londons-preparedness-respond-major-terrorist-incident>

HM GOVERNMENT. *CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism*. London: The Stationery Office, 2011. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/97995/strategy-contest.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97995/strategy-contest.pdf)

