

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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p.1

Brian M. Perkins

BRIEFS

p.3

Alison Pargeter

The Death of Morsi and Its Implications for the Muslim Brotherhood

p.5

James Potheary

Somalia-Kenya Maritime Border Dispute Could Threaten Counterterrorism Gains

p.7

Brian M. Perkins

2 Years Later - Analyzing the 2017 London Bridge Attack

AFGHANISTAN: AL-QAEDA PRIMED TO CONTINUE EXPANDING IN AFGHANISTAN

Brian M. Perkins

Despite being less flashy than its rival Islamic State (IS), al-Qaeda and its affiliates have achieved a lot over the past several years. Al-Qaeda’s successes include completing a complex merger of various militant groups to help expand in the Sahel, the growth of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and the persistence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its local victories against the Yemeni IS branch. Arguably, the group’s greatest achievement, however, is its return to and growth in Afghanistan over the past year.

A UN report released on June 13 highlighted al-Qaeda’s growth in Afghanistan and continued partnership with the Taliban and Haqqani Network as well as other foreign terrorist organizations, including the primarily Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) ([UNSC](#), June 13). Al-Qaeda has strengthened and expanded its area of operations as the Taliban has managed to take over an ever-increasing number of districts and is particularly active in Badakhshan, Kunar, Zabul, Helmand, and Kan

dahar. Additionally, it has been working to expand in Paktika Province’s Barmal District along the Pakistan border where LeT is notably active. What is also particularly concerning is that the report noted the arrival of al-Qaeda activists from Egypt, suggesting an effort to draw in more foreign fighters.

While its official branches and affiliates elsewhere comprise a significantly higher number of fighters and are important to the group’s image and growth, its leadership core is still seen as essential to its longevity and Afghanistan could once again provide an ideal base. Furthermore, the importance of the partnerships core al-Qaeda maintains with the myriad terrorist organizations in Afghanistan cannot be understated as they provide one another with financing, logistical, and communication support. The Taliban’s increased territorial control, the diminished role of U.S. troops, and the prospect of a troop withdrawal and peace deal is creating the ideal conditions for al-Qaeda to regroup in Afghanistan over the coming years.

Simply put, the Taliban is very much in a position of strength and has the wherewithal to continue the fight for years to come as it controls more territory now than when the war began. Meanwhile, Afghan forces are

weary, and the U.S. and other international partners are eager to make an exit rather than ramp up operations. One of the core aspects of any potential peace deal with the Taliban is that the group will not allow the country to remain a haven for terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda ([ToloNews](#), July 6). While the Taliban delegation negotiating for peace might be willing to agree to this requirement, it is simply a promise that is neither theirs to make nor is it particularly feasible. Those that have been sheltering and supporting al-Qaeda over the past decades are unlikely to turn their guns on the group. Then, there are the hosts of other foreign terrorist groups operating across the country that still need to be addressed.

If either the Taliban continues to expand or a peace deal is signed, Afghanistan will still almost assuredly see al-Qaeda itself in an increased operational space over the coming year. As we have seen before, al-Qaeda has the ability to shift its tactics and area of operations rather quickly and its leadership is well aware that there will likely not be a foreign military willing to increase operations in Afghanistan for years to come. As such, the group will almost certainly continue to expand in Afghanistan as it waits for the U.S. presence to further decline.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

PHILIPPINES: JOLO ATTACK SUGGESTS TACTICAL SHIFT FOR IS-ALIGNED ABU SAYYAF GROUP

Brian M. Perkins

On June 28, a bombing at the front gate of a military base on the island of Jolo in the Philippines' Sulu province killed at least eight people ([Channel News Asia](#), June 29). The base is the temporary headquarters for the Philippine First Brigade Combat Team, the army's counterterrorism unit, and the attack reportedly occurred during a change of command. The attack was, expectedly, claimed by the Islamic State East Asia Province in a statement purporting that two suicide bombers killed and wounded a total of 100 soldiers, a claim that was clearly wildly exaggerated. The attack was almost certainly the work of the local IS-aligned Abu Sayyaf, which has wreaked havoc on the Southern Philippines for years.

The embattled island of Jolo, and the larger Sulu province, has seen countless attacks over the past several years, but the nature of this attack points to several burgeoning trends, which will likely escalate in the coming months. One aspect in particular makes this attack different than those before it, and that is the fact that security forces confirmed on July 10 that it was, in fact, the first confirmed suicide bombing by a Filipino militant ([Straits Times](#), July 11).

Only two other suspected suicide bombings have been reported in the Philippines in recent years—a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack in Basilan in 2018 and the Sunday mass cathedral bombing in Jolo in January ([PhilStar](#), August 11, 2018; [PhilStar](#), February 2). While there are mixed reports regarding whether or not the cathedral bombing was a suicide bombing, authorities have placed the blame on foreign fighters for carrying out those attacks. Meanwhile, authorities are working under the assumption that the other bomber from the June 28 attack was a foreign fighter of Moroccan origin, potentially the son of the Moroccan who conducted the earlier VBIED attack ([Rappler](#), July 2).

This latest attack points to a growing willingness to conduct suicide attacks, a tactic that militant groups in the country have long shied away from due in large part to local cultural specificities. The move toward adopting suicide attacks as a tactic points to a shift in the ideology of Abu Sayyaf factions. This shift could, in large part,

be due to two factors. First, a growing presence of foreign fighters within the ranks of Abu Sayyaf, including radicalized Moroccans as demonstrated by the Basilan attack—potentially the recent attack as well—and militants from Indonesia and Malaysia, where suicide bombings have been successfully utilized or at least attempted on multiple occasions. Second, IS' push to ramp up its operations across Asia could be leading to closer communication and an emphasis on indoctrinating Asian militants to the group's ideology and style of warfare. It is unclear the direction IS will take in bolstering operations in Southeast Asia, but there could plausibly be an effort to draw together or at least increase coordination among the varying groups in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and other nearby countries.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

The Death of Morsi and Its Implications for the Muslim Brotherhood

Alison Pargeter

The death of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi on June 17 sent shockwaves through the Muslim Brotherhood. While Morsi's death may have been predictable given the former president's ill health and Egypt's notoriously poor prison conditions, it still dealt another heavy blow to a movement already on its knees following six years of relentless repression.

Although the Brotherhood moved to label Morsi as the 'Martyr President', Morsi was hardly made of inspirational mettle. A bumbling figure with a charisma-deficit, Morsi's time as president was hardly marked by greatness. He will certainly never reach the hallowed status of Sayid Qutb, the movement's only real theoretician who was executed in prison in 1966. Furthermore, the Brotherhood has always prioritized organizational conformity over personality.

Morsi's death is significant nonetheless. As Egypt's first democratically-elected president, Morsi had become the symbol of legitimacy for the Brotherhood; proof that the movement had not only won the country's first free and fair elections but that it had also played by the democratic rules. While Morsi was incarcerated, he embodied the spirit of the revolution but more importantly served as a vehicle through which the Brotherhood could claim the moral high ground in the face of the return of raw authoritarianism.

Given this symbolic significance, while Morsi was alive the Brotherhood had no choice but to insist upon his return to power as a pre-condition for engaging in any rapprochement with the Egyptian state. The movement resolutely refused to shift on this issue, wedding itself to accepting nothing short of a full return to power through Morsi's reinstatement.

Theoretically, therefore, Morsi's death represents the chance for a new start and the opportunity for the Brotherhood to craft a new strategy to get itself out of the corner in which it has boxed itself since 2013.

Setting a New Tone?

The faction of the leadership residing in Turkey, known as the General Bureau, certainly seized upon the moment to strike a new tone. In a statement dated June 29, this faction announced its new strategy would focus on two central aims: liberating all political prisoners in Egypt by lobbying the international community and unifying the “revolutionary camp,” namely the opposition, but also the main faction of the Brotherhood as represented by the traditional leadership ([Ikhwan Online](#), June 29).

In a bid to convince the opposition of its sincerity, this faction vowed that the movement would not involve itself in the post-al-Sissi era in the “narrow partisan competition for power,” but would work as a “general national current with an Islamic reference,” allowing its members to join any party or movement that shared a similar vision.

While the traditional leadership did not go as far as to endorse such a radical move, it also expressed its readiness to work with other opposition currents. General Secretary, Mahmoud Hussain, declared that with Morsi’s departure, he hoped other opposition groups would “come and sit with us.” [1] While opposition parties are still unlikely to trust a movement that treated them so shoddily during its time in power, the Brotherhood is clearly hoping that through Morsi’s departure, it can put its relations with the opposition on a new footing.

Recourse to Revolution

The overwhelming tone of this statement, however, was one of revolution. It proclaimed that Morsi’s death had paved the way for a “new reality” and a “revolutionary agenda” that would bring about “total comprehensive change.” Such calls are nothing new; this faction has long advocated revolutionary action in what it dreams will be a re-run of the Arab Spring. Similar calls have hailed from the traditional leadership that has also advocated a more revolutionary approach, in contrast to the Brotherhood’s traditional reformist methods. In light of Morsi’s death, however, this rhetoric has been cranked up.

Such rhetoric should not be conflated with any call for armed struggle. Both leadership factions are still at pains to distance the movement from violence. The General Bureau’s statement stressed the use of “legitimate civil resistance” only, while a statement issued by

the traditional leadership on July 3 emphasized the need for “peaceful civil resistance” ([Ikhwan Online](#), July 3) Any suggestion that Morsi’s death will propel the movement down a more violent trajectory is misplaced.

Yet such calls for popular revolution are fantastical in the extreme. The Brotherhood is in no position to ignite any kind of rebellion as Mahmoud Hussain acknowledged after Morsi’s death, “We demand popular rebellion but we cannot create it.” [2] Indeed, as these empty calls for revolution indicate, the Brotherhood is still so shattered by its experiences that all it can do is shout ever louder while it waits for the al-Sissi regime to falter.

Reliance on Turkey

There is another danger facing the movement, which lies in its ever-reliant relationship with Turkey. Although the Brotherhood was given refuge in the past by different states, most notably Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s, its current dependence on Turkey, which has opened its doors to Brotherhood exiles, is of a markedly different nature.

This time, the movement risks being subsumed by its patron, President Erdogan, and his international Islamist agenda. Erdogan has succeeded in turning Turkey into the go-to hub for the Islamist current, eroding the power and standing of the Muslim Brotherhood. Where once the Egyptian Brotherhood was held up as the very embodiment of political Islam, Islamists of varying hues are now looking to Turkey for support and inspiration. The Libyan crisis is a case in point, with Turkey serving as the main backer and point of reference for the Islamist camp, including the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood.

Furthermore, through its dependence on Ankara, the Brotherhood is in danger of no longer being the master of its own destiny. It has become increasingly instrumentalized in the wider conflict that is defining the region between Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one hand and Qatar and Turkey on the other. Being caught up in this struggle will inevitably compromise the Brotherhood’s autonomy and room to maneuver.

Ironically, the Brotherhood’s best hope to avoid being subsumed or being catapulted into obscurity lies in the very regime it stands against. For all its talk of revolutionary action, waiting for a re-run of the Egyptian revolution is nothing more than fanciful, and the Brotherhood’s only real option to save itself is to try to find a way back into Egypt. While this will be a struggle of

gargantuan proportions given the regime's unrelenting stance, with Morsi gone, the way is at least open for the Brotherhood to adopt a more flexible and strategic approach that may enable it to carve out some space for itself inside Egypt once again.

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Notes

[1] Interview with Mahmoud Hussain by the Mukamileen Channel. 20 June 2019. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8es3lwRS6oU>

[2] Ibid.

Somalia-Kenya Maritime Border Dispute Could Threaten Counterterrorism Gains

Sunguta West

A maritime border dispute between Somalia and Kenya is threatening to derail the war against al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa, which continues to execute a deadly war in the Horn of Africa.

The dispute is particularly precarious because Kenya is a key contributor of troops to the Africa Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which the Somali government relies on to fight al-Shabaab ([The East African](#), March 24).

Recently, the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa has stepped up attacks, increasingly striking targets in the capital Mogadishu. The weapon of choice has been Vehicle-Borne Improved Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) backed by suicide bombers and small teams of fighters armed with AK47s. In one of the latest incidents, the militants attacked a neighborhood in Mogadishu on July 8, killing three people, including police officers. In what is becoming a trend, the attackers detonated a VBIED, before opening fire on nearby individuals ([Daily Nation](#), May 24; [Intelligence Briefs](#), July 8).

Such attacks have struck home in Kenya, Somalia's southern neighbor, which has long paid a heavy price for protecting Somali government interests. One of the country's significant decisions has been to send troops to fight al-Shabaab, which has been battling to replace the Somali government with one governed under *Sharia* (Islamic Law). Kenya entered Somalia in 2011 in pursuit of the militants who it accused of kidnapping foreign nationals, aid workers, and tourists inside its borders. In 2012, Kenyan troops formerly integrated into the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) force, turning the battle against the group into a continental effort ([Daily Nation](#), July 6, 2012).

For supporting AMISOM, Kenya has paid with the lives of its troops. The militant group has also launched deadly reprisal attacks in Kenyan towns and cities ([Daily Nation](#), May 25).

In January, al-Shabaab attacked the Dusit D2, an upmarket hotel and office complex in Nairobi, killing at least

21 people. In 2015, the militant group attacked Garissa University College, killing 148 people, mainly Christian students. In 2013, the militants attacked the upscale Westgate shopping mall, killing at least 60 people and injuring over 200 ([Daily Nation](#), February 21).

AMISOM campaigns backed by increased U.S. airstrikes have, however, put the militants on the defensive. Al-Shabaab has lost significant territory and been forced out of towns and cities key to its revenue. The group, however, has remained a resilient force, extending its terror activities near the border with Kenya, with militants increasingly crossing into Kenya to carry out attacks.

But Kenya—a key U.S. ally in the war against terrorism—now finds itself at loggerheads with Somalia over a maritime border line. The dispute could put the war on terrorism and piracy in the Indian Ocean at stake. Security experts fear that the disagreement could upset the diplomatic balance, undo significant gains made against terrorism in Somalia and the region, and hinder the fight against piracy. Similarly, there is a fear that the dispute could embolden the militants.

The tensions have peaked in recent months, with diplomatic spats coming into the open. In May, three junior Somali ministers were blocked from entering Kenya at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi while traveling to join a European Union-sponsored cross-border management meeting. Somalia reacted by banning all Kenya-based NGOs working in Somalia. The government gave the organizations one month to relocate their headquarters to Somalia or be barred from operating in the country ([Daily Nation](#), May 21; [Business Daily](#), May 26).

After years of decline, piracy off the coast of Somalia has slowly been making a comeback. The incidents doubled in 2017 compared to 2016 and could surge again this year. [1] Terrorism and piracy in the area are closely related ([Business Daily](#), July 31, 2018).

Furthermore, how the dispute will affect the collaboration between the Somali Army and the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) remains to be seen. The two have been collaborating in the fight against the al-Shabaab, which still controls most of southern Somalia.

Past attempts to solve the border disputes have not been successful. In 2009, Kenya and Somalia agreed that a UN Commission in charge of border disputes

should resolve the border line and agreed they should work so that the border issue does not go to court.

In 2014, however, Somalia brought the issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague, sparking a fresh diplomatic row. Rejecting an out of court settlement, Somalia wants the line redrawn to run diagonally eastwards as an extension of the dry land border. Kenyan officials allege if the line is extended eastwards, it will affect Tanzania, then Mozambique, and finally South Africa ([Standard Digital](#), June 18).

Kenya maintains the border runs parallel to the line of latitude. Kenya, East Africa's largest economy, has argued that Somalia has recognized and respected this position since 1979 ([Standard Digital](#), July 1).

At the core of the disagreement are off-shore blocks in a 100,000 square kilometer triangle off the Kenyan port of Lamu. The sea blocks are believed to contain huge deposits of hydrocarbons, such as oil and gas. Kenyan officials allege a hidden hand, mainly of international oil and gas prospecting companies, which are apparently taking advantage of Somalia's weakness to drive the dispute ([The East Africa](#), June 9).

Gas and oil are new discoveries in the two countries, and each is keen to develop its own energy sector. Both have set sight on the disputed territory's hydrocarbons, in spite of the threat posed by piracy in the sea and al-Shabaab on the land.

At stake for Kenya is a sea area of approximately 51,000 square kilometers, which represents 26 percent of its Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). The country would also lose 85 percent, or 95,000 square kilometers, of the continental shelf beyond the EEZ as well as access to international waters ([Standard Digital](#), June 18).

Somalia had attempted to auction off oil blocks in the disputed region. According to the reports, the country held an oil exploration exhibition in London in February, where the blocks were put up for sale. Kenya alleged the country had exhibited seismic oil data for potential buyers, under the sponsorship of a potential explorer ([The East African](#), June 9).

Conclusion

The border dispute threatens the war against al-Shabaab and complicates efforts to end piracy in the Indian Ocean. Somalia could try to portray Kenya as a bullying, stable neighbor while Kenya could try to por-

tray Somalia as an ungrateful, troubled nation. If the diplomatic tensions increase further, Kenya could potentially choose to pull its troops from AMISOM. Such a move would be disastrous for Somalia as Kenya is a key contributor and the country does not have a stable and efficient army. Al-Shabaab, which over the years has emerged as a very resilient force, could quickly overrun most regions in southern Somalia, where it still maintains some control. The dispute needs to be resolved quickly and amicably so that it does not threaten, complicate and disrupt key security efforts in East Africa.

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Notes

[1] The State of Maritime Piracy Report <http://oceansbeyondpiracy.org/reports/sop/east-africa>

2 Years Later—Analyzing the 2017 London Bridge Attack

James Brandon

The vehicle ramming and knife attack carried out by three jihadists on London Bridge on June 3, 2017, killed eight people and injured 48, ending only when the police shot and killed the attackers. This was the third most fatal Islamist attack in the UK to date and the most significant attack in London since the 2005 transport bombings. In response to the attack, the government held a public inquest, including interviews with the attackers' acquaintances, the security services and police, and technical experts. When the hearing concluded on June 28 of this year, it became one of the most comprehensive public inquiries ever held in the UK, shedding new light on the perpetrators, their paths to radicalization, pre-attack planning, and on the attack itself. The report aims to gather this material together to provide insights into the attack and the prior events. [1]

The Leader

The eventual leader of the London Bridge attack, Khuram Butt, was born in Pakistan in 1990 and brought to the UK with family by his father in 1998. However, Butt's father died in 2003 when he was 13. This left him without a father figure, and—as for many other radicals—this may have made him more receptive to charismatic extremists. Butt subsequently performed relatively well at schools in London, but upon leaving took a succession of short-lived jobs, including in a removals firm, at a pizza outlet, and as an office assistant. In December 2013, he had an arranged marriage to Zahrah Rehman, a conservative British-Pakistani woman; their wedding day was the first time that they had met as adults. Shortly after this point, in 2014, which coincides with the rise of Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria and their glorification of violence through social media, Butt became more overtly religious, including attempting to convert colleagues to Islam, and saying that he wanted to leave the UK—perhaps to Turkey—to live in a more Islamic environment.

Some of this radicalization appears due to Butt coming increasingly under the influence of followers of al-Muhajiroun, the main British pro-jihadist group, which has operated under numerous other names. This includes at some point encountering and visiting the home of its

leader, Anjem Choudary, who he reportedly found inspirational. He further exposed himself to radical ideas through listening online to extremist preachers such as the Jamaican Abdullah Feisal and Ahmad Musa Jibril, watching IS videos and propaganda and being part of a WhatsApp group chat used by other British extremists. By around the peak of IS' power in mid-2014, Butt became significantly more radical, describing Shias as "non-Muslims", criticizing his family's traditional Pakistani cultural practices, and telling one friend, Hamza Raza, "You are not supposed to follow the rules in the country that you are in, you are supposed to listen to your own Islamic rules and regulations," as well as advocating the need for Sharia law. Also in 2014, around a year after the death of Lee Rigby—an off-duty British soldier killed by jihadists in London—Butt described the murder to a colleague as an "eye for an eye," and elsewhere criticized U.S.-led attacks on IS. However, other accounts given to the inquiry, from the same period and until as late as 2016, record Butt also listening to music and smoking cannabis, both usually viewed as forbidden by Islamist hardliners. However, such apparent contradictions are not unusual in accounts of radicalizing jihadists; both drug-taking and religious extremism can be seen as forms of escapism or as ways of rebelling against society.

As a result of this exposure to more radical individuals, media, and ideas, Butt became more committed to his hardline beliefs. Most notably, in February 2015, Butt planned to take his family to Turkey—perhaps to join IS in Syria—but his wife's family became aware of the plans and seized his passport. Further evidence of Butt's deepening radicalization came in July-August 2015 when he was filmed by a TV crew recording a documentary, "Jihadi Next Door," which showed him praying in front of a black flag similar to that of IS alongside other British jihadist sympathizers. Elsewhere, he defended IS atrocities, causing arguments with a number of acquaintances. In response to this deepening radicalization, on September 30, 2015, Butt's brother-in-law, Usman Darr, telephoned the Police Anti-Terrorism Hotline and reported his concerns about Butt. Butt was being investigated by MI5 around the same time, but surveillance resources were shifted away from him to other suspects as he was assessed to not be involved in actively planning an attack.

Meanwhile, however, Butt was becoming more volatile. This included arguing with imams of local mosques that he felt were too moderate and on one occasion in July

2016 physically attacking a prominent local Muslim leader, Usama Hasan, a former hardline Islamist who had since joined the anti-extremist Quilliam Foundation and publicly advocates for more moderate interpretations of Islam. Butt was arrested and interviewed over this incident, but he was not charged.

Fellow Plotters

A critical turning point in the development of the London Bridge plot occurred in mid-2016 when Butt joined an East London gym, the Ummah Fitness Centre, which was popular with numerous jihadist sympathizers. Through the gym and its network of radicals, Butt met Rachid Redouane, a Moroccan who had moved to London after living in Ireland for several years, where he had married an Irish woman (who he had met in a nightclub) and had a son. Redouane, however, despite adopting some radical views, had never been specifically investigated by the British or Irish police or security services and had also never been convicted of any other criminal activity. In other words, he was a "clean skin" whose association with Butt was no reason to raise particular alarm bells. This, in retrospect, can be seen as a critical reason why the UK security services never identified their emerging cell.

However, through the same loose network of radicals associated with the Ummah Fitness Centre, Butt also met Youssef Zaghba, who would become the third London Bridge attacker and was only 22 at the time of the attack. Zaghba had a conservative Moroccan father and Italian mother and lived sporadically between the two countries. Zaghba's family said that he was radicalized relatively rapidly around 2014-2015 due to unknown influences, and in March 2015, attempted to travel to Turkey to enter Syria and join IS, which he had come to see as running an ideal Sharia-governed state. Zaghba's plans failed, however, when Italian police at Bologna airport prevented him from catching a flight to Istanbul after he told them his reason for traveling was to be a "terrorista," which he rapidly corrected to "turista." Italian police added him to a Europe-wide database for suspected criminals, but when this triggered alerts when he entered the UK twice in 2016 and again in 2017, the UK and Italian authorities failed to liaise correctly. This meant that, despite his attempt to travel to Syria, he was not tracked by the UK security services during his subsequent time in London, during which he appears to have increasingly come under Butt's ideological and social influence.

Attack Planning

The small group of Butt, Redouane, and Zaghba, according to what is currently known, do not appear to have discussed their plans to carry out an attack with anyone else or to have sought to make contact with IS in Iraq and Syria prior to the attack. Indeed, their plan seems to have been inspired by the Nice and Berlin vehicle-ramming attacks of 2016 and the Westminster Bridge attack three months earlier in March 2017, in which a jihadist killed four people. That said, it is possible that evidence of such links between the attackers and a remote IS contact may emerge in the future, as has happened with previous cases which initially appeared to be “lone wolf” or “lone wolf pack” operations.

It appears that in the few days leading up to the attack, Butt took some steps to avoid raising any red flags with the authorities. For instance, he acquired the hired van which was used in the attack by paying £160 (\$200) in cash to a neighbor who then paid for it online on his behalf; Butt having convinced him that he did not have enough money in his own account. Meanwhile, Redouane on May 15, 2017—two weeks before the attack—purchased three 12-inch ceramic kitchen knives from a discount shop. Redouane had arguably the lowest profile of the group’s members, and he may have made the purchase for this reason. The group also acquired an additional mobile phone, which they used to make some operational arrangements.

London Bridge was likely chosen as the target, concluding statements at the British inquest said, as it had no barriers between pedestrians and vehicles and relatively light traffic, meaning that a vehicle could reach a high speed. Moreover, the timing of the day—early evening on Friday night and shortly after a major soccer game had finished—meant that the bar and restaurants area near the bridge would also be well-attended. There is also evidence from the group’s phones that they had planned to conduct their attack on Oxford Street, a main shopping area, but picked London Bridge as a target of opportunity while enroute. Prior to launching the attack, the three strapped mock explosives belts to themselves—perhaps to create additional fear or else as a form of ritual act of homage to previous suicide bombers—and attached their knives to their wrists using tape. They then drove their van along the pedestrian sidewalk of London Bridge, hitting various people before colliding with a barrier. They then exited the van

and immediately attacked people with knives before moving to nearby bars and restaurants. Here they carried out further stabbings before being shot dead by police, less than 10 minutes after commencing their attack.

Conclusion

The inquest showed that the radicalization of the individuals involved in the London Bridge attack involved a range of elements common to other militant plots. These include the presence of a central organizing figure able to inspire other followers to act, the critical influence of online radicalization, and the fact that the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria—and the international community’s strong military response to it—helped to turn extremists into militants, even if IS was not directly involved in the attack planning. Other key ingredients in the plot include the attackers employing some small elements of operational security, for instance disguising their hire of the vehicle used in the operation, which would have made the attack difficult to detect and prevent even if the individuals were being monitored. If there is any single lesson to learn from the attack, it is that Western security services will continue to face significant challenges in identifying and disrupting low-tech plots. This will particularly be the case when the attacks are planned by a small and tight-knit group of extremists who take steps to conceal their plans, use everyday objects as lethal weapons, and have little or no direct contact with known militant groups or individuals abroad.

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Notes

[1] All material in this report is drawn directly from inquest. Full transcripts of the hearings are available here: <https://londonbridgeinquests.independent.gov.uk/>