



WESTMINSTER IN THE FIRING LINE

Timothy Compston considers the ramifications of the recent attack on the heart of British democracy.

The tragic events that played out in and around Westminster last month, while Parliament was in session, may have lasted a mere 82 seconds but the security implications of the loss of life and serious injury that resulted will undoubtedly reverberate around the capital for months and years to come. Ultimately, it was only thanks to the bravery of the police officers on duty that the assailant – subsequently identified as Khalid Masood, 52 – was prevented from inflicting further fatalities in what has the hallmarks of a terrorist incident.

Initial media reports suggest that Khalid Masood, the perpetrator of the Westminster attack, was a British-

born convert to Islam who had a chequered history of petty crime and violence, even spending time in prison nearly a decade and a half ago, and at one time taught English in Saudi Arabia. It was also alleged that in the past he had been on the periphery of investigations into violent extremism but, significantly, was not part of the current intelligence picture.

Looking at the timeline of how things developed on the afternoon of Wednesday 22 March, the first indication that something was wrong came just after 2.40 pm when Masood driving a hire car – which he had sourced in Birmingham – started to accelerate his vehicle and mounted the pavement close to the start of the North bound side of Westminster Bridge. He then

proceeded to deliberately target pedestrians for pretty much the whole length of the structure. This action resulted in four deaths and tens of injuries, with some individuals even ending up in the River Thames.

Just 30 seconds later, after leaving the bridge and turning right into Bridge Street, Masood mounted the pavement again crashing his car into a perimeter fence at the Palace of Westminster. A minute after that he exited his vehicle and ran towards the Palace of Westminster, entering through the Carriage Gates, which were open at the time. There he fatally injured PC Keith Palmer, one of the officers on duty from the Parliamentary and Diplomatic Protection Command with a knife before being shot in the chest by armed officers that arrived quickly on the scene.

FAMILIAR PATTERN

The shocking actions of Masood at the Palace of Westminster had echoes of an equally tragic situation that had unfolded three and a half years earlier where a soldier was murdered near Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada. Thankfully, unlike the Canadian experience, this time around the assailant was stopped short of entering the Parliament buildings proper.

Of course, this is not the first occasion in living memory that Westminster has had to contend with the spectre of terrorism. The difference this time was the jihadist rather than Irish republican dimension. Back in 1974 the IRA bombed the Houses of Parliament injuring 11, then there was the murder of MP Airey Neave five years later by an INLA car bomb as he drove out of the Palace of Westminster and 1991 saw mortar bombs targeting 10 Downing Street when Prime Minister John Major was holding a Gulf War meeting.

Speaking in the House of Commons the day after the most recent act of terrorism in Westminster, the Prime Minister – Theresa May – condemned what had happened and said that it had been: “An attack on free people everywhere” and that “Our resolve will not waver in the face of terrorism”. She also referenced the fact that since June 2013 the police, security and intelligence agencies had successfully disrupted 13 separate plots in Britain, underlining the severity of the threat the UK faces.

On specific concerns being voiced about Parliamentary security, the Prime Minister offered some reassurance reiterating the point that the attacker had been shot dead within 20 yards of the gates: “If his intention was to gain access to this building, we should be clear that he did not succeed”. Beyond this she said that the police and the House authorities are to review the security of the Parliamentary estate, co-ordinated with the Cabinet Office.

The Palace of Westminster has already benefitted from a ramping up of security and now has what is often referred to as ‘airport style security’ for screening purposes and as far back as 2003 concrete blockers were put in place for hostile vehicle mitigation. Some newspapers are reporting that MPs had warned that the Carriage Gates, the entry point for Masood, was a potential security weak link and then there is the question of whether the police manning the gates should have been armed. All of this will undoubtedly form part of the security review.

Focusing on the *modus operandi* of the first part of the Westminster attack, where a vehicle was turned into a weapon, this is sadly far from an isolated occurrence.

Just a day after Westminster, a person was detained trying to drive at high speed into a shopping street in Antwerp, Belgium. Another example was, of course, the tragedy that struck Berlin on 19 December when jihadist Tunisian-Born Anis Amri used a truck to target a crowded Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz. The Bastille Day attack in Nice, France, was yet another manifestation of the new trajectory of terrorism.

Philip Ingram, chairman of Global Intelligence Insight – and an ex-military intelligence officer – reckons that the type of vehicle and other attacks we are seeing emerging on the streets of the UK, and mainland Europe are by their low-tech nature very difficult for the authorities to deal with: “It is more than just the vehicle attacks, it is what was labelled at one stage ‘kitchen terrorism’ but it is really household terrorism. If we go back to the appalling murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby, the perpetrators of that used kitchen knives. They [the terrorists] realise that they don’t have to get people high explosives, military-grade weapons or anything else. They are suggesting that those who are self-radicalised should use whatever is around them as a weapon to carry out an attack.”

The Westminster Bridge part of the recent attack, where most of the fatalities occurred, underlines just how vulnerable pedestrians and crowded places

KHALID MASOOD HAD A CHEQUERED HISTORY OF PETTY CRIME AND VIOLENCE

are when vehicles are employed as weapons. Moving forward, more attention will undoubtedly be focused on hostile vehicle mitigation (HVM) solutions such as blockers, barriers and bollards, some permanent and some temporary. One option on the agenda might also be to install specially designed refuges at regular points where pedestrians can seek safety.

Considering other elements to put the brakes on terrorist actions involving vehicles, devices like the ‘stinger’ spike system for tyre deflation – and the British-developed X-Net that punctures tyres and wraps around wheels and axles – may have some utility here but, obviously, police officers need enough time to manoeuvre themselves into a favourable position for deployment. When vehicle attacks are underway, ultimately, the police – as we saw in Nice – may have to resort to firearms to bring things to a swift conclusion.

Turning to the thoughts of the deputy assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Neil Basu, who is also the senior national coordinator for UK Counter Terrorism Policing. On the Monday after the Westminster atrocity he sought to address speculation regarding Masood’s motivation and whether anyone else was involved: “All I can say at this point is that Masood’s communications on that day are a main line of enquiry”. Basu went on to stress that Masood’s attack appears to have been based on low sophistication techniques copied from other attacks – and echoes IS (Islamic State) leaders in terms of the methodology of attacking police and civilians. He also confirmed that at this juncture the police are not aware

A police officer stands between armoured police personnel carriers on a street leading to the Houses of Parliament

of him sharing his plans with others: “Whilst I have found no evidence of an association with IS [Islamic State] or AQ [al Qaeda], there is clearly an interest in jihad”.

NO SIGN OF RADICALISATION

Regarding Masood’s time in prison, back in 2003, Basu said that, contrary to some suggestions, there was nothing to show that radicalisation had occurred there: “This is pure speculation”. Addressing the issue of whether Masood was already on the radar of counter terrorism policing or the security services, Basu commented: “He was not a current subject of interest or part of the current domestic or international threat picture”.

MORE ATTENTION WILL UNDOUBTEDLY BE FOCUSED ON HOSTILE VEHICLE MITIGATION

Entering the debate on how best to uncover terrorist communications, doing the rounds of the media on the weekend after the incident, Home Secretary Amber Rudd was adamant that the security services should not be blamed for what had happened at Westminster and, significantly, called for social media companies like WhatsApp to allow the authorities access to encrypted areas so there are no “secret places for terrorists”.

Philip Ingram is well placed to comment on the efficacy of the Home Secretary’s demands as the cyber intelligence company he chairs specialises in accessing closed groups on end-to-end encryption sites like Telegram: “I think she [the home secretary]

is being naïve. I talked to Jimmy Wales the founder of Wikipedia, about 18 months ago, and he said then that encryption was the only moral thing to do. If we look at end-to-end encryption technology it is not going to be un-invented”. Ingram says that trying to force companies to give encryption keys is unlikely to happen because they are not UK-based in many cases: “There are other ways of getting in and getting the information within the closed groups. It is back to good old-fashioned intelligence techniques and finding ways of penetrating into invite only highly encrypted groups”.

Moving on to discuss the Government’s efforts to deal with radicalisation post-Westminster, while some like Baroness Warsi feel that the Government’s Prevent scheme should be paused, Ingram believes that the strategy, and efforts like it, are a very good starting point to help communities and to stop people being radicalised. He believes, however, that there is much more that could, and should, be done: “So-called Islamic State or jihadists are targeting vulnerable people, they are bringing them into closed groups, they are filling their heads full of propaganda that will make them want to go out and do something, it may be a jihadi-style attack, it may be fundraising, it may be looking for other vulnerable people”. Ingram says that governments need to penetrate these closed groups and even think about setting up other closed groups to deliver alternative messages to try to turn people away from the path they are taking, sadly he reports that there is no evidence that this is happening.

Ultimately, when it comes to deterring and preventing a future Westminster-type scenario, the message seems to be that in this context counter terrorism requires a combination of good intelligence gleaned from both the cyber world as well and the communities where potential extremists live; a strong counter narrative and enhanced policing and physical security measures ●

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Police officers stand on Westminster Bridge as it is closed following the attack

