

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Responding to Streatham: Managing Low-Tech Terrorist Threat

By Raffaello Pantucci

Synopsis

The 2 Feb Streatham attack in south London does not appear to have been part of a larger plot. But it has once again shone a negative light on the UK's approach to counter-terrorism and de-radicalisation, this time under the newly appointed government.

Commentary

ON 2 FEBRUARY 2020, the south London district of Streatham saw a knife-and-fake bomb attack in which a man was shot dead by police after stabbing two people. ISIS claim of responsibility has little credible evidence; despite the young man's reported pledge of allegiance to ISIS, there is no proof they were in contact.

The attack, however, comes against a political context which will demand some reaction. The re-installed Tory government has now faced three incidents on its watch. The outward similarities in all three draws public attention. The United Kingdom fears that it could find itself in the midst of another 2017 when the country suffered five terrorist attacks in relatively quick succession.

More Copycat Attacks?

The most immediate concern for authorities will be the possibility of a copycat incident of some sort. The Streatham attack itself was already a copy. The knife-and-fake-bomb model is one that was deployed in 2017 on London Bridge, on London Bridge again in November 2019, and then in Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Whitemoor in early January 2020 when a convicted terrorist offender and a prisonmate attacked prison guards with bladed weapons and fake suicide vests.

Further emulation might be possible given the simplicity and relative success (in media terms) of the attack. The approach of using knife-and-fake-bomb is a new innovation that has been proven to deliver easy success. The Streatham attack showed how you could wait until the moment of attack to arm yourself, completely compressing the time to attack.

It is hard to completely assess at this stage the exact nature of inspiration that the three plots played towards each other. But on the basis of previous chains it is likely that any subsequent spontaneous ones are likely to come sooner rather than later. More considered plots do not necessarily fall within this analytical framework.

Undirected “Campaign” of Lone Actors

At this stage, the Streatham attack appears as an isolated act. However, as 2017 showed in the UK, a terrorist campaign no longer needs to come in the form of a series of directed attacks; it can also happen to a series of incidents like this. Both Al Qaeda and ISIS have championed the lone actor model of attack repeatedly.

Understanding how to analyse potential lone actors from a pool of potential offenders was a major question to emerge from 2017, and it will likely now be revisited again.

It is worth noting that security authorities were very concerned about the Streatham attacker. The fact he was being monitored as he went about his Sunday business by an undercover armed response unit (armed response units are rare in the UK) shows a high level of risk management assessment.

The high level of concern was visible earlier as well. The counter-terrorism lead at the time of his detention and the sentencing judge all publicly expressed concern about his level of radicalisation. Reporting from his time in prison has suggested that he refused engagement with de-radicalisation programmes.

Offender Management in Prison

A running theme between the London Bridge, HMP Whitemoor and Streatham incidents is prison. However, there are differences that are important to highlight. While the Streatham incident took place days after the offender’s release, the London Bridge attacker waited over a year to launch his attack, for some part of which he engaged with a de-radicalisation programme.

In contrast, the HMP Whitemoor offender still has a number of years on his sentence (a sentence which is likely now to become longer). It is therefore hard to judge where the useful comparison is to assess where the problems might lie.

Recidivism is rare among UK terrorist offenders – prior to the London Bridge attack last year, no successful plots involving recidivists had been seen. While there is a cadre of radicalised individuals who consistently show up on charges for various related offences (often individuals drawn from the Al Muhajiroun community), actual attacks (or plots) by people previously convicted of terrorism offences is a relatively new innovation in the UK context.

Prior to the current cluster, the UK had only seen two since the conflict in Syria started (out of around 40 or so plots that have been disrupted or taken place).

Youth Radicalisation and Long-term Monitoring

Another similarity between the three recent cases is the relative youth at the time of first offence of the three men. The Streatham attacker was 17 when he first came to authorities' attention, the London Bridge attacker's house was first raided by counter-terrorism authorities when he was 17 and the HMP Whitemoor offender was 18 when he was arrested on his way to launch a knife attack.

Aside from what this means for radicalisation, it presents a long-term issue for authorities when it is considered alongside the fact that the UK has seen a terrorist attack by a 52-year-old (London Bridge, March 2017). Authorities may have decades of monitoring ahead of them with all of the expense and resource that entails.

Beyond Deradicalisation Programmes

The attacks have drawn attention to the effectiveness of de-radicalisation programmes. While the Streatham attacker refused to engage, the London Bridge attacker before him had been engaged for some time before stopping in the months prior to his attack. In other words, de-radicalisation programmes are not relevant across all of the cases and such dramatic failures are a new phenomenon in the UK.

The UK has had almost two decades of Islamist terror offenders, but only recently are we seeing such attacks from amongst recidivists. At the same time, it is clear that this is where the current heart of the problem lies given the growing number of people coming out of prisons or back from Syria.

This means more offenders (or people of concern) who will need attention for longer. The idea of using probation services better to manage such offenders is good, but this means probation needs a considerable uplift.

Streatham is now the 11th known attack with Islamist links that the UK has seen since the Conservatives took power in 2010. While the nature of the threat has changed, it is not clear that all aspects of the response have kept up.

Problematically, however, the current commentary emanating from Whitehall suggests that the response is likely to focus on punitive measures pandering to a political base.

Raffaello Pantucci is a Visiting Senior Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence, Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.