

 ADAPTED VERSION

World rocked by Westminster terrorist attack

For years the UK has watched as terrorists strike its neighbours. Yesterday its turn came. The brutal attack in London captured the world's attention. What lessons can we draw from it?



Hitting home: Yesterday's terrorist attack was the deadliest in the UK in over a decade. © PA

"We all knew a day like [this] could come."

As the dust settled on yesterday's attack in Westminster, the words of Labour MP Clive Efford captured the grieving nation's mood. Since 2014, MI5 has classed the threat to the UK from international terrorism as "severe". In recent months, a string of experts have warned of the risk of an attack.

In other words, the authorities were prepared.

At 2:40pm the Metropolitan Police began to receive alarming reports. A car had mown down pedestrians on Westminster Bridge; a man had stabbed a police officer; a person had fallen into the Thames.

Within minutes, ambulances and extra officers were on the scene. The suspected attacker, after stabbing an officer of the parliamentary protection squad, had been shot by police and later died. Conservative MP Tobias Ellwood attempted to resuscitate the stabbed policeman, who also died, as did three members of the public. Around 40 more were injured.

The Houses of Parliament were placed on lockdown; MPs and staff were confined inside for hours. Streets were shut. The London Eye stopped turning. The police announced that the attack would be investigated as an act of terrorism.

The events made global headlines. Commiserations from world leaders poured in. Some had witnessed similar attacks in their own countries: a year earlier to the day, three suicide bombers connected to Islamic State killed 32 civilians in Brussels.

In recent years, the UK had evaded attacks while its allies — Germany, France, Belgium, the USA — suffered. But it is no stranger to terrorism. People vividly remember bombings by the IRA in the 1970s and 80s and by Islamist extremists in 2005. And Guy Fawkes' failed attempt to blow up Parliament in 1605 is still commemorated every November 5th.

These attacks resonate abroad because of their symbolism. The UK is a global champion of liberal values. Its legislature, which is sometimes styled the "mother of parliaments",

is seen by many as the cradle of modern democracy.

The swift reaction of the police yesterday was widely praised. Yet there were casualties, and the blow was felt worldwide. How should we react?

Fear and loathing

With optimism, say some. Awful as they are, these attacks are rare, and represent the views of a tiny minority. Yesterday's events showed that, with foresight and careful coordination, we can minimise the threat they pose. The good in this world outweighs the bad.

Take off your rose-tinted spectacles, reply others. These incidents are increasingly common; terrorists are getting bolder by the year. Meanwhile, governments are using them as a pretext for ever more illiberal policies. Faced with these two threats, we must remain vigilant.

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: A car drove across the bridge, mowing down pedestrians, before crashing near Parliament. A man armed with a knife emerged and tried to enter the building. He stabbed an officer to death before being shot; he later died. Two

further civilians were killed and 20 injured, 12 gravely. The police counterterrorism branch is conducting a full-scale investigation.

Q: What do we not know?

A: The attacker's identity, motives and affiliations (if any), and the identities of many of the victims.

Q: What do people believe?

A: Inevitably, many think that the attacker is an Islamist extremist. Some have pointed out the parallels with last year's truck attacks in Nice and Berlin. This kind of speculation is distracting and harmful – don't assume anything the authorities have not confirmed.

YOU DECIDE

1. Did yesterday's attack frighten you?
2. When reporting breaking news, what is more important: speed or accuracy?

ACTIVITIES

1. Without looking the word up in a dictionary, write your own definition of "terrorism".
2. As a class, compare your definitions and come up with one you all agree on. Then discuss: Is the word appropriate? Are there any problems with it?

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"The UK is the birthplace of modern democracy."

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Words – As reported by *The Guardian*.

Severe – The second-highest of five threat levels. The risk was classed "critical" – the highest level – for two brief periods in 2006 and 2007.

Experts – Last month Max Hill, the government's terrorism watchdog, warned that the risk from terrorism was at its highest level

since the 1970s.

Evaded – Among many reasons why the UK is better equipped to foil terrorist plots: it is surrounded by water and is not a member of Europe's border-free Schengen zone; and the close collaboration between its intelligence agencies and police. See the *BBC* article in *Become An Expert*.

IRA – Irish Republican Army. It campaigned violently for a united Ireland.

Guy Fawkes –

Fawkes was part of a Catholic conspiracy to assassinate the anti-Catholic King James I. The night before the planned attack, he was found hiding in a cellar below Parliament with 36 barrels of gunpowder.

Mother of parliaments – Coined in 1865 by British politician John Bright, who said "England is the mother of parliaments", is used to refer to the UK Parliament as the model for many other legislatures.

BECOME AN EXPERT

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Notes

