Manchester Arena bombing, 22 May 2017

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WHAT

At approximately 10.30 pm on 22 May 2017, 22-year-old Salman Ramadan Abedi detonated an improvised explosive device among a concert-going crowd at Manchester Arena. The device was concealed in a backpack carried by the bomber and detonated in the arena foyer at the end of the concert. The explosion killed 23 people, including the bomber, and injured 250.

UK authorities assess that Abedi received training and direction from an overseas Islamist terrorist group, most likely based in Libya, where he had family links and had frequently visited. The Islamic State (IS) terrorist group claimed responsibility for the attack, releasing a statement through its Nashir Telegram channel calling the attacker a ‘soldier of the Khilafah’, indicating that the attack was inspired or enabled rather than directed by IS. UK authorities made a series of arrests following the attack, but investigations have not yet confirmed an active support network within the UK.
SO WHAT?

The Manchester bombing was the first successful terrorist bombing in the UK, and the most lethal attack, since the 2005 London 7/7 attacks. In the post-2014 threat environment, UK authorities have disrupted 12 major mass-casualty terrorist attack plots, including plans to use explosives, such as seen in the disrupted October 2016 North Greenwich train station incident.¹

Radicalisation. Abedi was a radicalised local national, assisted by a terrorist group based in Libya, possibly IS-affiliate Katibat al-Battar al-Libi. Abedi’s parents had migrated to the UK before his birth but returned to Libya in 2011, and it’s likely Abedi contacted the group during regular visits to his family. Abedi was known to police in relation to petty crime, but not for terrorism, despite his frequent travel to Libya and reports that authorities had been alerted to his extremist views. MI5 is reviewing its action on the reports. The UK Government’s PREVENT countering violent extremism (CVE) program has been widely criticised, including in calls in 2016 by the Independent Security Legislation Monitor and the Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee to review and redesign the approach, which was agreed by the government. The Queen’s 21 June 2017 opening speech to the UK Parliament confirmed that a new Commission for Countering Extremism would be established along with a review of counterterrorism (CT) powers.

Response. The initial response by authorities to the Manchester Arena bombing was immediate, proportionate and well coordinated. Local emergency service call centres handled an extreme spike in calls within minutes of the explosion, which soon overloaded capacity; reports indicate that around 400 local police responded, while the emergency health response included 60 ambulance units being quickly deployed to the incident site. Police, supported by venue security, cordoned off the area and moved approximately 14,200 people away from the arena, which was checked for further suspicious items. Manchester Victoria train station, located partly beneath the arena, was evacuated and then closed due to a risk of structural damage. In response to the ongoing assessed threat, the government raised the national alert level from ‘Severe’ to ‘Critical’, meaning that a terrorist attack is expected (where it remained until 27 May), and enacted Operation Temperer, deploying 984 British troops to undertake police protective security duties.² These decisions were appropriate, alerting the public to the ongoing threat and providing police with additional resources while sending a message that the government was ready and able to respond to the circumstances.

Mass gathering. UK authorities advise that Abedi accessed the venue at the end of the concert, when security would no longer be expected to be in place, positioning himself and the device at the foyer exit. Witnesses also reported that there appeared to be lax security screening at the concert, noting that bags weren’t searched.³ The attack in Manchester—as with the 2016 attacks in Jakarta, Brussels, Nice and Berlin—confirms that IS-related groups and individuals retain the intent to attack places of mass gathering. The UK Government has policies and guidelines on protecting places of mass gathering from terrorism—considered among the best in the world—supported by practical lessons learned from the experience of mass-gathering terrorist attacks both in 2005 and earlier by the IRA. Government websites host freely available information and guidance, including specific sector advice, on managing the terrorist threat to places of mass gathering. Despite these measures, the attacker and his explosive device could access the concert venue. UK authorities have announced a review of security at public events.

Terrorist tactics. The explosive used was peroxide-based triacetone triperoxide (TATP), often used by terrorists due to its availability and difficulty to detect. It was previously used in the 2005 London bombings and recently by IS affiliates in the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels bombings. TATP is, however, relatively unstable, and the design and employment of the suicide explosive device led UK investigators to assess that Abedi likely received training and advice from a broader network. Nuts and bolts were used as shrapnel. Photos of the device and backpack remains—critical to investigating terrorist links—were published by US media after being provided by US agencies, but without the knowledge or approval of UK authorities; this led to the UK temporarily suspending CT information sharing with the US.

Encrypted communications. Media reports following the attack cited European intelligence reports that Abedi used an intermediary in continental Europe to contact his Libyan terrorist support group to avoid the UK’s monitoring of communications to and from terrorist groups in North Africa and the Middle East, and that he used encrypted communications. The availability of encrypted communications technology provides a powerful capability for terrorists to operate away from scrutiny. The passage of the Investigative Powers Act in late 2016 provides a legislative framework for technology providers to assist the UK Government in accessing encrypted data, but the supporting mechanisms are yet to be put in place.

NOW WHAT?

Radicalisation. To date, Australia hasn’t experienced a significant terrorist attack by homegrown perpetrators with training, technical advice and direction from overseas. Geography, strong border control and effective intelligence remain key to that remaining the case. Countering radicalisation within Australia, however, remains complex, and the effectiveness of Australian CVE programs has been criticised. PREVENT has been used as a model for CVE approaches around the world, including in Australia, and the outcomes of the UK
review of PREVENT should be closely examined by Australian authorities. CVE programs have received large amounts of funding in the past two federal budgets, but to date lack effective means to measure and evaluate their effectiveness.

**Response.** Key lessons from the Manchester Arena attack include the need for the ability to respond quickly to a mass-casualty, large-venue attack in a regional city while managing an ongoing threat. The experience of UK emergency services demonstrated the need to manage high numbers of emergency calls and mobilise emergency health responses in areas outside the capital. Australia's emergency management arrangements for natural disasters—including public messaging and health responses—provide an effective existing model for this type of response, but need to be incorporated into terrorism response—and practised. The UK Government’s decision to provide military support to police is relevant for Australia, noting the current review into Defence support to CT. While Australia's military call-out procedures are robust, the findings of the Lindt Café siege coronial inquest and subsequent public debate indicate that the arrangements are not well understood or practised by decision-makers or operators. The Australian Government’s announcement of legislative amendments and enhanced Defence support to CT is a positive development to address these issues.

**Mass gatherings.** The Manchester Arena attack demonstrates the importance of appropriate and effective security practices at large events. Australia has guidelines to protect places of mass gathering, but a 2016 review of lessons learned from the Nice attack identified the need for a new national strategy, including a common approach to risk assessment. The ANZCTC’s Mass Gathering Advisory Group should also look at publicly available sector-specific advice and direction, event planning and coordination, as well as public-space design advice accounting for the threat of terrorism. In Australia, security screening is undertaken at most major sporting, entertainment and high-profile public events. As noted in CT Quick Look 6: The Westminster Attack, local and state authorities should audit and review security arrangements for organised events drawing large crowds in order to determine where screening is and isn’t occurring, and understand the risk factors that should inform screening decisions.

**Terrorist tactics.** The disrupted Christmas 2016 plot to attack the Melbourne CBD using improvised explosives, firearms and bladed weapons confirms the intent of Islamist terrorists to detonate an explosive device in Australia. While all such plots to date have been successfully disrupted, prevention and response need to remain focused on a potential mass-casualty explosives attack. Australia has effective regulation of explosive precursor agents, but this requires regular review and updating to ensure that it’s informed by the terrorist threat and is consistent across state and federal jurisdictions. The public release of sensitive investigative information in the UK highlights the need to enforce secure information handling procedures while also planning how to respond to any unauthorised release of information.

**Encrypted communications.** The Australian Government has recently announced initiatives to address terrorists’ use of encryption technology, but will need to clearly articulate to the broader community both the requirement for those measures and the checks and balances to protect privacy. CT agencies should continue to focus on other means of investigation to mitigate the knowledge gap caused by encrypted technologies. Successful interdiction of encrypted terrorist communications will rely heavily on the support of encrypted communications providers as well as other governments, including those in countries where the technology companies are based.

**Conclusion**

The Manchester Arena attack demonstrates that Western countries remain vulnerable to terrorism that exploits radicalised local nationals, trained and directed from overseas, and will target mass gathering events. Government responses need to account for the influence of emerging data encryption technologies as well as the exploitation of previously used methodologies involving homemade explosives and effective tradecraft.

**Recommendations:**

1. Major venue and event organisers should review their venue and event security plans and procedures with reference to the risk of mass-casualty terrorist attacks and engage with the ANZCTC process in developing the national strategy to protect places of mass-gathering from terrorism.
2. CT response planning and exercises should incorporate emergency call centre management as well as emergency health responses to deal with mass casualties, drawing upon other emergency and crisis management arrangements where appropriate.
3. The Australian Government should continue efforts on updating legislation, policy and capability to address terrorists’ use of encrypted communications. This should include engaging closely with Five Eyes partner governments and relevant technology companies, while also ensuring ongoing public messaging to explain both the security requirement and the checks and balances on access.
State and federal agencies should continue to focus efforts on enhancing and measuring CVE program effectiveness and coordination. CVE efforts should be focused on relevance to the Australian environment, while considering the findings of the UK CVE review.

Notes
1. On 20 October 2016, an improvised explosive device was discovered on a London train; it partially detonated while the response and evacuation was underway. The perpetrator, 19-year-old Damon Smith, was found to have prepared the device following online instructions, and to be a supporter of Islamist extremism, although not linked to any particular network or group.

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