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Citation:

Lowe, D (2022) Issues Related to Establishing Causes Behind Terrorist Attacks: The Liverpool Attack Conundrum. Counter-IED report (Winter). pp. 27-31. ISSN 2050-6732

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Document Version:

Article (Published Version)

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This article first appeared in Counter-IED Report magazine, Winter 2021/22 edition.

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# ISSUES RELATED TO ESTABLISHING CAUSES BEHIND TERRORIST ATTACKS: THE LIVERPOOL ATTACK CONUNDRUM

By Dr David Lowe, Leeds Law School at Leeds Beckett University

On the 14th November 2021 Emad al-Swealmeen was in a private hire taxi when the improvised explosive device (IED) he had made detonated in the vehicle outside the Women's Hospital in Liverpool. Although the taxi driver escaped with minor injuries, as a result of the device activating and the subsequent fire in the vehicle, al-Swealmeen died. Al-Swealmeen was an asylum seeker having travelled to the UK from the Middle East in 2014, however the UK rejected his asylum claim. During the investigation the Northwest Counter-Terrorism Unit have struggled to establish the cause for this act of terrorism. Al-Swealmeen was a Muslim, but during his time in Liverpool he converted to Christianity and based on previous terrorist attacks, being a women's hospital, the location where the IED detonated was not a target that one expected that would assist in establishing the cause behind the attack. At the time of writing the cause behind this attack has not been ascertained. This article examines the variety of causes to promote acts of terrorism, assessing the increasing difficulty counter-terrorism investigators face in determining what the cause is behind terrorist attacks.

## THE CAUSE BEHIND TERRORIST ATTACKS

Section 1(1)(c) of the UK's Terrorism Act 2000 states that a terrorist act occurs where the action or the threat of action is used for the purpose of advancing a religious, political, ideological or racial cause. Many other states have similar wording in their statutory definition of terrorism, for example Canada and Australia include a religious, political or ideological cause to promote an act of terrorism. In determining the cause behind terrorist attacks that have occurred over the last few years it has normally been ascertained within 24-48 hours, be it from a group that claim responsibility for the attack, the posting of an online manifesto by the perpetrator or from evidence that investigators have found following searches of premises controlled by the perpetrator or their electronic devices. The latter involves examining the devices to see what internet sites the perpetrator was looking at, who they were communicating with, what they were downloading and sharing on various forms of social media. This evidence will be added with physical evidence found at the search of the perpetrator's premises such as memorabilia, books and other written communication, all of which helps in ascertaining the cause.



The Remembrance Sunday car explosion outside Liverpool Women's Hospital has been declared a terrorist attack, though police have said the motive remains unclear. (Photo credit: [centralrecorder.com](http://centralrecorder.com))

### RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL CAUSES

Since the 2001 Al Qaeda attack on the US in New York and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia the only religious cause we have become familiar with is the Islamist cause. The two main terrorist organisations that have carried out attacks to promote their Islamist religious cause are Al Qaeda (for example the London 2005 attacks on the Underground and Tavistock Square) and Islamic State (for example the 2017 Westminster Bridge, and Manchester Arena attacks). In essence these groups want to end western state hegemony, overthrow liberal democracies, have a global Islamic caliphate that follows their very narrow interpretation of Wahhabi fundamentalist Sunni Islam in the strict application of Sharia law. In relation to religious causes, they do not only apply solely to Islamism, but it can also apply to any attack carried out

in the name of a religious cause. An example would be an IED attack on an abortion clinic by Christian fundamentalists because this goes against their religion.

Regarding political causes, the most familiar political cause is those carried out by nationalist groups. In the UK the 1968-1998 Irish Troubles are a good example where dissident republican groups such as the former Provisional IRA, Continuity IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army were fighting for the reunification of Ireland's 32 counties and the end of British governance in Northern Ireland. On the other side of this conflict were the loyalist groups like the Ulster Defence Association, Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Freedom Fighters who want to maintain the state of Northern Ireland and remain part of the UK with a degree of governance from the UK's Westminster

government. While the 1998 Good Friday Agreement saw the Provisional IRA and the loyalist groups end their violence, terrorist activity by dissident republican groups including the New IRA along with Continuity IRA and the INLA (these two groups did not sign up to the Good Friday Agreement) has continued, albeit to a far less scale of violence when compared to the Troubles. This is not unique to the UK. In Turkey the Kurdistan Workers Party are still continuing armed conflict with the Turkish government that originally were fighting for an independent Kurdish state. Since the 1990s they want autonomy and increased rights for Kurds in Turkey, similar to that which the Spanish Basque group ETA and its political wing, Batasuna, secured for the Basque region with the Spanish government in 2018 following their violent campaign.

Another political cause behind acts of terrorism is related to the extreme far-right, the neo-Nazis, where the UK has proscribed nine neo-Nazi groups (two of which are alternative names for the group National Action) and Canada has banned four groups as terrorist organisations and James Mason, who wrote 'Siege', a book that inspires neo-Nazis to violence, as a terrorist entity. In the UK an extreme far-right attack could come under a racial cause. Globally there have been a number of neo-Nazi inspired attacks that include Brevik in Norway in 2011 where he killed 77 people, Tarrant in New Zealand in 2019 where he killed 51 people and, in the UK, where Thomas Mair killed the Member of Parliament Jo Cox in 2016. The main tenet of the neo-Nazi ideology is the promotion of white supremacy making it a racist ideology that is also anti-Semitic, anti-Marxist, and believes in the violent overthrow of liberal democracies (that they see as Jewish controlled). The followers of the neo-Nazi movement are moving from a nationalist focus and are becoming more international as seen with groups like Atomwaffen and Sonnenkrieg Division. When Tarrant was carrying out his attack in Christchurch he ran a live Facebook feed, where in the comments on Facebook he was being encouraged by neo-Nazis globally.

Another political cause that is give a rising cause for concern is the extreme far-left, but to date there have been no attacks that have been found to be carried out in western states under this cause.

## IDEOLOGICAL CAUSES

In relation to terrorist attacks that are carried out under a religious or political cause, it is easier to ascertain this is the cause compared to ideological causes that cover a wide spectrum of ideologies. In November 2021 the UK the Home Office released the figures for the referrals of persons vulnerable to being drawn towards terrorism under the Prevent strategy for the year up to March 2021 where of the 688 cases referred to the Channel programme<sup>1</sup> 46% (317) were related to the extreme far-right, 22% (154) related to Islamist radicalisation, with nearly a third, 30% (205) related to, '...those with a mixed, unstable or unclear ideology'. It is an ideological cause that is more difficult for counter-terrorism investigators to determine and where you have a category like that in the UK's Prevent strategy of 'unclear ideology' this shows how problematic this can be. What will be in common with the causes discussed above is in relation to a terrorist attack there will be the glorification or promotion of violence for the cause.

An example of an ideological cause that is growing in popularity that has influenced attacks is the involuntary celibate movement, known as incel. Predominantly a misogynistic male movement consisting of men who struggle to start or maintain a relationship with women, incels are angry because they believe the sexual revolution made women more promiscuous and manipulative and that has been fuelled by feminism, the contraceptive pill and women's involvement in politics. The incel ideology has its own unique terminology where 'lookism' means attractive people receive advantage and, where women only pursue attractive men that incels call 'hypergamy'. They rank all racial groups by attractiveness where the

<sup>1</sup> The Channel programme is part of the Prevent strategy where it has been assessed that the person needs assistance. Channel is a multi-agency approach that puts safeguarding measures in place to help the person return to mainstream society.

most attractive white men and women are called 'Chads' and 'Stacys', attractive black men are referred to as 'Tyrones', attractive Asian men are 'Changs' and attractive Arabic men are 'Chaddums'. However, driven by the incel ideology, attacks have occurred mainly in the US and Canada, that can be traced to 2014 in the US when Elliot Rodger stabbed three people and shot another three killing all six as well as injuring several others in May 2014 in Santa Barbara, California. Prior to the attack Rodger made a series of YouTube videos, the last one titled 'Rodger's Retribution', which along with a rambling 141-page manifesto he posted espoused an extreme incel ideology.

An example of how incel ideology can radicalise and influence individuals to commit violence is the Toronto van attack in 2018, where Alex Minassian was found guilty of 10 counts of murder and 16 counts of attempted murder after driving a van onto a crowded pavement in Toronto city centre. Claiming he was an incel, Minassian posted on Facebook:

*'...the incel revolution has already begun!  
We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All  
hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger.'*

After being arrested, Minassian told police he was radicalised by other incels online. Among the latest violent incel inspired attacks, two occurred in May 2020. One in Chandale, Arizona, US where a 20-year-old male, Armando Marnandes, went on a shooting spree, targeting couples to express his anger over the fact that women rejected him. The second was in Toronto, Canada where a 17-year-old boy imbued with the violent incel ideology, killed a woman with a machete and was the first occasion an incel inspired killing was classified as a terrorist crime. In the UK when Jake Davison shot and killed five people before shooting himself in Plymouth, UK in August 2021, the term 'incel' became more widely known with the mainstream media asking if incel should be considered as an extremist ideology that inspires acts of terrorism. This incident was not investigated as a terrorist attack.

Other ideological causes potentially glorify or promote violence can include environmental groups or animal welfare groups, but one must be very careful when assessing if these groups are used to advance their cause in terrorist related activity. For example, environmental issues are a genuine cause for concern for many and the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) was held in Glasgow in November 2021, so an environmental group's ideology per se cannot be seen as a cause related to terrorism. However, if a certain group promotes violence and encourages attacks on people working in industries that environmental groups oppose, this could be a game changer in how the incident is investigated. Caution must be present, as once you get into ideological causes, it is not so clear cut if it is behind an act of terrorism. Even more difficult causes for investigators to identify are those classified as 'unstable or unclear ideology'.

### THE LIVERPOOL TERRORIST ATTACK

This returns us to the terrorist incident in Liverpool at the Women's Hospital on the 14th November 2021 and determining what the cause is behind the attack. This could be one that could come under an unstable or unclear ideology. As stated in the introduction, al-Swealmeen was an asylum seeker having travelled to the UK from the Middle East in 2014, however the UK rejected his asylum claim, and it was reported that he was appealing that decision in late 2020. He was a Muslim, but during his time in Liverpool he converted to Christianity and based on previous terrorist attacks, being a women's hospital, the location where the IED detonated was not a target that one expected that would assist in establishing the cause behind the attack. What the investigators have looked at is the timing of the attack that was at 11.00 hours on Remembrance Sunday, where the UK remember the armed forces personnel who gave their lives in conflicts since World War One, and this is the time when all services around the country fall silent to remember the dead. At that time such a service was being held in Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral a short distance away from the Women's

Hospital. In relation to the IED al-Swealmeen made and intended to use, it contained ball bearings. Those who have used similar devices normally suggests that the target they had in mind would have been one where there would be a large number of people to ensure that the detonation of the IED would have maximum impact. Whether it was the hospital or a Remembrance Service al-Swealmeen was targeting, with the taxi coming to a halt possibly causing a premature detonation killing al-Swealmeen, we may never know. These are lines of enquiries the investigating officers from the UK's Northwest Counter-Terrorism Unit released that they were pursuing. Accepting this is pure speculation based on the facts that have been released by the investigation team, the motive behind al-Swealmeen's actions could range from a religious cause to wanting revenge for his asylum application having failed. It is clearly a conundrum for the investigators in determining the cause and one that may never be ascertained, resulting in it being classified as an attack carried out under an unclear ideology.

## CONCLUSION

In most terrorist attacks the cause the attack used to advance is determined quickly during an investigation and as stated most are carried out to advance either a religious or political cause. As covered in this article not all causes behind terrorist attacks are political or religious, they can be ideological. In relation to ideological one has to be careful in assessing if this is a cause and to assist in this, if the ideological cause is glorifying or promoting violence towards its cause then it may apply. In contemporary society other extremist causes maybe behind attacks, as seen in Canada and the US, the incel ideology appears to be gathering momentum where attacks to promote the incel cause have the potential to expand into other states. As seen in the Liverpool attack, some causes can be difficult to determine and could be classified under 'unclear ideology', the terrorist version of miscellaneous. While not ideal, it appears to be the most appropriate way to classify ideologies that are difficult to define. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Dr David Lowe** is a retired police officer and is currently a senior research fellow at Leeds Law School, Leeds Beckett University researching terrorism and security, policing and criminal law. He has many publications in this area including his recent books 'Prevent

Strategy: Helping the Vulnerable being drawn towards Terrorism or Another Layer of State Surveillance?', 'Terrorism and State Surveillance of Communications' and 'Terrorism: Law and Policy', all published by Routledge. Routledge will be publishing the 2nd edition of his book 'Terrorism Law and Policy: A Comparative Study' in early 2022. David is regularly requested to provide expert commentary to UK national and international mainstream media on issues related to his research areas and he provides an expert witness service.