



## How probable is an attack here in Ireland, similar to that conducted in London in March?

'Possible but unlikely'? What does this really mean?

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As the dust settles in Westminster and London tries to return to normality, questions are likely to emerge about whether the security infrastructure in place was sufficient in light of their security threat level, which was at severe. Similar questions have resonance here in Ireland. Reassurance that such an incident is 'possible but unlikely' by the Government is becoming increasingly questionable. In fact, what does it actually mean?

Unlike the UK and many other countries in Europe, Ireland does not have a standard scale of threat level. 'Possible but unlikely' albeit similar to Moderate on the UK scale is a descriptive assessment not a measurement of risk. In fact, 'possible' is a redundant term. The recent events in France, Germany, Belgium and London clearly illustrate such attacks are possible. At the national level, there are

reportedly a small number of 'people of interest' in Ireland, others have travelled to Iraq and Syria and possibly returned and/or provided logistical and financial support. Access to weapons and explosives is not difficult. This is illustrated by the deaths associated with the Hutch/Kinahan feud, and recent discoveries of viable explosive devices in Kildare. So what benefit is there in using the term 'possible'? Nothing.

The term 'unlikely' is also vague. In risk assessment terms it is usually used to indicate something that only occurs in exceptional circumstances. So are we to assume that these 'people of interest' don't have the capability and/or motivation to conduct an incident in Ireland, or that there are no or limited attractive targets. If so, is it based on the absence of intelligence rather than a known lack of capacity, intent or suitable target? How has the term 'unlikely' been substantiated? And state security is not a good enough reason why we as citizens can't be given a better understanding as to what it means. As citizens, we are asked to remain vigilant, report suspicious activity, surely to do this properly a better understanding by the public of risk is required.

If there is intelligence to suggest there is no intent amongst these 'people of interest', assuming an association with a terrorist group, then 'unlikely' may be applicable in regard to the threat of a high level strategic attack directed by that group. However it is unlikely to hold true for the threat from lone actor terrorists. Incidents in Nice, Berlin and London clearly illustrate this. Furthermore, the factors often used to justify the 'unlikely' label, such as Ireland being a neutral country, good relationships with Islamic communities, amongst others, may in fact make us susceptible to lone actor attacks. Because if an individual with such tendencies cannot access a group of like-minded individuals, they may be self-motivated or influenced by others abroad to work alone. It is evident that IS have identified this possibility, given their messages that if individuals cannot travel to Syria or Iraq they should conduct jihad at home. They even provide examples of possible methods.

So are we to believe that these messages have not reached Ireland or that Ireland does not have individuals who find solace in IS's cause? Such individuals may not be known to the security forces or

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<i>UK Threat Levels</i>
<i>Low – an attack is unlikely</i>
<i>Moderate – an attack is possible but not likely</i>
<i>Substantial – an attack is a strong possibility</i>
<i>Severe – an attack is highly likely</i>
<i>Critical – an attack is expected imminently</i>

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may not publically demonstrate their affiliations or interest. Can the state effectively determine the risk of this potentially large 'unknown' element? If yes, how? If no, why then use the term 'unlikely'? The reality is that lone actors, be they alone or part of a small group, are potentially in our communities. It would be naïve of us to think differently. It is doubtful that there is anything in Ireland that reduces the risk of a lone actor attack, given recent incidents across Europe.

Indeed, the continued use of the term 'unlikely' despite these recent incidents raises the question, what would it take to change the threat description, given that concrete intelligence is rarely available, and even less common in lone actor attacks, or will we wait until 'unlikely' becomes a reality and deal with it then? That said, changing the threat description alone will not reduce the threat, the ability to prevent and the speed of response are what will help reduce the risk, but a change in the threat assessment will demonstrate that increased resources and greater investment in training, capacity, technology and intelligence are required within the security forces in Ireland as a matter of priority.

The UK reportedly thwarted 13 potential attacks between 2013 and early March. They commonly used the phrase 'it is not if, but when' when discussing the potential threat; that day came, but their ability to respond ensured that the incident was contained relatively quickly, potentially saving further casualties. While this incident shows that every incident cannot be prevented, the ability to respond effectively to reduce the associated impact is key.

Would Ireland see a similar response? Ongoing issues within An Garda Síochána, the Defence Force and the health service to name but a few, provide enough indication that the ability to respond may not be at the standard required. Unfortunately, the description 'possible but unlikely' seems even more appropriate here.

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