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Islamic Terrorism in the UK since 9/11: Reassessing the 'Soft' Response

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SUMMARY

The death of Osama bin Laden has once again flooded the media with images of Islamic terrorism, while a recent bomb threat from Irish dissidents in London¹ has heightened the fear of new terrorist attacks in the UK. In this context, and ahead of the publication of the review of the 'Prevent' strand of the government's counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST)², this paper analyses the main Islamic terrorist attacks in the UK since 9/11. The conclusions made from this analysis aim to challenge commonly held assumptions and provide a background for an assessment of the current 'Prevent' strategy. Drawing on common criticisms and positive lessons gained from the strategy implemented in Bristol, this paper makes six recommendations:

- The difference between extremism and violent extremism must be defined to ensure that the policy is not viewed as a government attempt to shape religious ideology.
- The sense that 'Prevent' is a general intelligence-gathering mission must be removed to gain trust and acceptance from Muslim communities.
- The drivers of violent extremism must be addressed directly by discussing the impact of and justification for British foreign policy in the Middle East.
- Local authorities must understand the make-up of the different Muslim communities in the area so as to tailor the strategy to each.
- Muslim communities must be engaged with local authorities while the strategy is being formulated at the operational local authority level to ensure it is appropriate and accepted.
- Events need to be focused on the discussion and demystification of violent extremism framed within a wider religious and cultural context.

1 'Bomb warning received in London', BBC News, 16 May 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13412871>.

2 Home Office, 'Review of the "Prevent" Strategy'.
<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism/review-of-'Prevent'-strategy/>.

1. CONTEST AND THE 'PREVENT' STRAND

The UK counter-terrorism strategy can be split into two areas, 'soft' and 'hard' responses. The 'hard' response is run by the security and emergency services and is aimed at arresting terrorists before an attack and dealing with the effect of an attack after it occurs. The 'soft' response is aimed at understanding the causes of extremism and tackling them in local communities, thereby preventing people from becoming terrorists.

On 18 October 2010, the UK's coalition government published its new National Security Strategy, entitled 'A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty'. In this document, the National Security Council presented international terrorism – 'affecting the UK or its interests, including a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack by terrorists; and/or a significant increase in the levels of terrorism relating to Northern Ireland' – as a Tier One risk to the country, 'of highest priority for UK national security looking ahead, taking account of both likelihood and impact'.³

More than seven years after the launch of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST, terrorism is still considered to be one of the primary threats to the country's national security. Before suggesting ways to assess the government's performance, it is essential to take a closer look at CONTEST, and in particular its soft strand 'Prevent'.

Overview of CONTEST

The government identifies the aim of CONTEST as 'reducing the risk to the UK and its interests overseas from international terrorism, so that people can go about their lives freely and with confidence'.⁴ It is interesting to note the use of the word 'risk' rather than the more traditional 'threat'. Terrorism is thus regarded as a problem that cannot be solved or eradicated altogether, but that should rather be managed in order to mitigate its negative impact on national security. The CONTEST strategy is organized into four streams:

1. *Pursue* – to stop terrorist attacks.

The idea behind this stream is to 'detect and investigate terrorist networks and disrupt their activities', by improving the government's ability to 'identify and understand the terrorist threat', 'disrupt terrorist activity', 'bring terrorists to justice through prosecution' and 'develop international co-operation with partners and allies'.

³ 'A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy', HM Government, 18 October 2010. http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_191639.pdf?CID=PDF&PLA=furl&CRE=nationalsecuritystrateg.

⁴ 'The UK counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST)', Home Office website. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism/uk-counter-terrorism-strat/>.

2. *Protect* – to strengthen protection of the UK against terrorist attacks.

This strand aims to reduce the country's vulnerability and its interest overseas from terrorist attacks. This addresses aviation and maritime security, and the protection of energy infrastructure, crowded places and 'soft' targets, for instance, in cooperation with foreign countries.

3. *Prepare* – where an attack cannot be stopped, to mitigate its impact.

The government aims to be able to manage an ongoing attack and recover from its aftermath.

4. *Prevent* – to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism.⁵

The main elements of this last strand are outlined below.

What is 'Prevent'?

When CONTEST was first released in 2003, 'Prevent' was the least developed strand. The focus of the strategy was on the immediate threat to life rather than understanding the factors driving radicalization.⁶ After the 7/7 bombings in 2005 the government realized that as well as 'hard' security measures the counter-terrorism strategy must also focus on 'soft' measures to prevent people from becoming home-grown terrorists in the first place. The Home Office led seven working groups under the title 'Preventing Extremism Together' to develop practical recommendations for tackling violent extremism.⁷ The revised 'Prevent' strategy was then released in 2007, backed up by a significant increase in funding. It has five main objectives, intended to address specific root causes of radicalization:

1. To challenge the ideology behind violent extremism and support mainstream voices;
2. To disrupt those who promote violent extremism and support people living in the communities where they may operate;
3. To support individuals who are vulnerable to recruitment or who have already been recruited by violent extremists;
4. To increase the resilience of communities to violent extremism; and

⁵ Ibid.; 'Safeguarding Britain's National Security', Foreign & Commonwealth Office website. <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/global-issues/counter-terrorism-policy/>.

'The UK counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST)', Home Office website. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism/uk-counter-terrorism-strat/>.

⁶ 'Project CONTEST: The Government's Counter-Terrorism Strategy', September 2009. <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm77/7703/7703.pdf>.

⁷ 'Preventing Extremism Together: Report and Government Response', Department for Communities and Local Government, 10 November 2005. http://www.communities.gov.uk/archived/publications/communities/Preventing_extremism_together.

5. To address the grievances which ideologies are exploiting.⁸

Partnership with local actors is a key element of 'Prevent' and local authorities are in charge of objectives 1, 2, 3 and 5. In 2008 a guide was released to help them implement the revised strategy, and in that year 70 local authorities were involved in designing a local 'Prevent' action programme. They are expected to build local partnerships with a number of organizations including police, local services (social, cultural, children's and leisure services), education, probation, prisons, health and the UK Border Agency, as well as community representatives.⁹ The guide also introduced seven objectives for local authorities, most of them closely corresponding with those of the overall strategy:

1. Challenging the violent extremist ideology and supporting mainstream voices;
2. Disrupting those who promote violent extremism and supporting the institutions where they may be active;
3. Supporting vulnerable individuals;
4. Increasing the capacity of communities to resist violent extremism;
5. Addressing grievances;
6. Developing 'Prevent'-related research and analysis; and
7. Strategic communications.

The difficulties faced by local authorities in implementing the strategy are highlighted later in this paper, in an analysis of the first three objectives.

'Prevent' funding

The Department for Communities and Local Government provides funds for local authorities to run a 'Prevent' programme. This amounted to £45m between 2008 and 2011.¹⁰ In 2008, the 70 local authorities involved in designing the local 'Prevent' action programme received funding for work in tackling violent extremism. The number increased to 82 in 2009 and 94 in 2010. The 'Prevent' strategy as a whole has had a much wider remit and has given rise to a number of funding streams and a large number of programmes, including the Department for International Development's 'Prevent Overseas' programme, and the UK Border Agency's strategy for supporting vulnerable individuals in immigration detention centres. Given the number of actors involved, it is difficult to know precisely how much the government is spending on 'Prevent' as a whole. Nonetheless it was

⁸ 'Pursue, Prevent, Protect, Prepare', HM Government Annual Report, March 2010.
<http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm78/7833/7833.pdf>.

⁹ 'The Government's "Prevent" Strategy', The Interfaith Network for the UK, December 2009.
<http://www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/Preventstrategydec09.pdf>.

¹⁰ Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, Michael King, 'The Edge of Violence', Demos, 2010, pp. 55–7.

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estimated that across all departments involved (including Home Office, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Department for Communities and Local Governments, Department for Children, Schools and Families), it was approximately £140 million in 2008/09.¹¹

¹¹ Arun Kundnani, 'Spooked! How not to prevent violent extremism', Institute of Race Relations, October 2009, p. 6.

2. THE PLOTS: PATTERNS AND MYTHS

In order to gain some insight into Islamic terrorism in the UK, twelve cases – all the attacks that were executed, attempted or planned in the UK since 9/11, met the definition of terrorism outlined in the UK Terrorism Act¹² and fitted the following criteria – were selected for analysis:

1. The case could be attributed to a specific individual or individuals;
2. The individuals involved in the attack clearly had an Islamic-based motivation;
3. The target or method of the attack was specific.

The following analysis serves to challenge some misconceived assumptions about Islamic terrorism and supports an assessment of the 'Prevent' strategy, as outlined in the last section of this paper.

Case 1: The shoe bomb plot

On 22 December 2001, Bromley-born British citizen Richard Reid boarded a flight from Paris to Miami with a bomb hidden in the heel of his shoe. After he unsuccessfully attempted to detonate the explosive device on board the flight, he was restrained by staff and passengers and later convicted of eight criminal counts related to terrorism. Richard Reid was nonetheless not the only one involved in this case, as was initially thought.

Sajid Badat, a British citizen born in Gloucester, was to detonate a similar device on board another transatlantic flight from Amsterdam, as instructed by Belgian co-conspirator Nizar Trabelsi. Badat, Reid and Trabelsi met in Pakistan and Afghanistan on at least two occasions between 1999 and 2001 and coordinated their operations primarily via text messages. Badat, who had been raised as a moderate Muslim and acted as a role model for children in his neighbourhood, withdrew from the attack but was arrested almost two years later.¹³ Since he had decided to turn away from the attack and Islamic terrorism altogether, Badat received a more lenient sentence at the Old Bailey in February 2005 (13 years' imprisonment).¹⁴

Case 2: The Wood Green ricin plot

In January 2003, the Metropolitan Police arrested a number of people (up to 100 according to some sources) following the discovery of traces of ricin in a flat in Wood Green, north London. Ricin, made from castor seeds, is considered a potential biowarfare or bioterrorist agent.¹⁵ However, what was initially described in the press as a plot to attack multiple public places in the end only led to the imprisonment of one individual.¹⁶

¹² See appendix

¹³ 'Shoe bomber conspirator pleads guilty', *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 February 2005.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1484583/Shoe-bomber-conspirator-pleads-guilty.html>.

¹⁴ 'Shoe-bomb plotter given 13 years', BBC News, 22 April 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4474307.stm>.

¹⁵ 'Terror police find deadly poison', BBC News, 7 January 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2636099.stm>.

¹⁶ 'Ricin: The plot that never was', *The Independent*, 17 April 2005.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/ricin-the-plot-that-never-was-489582.html>.

Kamel Bourgass, an Algerian national with alleged links with the extremist *Groupe Islamique Armé*, was arrested in Manchester on 14 January 2003. During the immigration police raid, he stabbed to death special branch officer Stephen Oake, for which he was convicted of murder and sentenced for life in June 2004. Bourgass, illegally residing in the UK, was then convicted and sentenced to 17 years' imprisonment in April 2005 for 'conspiracy to cause a public nuisance by the use of poisons and/or explosives to cause disruption, fear or injury'.¹⁷

Case 3: The fertilizer bomb plot

When Antony Garcia asked for 600kg of ammonium nitrate fertilizer in an agricultural retailer in Burgess Hill, Sussex, in November 2003, the manager jokingly said: 'I hope you're not going round bombing everything'. The amount purchased that day was enough for four or five football fields, and it was also the wrong time of the year to apply ammonium nitrate as a fertilizer.¹⁸ However, the plot was only uncovered thanks to the plotters' carelessness, when a storage unit manager eventually reported their suspicious activities to the police in early 2004.¹⁹

The plot, which involved seven conspirators – five British, one American and one Canadian – with links in Afghanistan and Pakistan, had considered a number of targets for a terrorist attack in the UK. They most likely intended to bomb a shopping centre or a nightclub or to shut down the country's gas, electricity or water systems. They were careful enough to avoid cell phone and email conversations as much as possible, regularly discarding hard drives and phone SIM cards. A majority of the plotters had received a good education and the group was working with a technician residing in Canada to fabricate the bombs.

On 30 March 2004, 950 British police took part in Operation Crevice to arrest the suspects.²⁰ But little more than a year later, Mohammed Sidiq Khan and Shehzad Tanweer, who had been seen in a car with fertilizer bomb plot ringleader Omar Khyam, would launch the biggest Islamic terrorist attack in Britain's history.²¹

Case 4: 7/7 London bombings

'Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible ... Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing,

17 'The ricin case timeline', BBC News, 13 April 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4433459.stm>.

18 'Dateline London: Operation Crevice', *Ottawa Citizen*, 24 June 2008.

<http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/features/khawajatrial/story.html?id=96e4f3b4-4b0b-4fa6-8d5e-479c0aaa03d7>.

19 'UK Fertiliser Bomb plot', BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/guides/457000/457032/html/nn1page6.stm>.

20 'Chronology – The British fertiliser bomb plot', *Reuters*, 30 April 2007.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL2559097320070430>.

21 'Intelligence and Security Committee Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005', May 2006.

<http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm67/6785/6785.pdf>.

gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation.'

Mohammed Sidique Khan, video statement released on 1 September 2005²²

In the morning of 7 July 2005, three bombs simultaneously detonated on board London Underground trains, followed only an hour later by a fourth explosion on a bus in Tavistock Square. With less than £10,000, a small number of British citizens managed to launch a large terrorist attack on the country's capital, altogether killing 56, injuring more than 700, and causing widespread fear. The group leader, Mohammed Sidique Khan, worked as a teaching assistant in a primary school for three years until 2004, just a year before carrying out the attack along with Beeston co-conspirators Hasib Hussain, Shezhad Tanweer and Germaine Lindsay. While he was always clear about his Islamic faith, there was no suggestion of extremism in the way Khan talked about religion and politics. He had even spoken out at the school against the 9/11 attacks.²³

What went wrong? How did the terrorist group manage to evade police and MI5 surveillance? Why would a group of British citizens born or raised in the UK, for the large part benefiting from the country's public and social services, target their fellow citizens? These questions would be the basis for a large reassessment of the government's counter-terrorist strategy.

Case 5: 21/7 London bombings

Only two weeks after the 7/7 bombings, four individuals attempted similar attacks on the public transport system in London, but the explosive devices failed to detonate. During their trial, the conspirators argued that the plot was in fact a sophisticated hoax meant to scare people and make a political statement, yet without injuring anyone. However, the defendants were unable to explain why their escape was so disorganized.²⁴ Moreover, shortly after the attack, the plotters each looked clearly unprepared for the option where the bombs would not explode.

Their escape also shed light on communication problems between police authorities, as Yassin Omar managed to travel to Birmingham wearing a burkha while Hussein Osman made his way from Waterloo Station, London, to Rome by train.²⁵ More importantly perhaps, the failed attacks on 21/7 proved that the UK was still vulnerable to large-scale terrorist attacks in its largest city despite reinforced security measures implemented in the immediate aftermath of 7/7.²⁶

22 London bomber: text in full, BBC News, 1 September 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4206800.stm>.

23 'The mystery of "Sid"', BBC News, 19 October 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4354858.stm>;

'Report of the official account of the bombings in London on 7th July 2005', 11 May 2006.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/11_05_06_narrative.pdf.

24 'July 21: The prosecution case', *The Guardian*, 15 January 2007.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/jan/15/terrorism.world1?INTCMP=SRCH>.

25 'July 21 ringleader's fiancée jailed for aiding escape', *The Guardian*, 11 July 2008.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/jul/11/uksecurity?INTCMP=SRCH>.

26 'The July 21 helpers', *The Guardian*, 4 Feb 2008.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/feb/04/terrorism.world2>.

Case 6: The transatlantic airline bomb plot

In summer 2006, a number of plotters were planning on attacking several transatlantic flights to the United States and Canada, by detonating liquid bombs on board the planes. Deputy Assistant Commissioner John McDowall, head of Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism command, declared that the convicted men intended to commit 'mass murder on an unimaginable scale. They intended to cause carnage through a series of co-ordinated explosions and bring terror into the lives of people around the globe. Apart from massive loss of life, these attacks would have had enormous worldwide economic and political consequences.'²⁷

Operation Overt, the police investigation on the plot frequently referred to as 'Britain's 9/11', is estimated to have cost £35 million. It was the biggest counter-terrorism operation in UK history, involving hundreds of police officers and MI5 agents.²⁸ The plot was ended on the night of 9–10 August 2006 when the police arrested almost 30 people. A total of eleven people, for the large part born and raised in the UK, were convicted later, after more than two years of trials.

Case 7: Plan to kidnap and murder a Muslim soldier in the British Army

Parviz Khan was born into a large family of Pakistani heritage in Derby and later moved to Birmingham with his mother.²⁹ Unemployed and receiving social aid to care for his invalid mother, he started a terrorist cell which sent equipment to Afghanistan to help those fighting against Western forces.³⁰ Additionally, in order to deter Muslims from joining the British army, he planned to kidnap a Muslim soldier in the army, brutally murder him and release a film of the murder on the internet. He was caught on 31 January 2007 before he was able to carry out the attack.³¹

The death of Jabron Hashmi, the first Muslim soldier serving in the British army to die in the current war in Afghanistan, on 1 July 2006, was well publicized in the media. This may have played a major part in Parviz Khan's decision.³²

Case 8: London and Glasgow car bombings

Kafeel Ahmed and Bilal Abdullah left two car bombs in central London on 29 June 2007 and drove a car bomb into Glasgow airport in an attempted suicide attack on the following day.³³ After the car

27 'Eight "plotted to blow up flights with liquid bombs"', *The Independent*, 17 February 2009.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/eight-plotted-to-blow-up-flights-with-liquid-bombs-1624448.html>.

28 'Terror trial: Counting the cost', *The Independent*, 8 September 2009.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/terror-trial-counting-the-cost-1783389.html>.

29 'Profile: Parviz Khan', *The Guardian*, 18 February 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/feb/18/uksecurity3>.

30 'Birmingham's jihad shopping trips', BBC News, 18 February 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7244781.stm>.

31 'Profiles: The Birmingham Cell', BBC News, 18 February 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7246646.stm>.

32 'Beheading Plotter "had al-Qaida material"', *The Guardian*, 30 January 2008.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/jan/30/terrorism.world1>.

33 'Interactive. Britain terror attacks', *The Guardian*, 2 February 2007.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/flash/page/0,,2116893,00.html>.

failed to explode in Glasgow Kafeel Ahmed poured petrol over himself and set himself alight, later dying from his injuries.³⁴ Bilal Abdullah was caught and sentenced to 32 years in jail.

Both men came from relatively wealthy families and had a university education. They met for the first time in 2004 at the Islamic Academy Charitable trust in Cambridge. Kafeel Ahmed was studying at Anglia Ruskin University and Bilal Abdullah was in Cambridge to take exams that would enable him to train and work as a doctor in hospitals in the UK. In 2006 Kafeel Ahmed spent time in India designing and testing car bombs using manuals found on the internet and possibly knowledge gained from internet contacts.³⁵

A suicide note Kafeel Ahmed uploaded to the drafts folder of his email account on 28 June 2007 read:

It was time I put my words into actions. I was given an opportunity to do so and I took it up. So rejoice everyone and celebrate because I have achieved one of the two promises from Allah. Me and some brothers were given the opportunity to hit the devil's place, the core, and this is what we have tried by the help of Allah and this was a priority.³⁶

Case 9: Exeter suicide bomber

On 22 May 2008 Mohammad Rashid Saeed Alim (born Nicky Reilly) prepared three caustic soda devices in plastic bottles in the toilet of the Giraffe café in central Exeter and planned to detonate the bombs in the café.³⁷ Alim himself was the only person injured, with burns to his arms and face when one of the bombs detonated prematurely. Alim, who suffered from Asperger's Syndrome and had an IQ of 83, was reportedly 'brainwashed' by British-based Muslim radicals who persuaded him to plan and execute a terrorist attack.³⁸ However, in his suicide note Alim claimed 'I have not been brainwashed or indoctrinated. I am not insane', and that he was simply doing 'what God wants from his mujahedeen'.³⁹

Alim had a troubled background, he had first been to see a psychiatrist when he was nine and tried to take an overdose at 16, apparently in response to feeling rejected by his birth father.⁴⁰ Alim's stepfather is a convicted heroin dealer and his younger brother is serving a six-year prison sentence for kicking a man unconscious in a violent robbery.⁴¹

34 'Profile: Kafeel Ahmed, Glasgow attack terrorist who burnt to death', *The Times*, 16 December 2008.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article5352923.ece>.

35 'Profile: Kafeel Ahmed'. *The Guardian*, 16 December 2008.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/dec/16/kafeel-ahmed-profile>.

36 'Bomb plot: Arrests and releases', *BBC News*, 5 October 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6264230.stm>.

37 'Exeter bomb loaded with chemical', *BBC News*, 23 May 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7416642.stm>.

38 'Exeter explosion: Suspect brainwashed by Muslim extremists', *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 2008.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2014358/Exeter-bomb-Nicky-Reilly-white-Muslim-convert-is-named-as-suspect-in-Giraffe-restaurant-explosion.html>.

39 'Nail-bomber given life sentence', *BBC News*, 30 January 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7859887.stm>.

40 *Ibid.*

41 'Neighbours tell of Nick Reilly's troubled past', *The Telegraph*, 23 May 2008.

Case 10: Attack on publisher's house

On 27 September 2008 Martin Rynja's London home was attacked by three men who poured diesel fuel through the letterbox and set it alight. One of the attackers, who all lived in East London, was a taxi driver and the second a mobile phone salesman, while Ali Beheshti, the main instigator, was unemployed at the time of the attack. Martin Rynja is the owner of Gibson Square Books, a publishing company that was due to release a novel about the private life of the Prophet Mohammed. The three men were being followed by the police at the time of the attack and the fire was quickly put out.⁴²

Ali Beheshti was already well known to the police; during a protest against cartoons of prophet Mohammed printed in Denmark in February 2006 he had put a hat on his daughter displaying the words 'the youngest member of al-Qaeda'. During the protest he is reported to have said: 'The cartoonists and publishers need to be handed over to Al-Qaeda or the Taliban. France, Norway, Denmark, whoever publishes these pictures – kill them.'⁴³

Case 11: Bristol suicide bomber

On 17 April 2009 Isa Ibrahim (born Andrew Philip Michael) was arrested in Bristol when a member of his mosque alerted the police after he entered the mosque with cuts on his hands and feet. Ibrahim, who was known for his radical views, had been experimenting with HMTD explosive and had bought everything he needed to build an explosive and detonator from shops around his home. He had chosen Broadmead shopping centre in central Bristol as his target.⁴⁴

Ibrahim was born in a wealthy family in Bristol and educated in a number of private schools. He had problems at an early age, experimenting with various drugs before becoming a crack cocaine and heroin addict. He was considered a 'loner' with very few friends and was also addicted to computer games. He became estranged from his family, and at one time had been homeless, and was living in social housing at the time of the attack.⁴⁵

Case 12: Attempted murder of a British politician

'I've fulfilled my obligation, my Islamic duty to stand up for the people of Iraq and to punish someone who wanted to make war with them.'

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2017366/Exeter-explosionNeighbours-tell-of-Nicky-Reillys-troubled-past.html>.

⁴² 'Islamic fundamentalists jailed for arson attack at publisher's home', *The Times*, 8 July 2009.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article6661551.ece>.

⁴³ 'Muslim extremists jailed for arson attack on Mohammed book publishers home', *Daily Mail*, 8 July 2009. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1198111/If-choose-live-country-live-rules-says-judge-jails-Muslim-extremists-arson-attack-publishers-home.html>.

⁴⁴ 'Isa Ibrahim guilty of terrorism and explosive offences', Crown Prosecution Service, 17 July 2009.

http://www.cps.gov.uk/news/press_releases/134_09/.

Roshonara Choudhry, in police interview⁴⁶

On 14 May 2010 Roshonara Choudhry used a 3-inch kitchen knife to stab Stephen Timms, a British politician who had voted in favour of the Iraq war, twice in the abdomen. She was a promising student at King's College London but dropped out after deciding to murder a politician to gain revenge for Muslims killed in the Iraq war.

Choudhry had no known connection to any Islamist groups. There was also no evidence she had attended meetings or owned any potentially extremist literature. She did not even worship regularly at a mosque. Nevertheless she had been using the internet to access extremist material. She stumbled across radical Muslim teachings on YouTube from Yemen-based militant preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, later explaining to the police: 'I wasn't searching for him, I just came across him.'⁴⁷

Since her arrest Choudhry has not seen her family or any visitors, including her lawyers. She is held as a 'Category A' prisoner, making her subject to strip searches before and after any visits. Because she feels this demeans her dignity and religious beliefs she has instead opted for isolation.⁴⁸

Patterns and myths

The twelve cases outlined above are of course only a snapshot of violent extremism in the UK. In 2007, according to the then director of MI5 Jonathan Evans, there were 2,000 people in the UK who posed a threat to national security because of their support for terrorism.⁴⁹ Nevertheless some conclusions can be drawn from the cases above which will provide an analytical background for the assessment of the 'Prevent' strategy in the next section and may help to dispel some myths about terrorists and terrorism in the UK.

1. There is no single route into Islamic terrorism

The aforementioned cases demonstrate that a typical terrorist will generally be male, a second-generation immigrant and young. Of the 36 offenders prosecuted for the twelve attacks investigated, 35 were male, 27 were second-generation immigrants and 27 were aged under 30 at the time of attack or arrest. However, the cases also illustrate that the offenders come from a number of different backgrounds and here no obvious pattern emerges: there was an approximately 50/50 split between high and low levels of education, wealth and poverty, religious

45 'Revealed: How a public school boy was turned into a Muslim terrorist by online preachers', *Daily Mail*, 17 July 2009. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1200380/Revealed-How-public-schoolboy-turned-Muslim-terrorist-online-hate-preachers.html>.

46 'Roshonara Choudhry: Police interview extracts', *The Guardian*, 14 May 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-police-interview>.

47 Ibid.

48 'Profile: Roshonara Choudhry', *The Guardian*, 2 November 2010.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/nov/02/profile-roshonara-choudhry-stephen-timms>.

49 'Thousands pose UK terror threat', BBC News, 5 November 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7078712.stm>.

and non-religious upbringings, and connection to terrorist networks (four had links, three had possible links and five had no links at all). It is therefore very difficult to identify typical drivers towards extremism in a particular person's upbringing and background.

2. The main motive is anger over British foreign policy

In nine of the twelve cases, the perpetrators were strongly opposed to Britain's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. The anger and scepticism regarding Britain's role in the Middle East was obvious in the statements made to the police and media by each of the offenders. Saeed Alim (case 9) also mentioned immoral behaviour and depravity in the West as a motive for an attack but this was second to the need for Western troops to withdraw from Muslim lands. In the three cases in which the motive was not opposition to this aspect of British foreign policy, the motives were unclear in two: in the Wood Green ricin plot (case 2) because the plot was never properly substantiated by the police; and in the shoe bomb plot (case 1) Sajid Badat's motives were unclear after he withdrew from a planned attack and turned away from Islamic terrorism. In the third case, the attack on the publisher's house (case 10) was motivated by anger over a specific book about the private life of Mohammed which was considered blasphemous. Despite these three cases there is no doubt that the way British foreign policy is perceived by Muslims in the UK is an important driver in the indoctrination of terrorists.

3. Executing a successful terrorist attack is difficult

A successful terrorist attack requires reliable and fully indoctrinated people, careful planning to avoid detection and the technical ability to execute an attack. So far there has been only one case in the UK in which all these factors have combined to result in loss of life (case 4). The four men were heavily indoctrinated and reliable, planned the attack meticulously with great secrecy and most likely had training in Pakistan from Al-Qaeda operatives in order to develop the practical skills required to build and detonate bombs successfully.

In every other case there has been a failure in one or more factors. Finding reliable people was a problem in two of the cases; Sajid Badat (case 1) and Manfo Kwaku Asiedu (case 5) withdrew from the attacks and Basiru Gassama decided not to help Parvis Kahn identify a suitable Gambian-born Muslim soldier to murder (case 7).⁵⁰ In six cases the security services arrested the offenders before the planned terrorist attack could be executed. Poor technical ability meant that four attacks were unsuccessful in their execution owing to a lack of practical skills. Despite testing devices in India, Kafeel Ahmed built three car bombs in the UK which all failed to detonate (case 8). In the 21/7 attempted attacks, four bombs were detonated and all failed to explode (case 5). One of Nicky Reilly's home-made bombs blew up in his face before he got a chance to detonate three others in Exeter (case 9). Although Isa Ibrahim (case 11) was arrested before attempting a suicide bomb

attack, he injured himself when experimenting with home-made HMDT explosive. Despite the multitude of chemicals under most kitchen sinks it is difficult to build a well- functioning and reliable bomb without serious training. Roshonara Choudhry (case 12) failed to inflict a fatal wound on her victim.

4. The internet is a crucial tool

In nine cases the internet played a part at some stage of the attack, whether for indoctrination, research, communication between attackers or to spread ideology. Indoctrination was a factor in seven of the cases and was particularly important in the spread of terrorist ideology when the offender had no personal links to any terrorist networks. Isa Ibrahim (case 11) and Roshonara Choudhry (case 12) used the internet extensively to watch radical Islamic preachers while not having any face-to-face contact with anyone holding radical views. In seven cases the internet was used to research the targets and/or methods of an attack such as looking up flights that could be bombed (case 6) or finding the home address of a publisher (case 10). The internet was used to research bomb-making techniques in three cases and enabled offenders to learn bomb-making skills without the need to meet experts abroad. Communication over the internet played a part in six cases and was vital for planning in the UK and keeping in contact with people in the Middle East. It is important to note that the 7/7 bombers did not use the internet for research or communication, to ensure the plot was kept secret. But it did play a major role in broadcasting their suicide videos across the world and spreading their ideology.

5. The 'hard' strands of CONTEST seem to be working

There have been no terrorist-related deaths in the UK since the 7/7 bombings in London, although there have been some near misses. This success must be attributed to improvements in the security services working in the counter-terrorism field. In four cases they had no foreknowledge of the attempted attacks, which were unsuccessful owing to a lack of technical skills. In two of these cases the offenders, Isa Ibrahim (case 11) and Roshonara Choudhry (case 12), acted completely alone and had no links to any terrorist networks, making it extremely difficult for the security services to track their intentions. However, they were aware of six cases and arrested the offenders before any casualties occurred. Although the security services will always struggle to identify and monitor all the terrorists planning an attack in the UK, it has become more difficult for those with extreme views to execute an attack.

50 'Profiles: the Birmingham cell', BBC News, 18 February 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7246646.stm>.

3. 'PREVENT' IN ACTION – FAILURES AND SUCCESSSES

The 'Prevent' strand of the counter-terrorist strategy has been widely criticized by Muslims and non-Muslims alike as a strategy that has in some cases seriously damaged the trust in the police and community services. This section will analyse its successes and failures and offer some recommendations for the updated 'Prevent' strategy to take into account.

Failures

The main failures of the 'Prevent' strand seem to stem from confusion over what the strategy is trying to achieve. Its aims have oscillated between tackling violent extremism, promoting community cohesion and gathering intelligence. This broad spectrum has resulted in difficulties defining the problem and thus finding a way to resolve it. As noted above, the 'Prevent' strategy guide for local partners in England, entitled 'Stopping people becoming or supporting terrorists and violent extremists', outlines seven objectives for local authorities. The first three have been identified as the main areas of criticism and are analysed in more detail below.

Objective 1: Challenging the violent extremist ideology and supporting mainstream voices

This objective is focused on local authorities 'providing young Muslims with positive British Muslim role models'⁵¹ and identifying credible mainstream voices. But the government has been accused of social engineering by promoting 'moderate' Islamic groups that support government policies over groups that may challenge mainstream thinking.⁵² The problem stems from conservatism in government over what is considered an extreme or radical view and where the line is drawn between extremism and violent extremism. In surveys among British Muslims it is often apparent that supposedly extreme views such as support for Sharia law or a Muslim caliphate in the UK are relatively commonplace. A survey of 1,000 Muslims for a Channel 4 television documentary found that a third would prefer to live under Sharia law, and some 40% said Britain was a country of bad moral behaviour.⁵³ These are obviously not mainstream views supported by the government and would be considered extreme when compared with Western values. However, the opinions expressed in the survey do not automatically mean that large numbers of Muslims also support terrorist-related violence. The danger of ignoring more 'radical' Muslim groups is that the organizations that do receive funding through 'Prevent' may lose credibility within the Muslim community. The government then gains a reputation for trying to engineer acceptable religious ideologies rather than tackling crime. This can alienate Muslims further and creates an environment

51 HM Government, 'The "Prevent" Strategy: A Guide for Local Partners in England', May 2008.

https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Prevent_Strategy.pdf.

52 "'Prevent' extremism strategy stigmatising, warn MP's", BBC News, 30 March 2010.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8593862.stm>.

53 'Almost a quarter of Muslims believe 7/7 was justified', *Daily Mail*, 7 August 2006. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-399352/Almost-quarter-Muslims-believe-7-7-justified.html>.

in which they believe Islam is selected for special treatment by the government. In a YouGov survey for the *Daily Telegraph*, 50% of Muslims surveyed thought that the main party leaders were not being sincere in their professions of respect for Islam and desire to cooperate with Britain's Muslim communities.⁵⁴ In 2006 Tony Blair, appearing before the Commons Liaison Committee of senior MPs, declared:

People should stand up and not merely say, 'You are wrong [but] you are wrong in your view about the West, you are wrong in your sense of grievance, the whole ideology is profoundly wrong.'⁵⁵

There is a difference between denouncing violent extremism, which is important, and an inflammatory attitude of dismissing Islamist ideologies and the view Muslims have of the West. This stance creates resentment and gives Muslims a justification to believe that Islam is being unfairly targeted.

Objective 2: Disrupting those who promote violent extremism and supporting the institutions where they may be active

In practice this translates as 'identifying individuals or groups that promote violent extremism' and 'identifying the locations where radicalisation may already be taking place'.⁵⁶ This is where a 'soft' strategy aimed at opening debate crosses over into a 'hard' security strategy aimed at finding and dealing with dangerous individuals. Local authorities are expected to monitor the Muslim community and point out individuals for the security services to deal with, but this has resulted in allegations of spying.⁵⁷ This crossover of responsibilities can seriously reduce trust in a local authority if a community becomes aware of such monitoring, and it does not nurture an environment in which Muslims can openly discuss difficult subjects such as violent terrorism. There is, of course, a balance to find: any individual showing significant signs of committing a violent act should be identified and the security services need to be notified. However, the 'Prevent' programmes should not be primarily designed as intelligence-gathering missions to identify violent Muslims. This undermines the very nature of their remit in fostering trust and open debate. It would be naïve to think that the MI5 did not have agents infiltrating various community programmes in Muslim neighbourhoods. This is their job, undertaken in complete secrecy, and has worked well in preventing an attack in six of the twelve cases analysed. Nevertheless the remit of the 'Prevent' strategy must remain clear to avoid mission drift; it is designed to encourage debate in order to prevent people from committing acts of terrorism, not to securitize Muslim neighbourhoods through greater local surveillance.

54 'One in four Muslims sympathises with terrorist', *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 July 2005.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1494648/One-in-four-Muslims-sympathises-with-motives-of-terrorists.html>.

55 'Examination of Witnesses (Questions 340-359)', Select Committee on Liaison Minutes of Evidence, 4 July 2006.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmliaisn/709/6070404.htm>.

56 HM Government, 'The "Prevent" Strategy'.

Objective 3: Supporting vulnerable individuals

This objective assumes that some people are more vulnerable to committing violence than others and should thus be supported through referral to existing networks such as social services. The assumption is that the drivers of terrorism stem from factors relating to the upbringing and background of a young Muslim such as peer pressure, the absence of positive role models, crisis of identity and links to criminality.⁵⁸ However, the case analysis above demonstrates that there is no single route to terrorism and it is extremely difficult to determine which background will lead a person towards terrorism.

The objective completely fails to take into account that the main driver of Islamic terrorism in Britain is anger directed at British foreign policy in the Middle East. As shown above, in nine of the twelve cases analysed British foreign policy was the main motive of the offenders. A research project led by Demos found 'widespread support among radicals and young Muslims for Iraqi and Afghan people "defending themselves" from "invaders"'.⁵⁹ The use of the term 'vulnerable' implies a diminished capacity for rational behaviour, which implies that nobody in their right mind could possibly react in such a way to UK interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and must have been manipulated.⁶⁰ If non-mainstream views are considered irrational and not discussed openly they can become taboo and exciting for young Muslims. The only mention of either Iraq or Afghanistan in the 'Prevent' strategy guide for local authorities is that they were discussed in a lunchtime forum at a secondary school in Oxford. A study of 261 'Prevent' projects in 2007/08, in which the local authority was asked to identify the intended primary beneficiaries for each project, found that just 3% were aimed primarily at those 'justifying or glorifying violent extremism'.⁶¹ If the primary driver of anger in the Muslim community is largely ignored by the government, it does not create a space in which Muslims with extreme views may be able to think differently. The danger is that young Muslims may then be attracted by violent radical Muslim preachers who discuss British foreign policy on the internet, as was the case in seven out of the twelve cases analysed. A quote from a Muslim with radical views possibly sums up the argument: 'You don't need to reject your faith or jihad ... you need people who will discuss the real issues of jihad.'⁶²

57 'Preventing Violent Extremism - Communities and Local Government Committee', UK Parliament, March 2010. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcomloc/65/6505.htm>.

58 HM Government, 'The 'Prevent' Strategy'.

59 Bartlett et al., 'The Edge of Violence'.

60 Anthony Richards, 'The problem with "radicalisation": the remit of "Prevent" and the need to refocus on terrorism in the UK', *International Affairs*, 87, January 2011.

61 'Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder Fund Mapping of Project Activities 2007/2008', Karen Kellard, Leighton Mitchell and David Godfrey for BMG Research, Department for Communities and Local Government, December 2008. <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1092863.pdf>.

62 Bartlett et al., 'The Edge of Violence'.

Successes

Although the 'Prevent' strategy has struggled to meet its aims on a national level, there have been some local successes. Bristol in particular has managed to navigate the social and political minefield to develop a programme with the community that has enhanced trust and cohesion in the city. This improved environment produced a concrete result when members of the Muslim community contacted the police because of their concerns about Isa Ibrahim (case 11). Acting on this information, the police arrested Ibrahim after finding extremist material, home-made explosive and a suicide vest in his flat. This was the first time that a counter-terrorism intervention had been initiated by the Muslim community.⁶³ It contrasts with the case of Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly, who attempted a suicide attack in Stockholm in December 2010 (the bomb malfunctioned, killing Abdaly but not injuring anyone else). Although his violent views had been well known at his local mosque in Luton as early as 2006, when Qadeer Baksh, chairman of Luton Islamic centre, was asked why no one from the mosque had reported Abdaly, he replied: 'It's the police's job, the intelligence service's job to follow these people up, not ours.'⁶⁴

The Bristol approach used a number of well-thought-out strategies which helped make it successful. First, before the strategy was formulated a survey was carried out by Ethnic Focus to gain an understanding of Muslim communities in Bristol. Through this survey the local authority identified two types of Muslim community, 'those who emigrated from Pakistan, India or Bangladesh during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and Somalis who had arrived over the past few years as asylum seekers or refugees'.⁶⁵ Different strategies were designed for the well-established Muslim communities and those that had arrived recently. Secondly, the local authority engaged Muslim communities while formulating the strategy.⁶⁶ One result was that the strategy was renamed 'Building the Bridge' rather than 'Preventing Violent Extremism'. This name better reflected the aim of building links between Muslim communities, local agencies and different areas of society in Bristol, rather than focusing blame. Thirdly, there was a focused strategy of organizing events mainly targeted at understanding and demystifying Islam, extremism, Al-Qaeda and what culture and religion mean in a wider sense. This avoided the trap of a woolly 'Prevent' strategy in which funding is spread around on various unfocused projects such as sport and recreation events in the name of community cohesion. The Home Office has already indicated it may be separating work on preventing violent extremism from work to promote integration; the former will be led by the Home Office and the latter by the Department for Communities and Local Government.⁶⁷ This should make it easier for local authorities to run more focused 'Prevent' programmes.

63 'Turned in by his community, the extremist who wanted to belong', *The Guardian*, July 2009.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/jul/17/isa-ibrahim-profile-muslim-community>.
64 'The bubbly Luton radical who became a suicide bomber in Sweden', *The Guardian*, 14 December 2010.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/13/sweden-suicide-bomber-luton-radical>.

65 'Preventing Violent Extremism in Bristol', Bristol City Council, March 2009.
<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=9543243&aspect=print>.

66 'Prevent strategy: local success but a national disaster', Bristol Somali Media Group, 9 June 2010.
<http://smgbristol.wordpress.com/2010/06/09/Prevent-ion-strategy-local-success-but-a-national-disaster/>.

67 Home Office, 'Review of the "Prevent" Strategy'.
<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism/review-of-'Prevent'-strategy/>.

Recommendations

The 'Prevent' strand of the CONTEST strategy has struggled to meet its aims and in some cases has actually damaged the ability of local authorities to prevent violent extremism. However, the approach adopted in Bristol has shown that local authorities can make a positive difference in Muslim communities. In order for the revised strategy to be more successful it must refocus and address the following key points from a policy standpoint:

- The difference between extremism and violent extremism must be defined to ensure that the policy is not viewed as a government attempt to shape religious ideology.
- The sense that 'Prevent' is a general intelligence-gathering mission must be removed to gain trust and acceptance from Muslim communities.
- The drivers of violent extremism must be addressed directly by discussing the impact of and justification for British foreign policy in the Middle East.

The successes in Bristol have shown that from an operational standpoint the 'Prevent' strategy must be applied more intelligently, and needs to be more targeted and inclusive:

- Local authorities must understand the make-up of the different Muslim communities in the area so as to tailor the strategy to each.
- Muslim communities must be engaged while the strategy is being formulated to ensure it is appropriate and accepted.
- Events need to be focused on the discussion and demystification of violent extremism framed within a wider religious and cultural context.

There must be a fundamental shift away from a 'them versus us' approach which can result in isolation and alienation. If 'Prevent' is about debate, integration and understanding, then this is what the strategy must strive for in Muslim communities around the UK.

APPENDIX: TERRORISM ACT⁶⁸

1) In this Act “terrorism” means the use or threat of action where—

- (a) the action falls within subsection (2),
- (b) the use or threat is designed to influence the government or an international governmental organisation or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and
- (c) the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious racial or ideological cause.

(2) Action falls within this subsection if it—

- (a) involves serious violence against a person,
- (b) involves serious damage to property,
- (c) endangers a person’s life, other than that of the person committing the action,
- (d) creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public, or
- (e) is designed seriously to interfere with or seriously to disrupt an electronic system.

(3) The use or threat of action falling within subsection (2) which involves the use of firearms or explosives is terrorism whether or not subsection (1)(b) is satisfied.

(4) In this section—

- (a) “action” includes action outside the United Kingdom,
- (b) a reference to any person or to property is a reference to any person, or to property, wherever situated,
- (c) a reference to the public includes a reference to the public of a country other than the United Kingdom, and
- (d) “the government” means the government of the United Kingdom, of a Part of the United Kingdom or of a country other than the United Kingdom.

(5) In this Act a reference to action taken for the purposes of terrorism includes a reference to action taken for the benefit of a proscribed organisation.

⁶⁸ Terrorism Act 2000, including amendments introduced in 2006, 2008 and 2009.
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11/section/1>

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