Viewpoint:
The Current Challenges to UK National Security and How They Might be Addressed

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Abstract

This article offers a qualitative assessment of the current major security challenges facing the UK, as of the first half of 2017. It argues that to address the increased number of threats, the UK's intelligence-led security community must not only be expanded in terms of size but also of reach. It should seek to generate better actionable intelligence, chiefly, but not exclusively, from electronic sources, and exploit it more effectively. Intelligence should also be deployed to assist in preventing young British Muslims from being drawn into terrorism. Whilst recognising that good intelligence by itself cannot deliver total security, itself an unrealisable aim, and that many other measures are needed to keep any country as safe as possible, the article concludes that intelligence, and intelligence-led security activity, is the best single means of keeping democracies as safe as possible from terrorism, whether it is of the Islamist or any other variety.

Introduction

This article argues that the best means of addressing the current security challenges to the UK, chiefly, but certainly not exclusively Islamist in origin, lie in developing the effectiveness and reach of intelligence-led security activity and that to meet current and future security challenges it will be necessary to make further substantial investment in it whilst expanding and refining both its collection and its use.

The term intelligence is here understood as the collection and analysis of secret information, secretly acquired and secretly exploited, for the main part, by those national agencies charged with this duty[1]. This definition reflects the official UK government definition of 'intelligence'. This is not to say that confidential information gained from open sources, diplomats or ordinary police officers is unimportant but merely this study is concerned only with the national policy dimension to intelligence, and this means information lawfully obtained without the knowledge of those providing it and those for whom it was intended and is used against both for national security purposes (Omand, 2010).

It begins by looking at the national security picture in the UK, placing in context the most recent Islamist attacks[2] and proceeds to consider the various counter-measures available to the UK government. It concludes by proposing the adoption of a specific series of intelligence-led preventative policy measures.

Current National Security Challenges

National Security and Brexit

For more than ten years, Britain has been subjected to a succession of Islamist terrorist attacks. The three attacks in the first half of 2017 taken together, combined with some, so far, minor evidence of right wing violence and terrorism, were widely seen as constituting a new level of concern for a variety of reasons: the attacks could not be disrupted, the perpetrators involved in the Islamist ones were not unknown to the authorities[3] and they implied that the problem was worsening. Britain appeared very vulnerable and Islamist thinking seemed to be becoming endemic amongst small but dangerous groupings of British Muslims.

At the same time Britain has been going through a period of national political instability, not least the result of an unprecedented number of elections since 2010, which, in one sense or another, have revolved around national security issues ranging from how best to protect the UK from Islamist terrorism to whether or not Britain should continue to be part of the European Union (EU) on security as well as economic grounds. The most recent election was held on 8 June, three years prematurely, and the link between Brexit and national security was most clearly put by Theresa May on 25 April 2016[4] when she said 'my judgement as home secretary is that remaining a member of the EU means that we shall all be more secure from crime and terrorism' (Conservative Home, 2016). Although she has had to change her mind on this, the case she made was – and remains – compelling.

Mrs May concluded that leaving the EU did 'not mean we would be as safe as if we remain. Outside the EU, we would have no access to the European Arrest Warrant'[5]. She listed 'the Passenger Name Records Directive, the Records Information System, the joint intelligence teams' as being considerable advantages to the UK. And her conclusion was an important one: 'these are all agreements that enable law enforcement agencies to cooperate and share information in the fight against cross border crime'. Britain has used the EU Schengen Information Database System 514,160,087 times in 2016[6] (Towsend, 2017 and Rankin, 2017).

Even after 23 June 2016, when Britain voted to leave the EU, national security issues remained high on the agenda. In her important speech of 17 January 2017, Theresa May, now prime minister, made it clear that security policy would be a key part of

her Brexit high policy, not least, because it is, itself, a major security challenge to the UK. Although the Lisbon Treaty points out that 'national security remains the sole responsibility of the member state' and that the EU has no direct competence in this area[7], it might follow that, in theory, EU membership should make no difference to any individual nation's ability to deliver security and no difference to whether it would wish to work together on a bilateral or multilateral basis with other states.

In practice, however, the member states of the EU have opted to cooperate, exploiting the facility possessed by the EU to facilitate this through practice-oriented institutional arrangements that are capable of enhancing the intelligence reach of all member states, not least, in respect of resource-intensive ones, such as interception and satellite technology. This cannot fail to impact on the delivery of security.

Leaving the EU means that the UK will be required to leave INTCEN, the Open Source (OSINT) Division, the EU Situation Room and the Consular Crisis Management Division, as well as the Counter-Terrorist Group (Whitehall Briefing, 2016). The UK will also have to quit Europol, which is now an EU institution. Britain will no longer participate in the Common Security and Defence policy, the Political and Security Committee, the EU Satellite Centre (SATCEN), Galileo, as well as be a host of Open Source (OSINT) research groups. For example, the Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity (INTCEN, 2016).

Leaving Europol would have an immediate and profound impact according to one senior police intelligence commander. Extradition which used to take months or even longer, now takes days. Some pro-Brexit former officers, such as Sir Richard Dearlove, head or 'C' of MI6 from 1999 to 2004, have argued Britain would be safer out of the EU and relying on the USA for its security[8] (Slack & Cohen, 2016 and Burrows, 2017). A former head of police counter-terrorism claimed that Europol was not an EU institution, so there was no need to quit it, but that it did the UK little good (Evans, 2016 and Martin, 2017).

That said, Britain still hopes that, by virtue of an agreement on security, it will continue to share intelligence-led security work with the EU27, in line with the prime minister's Lancaster House speech of 17 January 2017 where Mrs May offered security and intelligence sharing to the EU27 in return for a favourable 'deal' on trade. She emphasised that Britain had uniquely successful intelligence services and was providing a lead on security in Europe. Continued security and intelligence cooperation with the EU27 is deemed of such importance to the UK that, in any rational scenario, it is inconceivable it will not continue post-Brexit, unless the break with Europe is complete in every respect.

The implications of the three Islamist Attacks on the UK in the first half of 2017

By any reasonable metric, in respect of terror, the security situation in the UK in the first six months of 2017 was dire, with the most serious challenges all being presented by Islamist terrorism. On 22 March 2017, 52 year-old, Khalid Masood, an Islamist jihadist, drove a hired SUV over Westminster Bridge and ran into Parliament, getting within 300 metres of the prime minister who was then in the building. He murdered five people. A second intended attack on Westminster was successfully disrupted on 27 April 2017. Then, on 22 May 2017, at Manchester's Arena concert hall, Salman Abedi, a British citizen from a Libyan background, detonated a bomb, skilfully constructed and packed with metal bolts designed to cause maximum carnage, killed 22 and maimed and wounded over 200 young people attending a pop concert. By targeting children, the Manchester attack represented a new low of horror in an already horrific catalogue. As if this were not enough, on 3 June 2017, three jihadists, led by 27 year-old Khuran Butt, killed eight people with kitchen knives and injured 48 others.

When Theresa May declared on 4 June, that 'enough is enough', many British people would have agreed with her. In her statement outside 10 Downing Street, Mrs May stated that Britain was now subject to what she called a 'new trend of terrorism' (BBC News, 2017a). Britain, she said, had also become too tolerant of the ideology of extremism. Mrs May called for the UK's entire counter-terrorism strategy to be reviewed, in order to make it more 'robust'. She also demanded new policies 'to identify and defeat' Islamist ideology, that the Internet be purged of Islamist material and to dismantle 'separated segregated communities'.

Yet, some voices could immediately be heard questioning both her analysis and also her own record on security (Nevett, 2017). What was new about these measures? Why had they not been taken before? Mrs May had, of course, been Home Secretary from 2010-2016 before becoming Prime Minister.

And what, exactly, was the 'new trend' to which Mrs May was referring? The implication was that this was about the methods used by terrorists (knives and hired vehicles). In fact, little here was new. Some terrorists have used knives and vehicles[9] and some have used bombs, very recently, as in Manchester in May 2017.

Some experts argued that what was new was the frequency of terror attacks in the UK and the fact that jihadism appeared now to be becoming endemic in a small but highly dangerous number of British Muslims, not least because the idea of 'defeating' Islamist ideology was easy to describe but hard to achieve (Maidment, 2017).

A Worsening Security Picture: Measures Not Taken

Mrs May had presided over a worsening security situation and had failed to do things that ought to have been done. When she became Home Secretary in 2010, one of her first acts had been to abolish control orders and replace them with 'TPIMs' (Home Office, 2016). In January 2011, she declared 'for too long, the balance between security and British freedoms has not been the right one…these measures will restore our civil liberties, whilst allowing the police and security services to protect us' (The Daily Telegraph, 2011). She had done so, in part, to flatter the Liberal Democrat coalition partners of David Cameron's first administration, but, no less importantly, to appease the libertarian wing of her own Conservative Party, of which she appeared to be a member.

The essential difference between a control order and a TPIM was that, under a control order, a suspected Islamist could be removed from his or her environment and sent to another part of the UK, away from any support networks or radicalising influences. But to enhance the civil liberties of those who were committed to doing harm to the civil liberties of others was perhaps a freedom too many. At any rate, this was the view of commentators and some in the security community.

Correspondingly, in early 2015, and almost sub rosa, a new version of TPIMs was brought forward, it was stronger because it was allowed an element of re-location (Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, 2015). However, 'enhanced' (E) TPIMs permitted suspected Islamists to continue to use the Internet and their mobile phones. Actual 'internal exile' had been replaced with the permission to continue to have 'virtual' contact with existing networks. The thought, perhaps, was that the security service could monitor all communications. But, in practice, this was not possible. TPIMs could be issued for only two years and could not be renewed. In any case, virtually no ETIPMs or TPIMS were ever issued.

Whilst it was possible for the authorities to withdraw the passports of those suspected of wishing to travel to support terrorism, a power that seems to have been used 24 times in 2014, this did not operate the other direction. That is, to remove a passport from someone who had already travelled for the purposes of terrorism but wished to return (Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, 2016)

In the event, the charge is not just that effective security measures were withdrawn to avoid legal fights, or that governments lack strong powers, but that where they do possess them, they are too reluctant to use them. Only six jihadists returning from Daesh were subject to TPIMS and only one in eight prosecuted (Travis, 2016 and Matharu, 2016).

Abedi, ought to have been given a so-called Temporary Exclusion Order, introduced by David Cameron in 2015, but was never executed on the grounds that it might render stateless those served with them and contravene international law. Had Abedi been subject to this order he would have been refused entry to the UK, pending further investigation of what he had been doing in Libya. The failure to implement existing measures has had far too high a cost and undoubtedly gave off the wrong signals to potential terrorists that the UK was unsure of how to deliver its security and, therefore, safer from their point of view.

The Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, pointed to the cuts made under Theresa May to the police budget and claimed the security community had been seriously undermined by them. This was true, even if it was not the complete story. The police budget had been cut by 18% since 2010 and the number of uniformed officers declined by 17% and police staff by 16% (BBC News, 2017b).

But it was also the case that in 2015, the funding given to the intelligence-led security forces had increased by 30%, allowing the appointment of 19,000 extra officers to the three main intelligence agencies. As is explored below, a compelling case can be made that the cuts to community policing will have reduced the ability of the police to garner intelligence from local Muslim communities and evaluate it.

Some important security successes had been scored prior to 2017. We are told that, since 2013, MI5 and the counter-terror police have disrupted 18 Islamist attacks, 5 of these in the past nine weeks (BBC News, 2017c). But, whenever an attack succeeds and lives are lost, it is, whether fairly or not, the failures that resonate rather than the events that did not take place. Had the measures the government possessed been implemented and had there been better intelligence about potential terrorists, it might have been possible to have identified those who went on to attack at an earlier stage, disrupting their plots and bringing them before the courts.

Britain under Attack: Missing Targets

Within hours of the Manchester attack, the threat level in the UK was raised from 'Severe' (meaning an Islamist attack at any time is highly likely) to 'Critical' (meaning an attack is imminent). The threat level is set by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) housed in the headquarters of Britain's Security Service (aka MI5) and not by the government. It is a candid intelligence-led assessment of the risk to the nation put out for the public.

Although the threat level was lowered on 27 May, it merely returned back to 'Severe'. Then, just ten days later, Islamists struck Britain again, this time in London. What the lowering of the threat level demonstrated, to the public as well as to Islamists, is that our intelligence community had no idea this attack was being planned, let alone would actually be undertaken.

A few years ago, the head of MI5, Andrew Parker, stated that there were 'thousands' of Islamists in Britain wanting to harm people here; his office later said there were 3,000 people of interest to them. By 2017, the situation had deteriorated dramatically: on 26 May the Security Minister Ben Wallace stated that THE MI5's data base of potential attackers contained 23,000 names (O'Neill, 2017b).

Whilst the major challenges continue to come from Islamist terrorism, we should not ignore the existence both of neo-Nazi and Far Right terrorism[10]. Who can say with certainty that Brexit-induced changes to the conditions in Northern Ireland will not lead to a resurgence of Provisional IRA activity?

Whilst it is perfectly fair to argue that, of itself, better intelligence will not prevent all future Islamist attacks, it is equally true that it is only through better intelligence that far more attacks will be successfully disrupted. Better intelligence is the sine qua non of effective counter-terrorist strategy in any democracy that refuses to countenance oppressive police measures such as internment or believes that 'prevention' is better than 'cure'.

'Better' means more intelligence and exploiting it more effectively, not least by developing the areas in which it is used. This, in turn, requires more investment in intelligence-led activity[11] and extending its use by increasing the 'fusion' between the national and regional authorities but also, and critically, by introducing intelligence into areas currently untouched by it. In particular, the processes of preventing young Muslims from turning to extremism in the first place.

When it receives intelligence about an individual, MI5 will always be required to assess whether the target in question is an 'essential' ('Priority 1') target, or a 'desirable' one ('Priority 2, 3 or 4') (O'Neill, 2017a). If it is only the 300 'Priority 1' individuals, involved in 500 current plots, that are investigated by MI5, the police handle most of the others.

The assessment of potential risk is complex, yet, too often, both MI5 and the police have made the wrong call. Both Masood, the Westminster killer and Abedi, the Manchester bomber, were in the 'Priority 4' category. According to a credible report in The Daily Mail, the British authorities had 18 different points at which the London killers could have been dealt with (Robinson, 2017).

With only 3,500 officers and an unspecified number of counter-terror police[12], it is all too easy to make, what turns out to be, errors (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament Report, 2016). Of course, intelligence-led activity is not an exact objective science and more intelligence by itself will not necessarily produce better judgements. A good education and training in intelligence analysis and the professionalization of intelligence analysis are other significant issues to bear in mind but cannot be investigated here (Glees, 2015).

However, with increased staff, investigating each of the 23,000 potential jihadists in the UK should not be difficult nor should one be defeatist about monitoring this number of suspects which could be even larger. In the 1950s, MI5 led an operation 'Post Report' to interview almost 213,000 Eastern Europeans living and working in the UK to check for Communist sympathies. In the 1970s, the German Federal Criminal Office recorded the details of 4.7 million 'sympathisers' of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist gangs (Glees, 1992; Glees 1996; Burke, 2007; Dornschneider, 2015; Hewitt, 2008; Hoffman, 2006 and Taylor, 2011).

A New Front

One new challenge has opened up over the past few years. It is located in cyber space and, given the exposure that social media has to its viewers, its potential to radicalise and recruit to the Islamist cause is today far greater than before. It represents a specific challenge to British security officials but also provides them with a number of opportunities. The ease with which communications with target individuals can be established allows a new means of recruitment and steering. On the other hand, given the right skills, interception and analysis of cyber space enables intelligence and security communities to discover and track potential and actual extremists. It can also be a means to disrupt extremist and terrorist activities.

There were many cases documented in 2016 of individuals who had gone to join Daesh after being contacted by Daesh via their social media accounts. These individuals were bombarded with radical and extremist posts, and ultimately successfully brainwashing those who showed themselves ready to engage with the organisation (Koerner, 2016).

Daesh are known to have a Twitter presence. There are multiple pro-Daesh accounts that are free to express opinions and spread radical beliefs to others, relatively unchecked. Similarly, Daesh have started using Snapchat, to share images of daily life on the front-line (Brown, 2016). When it comes to the recruitment of individuals, those that have themselves expressed radical views are the most prominent targets for grooming and development. In the past, this has taken the form of so-called 'academic' groups, 'religious' groups and other forms of interaction. It is likely that Facebook is used to track and then communicate with particularly vulnerable individuals. Algorithms can readily be developed to track and identify those whose stated ideals are a sure fit with what Daesh will be looking for.

Shared video propaganda is the other main method of Internet recruitment or grooming and indeed training. The amount of openly accessibly information online on bomb making techniques is vast. Damon Smith, who attempted to set off a ball bearing explosive device in a Tube Station, learnt how to construct this from videos he found online (Ross, 2017).

Indeed, an increasingly large number of videos are now being circulated, all propagating extremist views. Exposure to them will confirm the usefulness to Daesh of those who watch them. *Inspire*, the notorious Al-Qaeda Internet propaganda and instructional magazine, is easily accessible. Many of those who have gone on to become terrorists were found to have followed advice it gave, whether they were vulnerable in social terms or those who had just been released from prison. The latter were targeted with 'redemption' messages that were clearly appealing. We are already sure that Khuran Butt, the ring leader of the London Bridge attack, had viewed YouTube videos and said he had been inspired by them to the extent that he was encouraged to support Daesh and then to go to Syria to join up (Harris, 2017).

British government policy in respect of the online threat is still in its infancy. On 4 June, Mrs May signalled her intention to act against Islamist exploitation of the Internet and social media in particular. Despite Brexit, she joined with the new French president to work on a method, a 'legal liability', of new laws to coerce the technology companies to remove jihadist material from their servers: perhaps seeking to replicate the recent German measure which imposed fines of €50m on social media providers who did too little, whatever that might be, in this regard (Elgot, 2017 and Burns, 2017).

It seems highly probable that attempts to regulate the Internet will defy an easy solution, partly because, in a philosophical sense, this could be said to be about 'free speech' in a democratic society, and partly because most of the social media service providers and technology companies are based in the USA and, therefore, outside the jurisdiction of the English courts.

The Future Agenda: Developing Intelligence-led Prevention Activity

For the future, two things would appear to be necessary to deliver better security in the UK. The first is to implement the measures that government already possesses; the second is to get the broader community of policy-makers to think imaginatively to develop new, and more robust, ways of combating jihadism. Increasing the number of counter-terrorist police and the size of MI5 as speedily as possible, as both major UK parties promised during the election, must be achieved (ITV News, 2017). One route would be to develop new strategies to contain what, to some observers, looks increasingly like an endemic spread of jihadism amongst Britain's young Muslims. These measures must be targeted and that means they need to be intelligence-led.

The measures the British state employs to fight Islamism consist of two parts, prevention ('Prevent') in effect through countering the ideology of Islamism and disruption and arrest ('Pursue') (Home Office, 2016). They have been frequently described. If Mrs May is to be taken at her word both 'Prevent' and 'Pursue' will undergo an 'uplift' once the new post-8 June government settles into power.

The focus of 'Prevent' rests on a variety of measures which include building 'resilience' to Islamist extremism within Muslim communities, information and intelligence collection by police forces and, since 2015, a duty on educational institutions at secondary, further and higher education levels, to challenge extremist narratives amongst students, monitor outside speakers and ensure what is said in schools and on campus is consistent with the law.

More recently, the new British Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, has announced a major review or 'uplift' of 'Contest' (Maidment, 2017). There are good grounds for believing that the Security Service should devote more resources to combatting radicalisation as part of this 'uplift'.

Currently, MI5 does not concern itself with the collection of intelligence about radicalisation but leaves this to the counter-terrorist police and the police force more generally. It follows that MI5 will be absent during the processes through which a young Muslim becomes a jihadi. Yet, the 1989 Security Service Act places on MI5 the statutory duty of 'protecting national security…from actions intended to overthrow or undermine parliamentary democracy by political…or violent means' (Security Services Act, 1989). It is frequently stated, in off the record briefings, that MI5 itself does not wish to exercise this role and, if there were a new Act, it would lobby to remove this duty to involve itself with subversion. But this is not something that MI5 should, by itself, be entitled to determine.

Much of the intelligence, perhaps most, will come from the interception and analysis of electronically transmitted communications. The British government's new law on the regulation of investigatory powers (2016) gives the UK's intelligence community, and especially GCHQ and MI5, lawful but massively intrusive powers in respect of the interception of communications. They adhere to European and international norms in human rights (Investigatory Powers Act, 2016).

Some Muslim community 'leaders' have claimed this policy is counter-productive because it allows Muslims to be spied upon and alienates them from the security community. This is far from so. Indeed we now know that the authorities were given tip-offs about both the Manchester and London killers by members of the UK Muslim community. The basic problem, as we have seen, is that there are just too many Islamists for existing personnel to evaluate fully the risk they present.

Prevent has, in fact, frequently worked: in 2015-16, 7,500 people were referred to Prevent; that is 20 per day. It is believed that it prevented 150 people from travelling to Daesh. It has a budget of £40m p.a. It is thought that some 350 Daesh 'travellers' will be returning to the UK, some 400 have already come back. Nothing has happened to them (O'Neill, 2017c). Yet faced with more than 23,000 potential jihadists in our midst, it is obvious that what we have done in the past, has not been enough.

Under the 2015 Prevent law, Prevent is also a duty that teachers are obliged to discharge, whether in schools, colleges or universities, to seek to stop their students being drawn into extremism, violent or non-violent. Some 55 per cent of British jihadists have a background in further or higher education. What is more, as Raffaelo Pantucci has suggested, some 50% of UK Islamist terrorists are linked to Al Muhajiroun founded by Anjem Choudary and others (Pantucci, 2014). Although David Cameron proscribed the organisation in 2010, nothing seems to have been done about it (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2015). It is likely that recruiting on campuses still exists, however, many academics regards the Prevent duty as anathema, and contrary to their sense of academic freedom. Therefore, further debate on the subject is inevitable.

Conclusion

Security policy is not a 'switch' it is a 'dial' and when times demand it, the dial has to be turned up; when they improve, the dial can be turned down again. To meet current security challenges, the argument here is that the UK needs to 'turn up the dial', to improve its intelligence-led activity, both to disrupt terrorist plots and bring attackers to justice and to allow targeted prevention measures to prevent young British Muslims from being drawn into terrorism in the first place.

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Whitehall, 25 February 2016; 5 May 2016

Endnotes

1 The Security Service, MI5, the Secret Intelligence Service, SIS/MI6 and the Government Communications Centre, GCHQ

2 In London and Manchester

3 Both matters suggesting that the UK security community was not meeting the demands placed on it.

4 When she was a Remain-supporting home secretary

5 This had allowed the UK to extradite 5,000 people since 2011 and bring 675 suspects or convicts to the UK

6 There are some 70 billon items in the Brussels database tracking 28,472 persons of interest to British intelligence, 1768 firearms and 113414 vehicle records (Townsend, 2017 and Rankin, 2017).

7 At 4(2) TEU

8 A view he may have changed following allegations made about Russian interference in the US presidential election.

9 For example, in the killing of Drummer, Lee Rigby, in 2013.

10 Examples are the assassination of Jo Cox MP in June 2016 by Thomas Mair a neo-Nazi Brexit supporter, and the murder of a Muslim worshipper in London a year later (BBC News, 2016 and Kirka, 2017).

11 Including its further professionalization

12 Reduced, as we have seen, by 16% in number.

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