POLICE RESPONSES TO ISLAMIST VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

A Critical Analysis

TIMOTHY F. PARSONS

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For my wife Karon and children, Katie and Morgan.

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About the Author

Timothy F. Parsons has 40 years of experience in policing, first as a serving officer and later as an adviser to foreign governments. He has taught and lectured on police matters in 25 countries across four continents and continues to work as a research fellow at Liverpool John Moores University. He has an education doctorate from King's College London and was a chief inspector in the City of London Police.

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Preface

This book is the culmination of over two decades of study; a study that began when I was a serving police officer in London in the early years of this century. After the audacious and shocking terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda on the United States mainland in 2001, later to be followed by other devastating attacks in Bali 2002, Madrid 2004 and later London itself in 2005, United Kingdom law enforcement had to refocus on the terrorist threat posed by Islamist terror groups such as al-Qaeda and much later Islamic State (IS), sometimes referred to as Daesh by the United Kingdom Government.

Beginning from a point of no knowledge and gradually building an awareness of the many facets and complexities of this emerging threat, I consulted many figures within London's large and diverse array of Muslim communities. Visiting masjids (mosques), Islamic centres and prayer rooms, I listened, asked questions and reflected on the many deep and insightful conversations that I was grateful to have had with members of mosque management committees, community groups, scholars, fellow police officers and security professionals.

Later, my research and enquiries led me to meet officials or representatives from the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Hamas, Hezbollah and former members of al-Qaeda. I sat on two Prevent Boards, one for the police and one for the local authority. I have little memory of anything that was discussed, agreed or acted upon. At the time, I was of the view that too many meetings in both the police and local government simply became exercises in exchanging platitudinous nonsense about aims and objectives, performance indicators, consultations, reviews, action plans and policies. Out in the community things were a bit different, I enjoyed a free-ranging brief which allowed me to test out the appetite for police recruitment in local masjids, this proved to be immensely popular although the many barriers to entry became a major source of frustration. The exercise in listening continued apace. One day I would be having dinner with the Bishop of London, the next I would be attending a Shavuot dinner in a tiny synagogue in Bucharest, sandwiched between the Labour peer, Lord Janner and a senior member of the American Jewish Committee (AJC).

Working closely with colleagues in the Metropolitan Police (MPS), provided an opportunity to broaden my perspective and to challenge some stereotypes. Meeting and subsequently befriending, British Muslims with long beards, turbans and flowing robes, who were Special Branch officers with the highest level of security clearance, was an enlightening experience. As was the occasion when I attended a police retirement party on the upper floors of New Scotland Yard.

After listening to a short and uninteresting speech by Commissioner Sir Ian Blair, I was more than a little surprised when Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens), wandered in clutching his guitar. He proceeded to sing a number he had composed specially for the retiring Muslim Contact Unit (MCU) Detective Inspector.

Outside the United Kingdom my ongoing work as a police officer took me to Bosnia and Kosovo then later, having left the service and become an academic and research scholar, I worked in the United Arab Emirates, Rwanda, Nigeria and Burkina Faso. I also made a point of visiting Beirut and the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories. Throughout, I have always sought to look, to learn, to listen to people and to ask questions. Of course, my knowledge is far from complete. I have reached certain conclusions that many will take issue with and fervently disagree with. Such is the nature of academic study. I have a wider background in police reform and education having designed and delivered police training programmes in Croatia, Armenia, Georgia, Poland, Hungary and Ukraine.

In the section on policing, I talk briefly about class. My comments are observational rather than analytical, I am not a sociologist or social anthropologist, neither am I a student of Marx, Gramsci, Foucault or Hayek. I was born the son of a penniless immigrant although for reasons not elaborated here, I grew up in a solidly middle-class household. My brother went to public school and Oxford, I went to a secondary modern and joined the police. So, I think, I hope, that I can offer some very personal insights into how class operates both in the police service and in wider society.

This book is provocative, not I should stress for the sake of being so, but rather because I feel strongly that some of the policies being pursued by successive UK governments are plain wrong. Grounded in a false analysis of the problem, based upon Orientalist and thoroughly outdated perceptions of Islam and majority Muslim countries in the Middle East, as well as Muslim communities here at home, I argue that the UK's counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) is deeply flawed and that it should be the subject of a major rethink and overhaul. I readily accept that this is a controversial view and that many of my arguments will be quickly dismissed by scholars in the field, as well as security professionals.

Nevertheless, I hope to contribute to the wider debate around terrorism, Islamism, extremism and policing. I should make clear this is not a book about Muslims or about Islam. My knowledge of both is strictly limited. Where I have ventured into some of the detail about Muslim organisations and religious communities it is simply to illuminate the worrying degree of ignorance that pervades so much UK security policy and the CONTEST itself.

To conclude, I take a positive view of the future. Ultimately the threat from Islamist violence and terrorism will diminish and finally disappear. That is a long way off at the moment, but a combination of well thought out policy interventions, organic and unforced integration and longer term demographic change will all serve to mitigate the threat.

Acknowledgements

Over the course of two decades of what at first was rather haphazard and ill-defined research, I have met and spoken at length to many experts and practitioners but have benefitted in particular from long associations with Dr Robert Lambert MBE, former Detective Inspector in SO15, Mr Tarique Ghaffur CBE, QPM, former Assistant Commissioner in the Metropolitan Police (MPS) and Commander Central Operations, Professor John Grieve CBE, QPM, former Deputy Assistant Commissioner (MPS) and National Co-ordinator for Counter-Terrorism in England and Wales, Frank Armstrong QPM, former Assistant Commissioner of the City of London Police, Mr David Clarke, former Chief Superintendent and Director of Intelligence at the City of London Police, Major General Ahmed Naser Al-Raisi, President of Interpol and former Inspector General of the Abu Dhabi National Police. I am also extremely grateful to two dear friends and colleagues who still serve in SO15 but who I will not name here. I must also thank Dr Abdul Wahid from Hizb ut-Tahrir[1], Daniel Pipes, President of the Middle East Forum and Dr Khalid Hroub who provided interesting critiques of some of the issues covered within this book. Likewise, I have benefitted enormously from attending lectures by eminent Orientalists, Professors Gilles Keppel and Olivier Roy. I have at various times had the privilege of sharing a platform with Professor Tariq Ramadan and Dr Anas Altikriti. Perhaps the person who I am most indebted to is Mr Mehmood Naqshbandi who over a period of nearly 20 years has generously donated his time to me, answering questions, clarifying points of fact and accuracy and instilling in me a fascination and enduring respect for Islam and its followers and devotees. During the writing of this book, I have also been indebted to Mr Steve Clarke, a close friend and former colleague who has provided great assistance in reviewing and editing my numerous drafts. I must also thank Katy Mathers, Senior Commissioning Editor at Emerald Publishers and her most helpful and supportive staff.

[1]In January 2024 the Home Office announced that Hizb ut-Tahrir was to be added to the list of proscribed organisations under the Terrorism Act 2000.

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Introduction

This book focuses on the threat posed to the United Kingdom and beyond, by Islamist violent extremists and terrorists. It examines government and police responses, identifying gaps and areas where more and better focused work could take place. It should be made clear from the outset that there is no suggestion that Islamism is the sole source of terrorism and religious or political violence, it is not. There are clear and present terrorist threats emanating from neo-Nazi groups, from extreme animal rights groups, as well as from dissident Irish republican terrorist groups operating out of Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom Government has made clear in its current Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST, p. 9), updated and republished in 2023, that in the United Kingdom, 'the primary domestic terrorist threat comes from Islamist terrorism, which accounts for approximately 67% of attacks since 2018, about three quarters of MI5 (domestic security service), caseload and 64% of those in custody for terrorism-connected offences'.

Scholars, attempting to make an objective, unbiased and impartial study of so-called Islamist violent extremism and terrorism are considerably hampered by two similar but opposing viewpoints that circulate widely in popular discourse (Parsons, 2021, p. 101). The first is a hostile and aggressive critique of Islam as a faith, the second is an attempt to label as 'Islamophobic' anyone who seeks answers to questions about the link between Islamism and terrorist violence. Both of these extreme and absolutist stances are unhelpful and counterproductive. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that neither Islam nor Islamism have any connection to terrorism or violent extremism. That some terrorists strive to make such a connection is obvious, but those individuals are a small minority whose views have no traction with the majority of UK citizens, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

Central to the overarching thesis of this book is the subject of Orientalism. This subject was examined at length and in forensic detail by the Palestinian scholar Edward Said in a seminal work titled *Orientalism* first published in 1978.[1]

[1]Orientalism was first published in 1978 by Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd. Throughout this book, I have relied upon the 2003 updated and republished version from Penguin Books: London.

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Orientalism as described by Said is the study of the Muslim East by scholars and researchers in the West, Europe and North America. As originally envisioned, this was a highly specialised area of scholarship that fed directly into Europe's era of imperial conquest and colonial settlement. With Muslims and Islam being seen as somehow foreign, exotic and remote Western scholars had little connection to the people and culture they sought to understand. The assumptions made and the theories advanced by Western Orientalists in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continue to exert influence today. Much of that theorising was misconceived, misdirected and fundamentally malign. There is a direct connection between those imperial assumptions and the strained relationship that exists between the United Kingdom and the peoples of the Middle East today. A situation further complicated by the fact that Muslims now make up a significant and growing part of the UK's settled population. Those citizens understandably want their stake in the UK's future to be acknowledged and respected. Endlessly pursuing the same interventionist policies in the Middle East and North Africa that have been pursued for decades, going back to the abortive invasion of Egypt in 1956, does not provide a solution to current and future threats to national security.

The book commences with an explanation of how the current United Kingdom, counter-terrorism strategy, popularly known as CONTEST, has developed and evolved from when it was first launched in 2006. Since then, it has gone through a series of revisions and updates, first in 2009 under the then Labour government, then in 2011 under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government and then again in 2018 by the current Conservative government. In 2023, the strategy was further updated and republished by the Government. The strategy documents provide valuable insights into how official thinking about the nature and form of the terrorist threat emerges, how best to tackle the threat and how priorities for action and intervention are identified.

When looking for recurring features in so-called Islamist terror plots, perhaps the obvious place to look is at Islam itself and the religious inspiration it may provide. In fact, there is often little or any religious inspiration. Commonly recurring features include the presence of converts to the faith, people who have only discovered Islam and become adherents to the faith a short while before committing violent or terrorist acts. This obvious point of commonality between a significant number of identified terrorist plots is neither acknowledged nor discussed in any of the policy documents. Secondly, the widespread use of cannabis by the perpetrators of terrorist offences is, again, a constantly recurring feature that remains unacknowledged and largely ignored by policymakers and police leaders. The importance of kinships in terrorist plots is periodically acknowledged in the literature but does not receive the attention in policymaking circles that it should. Again and again, brothers feature as co-plotters or offenders. Husbands recruit their wives and parents involve their children.

The book continues with an examination of the origins of current western thoughts and attitudes towards Islam and Muslim societies. The enduring legacy of imperial conquest and colonialism in Muslim lands cannot be ignored. Indeed, it has to be confronted and acknowledged as a persistent contaminant in how UK security policy has evolved. The study of the Muslim East and Middle East by

western scholars has come to be known as Orientalism. Throughout the 19th century, the scholarly output from western Orientalists served to explain and justify the perceived need for colonial expansion into Muslim countries. Even today, the Orientalist tradition endures and continues to influence western policymaking.

In the United Kingdom, there is a significant and growing Muslim population. Data produced for the 2021 census indicate a figure of around 3.8 million, which means there are more Muslims in Britain than there are in Lebanon[2] or Qatar. This population does not form or act as a monolithic bloc. In fact, it comprises a wide range of communities that can be distinguished by national or ethnic origin as well as a diverse range of doctrinal beliefs within the faith of Islam. For both police leaders and policymakers, it is vitally important to acknowledge and understand that diversity and complexity and to appreciate how both intra and inter-community differences can lead to community tensions and sometimes overt hostility. Counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policy has to closely align with the realities of local demographics, population change and the fears and vulnerabilities of local communities.

In recent years, there have been profound and wide-reaching changes to how policing in the United Kingdom is organised, overseen and led. In 2002, legislative changes made by the Police Reform Act of that year saw the introduction of Police Community Support Officers (PCSO). These officers are not police officers and have very limited powers. They are members of civilian support staff who are tasked with patrolling the streets in uniform and providing a reassuring presence to the public. Most specifically, they are not authorised to make arrests, to conduct stops and searches or to use powers contained within the Terrorism Act 2000. Changes to police oversight and governance were made with the introduction of the Police Reform & Social Responsibility Act 2011. This legislation removed the powers of police authorities and replaced them with a system of elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). The PCCs have powers to appoint and dismiss chief constables and to set a policing budget and publish a policing plan for their respective police area. PCCs are not meant to direct or interfere with police operational decision-making.

Further changes to policing were made using statutory instruments in 2014. These instruments varied the Police Regulations 2003 and the Police (Promotion) Regulations of 1996 allowing for the direct appointment of new police officers at the rank of inspector and superintendent. This was a significant change which overthrew a system that had been in place for 180 years, which allowed for only one point of entry into the service which was as a probationer constable. All promotion and advancement had to proceed from this starting rank. In addition to these wide-ranging reforms, the appointment of a civilian (that is to say, someone from outside of the police service), as the chief inspector of constabulary

[2]There hasn't been a formal census in Lebanon since 1932, but the United Nations estimates put the population at 5.3 million of which 68% are Muslim. https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/lebanon-population.

in 2012 [3] was another major departure from established practice. Despite these reforms, a number of high-profile scandals have consumed the UK police service in recent years. This has included a serving police officer being convicted of kidnap, rape and murder.[4]

While it remains unclear how both the terrorist threat and the UK policy response to that threat may evolve in the coming years, police budgets and resources will continue to be squeezed as other areas of high priority State spending, such as health and education, continue to grow. It is not unreasonable to assume that there will be far greater pressure on the police to produce efficiency savings to streamline processes and procedures and to use available resources in a more targeted way. Calls for a national police service are likely to grow, and it will be increasingly difficult for politicians to justify the current system whereby the United Kingdom maintains 48 separate police forces. Both societal and demographic change are likely to influence future policymaking as the United Kingdom increasingly relies upon inward migration to maintain population size as the settled community ages and ceases to be economically active. A younger, more ethnically and religiously diverse working population will demand a reordering of political priorities and a revisiting of existing alliances and partnerships with other countries.

[3]Tom, now Sir Tom Winsor, was appointed as the Chief Inspector of Constabulary in 2012. He had previously served as the Rail Regulator and is a corporate lawyer.

[4]See conviction of Police Constable Wayne Couzens in September 2021 for the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard.

Chapter 1

The UK Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST) Evolution and Development

The foundation of the United Kingdom's effort to combat violent extremism and terrorism is a counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) that was initially formulated 20 years ago. The strategy has proven to be contentious and controversial for a number of reasons examined throughout the book. There has been widespread concern and criticism expressed from within the United Kingdom's many and diverse Muslim communities, as well as from think tanks, research centres, independent scholars and some lawyers. Successive governments have stuck tenaciously to the strategy albeit with small changes and alterations over time. Nevertheless, throughout the intervening two decades, the strategy has continued largely as originally envisaged.

Terrorism

This chapter considers the evolution and development of the United Kingdom's current counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST, 2023). It has of course been influenced by events, not least of which was the al-Qaeda attacks on the United States mainland in September 2001. The strategy has undergone a number of reviews over the years with successive governments making various alterations and amendments. Regardless of this, the fundamental structure, the main component parts of the strategy and significantly, the underlying assumptions that have shaped and informed its content, have remained constant, unaltered, unrefined – clear evidence of the ossification that has occurred in official analysis and comprehension of the nature and origins of the threat.

What exactly is terrorism and how should it be defined? The Terrorism Act 2000 defines it thus:

'Terrorism' means the use or threat of action where:

- the action falls within subsection (2),
- 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

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- the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious [racial] or ideological cause.

Subsection (2) Action falls within this subsection if it:

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

This legal definition is wide-ranging and all-embracing; it covers actions taken by any group from all types of religious, political or ideological standpoints. This of course is how terrorism and terrorist acts are defined within UK law. There is no international agreement on the definition of terrorism and the issue becomes more complicated where armed groups are waging war against a foreign occupier or against an authoritarian regime which has no democratic mandate and, therefore, no legitimacy. Prior to the meticulously planned and executed al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the US mainland in September 2001, the primary focus of UK counter-terrorism efforts had been on the threat posed by Irish republican terrorism, principally from one terror group, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) (Huiskes, 2023). The peace process in Northern Ireland finally delivered a fragile but durable peace in 1998. A new Terrorism Act 2000 was introduced shortly after that, which served to clarify and enhance the powers of the State to combat the threat from terrorism. Following the 2001 attacks on the United States and the realisation by the UK Government that a new and emerging terrorist entity was now threatening the peace and security of western countries, an entirely new counter-terrorism strategy was produced in 2003.

Later in 2006, it was published and became known as CONTEST. The strategy was divided into four key objectives and associated work strands. These were, *Pursue:* to stop terrorist attacks, *Prevent:* to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism, *Protect:* to strengthen our protection against terrorist attack and *Prepare:* where an attack cannot be stopped, to mitigate its impact. These four strands have remained as constants throughout the two decades that the strategy has been in place and through the four major revisions of the strategy that has occurred since 2006. (These include an update in 2009 under the Labour government, a revision in 2011 under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government and two further revisions under the Conservative government in 2018 and 2023).

From the outset, three of the four policy strands contained within the CONTEST documents, namely prepare, protect and pursue, have been largely uncontroversial and uncommented upon. The fourth strand however, Prevent, has from the very beginning attracted much controversy and many criticisms

which continue to this day. The key criticisms, which are advanced by a wide range of individuals and groups, will be examined in detail in the following chapter. The stated objectives of the current Prevent programme (HM Government, 2023, pp. 30–31) are: 'Tackling the ideological causes of terrorism; intervening early to support people susceptible to radicalisation; enabling people who have already engaged in terrorism to disengage and rehabilitate'. Further to this, the strategy document states: 'We will ensure the Prevent system develops expertise and instils better levels of understanding of ideology and radicalisation by improving training and providing clearer guidance and information to front-line practitioners'.

To fully understand the process through which the CONTEST strategic response has gone and the inevitable realignment to current threats and refinement of strategic objectives, it is necessary to look back at how the strategy has changed over two decades and three governments. The 2009 strategy (HM Government, 2009, p. 9) set out for the first time UK Government thinking on the existing nature of the terrorist threat plus, importantly, the strategic factors that underpinned that threat. It is enlightening examining these in detail as it provides a clear insight into the underlying political doctrine that informed and continues to inform the overall strategic approach to countering terrorism. The strategy identified four specific sources from which the existing threat emanated. These were:

> the al-Qaeda leadership and their immediate associates, located mainly on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border; terrorist groups affiliated to al-Qaeda in North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq and Yemen.; self-starting networks, or even lone individuals motivated by an ideology similar to that of al-Qaeda, but with no connection to that organisation, and terrorist groups that follow a broadly similar ideology as al-Qaeda but which have their own identity and regional agenda.

These identified sources of terrorist threat are straightforward enough and clearly focused (at that time) on the looming threat of al-Qaeda as a single Islamist terror group that had executed or inspired terrorist attacks aimed at soft civilian targets in Bali (2002), Madrid (2004) and London (2005). Further insights into government thinking are provided by the section on the same page that is titled 'Strategic Factors'. This section points to a focus on 'four deeper and longer-term strategic factors', described thus (2009, p. 40):

> Unresolved regional disputes and conflicts (particularly Palestine, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Lebanon, Kashmir and Iraq) and state fragility and failure. The violent extremist ideology associated with al-Qaeda, which regards most governments in Muslim countries as "un-Islamic" or apostate, claims that these governments are sustained by western states who are engaged in a global attack on Islam. Modern technologies and radicalisation – the process by which people come to support violent extremism

> and, in some cases, join terrorist groups. Radicalisation has a range of causes.

The highlighting of these additional strategic factors is illuminating. In the same way that the reasons for the presence of al-Qaeda in Iraq is not explained (A direct consequence of the UK/US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Prior to that al-Qaeda had no discernible presence in the country and no power base, a point made clear at the time by Hage (2005, p. 4) in an article for the Australian Financial Review 'We know very well that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with al-Qaeda before US and British forces invaded Iraq, but the neoconservatives confidently theorised Iraq as a flashpoint in the war against terrorism, and once again they have transformed their theory into reality'. As Mossallanejad (2016, p. 6) pointed out, US 'President Bush used a terrorist attack conducted by Saudi citizens trained in Afghanistan as an excuse to invade Iraq'.) These points are not inconsequential or irrelevant. To work, to persuade UK citizens as well as international partners of its efficacy, the underlying analysis of the threat, contained within the UK strategy, must be credible. That means explaining the origins of the threat in an open, honest and transparent critique. If regional disputes and conflicts in Palestine Afghanistan, Lebanon, Kashmir and Iraq are at least in part a basis for the threat, then why is that? What is the government's explanation? How did these conflicts come about? Of course, the answers to these key questions are neither elusive nor difficult to discern. They are well-known, well-documented and well-understood. The main cause of these intractable and unresolved conflicts is a recent history of imperialism and colonialism in which the United Kingdom was a central player.

The enduring conflict around the territorial status of Kashmir is a direct legacy of the United Kingdom Government drawing arbitrary lines on a map as it sought to disentangle itself from an imperial presence in India and newly created Pakistan. Attlee's government had no more regard for the safety and security of the people of India in 1947 than Blair's government did for the people of Iraq in 2003. The former foreign secretary Robin Cook once talked about the need for an ethical foreign policy.[1] He was soon demoted and removed from his post. Instability in Afghanistan and Iraq can be directly attributed to those countries being invaded by the United Kingdom and United States, Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

The origins of the disputes and conflicts in Palestine and Lebanon go back a lot further, to a cynical and calculated carve-up of the remnants of the Ottoman caliphate by European powers (United Kingdom and France) at the end of the 1914–1919 war. In an article in Prospect magazine in 2005, Michael Hirsh made specific reference to the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 (dividing the Arab lands between the United Kingdom and France) as one of the main causes of current Muslim anger in the Middle East. So, if the fundamental policy approach

[1]Robin Cook's speech on the government's ethical foreign policy, The speech by Robin Cook that started it all. https://www.theguardian.com/world/1997/may/12/indonesia.ethicalforeignpolicy