COUNTERTERRORISM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

MODULE I: HISTORY, RADICALISATION AND THE CURRENT AL-QAEDA THREAT

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Module 1: Content

The following three modules address counterterrorism in the United Kingdom. This first module considers the recent history of terrorism in the UK, radicalisation amongst the UK’s Muslim Community, and the UK’s current threat from Al-Qaeda.

“The Irish Troubles”

The British have a long history of terrorism, from Robin Hood fighting the Normans in the 11th Century to the campaigns against the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the 20th Century. Undoubtedly the last of these campaigns against the IRA has been the most significant in terms of influencing the current British approach to terrorism. The British Army’s deployment to Northern Ireland, Operation Banner, which began in 1969, only officially came to an end in 2007. It is the longest campaign in the history of the British Army, inciting violence not only in Northern Ireland, but throughout the UK and even on the continent of Europe. Over 3000 civilians, around 600 soldiers, and 300 policemen died in a sectarian struggle that at one stage went beyond terrorism to briefly become low level insurgency. In addition, 30,000 civilians were injured – all in a population of only 1.5
million. Few families in the Province have remained unaffected by “the Troubles” in the last 30 years.

But what has this meant for the British population at large and for the Government’s response to the current threat from Al-Qaeda?

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**Impact of the Troubles**

The British counterterrorism experience in Northern Ireland resulted in a wealth of counterterrorism experience for the British military, police, and intelligence services. First, many individual officers in MI5, the UK police, and the British Army have served in Northern Ireland and against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) on the UK mainland. As a result, they appreciate the challenges of conducting a fast-paced, covert investigation, which may run for several weeks.

Secondly, after numerous strategic and tactical counterterrorism mistakes in the early days of Northern Ireland – and turf wars between the British Army and the local police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary – the British developed a counterterrorism doctrine for the investigation of terrorism by the early 1990s. This doctrine brings together intelligence collection by the intelligence services, army, and police to provide evidence in support of executive action carried out by the police under the rule of UK law. Interagency counterterrorism committees and command groups have been organised, trained, and operationally tested at every level of control, from Whitehall down to the local constabulary. The procedures originally established in response to the Irish threat have now been adopted to respond to the threat from Al-Qaeda. The UK doctrine and counterterrorism organisation already existed years before 9/11.

Finally, the British population is used to being blown up! This sounds cynical, but after 30 years of frequent bombings by the IRA, the British people accept that there is no such thing as 100% security, that required counterterrorism laws may conflict with civil liberties, and that a counterterrorism campaign is a long struggle over “hearts and minds.” As a result, counterterrorism measures that would be considered unacceptable in the USA, such as detention without charge for up to 28 days and the deployment of a quarter of the world’s closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras on UK streets, pass without popular comment in the UK. Based on the UK’s recent terrorism experience, there is general public support for the government’s counterterrorism measures – not suspicion and opposition to what is often perceived as greater government “interference with a citizen’s rights under the guise of counterterrorism” by political opposition, the press, and the public in the USA.
Development of UK CT Legislation

The increasing threat of terrorism in the UK facilitated a gradual development of counterterrorism legislation over the last 30 years.

The UK definition of terrorism is provided in Section 1 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which states, “terrorism means the use or threat of action where the use or threat is designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause.”

Like most other countries, the UK legal response to terrorism has been driven by terrorist attacks and the overall threat. In 1939, during the first IRA campaign on the UK mainland, suspects could be held for 7 days without charge. This was suspended in 1952 and finally repealed in 1973. However, the PIRA attacks on two Birmingham pubs in 1974, which killed or wounded almost 200 people, led to new legislation, the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The act reintroduced a 7 day detention with a magistrate judge’s consent. This was supposed to be temporary legislation; however, due to the continuing terrorism in Northern Ireland, it was renewed by Parliament every year. From 1974 until 1996, almost 27,000 people were arrested under this legislation, but fewer than 15% were subsequently charged. The disparity in numbers is explained by the fact that during the 1970s and 1980s the British Army used these legal powers to arrest multiple suspects in Northern Ireland. Most were questioned for around 4 hours and then released. These interviews were used to fully establish a suspect’s identity and also allowed the British Army to question the local population about recent terrorist activity in their communities. This tactic of "screening" was also an effective cover under which sources could be debriefed. However, mass arrests proved to be very detrimental to the wider "hearts and minds" campaign to convince the population to reject terrorism. Consequently "screening" by the British Army was eventually phased out. Instead targeted interviews by the local police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC - now the Police Service of Northern Ireland), became more the norm and both Army and police sources were run in a more clandestine way, which did not require "screening".

Response to PIRA Threat

Meanwhile, as opposed to the constant cycle of threats and attacks in Northern Ireland, the PIRA campaign on the British mainland was a more sporadic affair. After a series of random attacks against pubs and shopping centers in the 1970s and 1980s, by the 1990s PIRA
gangs, or "Active Service Units", focused their attacks on high value targets in major English cities. For instance, on 7 February 1991, an ASU mortared No 10 Downing Street whilst Prime Minister John Major was chairing a Cabinet Meeting. There were no casualties, but it was stark evidence of the threat PIRA posed right across the UK. As a direct result of that attack, there was a senior security review, which resulted in MI5 (the British Security Service) assuming the lead for intelligence gathering and assessment against PIRA on the mainland. But, regardless of this significant organizational development, there was no immediate operational need to amend, at that stage, the UK’s existing counterterrorism legislation.

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Adapting to Current Threat

However, by 2000 it was clear that terrorism was going to be a permanent feature of life in the UK. The temporary Prevention of Terrorism Act was replaced by the Terrorism Act 2000. A 2003 amendment to this act extended detention without charge from 7 to 14 days, but still required a judge’s approval. Its subsequent use is a good example of improved UK counterterrorism awareness since the early days of Northern Ireland, when, in 1971, “internment” without trial was attempted on the Catholic community with disastrous results. This arbitrary arrest of individuals, based on incomplete intelligence and their subsequent detention without trial, alienated the entire Catholic community and encouraged numerous new recruits to join PIRA.

Thankfully, this error was not repeated when UK legally responded to Al-Qaeda. By 2003, the principal threat of terrorism in the UK had changed from Irish to Al-Qaeda, and this potentially involved Muslim youths in every major city in the UK. Consequently, between 2000 and 2005, the 14-day detention period was used very sparingly, as the UK government realised that holding a suspect without charge for an extended period handed a propaganda victory to the Muslim radicalizers. It is worth noting that UK law regarding pre-charge detention did not change immediately after 9/11, despite the introduction of the 2001 Anti Terrorism, Crime and Security Act, which gave UK police stronger powers to “stop and search” on the street to intercept possible suicide bombers.

After the Al-Qaeda attacks on the London Underground on July 7, 2005, the UK government attempted to introduce a 90 day pre-charge detention period. Their justification was not based on the need for longer time to interrogate, but rather to investigate because international counterterrorism cases had become exceedingly complex. The House of Commons rejected the 90 day detention period, but passed a compromise of 28 days. In 2008, an attempt by the government to extend this to 42 days was passed in the House of
Commons, but was rejected in the House of Lords. The deciding factor in the debate was the widespread concern that unjustified, excessive legal powers would seriously alienate the UK’s Muslim Community, from which the current Al-Qaeda threat emanates.

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The Current AQ Threat in the UK

In a November 2007 speech, Jonathan Evans, Director of the British Security Service, summarized the current domestic threat from Al-Qaeda as:

Approximately 2000 extremists;

In approximately 200 networks;

Of which, at any one time, approximately 30 may be plotting terrorist attacks which represent a threat to life and property.

Consequently, the government advises its citizens that there will be more attacks and further casualties in the UK. It is not a question of “When?” but “Where?”

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The Range of AQ Threat in UK

Al-Qaeda activity in the UK includes:

- Centrally Al-Qaeda Core directed operations aimed at inflicting mass casualties, such as the Vehicle Born Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) plot in 2004, the mass transit attacks in London on July 7 and July 21, 2005, and the Airline Plot in 2006;

- Loosely Al-Qaeda directed operations aimed at inflicting mass casualties, such as the VBIEDs in London and Glasgow Airport in 2007;

- An attempt to prepare a ricin poison attack in 2004;

- Various lone wolf attempts (sometimes by British converts to Islam) to mount small attacks in their local cities; and

- Large scale fund raising and procurement of equipment for Al-Qaeda operations overseas.
The size of the threat and range of Al-Qaeda activity in the UK demonstrate the importance of radicalisation within the UK’s Muslim Community.

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The Islamic Community in the UK

Whereas Muslims comprise a mere 0.6% of the total US population, they represent 2.7% (approximately 1.6 million) of the total population of the UK. Half of all Muslims residing in the UK are native born. The UK Muslim population is diverse, with around two-thirds originating from South Asia, specifically India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the rest from the Near and Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe. African-Caribbean and White converts constitute a relatively small proportion of the Muslim Community in Britain.

43% of all UK Muslims are of Pakistani origin, and a further 16.8% are Bangladeshi. The majority of Al-Qaeda suspects in the UK come from these communities. Many Pakistani families moved to the UK in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The parents were law-abiding citizens seeking to take full advantage of the West, and many settled in industrial cities, such as Greater London, West Midlands, Lancashire, and Yorkshire, to work in the cotton industry. Many came from Pakistani Kashmir and the Northwest Frontier Province, having been driven out of their villages by religious violence and poverty. Consequently, the UK Pakistani community’s interest in politics and conflict in Kashmir and the Tribal Areas continued. Links home still remain very strong, with money regularly sent from Pakistani families in the UK back to those in Pakistan. There are also over 40,000 air flights every year between the UK and Pakistan, as family members travel in both directions.

Since the 1970s, the Muslim population in the UK has dramatically changed. Today, it is disproportionately young, with approximately half under the age of 25. And, with the collapse of the UK cotton industry, unemployment rates for Muslim men and women are higher than for non-Muslims. Currently, around 15% of eligible Muslims are unemployed, compared with 5% of the total population. Moreover, about 16% of Muslim males have never worked or are long-term unemployed, a figure that is five times higher than the UK population as a whole. One third of Muslim children grow up in households where there are no working adults, compared to 18% nationally. Even when employed, Muslims, particularly those of South Asian origin, disproportionately work low wage jobs. Three quarters of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children live in households earning less than half the national average.

This poverty can be concentrated. In the 1960’s and ’70’s, entire villages were occasionally displaced and resettled in the UK. As a result, complete housing estates in many British cities are now inhabited entirely by a single ethnic group. These are not necessarily slums
or ghettos, but areas in which all residents know one another as a result of attending the same mosque, church, school, or place of employment. Family units are large, with grandparents often living with their children and grand children. Arranged marriages between local families within the same South Asian community are still common.

Add to this social ethnic cocktail a degree of racial prejudice by the UK population at large, perceived government disinterest in the Muslim Community’s problems, the impact of increased criminality fuelled by drugs, improved education of the individual raising aspirations, 24/7 coverage of world events by the global media, and increased generational friction, and it is relatively easy to understand the attraction of Al-Qaeda radicalization.

In addition, the established historical and family links to Pakistan bring disaffected youths from the British Pakistani Muslim Community into direct contact with Al-Qaeda Core along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. Imagine the impact on the USA if Usama bin Laden were Guatemalan.

However, it is vital that government response to terrorism committed by 2000 individuals does not alienate the entire UK Muslim population of 1.6 million. To defeat Al-Qaeda in the UK, Her Majesty’s Government is literally engaged in “A fight for the hearts and minds of 14 year olds in the Muslim Community.”

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**Islamic Radicalization in the UK**

There is no universal template regarding terrorist identification. In 2007, a comprehensive study of 300 identified Muslim terrorists in the UK produced the following conclusions:

- The majority are British nationals (so cannot be expelled), but most parents were migrants to the UK;
- They are ethnically diverse, with Pakistanis constituting the largest group, but African, Middle Eastern, African-Caribbean, and converts all represented;
- Most are male, but the importance of females should not be underrated;
- While most are young (in their early to mid 20s), a significant number are over 30, especially those in leadership positions;
- The majority have steady relationships and most of these have children;
- Many are well-educated;
• Almost all, regardless of educational qualifications, are employed in low grade jobs;
• Most have no previous criminal experience and so, may not already appear on police records;
• Many do not practise Islam regularly and were not brought up in strict religious households; and

A disproportionate number of converts become radicalised, compared with 4.1% of the total UK Muslim Community.

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The Process of Radicalization

Extremists do not become terrorists overnight. Rather, the UK experience suggests a process of radicalisation. Consider the following hypothetical scenario. A Muslim youth, disillusioned with his parents or his own personal prospects, makes contact with a charismatic leader, who has been trained in the Tribal areas and directed by Al-Qaeda Core to launch an attack. The leader recruits the youth over the following 12 to 18 months, emphasizing the need to defend Islam against the West and the duty of all Muslims to engage in Jihad. The youth's disillusionment progresses to anger, motivating his decision to become “a soldier of Jihad” and join a terrorist suicide attack. “Boot camps” separate the youth from his family, instil group discipline, and increase bonding between team members, facilitating the subsequent preparation and ultimate execution of an attack.

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The Preparation and Execution

The preparation and execution of an attack generally consists of the following steps:

1. Communication with Al-Qaeda Core, often by phone, Internet or occasionally by courier, which may be very security conscious regarding SIGINT.
2. Acquisition of a rental facility or apartment for IED preparation.
3. Acquisition of weapons or homemade explosives, such as Hydrogen Peroxide or Ammonium Nitrate.
4. Preparation of devices and/or weapons.
5. Reconnaissance of target.
6. Execution of the attack

It is surprising how many associates and family members are often aware of attack planning. Thus, it is impossible to arrest, charge, and convict all who were conscious of attack preparations. Consequently, investigation of the remainder by MI5 and police typically continues after the attack team is arrested.

Of course, the aim of MI5 and police counterterrorism investigation is to identify suspects during the radicalisation process (before they break UK law), and arrest them during the planning stage of an attack.

Module 2 will consider the UK’s policy response to the Al-Qaeda threat.

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Closing Credits

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