

Draft

Constructing the terrorist threat: the merging of the discourses of terrorism, radicalization and extremism in the UK and its consequences

Anthony Richards

Abstract

This paper argues that the UK has recently seen the merging of the discourses of terrorism, radicalization, and extremism, evident in the Prevent concern with extremist but *non-violent* ideology that is said to be ‘conducive’ to terrorism. This convergence has blurred the important distinction between extremism of thought and extremism of method when countering terrorism. One of the consequences of the characterisation or ‘construction’ of the terrorist threat as including non-violent but extremist ideology is that those who hold such beliefs, but who are non-violent, are excluded as potential partners and dissuaders against what counter-terrorism should really be concerned with: preventing acts of terrorism. Hence one can have the paradoxical situation of those who might adamantly urge peaceful methods but who are nevertheless seen as part of the ‘terrorist problem’ – an unhelpful counter-terrorism conundrum that fails to draw the distinction between extremism of thought and extremism of method. The concern is that contemporary counter-terrorism in the UK has itself become increasingly ideological (or counter-ideological).

Introduction

Since the emergence of the UK’s Contest strategy in the mid-2000s one can suggest that the parameters of counter-terrorism (c-t) have widened. This has been largely due to the way that the terrorist threat has been characterised, with an increasing c-t concern with the way people *think* as well as the way they *act*, and it is the Prevent strand of Contest that has arguably been the most controversial in this regard.¹ This paper, by briefly outlining the evolution of Prevent, will firstly describe how the terrorist threat has been characterised in the past decade in the UK and how this has impacted on the remit of counter-terrorism. It will then compare this contemporary understanding and ‘construction’ of the terrorist threat with traditional understandings of ‘terrorism’ within the academic literature. In other words how do conceptions of terrorism within terrorism studies correspond with the contemporary understanding, characterisation and construction of terrorism? For example, to most terrorism studies scholars the idea of a *non-violent* ideology that is ‘conducive’ to terrorism² is somewhat paradoxical, because terrorism has been understood as ineluctably about

¹ Contest consists of the four strands known as ‘the four Ps’ which are Pursue, Protect, Prevent and Prepare.

² ‘Contest: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism’, July 2011, p. 12, available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/counter-terrorism/counter-terrorism-strategy/strategy-contest?view=Binary>

violence or the threat of violence. The paper goes on to argue that this anomaly is a symptom of, and indeed part of, what has been the increasing convergence of the discourses of terrorism, radicalization and extremism in the UK.

The Shifting Focus of Prevent

Contest emerged as the UK's new counter-terrorism model in the mid 2000s and consisted of the four Ps – Pursue, Prevent, Prepare and Protect. It is probably fair to suggest that there was some confusion as to what the remit of Prevent should be, and most particularly the extent that it should be concerned with the way people think ideologically as well as the way they act (ie. 'preventing' acts of terrorism). For example, prior to the 2011 revision of Contest and Prevent, it had become involved with much wider societal aspirations such as the promotion of social cohesion and 'shared values'. The revised version distanced the strategy from these particular agendas but it was also unequivocal about its renewed focus: not just on those who were violent or engaged in acts of terrorism, or those who appeared to be on a trajectory towards violence, but also those who held certain 'extremist' *but non-violent* views. The strategy was henceforth also to be focused on extremist but non-violent ideology that it states, rather paradoxically, is 'conducive' to terrorism.

Conceptualizing Terrorism

Any discussion on what constitutes the 'terrorist threat' should logically be contingent on what one means by terrorism in the first place. How, then, has terrorism been traditionally understood in the academic literature of the past 50 years? 'Terrorism' is, of course, like any other social science concept, a *social construction* and so one cannot, by definition, speak 'truth' as to what it means. In the context of the literature on the definition of terrorism, there is therefore something of a paradox about trying to be definitive about something that is socially constructed and hence incapable of having a concrete and indisputable definition. Indeed, those who claim that the term 'terrorism' has been abused are therefore themselves culpable of making some kind of knowledge claim as to what terrorism is and what it is not.

This does not mean to say, however, that one should not endeavour to generate common understandings of such terms or to have an agreed conceptualization of terrorism at a given time in a contemporary context, even if the outcome can never amount to the truth. Indeed, the lack of such endeavours can have profound real-life consequences. Taking the concept of 'crime' as an example, it would be folly not to identify the parameters of what we mean by crime, otherwise appropriate laws cannot be drafted and implemented to counter what are deemed criminal behaviours. This is notwithstanding that crime, the laws to counter it, and indeed the states that introduce the laws are all social constructs. Similarly, in order to develop norms to do with the protection and advancement of human rights then there has to be some agreed notion as to what constitutes human rights, even though this is again socially constructed.

If we accept that it is still a worthwhile endeavour to conceptualize (rather than to determine definitively) then what is it that is analytically distinctive about terrorism compared with other forms of political violence? In any such conceptual endeavour the challenge is to carefully consider the criteria that need to be satisfied in order for an act of violence to be deemed an act of terrorism - and one should not seek out more 'positive' labels if that act of terrorism is carried out for a cause that one sympathises with, just as one should not be more inclined to use the term if one disagrees with the cause. Such leanings simply entrench 'terrorism' as a perjorative label at the expense of a more neutral and analytical approach.

Notwithstanding its social construction, a general consensus as to what the core essence of terrorism is does appear to have developed in the terrorism literature of the past 50 years. This consensus revolves around the psychological dimension of terrorism: that terrorism entails the intent to generate a psychological impact beyond the immediate victims, that terrorism is a form of violent communication for a political motive, that victims are not the intended targets - rather it is the wider audience(s) that are the intended recipients of the 'terrorist message'.

Two further points are worth drawing from the conceptual literature of terrorism that are particularly pertinent to contemporary constructions of the phenomenon. The first is that terrorism is best conceptualized as a method of political violence rather than as something that should be defined according to who the perpetrator is. Thus, if an act of violence satisfies one's criteria in order to be labelled terrorism then it remains, regardless of the cause. Of course, there are ideologies and belief systems that may justify, endorse and advocate the use of terrorism but such belief systems cannot take ownership of terrorism. This is because terrorism has been carried out in the cause of ideologies that are not in and of themselves violent - including many nationalist ideologies, or single issue causes (such as animal rights and anti-abortion). Terrorism is therefore best conceptualized as a *method* that can be carried out in the cause of a wide variety of belief systems, whether violent or non-violent.

The second point to draw from the conceptual literature of terrorism is that it is ineluctably about *the use of violence or the threat of violence*. If an ideology is non-violent then it cannot itself be responsible for terrorism - rather it is those who adopt the method of terrorism to pursue it that are responsible for it. If an ideology *is* itself culpable for terrorism in some way *then it is not non-violent*. Hence the paradox in the 2011 Prevent strategy of *non-violent ideology* that is nevertheless deemed to be 'conducive' to terrorism. The terrorism threat in the UK has therefore been constructed as including non-violent but 'extremist' thought *as well as* the method of terrorism in pursuit of that thought.

The Structure of Terrorism

The concern with non-violent ideology that is said to be 'conducive' to terrorism has taken place in the context of a structural shift in the nature of the terrorist threat. The terrorism that confronted the UK from the late 1960s and throughout the 'Troubles' of Northern Ireland emanated from terrorist organisations that were primarily centralised or hierarchical in

structure. As such the threshold for the remit of counter-terrorism was arguably more straightforward than it is today. In other words the existence of such groups meant that there was in the main an organisational threshold between those that would resort to political violence and those that would not.

While it would be a mistake to conclude that this type of relatively centralised structure no longer exists³, it is the case that the terrorism of most concern to the UK in the past 14 years has been that perpetrated by those claiming to be acting on behalf of Islam, and one of the features of this international terrorist threat has been its decentralised nature. This has manifested itself in the form of Al Qaeda and also, more recently, through the threat presented by Isis.

While the threat from ‘self-starter’, ‘lone wolf’ or ‘small group’ terrorism, consisting of inspired individuals with no obvious organizational affiliation, remains, there is a real concern, since Paris, that attacks will become increasingly orchestrated, organised and trained for, from within the so-called caliphate that Isis controls. The extent that future attacks will be more ‘centrally’ directed is difficult to predict but, through its encouragement of Isis inspired ‘homegrown’ attacks in European countries, and through the return of so-called foreign fighters (some of whom may wish to carry out attacks in their home countries), Isis still represents a formidable decentralised threat. Part of this threat includes the impact of the internet and social media which are ‘horizontal platforms’ well-suited to the grass-roots mobilisation and recruitment of would-be perpetrators of violence.

Confronted with the decentralised nature of the terrorist threat in recent years, the British government has been concerned with intervening in the trajectory of terrorism at the *earliest* possible stage, and to identify all those it deems ‘vulnerable’ to terrorism. Indeed, the Institute for Policy Research and Development has argued that, if it is believed that there is no ‘typical pathway to violent extremism’, then the ‘scope of risk-assessment is rendered potentially unlimited’ for British Muslims.⁴

Thus the construction of the terrorist threat in the UK has led to the expansion of ‘counter-terrorism’ in two ways. Firstly, as argued above, there is an increased *wider* concern with the way citizens think ideologically - that if they believe in certain *non-violent* dogmas that are said to be ‘conducive’ to terrorism then they are viewed as part of the ‘terrorist problem’, even if they deplore the violent methods of Al Qaeda and Isis. This represents an unhelpful counter-terrorism conundrum, manifested in the policy refusal to include such people as potential partners and dissuaders against those who resort to terrorism.⁵ Secondly, beyond

³ See, for example, the resurgence of dissident republican groups in Northern Ireland in recent years.

⁴ Institute for Policy Research and Development, cited in Communities and Local Government Select Committee, ‘Preventing violent extremism’, 30 March 2010, p. 9, available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcomloc/65/65.pdf> (accessed November 19th 2013).

⁵ One of the outcomes of this focus is that those ‘intervention providers’ tasked with preventing individuals becoming terrorists are not permitted to share the same ideological outlook as them: ‘intervention providers must not have extremist beliefs’ but ‘they must have credibility’ and be ‘able to reach and relate to’ them (‘Contest: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism’, July 2011, p. 65, available at:

this wider concern and the broadening of the potential ‘terrorism problem’, there is also the *longitudinal* concern where, in the context of the contemporary ‘low-level’, horizontal and social media influenced threat, there is the impetus for intervention at the earliest possible stage of any pathway or trajectory towards the use of violence.

The Merging of the Discourses of Terrorism, Radicalization and Extremism

The widening of the remit of c-t has been facilitated by, and indeed has been part of, the merging of the discourses of, firstly, terrorism and radicalization, and, more lately, of terrorism, radicalization and extremism in the UK. It is in this context that the construction of ‘terrorism’ or the ‘terrorist threat’ has evolved. This convergence has blurred the important distinction between extremism of thought and extremism of method.

This is not, however, to suggest that the ideologies in general of those who carry out acts of terrorism are not relevant for counter-terrorism. They certainly are. Firstly, ideologies of violence or terrorism are, of course, certainly of concern to counter-terrorism and secondly, whether violent or not, the doctrines of those carrying out acts of terrorism is important to scrutinise because they are likely to give some idea as to what the parameters of terrorist targeting are likely to be. But the idea of a *non-violent ideology* that is somehow intrinsically linked to the method of terrorism does not square well with traditional academic understandings of terrorism.

The Construction of ‘Extremism’

In this context it is also worth drawing attention to British government understandings of extremism. As the above has argued, extremist activity (ie. terrorism) has been carried out for non-extremist ideologies while it is also possible that non-extremist activity can be carried out in pursuit of ‘extremist’ doctrines. These distinctions between method and belief system appear to be overlooked in the UK’s definition of extremism which is: ‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs’.⁶ Thus peaceful activity itself becomes extremist if it is in support of an extremist ideology, while, conversely, the definition *excludes* extremist activity (ie. terrorism and violence) if it is carried out in the cause of a non-extremist doctrine. Saul, for example, considers that the international community might regard ‘some terrorist-type violence as “illegal but justifiable” ... where it was committed in the “collective defence of human rights”’ – hence a case of extremist activity undertaken in the cause of what would be considered a non-extremist doctrine (defence of human rights).⁷

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/counter-terrorism/counter-terrorism-strategy/strategy-contest?view=Binary> .)

⁶ Op. cit. Prevent, 2011 p. 107 (note 2).

⁷ Saul, B., ‘Defining Terrorism to Protect Human Rights’, in Staines, D., (ed.), *Interrogating the War on Terror: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle (UK), 2007, p. 208.

As the author has noted elsewhere, the Prevent definition, then, appears to extrematise *activity*, whatever activity that might be, if it is carried out for an extremist cause at the same time as excluding the possibility of extremist activity carried in the cause of a non-extremist doctrine. Yet, *it makes no analytical sense to extrematise the method just because of antipathy towards the goal, nor to dilute the extremity of the method just because one has greater sympathy with the cause.* Adopting such positions would have clear parallels with the subjective application of the term ‘terrorism’ at the expense of more objective analytical utility.⁸

Conclusion

The above has argued that the UK has in recent years seen the merging of the discourses of terrorism, radicalization and extremism in public, political and academic discourse. This has helped to blur the important distinction between extremism of method and extremism of thought - exemplified in the notion of an extremist but non-violent ideology that is said to be ‘conducive’ to terrorism. Such a notion would, to most seasoned terrorism scholars, seem to be something of a paradox because terrorism has conventionally been viewed as ineluctably about the use of violence or the threat of violence, and so if a non-violent ideology is culpable for terrorism in some way then it ceases to become non-violent. The argument made in this paper is that, if we are to engage with the concept of extremism, and most particularly in a counter-terrorism context, there needs to be a clearer distinction made between *extremism of (non-violent) thought* and *extremism of method* because it is surely violence and the threat of violence (integral to terrorism) that should be of primary concern to counter-terrorism. The concern is, through the way that the ‘terrorist threat’ has been constructed in the UK, is that counter-terrorism has become a counter-ideological tool over and above its remit of countering terrorism.

⁸ For example, the more one refrains from using the word ‘terrorism’ because of sympathy with the cause, or the more that one is inclined to use it because of antipathy towards the goal, then the further away we are from enhancing terrorism as an analytical (and more neutral) concept (see Richards, A., *Conceptualizing Terrorism, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37, no. 3, 2014).