**ATC Counter-Terror Module 1: Understanding Counter-Terrorism, Radicalisation and Extremism in the UK**

1. **Introduction**

This module of the ATC focusses on understanding the development of counter-terrorism, radicalisation and Extremism in the United Kingdom (UK). The UK has an established history of counter-terrorism, particularly in relation to sectarian and nationalist terrorism, which emerged following the conflict in Northern Ireland, notably involving the Irish Republican Army (IRA).[[1]](#footnote-0) However, shortly prior to September 11, 2011 (9/11), the Terrorism Act 2000 was conceived. It was the principal piece of legislation enacted to acknowledge the emerging threat of ‘Jihadi-Islamist’ terrorism across the world.[[2]](#footnote-1) The acute need to manage the threats presented by ‘Islamism’ following 9/11 instigated a series of strategic counter-terrorism actions in the UK over the course of the ensuing years. Consequently, in 2003, British Senior Civil Servant, Sir David Omand, was entrusted with formulating a counter-terrorism strategy to address the emerging threats, and, arising from this, the CONTEST strategy was devised.[[3]](#footnote-2)

1. **Key Terms: Definitions**

An agreed definition for the term ‘radicalisation’ is lacking. However, academics Neumann and Rogers, define radicalisation as ‘the changes in attitude that lead towards sanctioning, and ultimately, the involvement in the use of violence for political aim’.[[4]](#footnote-3) Despite a definition for the term not being agreed upon, academics are generally in agreement that the pathway by which an individual becomes radicalised, is an intensely complex phenomenon which is impacted by numerous components and factors. As such, it is believed that each individual traverses their own route to what is understood as radicalisation.

On the other hand, the difficulty in defining the term ‘extremism’ was acknowledged by the former government appointed commissioner on countering extremism, Sara Khan, who stated, “There is no legal definition of extremism and throughout our engagement and evidence gathering people have told us that it means different things to them”.[[5]](#footnote-4) Whilst previous efforts, though contentious in nature, have been made by the government, the term ‘extremism’ still has no operable, legal definition. From the government’s Counter-Extremism Strategy, 2015, ‘extremism’ is defined as “the vocal or active opposition to our shared values. These include democracy and the rule of law, mutual respect and tolerance of other faiths and beliefs. We also consider calling for the death of our armed forces either in the UK or overseas to be extremism”.[[6]](#footnote-5)

1. **Terrorism in the UK: Northern Ireland Threats**

Prior to 9/11, the UK's main threat of terrorism emanated from Northern Ireland, arising from terrorist-related activities involving the IRA.[[7]](#footnote-6) The deployment of the UK army to Northern Ireland under what was termed 'Operation Banner' first began in 1969 and authoritatively concluded in 2007.[[8]](#footnote-7) Amidst the sectarian-fuelled partisan struggle, the death toll rose to approximately 3,520 individuals, including: military personnel, police officers, and civilians.[[9]](#footnote-8)

By the mid-1990s, following various critical strategic errors identified relating to counter-terrorism at the outset of the Northern Irish conflict, the UK had established a doctrine of counter-terrorism. This doctrine assembled intelligence gathered by the intelligence services, armed forces, and police to provide proof to substantiate that executive actions should be undertaken by the police under the UK rule of law. At any level of command, ranging from Whitehall (administrative building of the UK Government) to the district constabulary, interagency counter-terrorism committees, and command units, all had been organised, trained, and operationally checked.[[10]](#footnote-9) Therefore, this clearly indicates that the UK’s counter-terrorism doctrine and organisation existed prior to 9/11.

Indeed, the growing threat of terrorism prompted the steady advance of counter-terrorism legislation in the UK over the past few decades. Similar to other nations, the UK’s response to terrorism had been propelled by incidents of terrorist attacks. In 1939, during the primary IRA crusade within UK territory, under the Prevention of Violence (Temporary Provisions) Act 1939, potential suspects could have been detained without charge for seven days.[[11]](#footnote-10) However, in 1952, this legislation was suspended, and in 1973 it was ultimately repealed.[[12]](#footnote-11) Nonetheless, terror attacks conducted by the IRA in Birmingham bars in 1974, resulting in the murder of 21 people,[[13]](#footnote-12) prompted a new enactment, namely, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Scorer 1980). The act once again introduced the earlier practice of a seven-day confinement with the consent of a magistrate judge.[[14]](#footnote-13) Initially, this was intended as a transitory enactment; however, due to the proceeding incidents of terrorism in Northern Ireland, parliament consistently renewed it on a regular basis.[[15]](#footnote-14) From 1974 until 1996, approximately 27,000 individuals were arrested under this law. After that period, less than 15 percent were charged. These disproportionate numbers are a reflection of the fact that during the 1970s and 1980s the British army utilised its lawful powers to arrest several suspects in Northern Ireland; the majority of whom were interrogated for nearly four hours and were subsequently released. Such interrogations were deployed to ultimately establish the identity of potential suspects and also permitted the British army to query the nearby populace regarding ongoing terrorism activities within their neighbourhoods. This ‘screening’ strategy was a further powerful cover under which sources could be probed.[[16]](#footnote-15)

Nonetheless, mass arrests resulted in significantly hindering the more extensive mission to persuade the populace to denounce terrorism. Thus, the assessment of individuals by the UK military was eventually eliminated. Instead, focused interviews held by the neighbourhood police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), currently, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, became more the norm. Both military and police operations were conducted more furtively, in which screening activities were not required.[[17]](#footnote-16)

In the interim, in contrast to the consistent pattern of attacks in Northern Ireland, IRA operations on English terrain were less frequent. By the 1990s, following a number of irregular terrorist attacks perpetrated on bars and malls during the 1970s and 1980s, IRA groups had zoned in their attacks on high-value, significant urban areas in England.[[18]](#footnote-17) For example, in February 1991, 10 Downing Street was mortared by an Active Service Unit (ASU), while Prime Minister John Major led a Cabinet Meeting. Although there were no fatalities, it was harrowing evidence of the danger the IRA posed directly throughout the UK. As an immediate consequence of the attack, a senior security audit was initiated by the MI5, where it assumed a lead role in intelligence gathering and evaluation against the IRA on UK territory. However, despite this critical turn of events, there was no prompt operational need deemed necessary in order to revise the UK's immediate counter-terrorism enactment at that time.[[19]](#footnote-18)

In any case, it had become apparent that terrorism would be an ongoing part of life within the UK. Consequently, the interim Prevention of Terrorism Act was superseded by the Terrorism Act 2000.[[20]](#footnote-19) In 2003, the period of detainment without charge increased to 14 days from seven under the Criminal Justice Act 2003.[[21]](#footnote-20) In 1971, ‘internment’ without a trial was imposed on Catholic communities with relatively poor consequences.[[22]](#footnote-21) Such arrests without reasonable suspicion, contingent on deficient insight and ensuing confinement of individuals without a trial, ostracised Catholic people and may have even encouraged them to join forces with the IRA in opposition to the UK police and military.

By 2003, the primary threat of terrorism in the UK had shifted in focus from Irish to ‘Islamist terrorism’, particularly Al-Qaeda.[[23]](#footnote-22) Essentially, young Muslims across the country may have now been perceived as potential ‘suspects’. However, between the years 2000 and 2005, the 14-day detainment period was sparingly utilised. The UK authorities thought detaining a suspect without charge for prolonged periods would give a promulgation triumph to the ‘Islamists’ who sought to radicalise young Muslims. The UK law regarding pre-charge detainment did not change instantly following 9/11, despite the unveiling of the 2001 Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act, which gave the UK police increased capacities to stop and search individuals.[[24]](#footnote-23)

Following July 7, 2005 bombings (7/7), carried out by homegrown Al-Qaeda terrorists in London, the UK Government endeavoured to present a 90-day pre-charge period of detention.[[25]](#footnote-24) The House of Commons dismissed the suggestion of 90 days; however, a compromise of 28-day detention without charge was passed (Ibid). However, the government sought to increase the 28-day to 42-day detention without charge under the Counter-Terrorism Bill of 2008.[[26]](#footnote-25) While this was initially passed in the House of Commons, the House of Lords dismissed it. The key aspect under consideration during the debate was concern that over-policing through extensive powers to detain individuals without charge for prolonged periods would ostracise and alienate the Muslim community in the UK.[[27]](#footnote-26)

1. **UK Counter-terrorism: What is the CONTEST Strategy?**

In 2003, Senior Civil Servant, Sir David Omand, and the Home Office under the Tony Blair Labour-led Government developed the CONTEST strategy as the UK’s immediate response to the 9/11 attacks.[[28]](#footnote-27) However, following the 7/7 attacks in 2005, a revised version of CONTEST was unveiled in 2006.[[29]](#footnote-28) Further iterations of the strategy were produced in 2009,[[30]](#footnote-29) 2011,[[31]](#footnote-30) and 2018.[[32]](#footnote-31) Essentially, the strategy seeks to ‘reduce the risk to the UK and its interests overseas from terrorism so that people can go about their lives freely and with confidence’.[[33]](#footnote-32) The strategy does not seek to eradicate the threat of terrorism, given that this is not deemed feasible due to the complex nature of both radicalisation and terrorism. Nevertheless, it adopts a risk-based approach that seeks to significantly reduce the risk of terrorism and keep the state and its people safe from potential incidents.

The strategy comprises four P’s: Prevent, Pursue, Protect, and Prepare. Firstly, the Prevent strand of CONTEST, and perhaps the most controversial, seeks to impede individuals from engaging in terrorism, either by becoming a terrorist or sympathising with terrorists. It involves countering belief systems deemed extreme or terroristic and challenging the individuals who advance such ideologies. This strand supports people who are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation and works within areas and foundations where the danger of radicalisation is appraised as high.[[34]](#footnote-33) In 2015, Prevent was billed as a safeguarding measure following the Conservative Government presenting the Prevent statutory duty through the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act.[[35]](#footnote-34) The obligation necessitates that schools, colleges, universities, the National Health Service (NHS), prisons, and the police have due regard for potential indications of radicalisation or extremism within their sectors. This duty is intended to help guarantee that people deemed vulnerable to radicalisation are provided with the appropriate support, as would be the case in relation to other safeguarding measures.

Controversially, with regards to Northern Ireland, despite the decades worth of terrorist attacks and activities emanating from the region as mentioned previously, Prevent does not directly apply in the region. There is no official reason for this, although it is likely to be related to the inherent sectarian structure of this community and the political ramifications for Prevent referrals across the Protestant-Catholic sectarian divide. However, it is claimed that, “many of the principles can be applied to Northern Ireland-related terrorism”.[[36]](#footnote-35) Nevertheless, since its very inception, Prevent has focussed heavily on British Muslims, highlighting the anti-Muslim biased nature from which the strategy was conceived.

Secondly, the Pursue strand of CONTEST aims to thwart attacks of terrorism from occurring in both the UK and against the interests of the UK abroad. Indeed, the Pursue strand believes that securing a conviction in court and imprisoning a terrorist or potential terrorist is the most effective method to impede and dissuade terrorists from committing attacks, as well as delivering equity and justice for the victims of attacks.[[37]](#footnote-36) Consequently, success through the Pursue approach is evident when the police and prosecuting authorities can identify, examine, and ultimately secure the convictions of terrorists. Essentially, the Pursue strand endeavours to disrupt activities associated with terrorism and mitigate their devastating consequences.

Moreover, the Protect strand strives to ensure that the public remain safe by reinforcing protections against terrorist attacks in the UK or on its interests abroad, thus decreasing potential vulnerability to terrorism within the country. The government aspires to implement a compelling multifaceted security system to ensure protection in the face of potential terrorist attacks. This includes reducing unlawful access to the material required for an attack and expanding the timelines of dubious reports of transactions, while securing public spaces in the UK that are most at risk of attack, such as transport systems and other infrastructure. Furthermore, full powers and capacities are utilised at the UK's borders to ensure protection from further incidents of terrorism.[[38]](#footnote-37)

Finally, the fourth strand of CONTEST is Prepare. The Prepare strand's motivation is to essentially save lives, decrease potential damage, and aid rapid recuperation in the aftermath of a deadly terrorist attack. This incorporates guaranteeing that the government and the authorities react quickly to end a potential terrorist attack, and while it is occurring, to limit its effects on the local neighbourhoods and those who have been impacted as a result of an attack. Ultimately, through the Prepare strand, the government and authorities plan to execute viable and rapid responses to incidents of terrorism, that are effectively coordinated on a nationwide scale.[[39]](#footnote-38)

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