



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Counter-radicalisation](#), HC 311

Tuesday, 21 July 2015

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair); Victoria Atkins, James Berry, Mr David Burrowes, Nusrat Ghani, Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Tim Loughton, Stuart C. McDonald, Keir Starmer, Anna Turley, Mr David Winnick

Questions 1 – 34

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Mark Rowley QPM**, Assistant Commissioner for Specialist Operations in the Metropolitan Police, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Could I welcome the Assistant Commissioner for Specialist Operations to this session, which is an update on the current counter-terrorism agenda? Can I refer all those present to the Register of Members' Interests, where the interests of Members are mentioned?

Mr Rowley, you came to the Committee just before Parliament went into recess so a lot has happened since then. I want to start by asking you specifically about Tunisia and the impact of what happened in Tunisia on the Met. Before I do so, it is worth saying this—we forget to say this sometimes—to pass on our thanks to all those who work in your team for the work they do in keeping our country safe. We are grateful for the number of plots they foil and the daily discharge of their duties. I would be grateful if you would pass that on to all those in the Met who deal with counter-terrorism.

Mark Rowley: I will. Thank you very much.

Chair: Sometimes our questions may seem a little robust but they are not criticism; they are just what we do sometimes in order to keep abreast of what is going on.

I asked about Tunisia. What is your assessment of the impact of what happened in Tunisia on Britain?

Mark Rowley: It was an awful event. Personally being involved in some of the 7/7 memorial events, it struck me that we were doing that at the same time as we were right in the middle of the massive investigation, the work that we are doing, in respect of 30 more British victims of terrorism. I think if you look back over the last two or three years one can see a trend of a slightly increasing number of attacks internationally: think of the In Amenas attack on the oil location in Algeria; think of Westgate Mall in Kenya; and some other individual events in various other

countries that have had less prominence. This, I think, is just the next stage of that and something that we have to be increasingly alive to is how do we, the police, as part of the UK counter-terrorism effort, project our ability to protect, prepare and pursue offenders internationally. We have an increasing network of counter-terrorism officers across the world. We had just got arrangements in place to put somebody in Tunisia as this happened.

Q2 Chair: You say as this happened? After the event or just before?

Mark Rowley: We put arrangements in place before but the person was going through training and about to land when the events took place.

We had a big investigation. We had hundreds of officers involved, collecting all the witness statements, across the whole counter-terrorism network that we co-ordinate from London that involves all the regions. We have been helping the Tunisians with their forensic efforts; helping them succeed in their investigation. I think we are going to have more of this work.

Q3 Chair: We are very grateful for that. Can you give us a number? How many of your officers are now in Tunisia trying to help the Tunisian authorities?

Mark Rowley: It changes on a daily basis. It is a handful. We had over 30 over at one stage but most of the effort now, of course, is back in the UK. From about 10,000 potential witnesses we triaged at airports across the country as everyone came back we have identified 307 significant witnesses who have seen the really awful events on the beach and we have been taking statements from them, which of course has to be done carefully and sensitively. We have material coming back from Tunisia where we are helping to support the Tunisian investigation with our forensic efforts.

Q4 Chair: Do you back up the Tunisian view that the gunman was radicalised in the town that they referred to; that he had gone to Libya, where he was trained, had returned from Libya to Tunisia, and then carried out the attack? Do you back up that story?

Mark Rowley: I am not keen to give detailed analysis of where we are with the investigation. It is a trend that we are obviously concerned about, the number of ungoverned states and places where law enforcement is not working effectively across the world, which terrorists find are safe places to operate. Whether you talk about north of Iraq and Syria or Libya, it is the same challenge. They act as training and operating bases for terrorists.

Q5 Chair: I appreciate how busy you and your colleagues are but there is a view that this was a foreseeable attack. Although you are there to protect people in mainland Britain, here was a country where hundreds of thousands of British citizens go on regular basis for their holidays and what we ought to have done is to have been more careful in providing the Tunisians with additional support, bearing in mind so many Brits are out there. What do you say to that view?

Mark Rowley: That is a very wide question, which is probably more for the Foreign Office as the lead than it is for me. Clearly we make a contribution to those efforts. If you look at the Foreign Office guidance before this incident it is pretty high-level in terms of the risks of travelling to Tunisia. It did talk about a significant or high likelihood—I would have to check the wording—of a terrorist incident. I do not think anybody was shrinking from that.

Q6 Chair: So you think that is a Foreign Office issue. I would have thought if you meet at COBRA every Tuesday one of the things that you might consider—especially after the museum attack in Tunis—is that it is coming up to the summer holidays; we have a lot of British citizens in North Africa; should we not take special care to work with the Tunisians to make sure some of the expertise that you undoubtedly possess because you work for the best brand of policing in the world, the Metropolitan Police, and should we have given more help to the Tunisians because this was a foreseeable event? You do not feel that that is a responsibility of the Met?

Mark Rowley: First of all, the policy responsibility for advice on travel is with the Foreign Office and that is perfectly right and proper and it was at a high level.

Chair: We understand that.

Mark Rowley: In terms of providing support and expertise internationally, we do some of that already. As a contribution to the national effort the police bring one component towards that and there have been Foreign Office efforts in respect of Tunisia. If you look across many countries where there are challenges—across large parts of North Africa there are different but significant terrorist risks and in other countries you see that too—while we see terrorists projecting internationally I don't think it is easy to say it is obviously going to strike next in this country or that country.

Q7 Chair: One final question from me: is it still the case that you are arresting one suspected terrorist every day?

Mark Rowley: Yes. Last year it was 338. That is just under one a day. I think it is tipping past that now. People may have seen that there are people appearing in court this afternoon charged with very serious terrorist offences. That is the latest significant act but there is a range. About one third of our activity is terrorist charges—disrupting significant terrorist activity—and about two thirds of those arrests are people who are on the edge of terrorism, perhaps aspire towards it, and we have intelligence about that and we are using crime powers to disrupt them. Often it is for fraud or violence or other offences. So it is that combination of taking on the highest-risk individuals and then disrupting those that are escalating towards that problem.

Q8 Mr Winnick: The Government of the day obviously has responsibility, Assistant Commissioner, for giving appropriate warnings to potential holiday-makers. There is no controversy how the Government reacted after the mass murder and this is a very sensitive issue as the dead are being buried and mourned by their loved ones. But there is a view—and perhaps you feel this is outside your remit—that however careful the Government is in warning people against going to Tunisia, it is a victory for terrorism for the mass murderers bearing in mind that apparently—I do not have all the facts before me—citizens of other western countries are continuing to go there on holiday. Do you have any view on that at all?

Mark Rowley: It is a very difficult decision. There is a very obvious point that on the one hand that we want strong countries that are able to join us collectively in international efforts in terms of confronting terrorism and if a country's economy is heavily dependent on tourism then that is a significant factor. Conversely, of course, the state does not want to take undue risk with British holiday-makers' lives. I think what the Government has been doing has been balancing those

decisions and we feed our small contribution of information into that but other people make that decision and it is extraordinarily difficult.

Q9 Nusrat Ghani: Assistant Commissioner, the police spend a huge amount of time nurturing relationships in the communities they wish to serve. I was looking at some statistics on the make-up of the police and I have noticed that the numbers of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic police officers are extremely low, especially in urban areas. For example, in the Metropolitan Police, in London where we have a BAME population of 40%, within that police force I think only 11.7% of officers are BAME. Even more alarming for the Met, you have women making up only 3% of its frontline police who are BAME. When it is so vital to have strong relationships with those communities and reflect those communities, do you think not having police officers with a background that reflects the diversity is an issue?

Mark Rowley: Is an absolutely massive issue, you are completely right. In different proportions the same issues apply in many other parts of the country but if I just look at London, where the population is certainly over 30% Black and Minority Ethnic, yet, as you say, 11% or so is the number. Our current recruits coming in, the latest cohort, are over 20%, which is really good but it is still not enough. You will have heard the Commissioner and I, and other members of the senior team in the Met, say that we want to make a step change in this. We are pulling every legal lever available to us and think change in legislation is one of the things that would help us. It is interesting that in Northern Ireland with the end of RUC and the creation of PSNI special legislative measures were created so that they could bring Protestants and Catholics into the force in a 50:50 ratio. That was a special legal lever created to deal with that situation. I think something similar—I am not saying 50:50 but something similar—needs to happen to help us accelerate recruitment and get to a different place over the next few years. Frankly, it is going to be doubly challenging as police forces are shrinking and doing this recruitment is even harder to make that shift in resource but we agree the principle and we are doing everything possible. You will have seen recently in the media, again in London, we are doing a surge of recruiting based on the need for second languages and other skills. That is because we have a need for people who can interact and deal with such a diverse and complex community. That should help us.

Q10 Nusrat Ghani: Thank you. You mentioned earlier on that you are making one arrest per day of potential terrorists. Do you think that figure would be higher if there were more police officers of BME background in those urban communities?

Mark Rowley: I do not think I can make a direct link between not having the best possible mix of officers to that consequence but it will make us less effective in lots of ways. Our ability to understand communities and to engage, I think my teams do an excellent job but it would be better if we were more representative. I accept that point.

Q11 Stuart McDonald: Assistant Commissioner, you have already referred to the fact that there is an arrest almost every day in relation to counter-terrorism offences. Would you say that what we need is more laws? Or are resources the big issue?

Mark Rowley: In terms of resources, it would be odd if I did not say that of course I could use more resources and of course we will be going through a budget process with the new Government where we will be expected to make efficiencies and we will be looking at the new challenges we face. That is the natural order of things.

In terms of new laws, we are in a sad sort of way fortunate that the number of decades we have been wrestling with serious terrorism does give us a range of provisions on the statute book that are helpful. I do see some western partners who do not have quite the same range of laws and experience, which is a challenge to them.

There are two current challenges to us that are areas that Government have indicated they are going to look at. The first is the challenge of going dark and our intelligence capabilities; increasingly we do not have the quality of intelligence that we once would have had. There are no-go areas on the internet and elsewhere that we cannot get to from a police perspective and terrorists and serious criminals can do their business there. The fact that Government has talked about looking at that afresh is helpful.

Q12 Chair: Can you just remind the Committee what your current budget is? What is your annual budget on CT?

Mark Rowley: About £450 million. That is across CT policing in the UK and that is not just pursuing offenders; that is prevent and protect.

The second point I was going to make was about extremism and the draw of people into terrorism. We are seeing a very different dynamic in terrorism today to what we have seen previously. About a quarter of our investigations involve people who are vulnerable. So you have young people dealing with mental health issues and other challenges.

Chair: We will be dealing with health later.

Mark Rowley: That plays into the extremism challenge, which is something that again might be helpful.

Q13 Stuart McDonald: Are you comfortable that £450 million is enough?

Mark Rowley: I do not think now is the place to have a debate on the detail of it. There are things we are going to need to spend more money on, going forward, about maintaining our digital capability, and there are some areas where we can see we can make efficiencies. We have to play all that out in conversation with Government in the spending review.

Chair: It is the same size as the NCA budget, roughly.

Mark Rowley: I will take your word on that. I don't know what the NCA budget is.

Q14 Stuart McDonald: What about local policing? Do decisions in relation to funding local policing have an effect on your ability to gather intelligence for example?

Mark Rowley: The dedicated counter-terrorism machine, the network of units across the country, is the core of the response but local policing has a critical response and increasingly so, given the number of local criminals who have been drawn into terrorism; given the need for confidence in communities and the information we need to help us spot people being radicalised, the role of local policing is growing and credible, strong local policing is a part of the counter-terrorism effort and needs to remain so.

Q15 Keir Starmer: I was going to deal with those returning, is that appropriate?

Chair: Not now. Shortly. We are coming to that in a minute.

Q16 Mr Burrowes: 700 Britons have travelling to Syria. Would you agree with the suggestion of your predecessor, Robert Quick, who said if they want to go you have to ask the question are we better off if they surrender their passports and go; it is better than them festering away here?

Mark Rowley: I do not know the context of him answering that question.

Mr Burrowes: It was on 7 July.

Mark Rowley: I do not know the context of the question. I have seen the quote but I don't know the context of the question. Generally speaking I do not agree with him. It is the wrong idea to say if we have a British citizen—I am restricting it to that for the moment—why are we going to allow them to go to somewhere where we think they are going to take part in murder, rape and all sorts of other awful, awful acts. Even if bizarrely one said that was acceptable because it is in a war zone, then what about the prospects of their coming back more trained, more angry, more radicalised, to this country. I think that is completely unacceptable. Of course for people who have dual citizenship, and there are other provisions about, there are powers to strip them of their British citizenship and one may take different decisions, but a sole British national, to inflict that risk on other parts of the world and wait for that to return all the worse is, I think, a poor suggestion.

Q17 Mr Burrowes: We learnt last November that the Home Secretary had refused or cancelled 29 passports to disrupt the travel of people planning to engage in terrorist activity. Do you know the up to date figure?

Mark Rowley: I don't but she is determined to do that every time it is legally possible and we and the Security Service put the information before her when we have it. Of course, we have new powers from earlier this year to start that process with temporary seizures at ports. That number that officers have seized at ports when we have had concern is around reaching double figures at the moment and about half of those cases do filter through into evidence that is sufficient for the Home Secretary to take it off somebody long-term.

Q18 Mr Burrowes: How much effect do you think the Prime Minister's mooted powers to give parents the right to cancel children's passports will have?

Mark Rowley: I have not seen any detailed proposal on that so I do not want to comment on the detail of it but the Government's ambition it seems is to try to tackle the extremism that draws people into terrorism, anything that can disrupt and influence that seems to me to be a good ambition. Of course we will feed the practical operational views into the legislation and policies as they develop.

Q19 Mr Burrowes: What is the average age profile of those you see at risk of going abroad and getting involved in terrorist activities?

Mark Rowley: The age profile is changing. To give one example, of 338 arrests last year, those who were 20 and under were 16% or 17%, about one sixth of them. One would not have seen that a few years ago. To give another dimension to this, because of the risk to young people either because they are being drawn into terrorism or because their parents are, over the last six months we have started putting cases through family courts, looking at wards of court to try to control and manage those safeguarding issues. Across the country we have 12 families who we have done that with in the last six months; over 30 children. It is indicative of how counter-terrorism is now reaching increasingly internationally to places like Tunisia but also increasingly connected to local policing and those issues.

Q20 Chair: The number of women and girls who have gone is 43, is that right? It is the figure we have from the Met.

Mark Rowley: That is right. Of the arrests we are making, I think one in nine are women and girls.

Q21 Victoria Atkins: You have just touched on the role of families in both encouraging and, I hope, in preventing terrorism.

Mark Rowley: Yes.

Victoria Atkins: How can parents and siblings and spouses do their bit to help stop radicalism?

Mark Rowley: We have done a number of appeals over the last year, myself and my deputy, Helen Ball, and we have asked for families' help because the changes in behaviour—changes in dress, perhaps; changes in friendship groups; changes in approach to the internet—families are likely to spot that first. The sooner that is spotted, the sooner the interception can be preventative rather than being too late and ending up being enforcement. That preventive intervention does not have to be the police. It can be social agencies; it can be all sorts of groups. That is why we are appealing to families and we have seen more information coming to us. Sadly some of the cases where teenagers have been involved, in hindsight there were missed signs, sometimes missed by families—not always—sometimes missed by schools; sometimes missed by other agencies; sometimes the police do not have it perfectly right either, but spotting those signs early is so critical.

Q22 Mr Winnick: It is estimated that over half of the 700 Britons who have travelled to so-called Islamic States are back in Britain and that is a very large number indeed. What danger to our country exists or is likely to exist from what I have just stated?

Mark Rowley: It is very significant. The current threat level is severe and attack is highly likely. This is one part of that. There is another part of that, which is those who stay out in Syria and are using the internet to try to provoke attacks from people who are based here, but the combination of those factors is of great concern.

Of those who have returned, of course every one of them gets serious attention from the police and security intelligence agencies. In some case we have managed to prove what they were doing overseas—not straightforward but we have proved what they done—and they have gone to prison for long periods. One can look at Imran Khawaja, who was stopped coming back through the port; one could look at the recent case of Sardar who got 38 years for bombmaking in Iraq a

few years ago and was found to be driving a taxi in London. We try to prove what people have been doing overseas. Where we cannot prove that it is about constantly prioritising our surveillance and investigative effort to keep an eye on those people and manage what they are doing.

Q23 Mr Winnick: I find it a bit puzzling. They have not gone just to explore, presumably, what the political and military situation is in the territory controlled by ISIS. There would have been an obvious reason why people go, unfortunately and tragically. Unless they are deliberately indoctrinated in order to return to inflict terror on their home territory, having gone there, how do they so easily, apparently, come back?

Mark Rowley: Well, they are British citizens so we cannot stop them coming back in the vast majority of cases. While we do not want people going there, it is not per se illegal to go to Raqqa. Clearly we are using every legal power available to us and using every opportunity to gather evidence about what people who have travelled have been doing. Frankly that is not straightforward but, as I say, we have charged many people. We do everything we can to stop people going there, for instance using ports powers to stop and delay people if we have any suggestion they are going to get involved in terrorism, which is where our power comes from; we will try to prosecute them for offences; we are using family proceedings to stop families travelling. We are using every provision available to us to support the ambition that British citizens do not go to a war zone but it is not illegal per se to do that.

Q24 Mr Winnick: Do you think there is a reasonable possibility that having seen what is happening some of them would have changed their minds pretty drastically and be only too keen to get back to this country? That is a possibility?

Mark Rowley: That must happen in some cases, yes.

Q25 Keir Starmer: Assistant Commissioner, can I follow up on that because of those returning there will be different states of mind. How do you triage them? You have told us about those that you have evidence about and they can then be prosecuted but there will be a range of mindsets of those returning. How do you triage them and get them to the appropriate response when they return, when you know about them?

Mark Rowley: The starting point is what information we have about what they have been doing out there. Sometimes it can be quite detailed; sometimes fairly scant. Clearly we have the opportunity at a port stop when they come in to stop them, question them, look at any material they have with them—so how much information do you build—and then it is about doing a risk assessment and we and the Security Service have specialist psychologist and other advisers who can help us spot is this person vulnerable and damaged; is this person dangerous. So we are using a combination of measure to gauge that, which then takes you to what is the degree of enforcement and investigative response through to is this someone who is in a state where a preventative programme like Channel would be appropriate.

Q26 Keir Starmer: Do you keep them sufficiently on the radar that if you get further information, intelligence or data, you can upgrade or downgrade the way they are being dealt with?

Mark Rowley: There is a weekly prioritisation meeting on operations jointly between ourselves and the Security Service and we are constantly prioritising up and down our risk thresholds, our operations. A couple of years ago we introduced a residual pool so we not only have the people we are concerned about at the top of the pyramid, who are, if you like, a risk at the moment, but we have a residual pool of people who we are satisfied are not active at the moment but we are concerned they may reactivate, for want of a better word, and we look to what gentle, low-cost surveillance we can keep on them, what visibility we can keep of them, so if they do change behaviour again, then we can spot that. That is clearly very difficult because we have so much resource at the top of the pyramid but we try to keep hold of what we call this residual risk.

Q27 James Berry: I was speaking to an Imam at a mosque outreach event recently and his concern about Daesh was twofold. First the nature of some radical speakers being allowed into British universities and secondly the amount of radical material that is available on the internet, be it via YouTube, Twitter, wherever. Leaving aside the legal powers, which is something we can deal with with other witnesses perhaps, do you feel you have the operational capability to deal with this material and particularly the material on the internet, which is so prolific?

Mark Rowley: We have the only unit in the world that is dedicated to this, from what I know, the internet referral unit, which is responsible for prompting about 1,000 postings being taken off the internet every week. It is massively productive and it is all about the relationship it builds with different parts of industry.

There are large parts of the technology and communications industry that are very helpful and supportive; there are some companies that have been less so but they tend to slowly mature and come towards being supportive when they recognise the implications.

You cannot clean up the internet and I am not going to pretend that you can. You can make it harder for people to find this material and I think that is the effect. It is positive that other countries are looking at this and indeed Europol are looking to build a bigger unit based on our model, which is helpful.

Your other point was about extremism in communities and speakers. Our Prevent interventions exactly tackle that sort of work and so far this year we think there are 43 extremist events across the country that have been disrupted because we have spotted them and intercepted them. Normally by speaking to community leaders, speaking to those organising the event who were not quite aware of the track record of the speaker, we are able to stop those taking place.

Q28 James Berry: The more recalcitrant private companies, internet providers and so on, how could you better be supported in dealing with those?

Mark Rowley: Clearly if they were all in Britain it would probably be more straightforward but most of them are not so there is a heavy international and political effort to try to put pressure on them and get them to be supportive. That is bearing fruit. It is not straightforward but it is bearing fruit. Different countries have different legislative provisions about freedom of speech and material and interpret it differently, which creates different boundaries and makes it easier to work with companies in some jurisdictions than others.

Q29 Nusrat Ghani: You are quoted as saying in a BBC interview that we are seeing more young people being drawn into extremism and radicalisation and we are seeing people with mental health

issues. There was also a report out last year, the Queen Mary University of London study, that saw, “The relationship between radicalisation and mental health as complex but we now know depression alongside poor social networks and isolation does play a role in vulnerability to radicalisation”. You hinted on it earlier. You are dealing with these people day in, day out and I wondered how you were managing them; if you have to monitor them how are you able to do that; how they are then assessed and taken forward if they have to be moved away from the ideologies that they have. I also wondered if you had any data on how many of those people that you come into contact with, especially of those one terrorist per day that you are arresting, that have spent some time in prison.

Mark Rowley: To give two indications: of our many hundreds of investigations about one quarter of them have somebody who has some degree of vulnerability, whether through age or mental health; about one in seven of them have somebody who is volatile, so potentially a lone actor and within that there is a large proportion with mental health issues, some diagnosed and some undiagnosed in our judgment.

In terms of how we deal with that, this links into the new Prevent duty and the expectations that fighting terrorism is a much wider government responsibility, so the responsibility of youth services; social services, mental health service. We are seeing them stepping forward increasingly and we need an awful lot more help from them. So we spot these cases and we are trying to balance in every case how much risk does this individual pose—are they escalating towards an attack and a criminal justice intervention, a police intervention, is necessary—versus can we try to refer them into mental health services or other diversion that will draw them away from this. I think it is all reflective of this: I still have a different approach to terrorism, which is that they are trying to get a group of people to act in their name and they do not really care about vulnerability and other issues whereas previous terrorism organisations tended to recruit somebody they could trust. They are using a much more open approach across the internet to get people to act in their name and that brings the vulnerable into this more often, which means that the partnership approach locally is so critical.

Q30 Anna Turley: You spoke earlier about the diversity of the police force and its relationship with the community. Do you feel the Prevent programme has helped or hindered that relationship? Do you feel it has given you better access to the community or has it built any sense of tension or divide?

Mark Rowley: First of all it is built on community policing and if we did not have community policing as bedrock and that core relationship with communities then no special programme on top of that could do any good in its own right. The Prevent programme has a lot to its credit. It is a contentious idea in many quarters, albeit many who speak against it are doing so for less than perfect purposes. I see our officers building effective relationships locally. Over the last year we have had far more information from communities about people of concern, some of whom we have been able to intervene with in a preventative sense, which is really positive, and I see an appetite from the majority of communities to work with us and tackle this. So I see largely a positive story. Of course there is more we can do as the terrorism threat changes but that is overlain by some fairly brutal public debate.

Q31 Victoria Atkins: The Prime Minister in his speech yesterday talked about the need to embolden the voices of reforming and moderate Muslims. Would this help to counter criticism from some quarters of the Prevent strategy?

Mark Rowley: I certainly think it is necessary. If we have an awful terrorism organisation that is acting to recruit anybody and everybody in their name, we need to challenge that ideology. I do not think the most powerful voices will ever come from law enforcement or other parts of the state, they have to come from community leaders. So I think the police have a small role in counter-narrative in these programmes and we try to do our bit but unless it comes from communities fighting against it and refusing to accept that corrupt definition of Islam, then I do not think it is going to succeed.

Q32 Mr Jayawardena: Assistant Commissioner, currently anyone that is convicted of an offence can be forced into a programme to deflect them from extremist views.

Mark Rowley: Yes.

Mr Jayawardena: It has been said that police might well need new powers to force people on to these sorts of programmes ahead of them staging or planning attacks. How would that work in practice?

Mark Rowley: Government is talking about things like extremism disruption orders, being able to put conditions on people who are gravitating towards terrorism, so I guess it could be one of the conditions you could make there.

The point for me is that we have a programme at the moment, set up by the Home Office, which is very effective—Channel—that is for those who are willing and volunteer and can be persuaded to go on a programme that counters the ideology that has started to affect them. In some cases we need something tougher to pull back people who are more hardened, a rehabilitative approach, if you like, rather than an enforcement approach is more appropriate. So I think you need a tactic that works—so programmes that can deliver and the Home Office is looking at procuring that—and then you need to look at what tools you have to force people on to them. Clearly people under sentence or licence and so on would be one part of it; people returning from Syria, if they were under a temporary exclusion order, that would work, but there may be a cohort of people in the middle, those we are identifying for Prevent programmes, where we need the extra leverage to force the preventative intervention rather than simply let things deteriorate until we have to arrest them for more serious offences.

Q33 Chair: Thank you. Finally, when you were last before the Committee and we were discussing the girls who had gone from Tower Hamlets, you did say—there was a plea from you and the Commissioner—that if they came back they would not be charged with a criminal offence. We saw for ourselves after that the work of the Met in dealing with the three young men from Brent when they were brought back from Istanbul and you have decided not to press charges even though they were planning to go to Syria. I too met them and I think that was absolutely the right decision. What is your message to those who go abroad who are innocently duped? Is it still the case that when they come back they will not face charges?

Mark Rowley: If you have been innocently duped, you travelled to a war zone and you regretted it and you have come back, there is nothing criminal or terrorist in that. Clearly if you take part in terrorism, if you take part in murder and rape and other acts, then we are going to do everything we can do to make sure you face the consequence of that through the criminal justice process. But if you have been duped, if you have not taken part in terrorism, then you have nothing to fear.

Q34 Chair: Is this threat on the increase? Are you more worried or less worried than when you came before us about the numbers of people going and the numbers of people—22 women have just disappeared and they may or may not be in Syria—in addition to the 43 women that you mentioned? Is this on the increase? Is it going down? Where is it at the moment?

Mark Rowley: It is hard to disaggregate parts of the threat but the overall severe-threat level, it is at the highest level it could be for a sustained period and that is continuing—has continued since last autumn—and it looks like it will continue for a long time. It is a combination of those travelling and those who are here who have no intention of travelling who are being influenced to plan attacks in the UK. The combination of that remains at as high a level of concern to me as it was last time I was in front of you.

Chair: Assistant Commissioner, can I thank you again for coming in and thank for all the work that is being done by the Met on this very serious and important issue in keeping our country safe?

Mark Rowley: Thank you. And colleagues across the country, of course.

Chair: Indeed. Thank you very much.