

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Counter-terrorism](#), HC 750

Wednesday 24 October 2018

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Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Rehman Chishti; Stephen Doughty; Kate Green; Stuart C. McDonald; Douglas Ross; John Woodcock.

Questions 54–167

Witnesses

I: Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, National Lead for Counter-terrorism

II: Sara Khan, Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism

Examination of witnesses

Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, National Lead for Counter-terrorism

Q54 **Chair:** Welcome, Assistant Commissioner Basu, to our evidence session today on counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. We are very grateful for your time this afternoon. Could I ask you for some opening remarks on your assessment of the terror threat at the moment, and also the work that is being done in order to counter it?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to give you some context for this session.

I probably wanted to start by acknowledging the Chief Coroner's findings in respect of the Westminster attack. That particular atrocity—along with Manchester, Finsbury Park, Borough Market and Parsons Green—took place on my watch, when I was Senior National Co-ordinator for counter-terrorism policing. It is important to me that the panel know that I think about the 36 people who were murdered and all the victims every single day, and particularly in this job.

It was incredibly painful to hear the coroner say there was a possibility that Police Constable Palmer might have been saved were it not for shortcomings in the security system at the Palace, including supervision of those engaged, and we unreservedly accepted those conclusions. We have improved. We are committed to further improvements.

In terms of the threat picture, we learnt that those attacks were not a temporary escalation of the threat. They are a sustained shift in that threat, and to this day the UK CT machine continues to run red hot. The attacks demonstrated that both the breadth of targets and methodologies employed have increased. The weapons used by attackers can now range from homemade explosives to a family car or an everyday kitchen knife. The greatest concern to me comes from simple attacks on softer targets that are cheap to mount, easy to disguise and, therefore, harder to see and stop.

The overriding threat to the UK remains from those inspired by Daesh and the resurgence of Al-Qaeda, but our operations reflect a much broader range of dangerous ideologies including, very disturbingly, rising extreme right-wing activity.

Across the counter-terrorism network at the moment, we are recording a record high of over 700 investigations. That is a combined figure of both counter-terrorism policing and MI5. Despite thinking for a long time that our biggest threat was returning or directed foreign fighters, the majority of attackers here who have attacked or plotted are UK or dual-UK nationals. Since the Westminster attack in March last year, we have stopped 17 attacks. Four were extreme right-wing terrorist plots. I expect those figures to increase. Against this threat we have significantly increased our engagement with the business community around



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protective security, and we have increased the number of public awareness campaigns to encourage vigilance and the reporting of suspicious activity.

At the same time as this step change in CT threat, we have dealt with alleged hostile state activity in Salisbury. We also conducted the most extensive review of the UK CT machine in a decade—I believe David Anderson called it one of the most extensive ever—reporting directly to the Home Secretary.

To keep ahead of the game, we need to make those changes that we identified to Government in that report, which runs to over 1,200 pages, but for me it has been like fine-tuning a Formula One car that is still going round the track and setting a lap record.

My predecessor, Mark Rowley, when he was in front of you a year ago today, said, “Despite our best endeavours we’re not yet as well matched to the threat as we were a year ago”. One year on, I would like to tell you that we are matched to the current threat, but the reality is we are not. We start from a position of strength. We have a national police security service and Government tripartite approach to counter-terrorism. That has been honed over decades. It is still the envy of many people in the world. It is world class. Matching that new threat—including now extreme right-wing terrorism and hostile state activity—requires new ways of working and for us to maintain our current resources.

We are working very closely with the Home Office, which has been supportive. The Home Office also recognises that policing is a system—a system with global reach but local connectivity. I depend entirely on well-resourced local police forces, from neighbourhood policing through to crisis response. It is extremely difficult for CT policing, when we are constantly working to short-term funding arrangements, so a longer term funding settlement would greatly assist.

Lastly, it is my view that the Government’s most important pillar of CONTEST has always and will always be Prevent and we all need to talk much more about it. Thanks for letting me speak.

Q55 Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate those remarks. Can I ask you a little further about some of those points? You talked about 700 investigations. What is your assessment of the main cause of why the number of investigations has increased?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: About 80% of those investigations will continue to be Islamist Jihadist threat; 20% or so will be other, including a significant number of right-wing ideological threats. There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that the two ideologies, both perverse, are both feeding each other, and there is no doubt whatsoever that, post the terrorist attacks of last year, some proxy measures for that increasing threat would be an increase in hate crime, particularly religiously aggravated hate crime. We have seen a significant rise in that, as the



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recently released figures demonstrate. That is not just about reporting; that is about increased offending, so there is a tolerance issue.

I have said this before publicly, that when the Westminster attack happened I think people were looking at the UK as a very hostile place to do business. That might have lowered the bar to extremists who thought, "Perhaps a simple plot could work". I think there is no doubt that it generated, in the minds of some extremists, an intention, or brought their capability forward—we certainly heard a lot about that.

If you see the number of plots that we have disrupted, it was 13 in the previous four years before Westminster. It was effectively 13 I think in just over eight months last year. Without a doubt, the success of one attack undoubtedly bred further attempts—certainly more chatter—and then we have the two ideologies feeding each other.

Q56 Chair: What is your assessment of the geographic spread of the threat, the investigations and the number of police forces you have involved in this?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: It remains largely consistent. London will always be 55% or more of the threat. London also has the vast majority of the iconic sites that terrorists are looking at, so this is where the greatest threat is. Our counter-terrorism units around the country are resourced on the basis of where that threat is, so it is of no surprise that major urban centres—the West Midlands, north-west and north-east, along with London—have the greatest resilience and investigative capacity within their counter-terrorism units.

Chair: We want to cover a series of these points, starting with the far-right issues because we are looking at that as part of another inquiry as well. Before we do so, I just convey our thanks to you and to all of the officers and staff who work with you on the challenging work that you have had to do in response to these terror threats and keeping all us safe. Thank you for that.

Q57 Rehman Chishti: Thank you very much for your statement and for all you and your officers do, day in day out, to keep our country and our citizens safe. Thank you.

On the far-right perspective, your predecessor, Sir Mark Rowley, called the threat from the far-right significant and concerning. In the last year there has been a significant rise in far-right terrorist activity and an attack in London, including a plot to kill a Member of Parliament with a machete. What is the current level of threat posed by the far-right extremists to our society and our country?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: I agree entirely with Mark's analysis, as you would expect—I was his deputy at the time. We effectively supplied the intelligence requirement that led to National Action being proscribed by the then Home Secretary, Amber Rudd. That is the first proscription since 1940—the British Union of Fascists was the last extreme right-wing,



effectively, terrorist organisation. The fact that we have now proscribed both National Action and two of its affiliated groups, Scottish Dawn and NS131, tells you something very dangerous about the state of society.

I mentioned earlier on about hate crime having increased, and for me there is something that says there is an ever growing threat. Up until the operation improvement review I mentioned, with David Anderson, one the big lessons learnt was that we needed much more parity in how we looked at what was called domestic extremism over international counter-terrorism, so that there was some parity of approach. We are beginning to do more, post-proscription of National Action, looking at the threat in concert with MI5 and JTAC. My prediction is that it is only going to reveal that the situation is potentially worse and growing, and the hate crimes give me some kind of proxy indication of that.

We are also seeing more Prevent referrals in the extreme right-wing space. Again, that is a proxy indication that extremism in the extreme right-wing area is increasing. We are seeing across Europe far-right activity increasing as well. There is no doubt that that crosses the border into the UK, and there have been attempts by groups here to co-ordinate with European partners as well. We are aligned to all of them, and there has been very good work by Border Force to stop some of those people coming into the country.

The short answer is: I would never want to be complacent about this. I think the problem is increasing. It is still about 20% of the threats, as opposed to the vast majority of the threats that still come from Islamist jihadists, but it is growing.

Q58 Rehman Chishti: Can I just ask a clarification, if I may? Last year we saw the terrorist attack during the incident in Finsbury Park and we saw the judgment in that case, and the remarks by the sentencing judge, Mrs Justice Chima-Grubb, who mentioned, "the time it took for the individual to see content online"—I think it was linked to the EDL, and Tommy Robinson was mentioned in that. Those are not my words; those are the words of the judge who presided in that case. The time it took to get sucked in to that poisonous ideology and carry out terrorist attacks was very short, and it showed the threat that is posed by individuals out there who get sucked into some of that material and carry out that threat.

What has been done to address that, and in how many of those cases in that category do you have real concern about individuals? You have intelligence on IPN and different information. How much of that significant threat is there, and have the agencies, following on from that judgment, along with the social media companies, taken that threat seriously?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: We have taken that threat seriously. The criminal threshold—the very high bar that is set for material that is online—for the extreme right-wing criminal threshold test is very small. At the moment, I think less than 0.5% of the total material that we have



taken down or looked at has been in that space. Again, I am not complacent about it. That is largely because they are relatively disorganised and don't have the same kind of machines that, for instance, Daesh had.

In terms of total number of investigations, we have over 100 live investigations in the domestic extremism space. The vast majority of those are extreme right-wing and far-right threats.

The most disturbing elements of those tend to be in the lone actor space. Finsbury Park was a very good example of that. Thomas Mair was a very good example of that. They are people who have other problems. As you say, the most malleable, vulnerable people are being sucked very quickly into this ideology and often having no touchpoints with the rest of society. It makes it very difficult to spot.

Q59 Rehman Chishti: Can I ask you for clarification on that and the time it takes for that person to be sucked in to carry out a terrorist attack? We saw the horrific tragic loss of Jo Cox, our parliamentary colleague. We saw a threat last year—an attempt to kill a Member of Parliament by machete.

Perhaps I may give you something that I have here. On Twitter I get, "I guess if it was a Pakistani Muslim he would be top of your list. You are a disgrace". Put that to one side. You click on the icon that comes up with that Twitter account, "Muslims have no place in Christian country. Go to a Muslim country. We don't want you. Adebolajo is a Muslim extremist. It is not for me to say he should be exterminated. That will be naughty. The Mayor of London is a scum". Then we see an image on that with a bomb vest around the Mayor of London, and saying, "Allah Akbar, God is great" at the top of it. On the same content there it goes up.

If ever one saw extremist content it is out there. The Mayor of London does a great job in terms of aspirations. He has worked hard. He did the right thing. We can disagree with his politics, but he is entitled to go out there and do his job without having extremist material put against him.

I am in public office and I never look over my shoulder. I go on the train and these individuals—this one here says he is my constituent—I don't know what they look like. There is no image of this person, but they contact you and then you read behind what they say. The point I make to you is: we will go on doing our job because we are elected by the public to do our job. It is up to the intelligence services. How much of a threat are individuals like this, lone actors, when you go through tweet after tweet, which is of extremist material? Parliamentary security will look at it with our Kent police. How much of a threat do these individuals pose to the security and well-being of Members of Parliament doing their job, day in day out?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: It is a very difficult question to answer, so you will find me incredibly sympathetic. I am a public servant who gets that kind of material as well. I know it is incredibly difficult to live



with, day in day out. Some of that stuff is completely reprehensible and some of it will cross criminal thresholds. Where it crosses criminal thresholds we will investigate and take action. Where it doesn't—and I should not be in this space because I am law enforcement officer and I should be dealing with criminal thresholds—we have to challenge extremist behaviour, even if it does not cross criminal thresholds because of the kind of intolerance that it brings. Whether it is white supremacy, the National Action type of perverse ideology, or whether it is Islamist jihadist ideology, it needs to be challenged.

There is a very high psychological bar for people going from words to violence. I am not an expert in this area, but there are a lot of psychologists who will talk about people living their fantasy life in the virtual world, and who are never ever going to take that towards the real world. We have experts who advise us as operators in terms of where people fit in that threshold, but it is a very difficult clinical professional judgment. We have very good people doing it, in terms of behavioural science, but it is a very difficult judgment to make.

Q60 Rehman Chishti: On that point, there are experts, like Peter Neumann at King's College London, and they say you get categories of individuals who are disturbed, disillusioned and quite clearly dangerous. You have the three Ds there on that. The point I make with regards to this—I am trying to understand from you and from the investigations you have, what it takes to flip that individual from having so much hatred towards individuals, based on their faith, to then carrying out an attack. I am not saying in this case that it would or not. We saw it from the judgment last year. It is like that. People get sucked in by what they see of extremist material and they go out and do it. We will do our jobs, go out there on the train, day in day out, but what needs to be done to help address some of that threat?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: A couple of things. Unlike terrorists who work as cells or work as groups of individuals where the prevalence of mental illness in those groups is the same as normal society, we see a much higher incidence of mental health and mental illness problems in the lone actor space—that is the Thomas Mairs and the Darren Osbornes of this world. You ask me what it takes to flip into that—normally it is a sense of vulnerability, a sense of personal grievance, and perhaps an underlying mental health problem or an addiction.

What is disturbing—and you quite rightly point this out—is the speed at which, if you are vulnerable and you lack protective factors in your life, you can be influenced by online material. One of the great pillars of Prevent is to try to get this stuff off social media. You asked a question about factors. My personal view is that the growth of social media in this area, and people being able to do such things, is probably the greatest single difference in terms of ramping up a terrorist threat, regardless of the ideology. We have to be as clinical in trying to get the hateful stuff removed from the extreme right-wing as we have been from Islamists.



- Q61 **Rehman Chishti:** Can I clarify two things, if I may? What roles and responsibilities do other agencies and organisations have or should have in preventing far-right extremism?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Do you want to be specific?

- Q62 **Rehman Chishti:** Yes, of course. I have given you the example of social media. There is material on there, and some people get sucked in by what they see online. You have answered one point; some of them do not read what is written. The reason I got this tweet was after I had put up a picture of the Bishop of Rochester who was campaigning for religious freedom in Pakistan for a Christian mother who was being persecuted under the blasphemy laws, and the person says to me that all I care about is Pakistani Muslims. Obviously he has not read what I have put on there, so these people often do not read exactly what has been written. They want to believe what they want to believe.

In relation to the social media, you are doing what are you doing in intelligence agencies to get a grip on it, but that material is out there and it allows people to be sucked in. Those social media providers that you are working with, are they doing what they should be doing to prevent this far-right extremist material online?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes. I am glad you have been specific about social media providers because that is the greatest threat. If I had been sitting here a year ago or 18 months ago, prior to the first attack, I would have probably been calling them out. The reality is that 2017 was a shock and a watershed year for a lot of people. That includes big tech, but it does depend where you are in the world and where you are talking to these people. I think they have recognised that it is no longer good enough to say "We are platforms", when they are actually publishers and they realise they have to do something about it. I am not sure they are as match fit to do something about it as we all thought they might have been. Were they putting enough resource, effort and people into this problem? I am not sure they were. I think they are stepping up.

The Government have an ongoing relationship with us. When I say "us", I mean Counter Terrorism Policing and MI5. They are coming much more to the table and doing something about it. Twitter is a great example of that. In the first quarter of this year they took down 1.9 million pieces of violent extremist ideology. None of the big players want any kind of criminal content on their platforms. They have been very clear about that. They are trying to do more about it.

My big plea to them is, "When you are taking stuff down"—and they are now starting to use automated artificial intelligence techniques to do that—"it is okay spotting it and taking it down, but if you don't read it and you don't understand what it is, then you don't understand what the underlying threat is, and if you don't report it to us that is a real gap in intelligence". The aspiration has to be—for all of them, and for us—that



the stuff does not get uploaded in the first place, so that is where we want AI to be.

Q63 **Chair:** Do they not report it to you?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: They have not always done that. They are beginning to recognise that that is a gap. We press them to take stuff down, but some of their systems do not have a human eye running over them and that is the difficulty. Unless they change their business model to do that, that would be a problem for us. We do put pressure on them to say, "Report what you take down". I think Mark reported to this Committee one example where bomb making instructions had, quite rightly, been spotted, flagged and taken down. But they had not reported it and it took several months for that to come to us due to a post-incident investigation.

Q64 **Chair:** Given what you know they are supposed to be trying to do at the moment, would it shock you if there were still National Action videos available on Twitter or Facebook or YouTube?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: It would not shock me. I know there still are. What keeps happening—this is well above my capability in terms of IT, but this is my point about trying to stop stuff being uploaded in the first place—is that once it is uploaded, unless it is taken down almost instantaneously or immediately, it is very often copied, hyperlinked to somewhere else and then re-posted as soon as we have taken something down.

It isn't just the companies taking it down; it is other people immediately re-posting it—it is a bit like painting the Forth Road Bridge. We need better AI to enable us to do that, and the utopia—I have no idea how far away this is; you would have to get real experts in to discuss it—is that at some point we have to get to the position where it is taken down. Effectively, anyone trying to upload something will not be able to upload it because it hits lots of particular flags, but creating an algorithm for that is incredibly difficult. That is what the experts tell us.

Q65 **Chair:** They have quite a lot of money, mind.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: They have, and I say the same thing, "You definitely have the resources. You definitely have some of the best brains in the world". What they do need—and this is something we need as well—is that there isn't a body of research in the same way that there is for serial murderers or paedophiles, so you are looking at creating an algorithm that tells you what terrorist behaviour is. We need a better understanding of what the behavioural triggers would be to create an algorithm for a company to first, spot when somebody is reengaging or, secondly, spot when stuff is going on. I am not talking about the very obvious. There is a lot of very obvious material that goes on that is very easy to spot and their robotics can take down. There is a lot of other stuff that does not quite get to that threshold. I would like to see them taking



extremism that does not cross criminal thresholds seriously, although I might be criticised for it not being my place to say so.

- Q66 **Stephen Doughty:** Assistant Commissioner, literally, as you were speaking, I have just gone on to YouTube and Twitter, as I have done in some of these sessions before. I immediately found Tommy Robinson for PM, pictures of Members of this House, the BAME community, describing them as anti-white British, and then material from the Democratic Football Lads Alliance, all promoting Tommy Robinson's speech—absolutely blatant far-right content—straightaway on YouTube and Twitter and no doubt it would be on Facebook as well.

When I complained about abuse that had been targeted towards me, Facebook admitted to me that it holds a different standard for abuse targeted at public figures. Despite what you have said, do you think that they are getting this and taking action?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Just to be sympathetic with your point, the courts used to hold police officers to a different standard when they were assaulted on duty. I found that particularly reprehensible but that was the case at the time.

In policing we distinguish between the far-right and extreme right-wing, so where it crosses a criminal threshold that is when we get involved and we start dealing with it and, of course, we have to put it in front of the Crown Prosecution Service. It has to cross a high bar and, because we are right into the emotive area of free speech and censorship, it becomes very difficult. Bear in mind where these companies are registered. Bear in mind that the vast majority are registered in the United States, where freedom of speech is the cornerstone of that particular democracy. It becomes very difficult to have a conversation with them about thresholds and where they set their thresholds.

Far-right activity is not necessarily criminal. It might be abhorrent. I grew up in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in this country with the National Front. I had a particularly hard time as a child, so I am very sympathetic with anyone who has to face this kind of stuff, day in day out, but there are thresholds. If we took everything that was on social media as a threshold, there are not enough taxes in the world to pay for the police force you would need, and that would be large enough to investigate and prosecute. That is why I think there should be some societal pressure about having a conversation that is not criminal but where, in the non-criminal space, we challenge as opposed to censor.

- Q67 **Stephen Doughty:** Specifically, in that regard, do you think it was appropriate that Lord Pearson and Gerard Batten invited Stephen Yaxley-Lennon here to Parliament yesterday to sit and dine and promoted it all over social media?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: That is a political judgment I would rather not comment on.



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Q68 **Stephen Doughty:** It is these sorts of things that are driving these debates. Could you concede that?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes.

Q69 **Douglas Ross:** Your predecessor told this Committee last year about social media, "They do some good work with us". You said about five minutes ago, "If I was sat here a year ago I would have been calling them out". Who is correct?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Sorry, Mark said—

Q70 **Douglas Ross:** Your predecessor said they do some good work with your team and you were saying if you were in his seat last year you would have been—to quote you—"Calling them out".

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes, and so did Mark. We were both of the view that some good work is not good enough and the answer I gave was: there is more work to do.

Q71 **Douglas Ross:** What you have been speaking about is work that they have done in the last year. What was he speaking about last year that was the good work? Because you were very clear to my colleagues that you would have been calling them out. You had no caveats to that.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Calling them out to do more. Hopefully, you are familiar with our Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit. That has engaged with 300 companies since it was founded back in 2010 and 308,000 pieces of terrorist ideology have been removed from the internet. All of that has been done through voluntary co-operation with those 300 companies, of which the vast majority sit on the big platforms. Those big companies have listened when we have flagged stuff to them and they have taken stuff down.

What we needed was more than that. We needed what Twitter managed this year. We needed them, with their resources and their brains, to come up with techniques that mean they could take stuff down en masse. I would rather my CTIU was not ploughing through the internet every day looking for pieces of terrorist material. I would rather they were investigating.

Q72 **Douglas Ross:** Have they worked well enough together to meet the needs of your team?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: No. That would have been another good thing to call them out on a year ago but now I think this is not a matter for policing. I think the Government have got them together to start discussing how they can be more formidable as a force and share technologies, particularly when we—

Q73 **Douglas Ross:** They are not doing that yet?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes, I think they are.



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Q74 **Douglas Ross:** As well as they could? You don't think there is a problem.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: My experts would tell me that they are stepping up and certainly, in my conversations with them, they have been much more positive than ever that they need to step up in this space.

Q75 **Douglas Ross:** Sorry, I am not following you. I just want to be clear for our evidence. Are they doing enough or do they need to step up, because you have said both and I just cannot quite follow what one you mean?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: A year ago I would have told them to step up.

Q76 **Douglas Ross:** No, particularly on sharing information and sharing algorithms and so on. Are they doing enough between these different companies who are competitors to share any good algorithms and so on to take down similar material, or are they still acting in silos, so that therefore you could maybe get it off Facebook but not Twitter and so on?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: I do not think they are acting in silos anymore but that is new behaviour post-2017. That is where they have stepped up.

Whether or not that is a continual iterative accelerated process or not, I do not know. I cannot answer that question, but what I want to do is maintain good relationships with them because we cannot do this by ourselves. We cannot do this necessarily by legislation because it depends where they are in the world, but that is a matter for Government. What we do need to do is through co-operation, and calling them out continually in public I am not sure is the best way to get that co-operation long-term.

I think they are sitting in rooms together wondering how they can do this. I am not saying for one second that is because they have all of a sudden developed this huge social conscience. There will be an obvious corporate responsibility to the people who fund them to make sure that they are not damaging their reputations by hosting this stuff. They are not stupid. I think they get entirely that corporate reputations stand or fall on this, and 2017 was a huge wakeup call for them in that regard.

Q77 **Douglas Ross:** You have touched on it already, the digital hash where things come down automatically so they never appear online and potentially have not been seen by a human eye. How big is that problem? Can you quantify it? Obviously, you have not seen them. You have given one example where you had an investigation, and you ultimately went back to your post that had automatically been removed before giving instructions. Do you have an estimate of what percentage of these ones that come down automatically should be referred to you that aren't?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: No, I am sorry I do not.

Q78 **Douglas Ross:** So how can you say it is a problem?



Assistant Commissioner Basu: Because we have specific examples of where it has happened.

Q79 **Douglas Ross:** But how big a problem is it?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: I cannot give you a percentage on that. I can go back to my experts and ask.

Q80 **Douglas Ross:** I think we need that because, if we are to encourage these companies to share this information with you—I know you are doing that as well—we need to know how big a problem it is. I would assume it is quite a big problem. How do you balance up the issue between making sure this content does not appear online and people don't see it, and ensuring that some people do see it so that it is reported and the perpetrators are brought to justice? Because, again, your predecessor has mentioned how the internet is going darker. It is hampering your efforts yet there is a public safety element to it as well.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: That last point is really important. There is a displacement effect obviously by getting rid of it in the first place, whereby we are less likely to see the threat, and less likely to see the person that we can go and arrest and interdict. The scale of the problem is so large that I would rather, on balance, make sure that there was as little out there as possible.

The other thing is that deflection tends to deflect to much smaller platforms with much narrower reach. That has to be a good thing for all of us because of the kind of vulnerabilities we were talking earlier on—whether you are very young, whether you have personal grievances and a lack of protective factors around you, or whether you are mentally ill, the easier it is for you to access the material, the worse it is for all of us. The deflection point for me is: I would rather be in that space.

In terms of the scale of the problem, well, if Twitter can take down 1.9 million pieces in three months, I would not describe it as "quite big". I would describe the whole problem as being very big. Where I cannot give you exact figures is, I don't know of that 1.9 million how many of those were fantastic quality pieces of serious terrorist material that had to be removed, or whether it was all swept up by the algorithm. I cannot get that because I don't own that information—Twitter owns that information—but it is still a fantastic step in the right direction.

My point about trying to get these people to work with us is that it is a clear demonstration of a major provider wanting to do something positive. I want to keep encouraging them to do that, not continue to call them out.

Q81 **Chair:** We would completely understand your perspective on this. We, perhaps, do not feel quite so constrained by the pressure not to call them out. In terms of understanding the facts about what is happening, are you saying that they are sharing information—that they are sharing visual images and so on across platforms? Because previously when we have



pursued this they weren't. We had YouTube recognising that a video was illegal, but they are not sharing that with Facebook and Twitter who were then not taking the same thing down.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: I will get you an answer to that question because I cannot say it off the top of my head. What I do know is the big six sit in a room together discussing these problems. I do not know what kind of solution they have reached because that is a meeting that is organised by the industry itself—it is not a meeting I am in. I will get an answer to that particular question. I hope that we have reached that point.

As part of the policing service we run a filtering list. We run a filtering list for all kinds of other agencies, not just other media companies, and that list includes shared imagery that we would want taken down, so we are currently running that filtering list.

In an ideal world, you are quite right, we would want those organisations to be running and managing that filtering list among themselves. I don't know whether they are doing that yet but I would be interested to ask them the question.

Q82 **Chair:** Would you expect them to be, though? This feels pretty basic to us. If we have something that everybody agrees is illegal, if it appears on one platform it is just sharing the technology so that it can be automatically taken down from other platforms as well. That feels like the first basic steps to dealing with this.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: I totally agree. I agree that is basic. I would expect them to be doing that. I hope they are. Certainly all of them agree with the fact that where it is clearly illegal content they want it removed, and those big six have been co-operating with our CTIU consistently. Obviously we have lots of problems with much smaller platforms who are very difficult to engage with, but the big companies, who have the biggest influence in this area, have been co-operating so, yes, I would expect them to be doing that basic thing. I will get you a definitive answer on it.

Q83 **Chair:** That would be helpful. The other thing we found when we pursued this some time ago was that YouTube in particular told us it was not doing as much on far-right extremism and illegal material. It had put a lot of investment into Islamist extremism but not far-right extremism. Is that your perception or do you think that YouTube is now dealing appropriately with all threats?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: We are certainly asking YouTube to deal appropriately with all threats, just as we are asking ourselves to deal appropriately with all threats. I think counter-terrorism policing has always been very clear that, regardless of the ideology, we want to fight it and take it down. We have been very clear about that. We now know that MI5 and JTAC have joined that particular fray, and we are working in



exactly the same way as we have worked against the Islamist jihadist threat for a long period of time against the extreme right-wing threat.

We are back in the “Where is the grey area?” If it is criminal; absolutely. If it isn’t criminal I think everyone is struggling with: what does that mean for censorship? I think those big companies will be wondering what that means for corporate social responsibility and moral duty versus what is criminal, and versus their other duties as a non-censoring platform in a democracy. I have some sympathy with that. I do not have an answer to that. I would like to see in particular the stuff you read out not be available to large sections of the community. Unfortunately, if it does not break the law, I cannot do anything about that, but society should stand up and challenge it.

Q84 Chair: Part of the reason we wanted to ask you so much about far-right extremism is because this is part of an inquiry we are close to concluding around hate crime. You referred to the links between hate crime and far-right extremism. Could you say a little bit more about that?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: It might be a bit of a personal view and you would probably want to ask criminologists, but I would have thought that as a proxy for where the country is going in terms of tolerance, rising hate crime must be seen as a very disturbing indicator.

Where I see the biggest rise of that hate crime is in religiously aggravated offending. We only started recording that properly in policing, and really enforced it in 2015, so it is very early to be definitive about trends, but a 40% increase last year—that is not recording practice; that is an increase in offending. I think that is my big concern. What I also know, because community leaders tell us this, is that that kind of hate crime—whether it is Islamophobia or anti-Semitism—fuels a personal grievance as well, so not only is it wrong but it is contributing to people who might be vulnerable to be drawn into Islamist jihadism—people who have not yet made up their mind but are thinking, “Hang on, it is one rule for them and it is one rule for me”. It might be pushing them over the edge, and that is a deep concern to me.

Q85 Chair: Therefore, you would see tackling hate crime as also being about preventing escalating extremism of all kinds as well?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes. I think stopping hate crime is one of the most important things police officers can do. I am all about threat, harm and risk. There has been quite a lot of media comment about how we have been diverted towards hate crime. I think that media comment is largely around people who have never experienced it or have not experienced it on a daily basis. They do not understand how pernicious it is, and they probably do not understand what the long-term consequences of it are, which is a divided society. Forget counter-terrorism policing—hate crime has all kinds of consequences for crime full stop.



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Q86 **Chair:** What do you see as being the main targets for far-right extremism, in terms of the kinds of investigations and the kinds of cases that you have seen?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: We have talked about the threat to individual politicians that we have seen. One of the most common threats is public order-related violence, which quite often has not been instigated by the far-right, because effectively they are promoting a political message that is not criminal but that effectively attracts a great deal of counter protest. It is the counter protest that has developed into public order situations, so that is a danger. That is not in the national security threshold but it is where you get to the promoting of a race war—effectively promoting a white supremacist cult and using violence to achieve those means. Then you are absolutely getting into a national security threshold and that was National Action. Effectively, that was the intelligence that underpinned that proscription, and that is what we were seeing.

I am very grateful to live in a country where that is still the minority of the problem. I certainly do not want my organisation to be complacent and let that get out of hand. That is probably where we were 15 or 16 years ago with ALM. This is my point: where is the criminal threshold and where is the tolerance of extremist behaviour and how long do you let that continue before it becomes a national security threat? That is a difficult judgment.

Q87 **Chair:** Finally, on the issue about the policing response to threats to public figures, and the practical police response to threats from the ground, are you aware of the failures that there have been in the West Yorkshire Police investigation of threats to Paula Sherriff?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: I am not, I am afraid. I have not been briefed on that at all.

Q88 **Chair:** Could I ask you to look into that and to come back to the Committee, because we have had evidence—and I think it is in the public domain—about far-right threats to Paula Sherriff, with long and quite unacceptable delays in the investigation by West Yorkshire Police, and some mistakes in the handling of the investigation as well. Given that this is obviously the next door constituency to Jo Cox's constituency, we would expect the police to take it extremely seriously. That would be very helpful.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes. I know the Chief Constable very well. I will speak to her. I have not been personally briefed on that, but that is not something we would ever want to hear.

Q89 **John Woodcock:** You said in your opening remarks that we should talk much more about Prevent, so let's talk about Prevent. Before you were in post earlier this year you spoke quite radically about the toxicity of Prevent, and how it ought to be housed outside of Government and it ought to be independently reviewed. Is that still your view and what are



you doing?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Whether Prevent is independently reviewed or not is a matter for Government, but I will be very clear about what I meant by that. Prevent is—and I said it right at the start—the most important pillar of the strategy if we want to see some reduction in threat in the long-term. Certainly, my people on the frontline tell me that when they go out to try to talk about Prevent in communities it becomes very difficult. I think the argument we thought previously was taking place was that toxicity was confined to small groups of people who had every reason to try to stop Prevent as a tactic. I think that has had a more pernicious effect in wider communities. The toxification of Prevent has happened in wider communities, so we need to rescue the image of Prevent and we need to talk positively about it.

The reason I was talking about an independent review is because we need good cross-party consensus on Prevent tactics, understanding exactly what happens in Prevent, and understanding that at its heart it is a safeguarding function, which we have been brilliant at over many decades in all kinds of multi-agency approaches. This is not just the police; we as multi-agencies are dealing with the safeguarding of children, which has become a complete mantra for everywhere from schools to health to policing to local authorities. We need to understand that that is what Prevent is about and, every time somebody calls Prevent toxic and tries to come up with a new brand or a new set of tactics, the tactics are exactly the same as the ones that are currently in place. I am not sure that changing the brand of something when the tactics are the same is a particularly wise thing to do. What it does need is more positive voices around it.

Q90 **John Woodcock:** What should be different about the tactics?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Nothing. That is what I am saying. The current Prevent tactics, which are about safeguarding vulnerable people, should stay exactly the same. People have come to me and said, “You have to change the name of Prevent”, but they have not come up with any new tactics. The tactics they come up with are often exactly the same tactics that are currently being employed, which is about working with grassroots organisations, with vulnerable people in communities, and Prevent is voluntary. It is working with people who want to be involved with Prevent to give them a different view on life. Those tactics are very sound, work very effectively, and speaking to those grassroots providers in communities would give people a different view of Prevent.

Q91 **John Woodcock:** Do you think that part of the problem has been that people in positions of responsibility—senior police officers, Members of Parliament—have not been prepared to talk up the good of what Prevent is trying to do?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes, absolutely. I do not think that that is a fantastic way forward either because, unfortunately, the people who



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are using the message that "Prevent is toxic and you should steer clear of it" are also promoting the message that, "Of course, the state would say that". Me saying that it is a positive thing—and it is and that is what I am saying—does not have the same effect as an impressive local community leader saying the same thing. We do need to make sure that we have a lot of different voices.

I am particularly energised by the fact that we have a Mayor of London who called it the only show in town. I am particularly energised that when the new Home Secretary launched CONTEST four, the percentage of his speech about Prevent and some very moving words about Prevent showed how important it was to the new CONTEST strategy.

The new Prevent delivery plan that is part of that CONTEST four deserves to be looked at in detail, so, yes, I think politicians and senior police officers should talk positively about it. Simon Cole is my lead for Prevent. He talks positively about it all the time and he is also all over social media talking about it. My point is that that has not been enough. We have left a vacuum where we do not have enough community voices—not state voices—talking positively about it.

Q92 John Woodcock: Do you have confidence beyond what you have said? I can understand why you have set this very important, positive example, but is there an infrastructure in place that could deliver a plan to get sufficient numbers of those voices to change the tide of perceptions?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes, I am confident that the plan exists, because I have read it in detail, and I reread it when preparing for this, just to check that I agree with it. I do. I think it is a pretty comprehensive plan. I have a great deal of respect for the director of Prevent in Home Office OSCT. He works very closely with my national co-ordinator and with Simon Cole. We do have a joined-up piece around this. Of course it needs to be well resourced and of course it is really difficult. I am calling for moderate, influential community voices to stand up and back Prevent.

I understand how difficult that is when you are living in that community. We have talked about hate speech on the internet. These people are threatened. There are threats to life as a result of standing up and supporting it. They need to know that they have the support of the state behind them. That does not often help them because it adds petrol to the problem. I am sympathetic.

The plan is there. It needs to be properly resourced and it needs to be directed into the areas where it most counts. We all have limited resources, but that is one of the crucial bits of Prevent. We need to stop leaving this vacuum for people who would seek to attack it to come in. I would much rather see that it had cross-party support. This Committee is a good place to look at it. I think Dominic Reid may be writing to this Committee to ask you to do exactly that.



Q93 **John Woodcock:** Interesting. Thank you. Can I ask you briefly about Anjem Choudary, and could you say a little about the operational cost of keeping the public safe from the harm he could do? We have heard a lot about a monetary figure, but talk to us about the operational costs and resources of doing that.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes. I really like the fact that my predecessor called them “grooms” the other day, because that is what they are. They are looking to influence vulnerable people. Every minute that we spend having to look at somebody like that is a minute taken away from a priority operation with an external threat. It is not a great position to be in, but nevertheless that particular organisation that he works for—and you will note I refuse to use his name in public—is of significant concern to us as a counter-terrorism community. We want to make sure that all the great work that went into breaking that organisation and breaking their momentum last year is maintained.

Q94 **John Woodcock:** Australia has recently introduced legislation that caused post-sentence preventative detention of high-risk terrorist offenders. Would you find it useful if the UK had something like that on the statute book that would enable someone like Anjem Choudary to remain in custody rather than being released less than half-way through his sentence?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: I have a couple of comments on that. We need to be really careful what we talk about regarding legislation in terrorism. I am sympathetic to the view that every piece of terrorism legislation should go through huge scrutiny before it is put on the statute book, and then when it is on the statute book it should continue to go under extreme scrutiny. Once you have had attacks it is always a really dangerous place to start talking about legislation; I have no doubt about that.

You are hearing testimony on the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill, and I am on the record giving evidence to the Bill Committee. That was fine tuning, but one of the fine tunings was significant sentences for preparatory acts—increased sentencing for certain crimes that we have seen through our experience have been preparatory to major offending. They are not minor acts, but quite often we have to intervene much earlier. The point that some of our radicalisers are getting short sentences, coming out early, and being able to continue is a problem, as is not having sufficient resources in place to use desistance or disengagement programmes.

It is good that the Government have invested in one of those programmes for convicted terrorists, and to allow them to try to disengage terrorists from terrorist ideology and offending. That has had mixed success around the world, but we need to continue looking at that. Continuing to lock people up when they have served their time, and where there is no current, existing intelligence that they are offending, is a real problem for society. I would not support that.



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Q95 **John Woodcock:** That is interesting. Thank you. Finally, I promise, are you content that so few returnees from Syria have been prosecuted?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: The reality is we have had very few returnees where we have had a case where we could prosecute. The difficulty is, if I do not have the evidence to prosecute them then I do not have the evidence to know whether they are guilty or not. A lot of the people who came back in the early days had gone for reasons that are not my concern, really. The 40% that came back quickly are not my concern. My real concern is the people who are back who are hardened terrorists, who are fighting and are committed to that fight. Should they seek to come back, or should they start to come back, they are a huge concern. That is the big national-security threat, and we need to ensure we have good evidence around them. That is not always simple.

Q96 **John Woodcock:** I absolutely understand that someone who was trained to fight is a bigger risk than someone who has come back. However, is it not a concern that people that have been able to go and support what is clearly a terrorist organisation working against a British state are allowed to return, and are not being prosecuted because of insufficient evidence?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes, it is absolutely a concern. One of the Australian pieces of legislation that is well worth looking at is the designated area offence, but that is not going to be retrospective. It is a lesson learned from Syria, but for future conflict we should definitely consider that.

Q97 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Turning now to the question of funding, we have a Budget obviously coming up, so it is an ideal opportunity for you to set out your shopping list. You have already spoken about one issue where I think you said a longer-term funding settlement is needed. How does it work just now, and what sort of length of funding settlement would you be looking for?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: It would be easy to have a funding settlement that was over five years and was manoeuvrable. I have two huge ICT projects that are fundamental to how we gather, store, structure and analyse data. Having to go back every year for the next increment of funding to fund projects that need to be planned over multi-year timeframes is very difficult. Having to go back every 12 months to fund recruitment, which often takes longer than that, particularly in my sphere because of vetting criteria, is very difficult.

It is a bit analogous: when I was a barrack commander I remember a lot of charities that we were supporting at the time would spend nine of their 12 months fighting to get funding just to survive for the next year. I find it a bit like that. I have been in counter-terrorism for four years. I cannot think of a time when I did not have to provide a demand analysis or budget on a yearly basis while still fighting the threat at the tempo I have described. I am not sure that is a great model, so that is why I have said that a longer-term funding settlement would be useful.



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I prefer doing my negotiations behind closed doors and not in public. What I have found this year, particularly because everyone has been so shocked by 2017, is a very sympathetic ear. What used to feel a bit like having my homework marked is now much more of a team effort. In terms of my lead department in the Home Office, do they understand the demand? I have my colleagues in MI5 to thank for this, because, of course, a lot of that demand analysis comes from the TS space and has to be shared.

We have very detailed metrics that talk about the demand, so although I give you broad figures in public, we know in detail what it is costing us, how much it is costing us, what the unit cost is, and just exactly what the threat tempo looks like. We have been through that alongside the Home Office in fine detail, and they recognise the pressure we are under. I have no doubt whatsoever that this Home Secretary, this Permanent Secretary, this Director General and their finance teams understand exactly the pressure we are under.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is encouraging.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: It is very encouraging.

Q98 **Stuart C. McDonald:** While I appreciate you wanting to have most of these discussions behind closed doors, I have to probe you a little bit further in public, I am afraid. You have spoken about 700 investigations ongoing, and if I understand correctly there are around 20,000 people who have previously been investigated and who could conceivably still pose a threat. That is clearly resource intensive. Basically you are saying that more resources are needed, but you are confident of securing them this time around.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: We made the case for increased resources last year as part of the National Security Capability Review. It was accepted that those resources would be required, but we got a one-off settlement for that year. That is what has created the problem. Effectively we got that funding settlement for this year, it has created the space for us to grow, and I am recruiting at speed because of that. What I did not get was that backed into the baseline for next year. Effectively my baseline for next year will collapse. What I need is the baseline to be effectively what we need to sustain the network that we need to grow. That is more people, and intelligence, and investigations.

Pressure on surveillance and digital media exploitation is huge. It is the money to underpin the ICT programmes to make us better at the way we deal with data, which was a fundamental conclusion of the operational improvement review. These are the things. As I said, I do not have to argue those points with the Home Office; they accept that that is what is required. Now what is required is a Treasury that is sympathetic.

Q99 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Yes, sure. You have also said that your work depends on well-resourced local police forces, and I think that is a point



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your predecessor also made. I think we have some fears, based on evidence we received during our Policing for the Future inquiry, that local police forces are really struggling with resources to do all the work that is being asked of them. Is that a discussion that you have been involved in as well, about the importance of increased funding for local police forces?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Absolutely. Do not forget, in my position I represent 43 Chief Constables, nine of which sit on the Counter-Terrorism Committee. They are the Chief Constables who lead for their regions in counter-terrorism, but they also run police forces. I am very much aware that across those 43 forces there are some forces that have absolutely reached probably the bottom of where they can be. You might call it efficiency, in terms of what they have managed to reduce their budgets to. I would not necessarily call it effective.

If I was parochial and just talked about Counter Terrorism Policing—Mark commissioned a very good piece of work post Westminster and Manchester that asked, “What was the total cost and what were the types of resources used in the opening hours, and opening days, and opening weeks of those two particular attacks?” and 70% plus of that was nothing to do with Counter Terrorism Policing. It does not matter how confident I am about my budget. If wider policing is not well resourced we are not going to be able to cope with an attack. Salisbury is a great example; 42 forces provided resources to keep the Salisbury investigation going, and that was nothing to do with my detectives. Nine regional counter-terrorism units provided 250 detectives, but the vast majority of the police forces in this country all had to supply local officers to man cordons.

Of course, there is a wider piece there about community reassurance. We know from our own polling in Counter Terrorism Policing that, when the public want to report something suspicious and they are nervous about it, the first people they are going to turn to are their local police. We are really proud of the fact that policing is right up there with the top two people. If you cannot turn to your family, you will turn to local policing. It is local policing, not Counter Terrorism Policing or the anti-terrorism hotline. It is local policing.

When we talk about “local to global” that is what we mean. We mean the local bobby on the beat in his or her community speaking to the community every day, giving them confidence that policing is on their side, taking reports, all the way up to my counter-terrorism police liaison officers in 50 countries worldwide. We need that kind of stretch in order to defeat what we are currently facing.

Q100 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Following up on one of the points you just made there, the Home Secretary in a similar vein spoke about resources having to be focused in locations where a threat from terrorism and radicalisation is the highest. How do you go about doing that, and how easy is it to move funds to where they are needed, given the speed and pace of change?



Assistant Commissioner Basu: How easy is it to do that? Not easy, because of the pace. That is the same with funding new capabilities. We do need to be much more agile, which is the point about having long-term funding settlements to do that. It depends what you are talking about. If you are talking about Prevent, it is a Home Office, OSCT-led directive about where that goes. It should be done in consultation with Chief Constables and with Counter Terrorism Policing.

In terms of Pursue, I have said that the actual ratios of where the threat is have remained broadly consistent. If we see the threat rising in certain areas, we have a fantastic network that we have developed over 10 years and which, effectively within a day, we can deploy a whole range of Counter Terrorism Policing skills to an area to support them on an almost indefinite basis, depending on where the next threat comes from. That is the power of the network. The network is not all about Wales police having to cope by themselves; it is not all about West Midlands having to cope by themselves. They buddy up across borders, so they already have immediate resilience.

They also work interoperably with their organised crime colleagues, which was very important in 2017—my thanks go to Lynne Owens and her teams in the National Crime Agency, not just the regional organised crime units. We worked very effectively as a team there as well. There are nine counter-terrorism units, and the support of Police Scotland and the Police Service of Northern Ireland was incredibly effective as a way of surging when required.

Q101 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Very finally on the question of resources, and going back to the importance of the Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit, again, it is very resource-intensive. Do you have the funding that is required to do that job properly, and how much easier would it be, and how would that unit change what it is doing, if more of the burden was on the internet companies instead of your staff?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: I am in danger of reopening that very detailed debate again, so you have hit the nail on the head. Part of our growth bid was in that space, but I want that growth bid to be investigators, not flaggers of material. Yes, it would help us enormously were social media companies to take that burden away from us and just report things that we needed to investigate. What that unit has been very successful in doing is putting its operating method on the world stage. We know Europol copied it. That model is now in France, it is in Germany, it is in Spain, it is in Belgium, and I think it is in Italy as well, and we are trying to spread it worldwide.

Q102 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Does it have the financial resources it needs?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: It was part of the growth bid of last year, so yes, if we get the settlement that we want—and as I said I have a lead department that is sympathetic—it will have the resources that it needs. It would be greatly assisted by your point.



Q103 **Stephen Doughty:** You have mentioned the costs and implications of the Salisbury case a number of times in your evidence so far, Commissioner. Obviously, we have seen also the horrific Khashoggi case that took place in Turkey. I am certainly aware of individuals who were alleged to have been involved in that having been in this building—in fact in my office just above here—and other individuals perhaps operating for foreign states have been in and out of this building on a number of occasions. Could you give us an idea of the scale of the threat that we face from foreign state agents potentially involved in acts of terror, hybrid attacks, or indeed, just plain murder and assassination?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: I cannot, because it is not my place to give that assessment; it is the Security Services'.

Q104 **Stephen Doughty:** What about in terms of the resources that are required from you to potentially have to deal with those situations?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Huge. Salisbury was probably the most complicated, most resource-intensive case of my career. Huge.

Q105 **Stephen Doughty:** Okay. Are you concerned about the safety of individuals attending embassies and consulates here in London, perhaps with high-profile figures going into them, journalists and others? Are there risks to the public or individuals who might be living in the UK, perhaps in a safe haven, from states operating on our soil here in London?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: It would be very difficult to give a general view about whether there was a threat, other than to say we work on specific intelligence. There is not currently specific intelligence against individuals. If there was we would deal with that specific intelligence. Certainly, when Salisbury happened, there was a need to understand whether there was a threat to other potential people who might have connections or problems with the state—hostile state activity. If individuals have concerns and come forward we deal with them on an individual, case-by-case basis. I think the point you are making is: if that ramped up so that we had to protect a lot of individuals, is that costed into our current resourcing model? The answer to that is that it is not. This is all additional work.

Q106 **Stephen Doughty:** I host a meeting of, for example, Chechen individuals who are very critical of the Russian regime in here. I am sure many of us have hosted individuals who would be of interest to outside influences. Are you concerned that there are allegedly individuals operating in here who have not gone through the proper security clearances, and of the backlog of security clearances for access to this place that exist at the moment?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: I am not sure how to answer that in a public forum. I would say this: I think we have possibly the best security services in the world. They are the people who monitor that kind of intelligence. If they had concerns about specific individuals they would be



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asking—in the same way we do with all other threats; we act as a partnership—the police to lead on investigation, and they would lead on intelligence. I cannot answer what the intelligence picture looks like. I can only answer what I know, which is: have I been asked to do specific investigations? I am absolutely convinced that we would have that kind of partnership.

Q107 **Stephen Doughty:** Okay. That partnership exists with the services here?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes, absolutely.

Q108 **Chair:** Going back to the threats that you raised at the beginning and the attacks from 2017, can I ask you about one of the London Bridge attackers who was stopped at Bologna Airport and prevented from travelling to Turkey, and whose name was on the Schengen system? We obviously had the Manchester bomber, who was known to intelligence agencies and who travelled repeatedly between Libya and the UK in the period before the attack. How were these individuals still able to travel freely in and out of the UK? Are you concerned about the interaction between some of this intelligence and the work of the Border Force?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: This is about watch listing, and who goes on the watch list is a Security Service responsibility. It is about the policy that underpins who goes on the watch list and under what criteria. They have answered that in detail in front of the Intelligence and Security Committee on both of those issues. There is no doubt whatsoever that the interaction between Border Force, Security Services, Counter Terrorism Policing, National Crime Agency and wider policing has to be as tight as possible. Is it perfect? No, it is not. It needs work, there is no doubt about it, and it probably needs resourcing. There are a lot of reasons why that needs to improve rapidly.

Q109 **Chair:** In those cases your view is that this was simply about decisions on whether these individuals should have been on watch lists, as opposed to any wider failure of communication between the Border Force and the police, or the way in which other organisations responded?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes. In the Salman Abedi case it was a matter of policy that he was not watch-listed when he went to Libya. That was a policy decision that was taken at the time. Whether or not that was the correct policy decision or not, it was a decision that was rationalised against that policy. That policy has changed, so effectively what we now see is a policy that says there needs to be good reason why someone is not watch-listed, not the other way around, if that makes sense. Zaghba is different, because there was a problem in terms of the way he was watch-listed by the Italian authorities. He was on the wrong system. Effectively there were process failures that were individual failures, not policy failures.

Q110 **Chair:** Sticking with the issues about the interaction with the borders and moving between different countries, what is your assessment at the moment of the impact that Brexit will have on the counter-terrorism



work?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Not as dramatic as it will be for my core policing colleagues, because we do not work at the same volume. We work in a very high-niche, high-threat, low-volume space. We work very much on bilateral relationships that have developed over a long period of time, largely because, obviously, national security effectively is a state responsibility, not an EU responsibility. A lot of our relationships are security service to security service, and I am very proud to say Counter Terrorism Policing to our police counterparts; often that is a significant source of police-to-police co-operation.

We still need the same tools and techniques that I am sure you will have heard from Lynne and from Sara Thornton talking about what is actually required in the high-volume space—things like the ability to share data across borders. Terrorism, like any other crime, and probably more so than a lot of other crimes, is a cross-border, trans-national problem. It is not just through the internet; it is through the movement of people.

Passenger name records would be a huge issue for us were we to lose that particular facility. That would be very problematic. You want to keep your threat as far away as possible and to see it coming as soon as possible. That is what that gives us the ability to do. Shared investigations are really important; the joint-investigation team philosophy that we can work alongside our partners in Europe and discuss investigations. That is really important.

The future of Prüm and the sharing of biometric data is important because it is a cross-border crime. We have had good examples—and particularly from Five Eyes relationships, which are probably deeper and longer, simply because of how they started and when they started—of that sharing of biometric information in the terrorism space. We would want that in Europe as well.

Q111 **Stephen Doughty:** Arrest warrants?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes.

Q112 **Stephen Doughty:** We heard comments from the NCA yesterday, I think it was; very serious comments about that.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: That would have been my final point—the European Arrest Warrant. Again, because we work at a low volume we could still rely on Interpol Red Notices, and NALP procedures, and the 1957 Extradition Act. If you look at where European Arrest Warrants took us to in a matter of weeks—as opposed to many months, if not years, to extradite people—that is a sitting risk for that length of time. That has to be a problem.

We have been very clear with the Government about the operational requirements that are necessary for the security deal, and my understanding is—I have not seen the full security paper but my NPCC



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colleagues who are leading on it have—that contains everything we would require to be operationally match fit. It is now a matter for governments to negotiate that position.

Q113 **Chair:** As part of that, how significant is the SISII information system as part of that?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Again, for us it is still significant. We would argue SIS along with the EAW and Prüm passenger name records would be our real concerns in counter-terrorism. If we lost SIS it would be hugely problematic for core policing.

Q114 **Chair:** What preparation are you doing from the counter-terrorism point of view for a no-deal?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: My lead for that sits on the NPCC Committee, which is putting things in place in case we have no-deal. We also have our own separate committee that is looking at each one of those areas that I just described and saying, “What is it we would need to do to put ourselves back in a position to cope?” Bilateral relationships through the Security Service and our police-to-police relationships help, however; losing our NALPs in various countries around the world would be distressing.

Q115 **Chair:** Given the NAO report on the no-deal preparations that talks about loss of access to security tools creating security gaps, and how less information at the border to be able to intercept people is going to provide security risks—their estimate is that even if all mitigating actions are put in place, UK capabilities will still be reduced—do you think that having no deal will cause significant problems for counter-terror work?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Not as significant as my wider policing colleagues. Yes, it will be significant, but not as significant. The loss of some of those particular tools would be problematic for us, yes.

Q116 **Rehman Chishti:** Just following on from the point raised by my colleague John Woodcock, with regards to the returning fighters I understand there are around 400 British citizens who have gone to fight with Daesh and are now back in the United Kingdom. From your expertise and the information that you have, do you feel that you have an adequate handle on them, and have you been able to adequately identify how much of a danger they pose? Linked to that very point, there are also a dozen or so of those individuals—if you speak to experts, such as Peter Neumann from King’s College London—who are being held by the Kurdish forces. Given your point these are British citizens. Should they be brought back or should they be dealt with in that jurisdiction?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: On the first point, those that we know of have clearly become a source of investigation for us. Yes, I am satisfied we have coverage on the people that we know travelled and the people that we know returned. Let me be clear, I would be a foolish person—and I do not know anyone who would be foolish enough—to give



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a 100% guarantee that we had full coverage and we could stop everything. That is just not a possibility and not a real-world problem that we have.

Of course, two people from the closed space attacked us last year, so people that we no longer consider a national security threat are also a problem for us. If we consider them a national security threat they would be in the 3,000; they would be a priority operation for ourselves and MI5, and I would be very satisfied that we are doing the very best we can to give the highest level of assurance and coverage of those individuals. So if anyone is listening and wanted to come back to this country they will be targeted by the might of law enforcement and the security services in this country if they have proved to be a national security threat. Of course, that is assuming that we know everyone who travelled and everyone who came back. That is the difficulty.

On your second point, there is a very clear Government policy on whether people should come back or not. From a counter-terrorism, policing perspective every individual who comes back where we do not have a case to prosecute them becomes another priority operation and a significant threat, not least because they are removing resources from current operations. So if they have committed horrific offences against another country and another people, my view is they should be tried in the jurisdiction in which they have been arrested.

If they are sole British citizens and they have no other nationality then Government policy is clear—they have to come back here and they effectively become a national security risk. We have to look at whether we have a case to prosecute them. If we do not have a case to prosecute them they become an operation.

Q117 Rehman Chishti: Can I ask a question on that? You say it is Government policy that they should come back, but from a resource perspective, from a policing perspective, and from an intelligence perspective, would you say that they are better off being left out there and being dealt with in that jurisdiction rather than come back?

Assistant Commissioner Basu: From a resource perspective, yes. The moral perspective is a difficult one to argue. You cannot make someone stateless, we know that, so if you have a UK passport and you are a British citizen you are entitled to return to this country, but if you have committed atrocities in another country and you are capable of being tried in that country under their laws, that is where you should face justice.

Q118 Rehman Chishti: The first duty of the state is always to protect its citizens and do what you think is appropriate in that regard.

Assistant Commissioner Basu: Yes, it is.

Chair: Assistant Commissioner, thank you very much for the evidence that you have given us and for your time. I think there were a couple of



areas where it would be helpful if you were able to provide us with further information, including in response to Douglas Ross's question about the level of co-ordination between social media companies and some of the work that is under way. Also about the investigation into the threats against Paula Sherriff, and I would be particularly keen to understand whether the regional CTU has been involved, given it is obviously about far-right extremist threats.

The reason it would be very helpful if you could give us your assessment of that case is because this reflects a wider issue that we pick up, where the experience of public figures who are targeted does not quite fit with some of the things that you are saying about what the police intention is, in terms of providing support and pursuing investigations into some of those far-right threats as well.

Then any further information that you have on any of the points that we have raised would be extremely welcome as well. Thank you again, both for your evidence this afternoon but also through you to all of your teams as well for the hugely important work that you are doing, which is so important to public safety. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Sara Khan, Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism

Q119 Chair: I welcome Sara Khan to give evidence as the Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism. Could you set out for us first what you see as being the most important parts of your role and what you are prioritising at the moment?

Sara Khan: Firstly, thank you for inviting me to give evidence today, Chair.

I want to briefly set out, in order to answer your question, the work of the Commission. I was appointed in January. The Commission was formally launched in March. I bring to this role 10 years' worth of grassroots experience, having run a women's counter-extremism NGO. The Commission launched in March, as I said, and engagement underpins everything that the Commission does.

Over that length of time I have visited around 13 towns and cities across England and Wales. I have spoken to about 400 experts, activists, civil society groups and others and I have also set up an expert group to specifically advise and challenge the work of the Commission. The aim of the Commission is to help everyone do more to challenge extremism. I believe that extremism is a whole society problem; it therefore requires a whole society response.



We have set out—as is outlined in the Commission’s charter—the key objectives for this first year, which is to engage widely, produce a wide-ranging study into extremism, looking at all forms of extremism and to go back to the Home Secretary, and highlight and identify key recommendations and what role the Commission should play, and what should be its long-term function, its structure and so forth.

We published last month the terms of reference for the study. There are five key themes that we want to look at. That includes the scale of extremism in our country; the harm that extremism is having in our country; understanding and analysing the objectives and wider evolving tactics of extremists; understanding the public’s perception of extremism; and finally looking at the Government’s response to extremism in particular and also possibly reviewing their definition as well.

We have been very busy. We have held workshops with both supporters and critics alike and it has been very insightful, but I suppose for me personally what I have found really interesting is going around the country and hearing people’s experiences of extremism. I have to say that people in this country are deeply concerned about what they perceive to be rising extremism.

Q120 Chair: Can you talk about how far your focus is on Islamist extremism and how far on far-right extremism?

Sara Khan: I have made clear that this Commission has to look at all forms of extremism, so we know that the greatest threat comes from both Islamists and the far-right, but I have also spoken to academics, practitioners and others who have specialism in hard-left extremism, Sikh extremism, Hindu extremism, and so I am very keen to look at it in a very broad way. I think if you do it that way you start to see similar tactics that extremists employ. You start to see similar objectives that extremists use, and so I think that is really important. Again, I feel that having spoken to, for example, members of the Sikh community who are deeply concerned about what they perceive to be Sikh extremism, the intimidation and bullying that is happening within and among different Sikh communities, that is something that we should also look at. I feel the Commission has the responsibility to look at all forms of extremism.

Q121 Kate Green: You said a moment ago that you see tackling extremism as an issue for the whole of society—indeed that message was echoed recently by the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, who in response to the report that he had commissioned on tackling extremism and hate speech spoke about the wish in Greater Manchester to develop a new whole society approach. What do you think are the characteristics of such an approach?

Sara Khan: I think he is right that we have to have a whole society approach to it. Sir Mark Rowley, the former Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, also very much argued this point. Extremism impacts all of us, and it is one of those issues that cross over into so



many different areas. I see the role of schools and education, for example, as vital.

Teaching children critical thinking skills is important. Teaching children about equality and human rights and diversity, helping to build resilience among young children, is important. Schools and teachers have an incredibly important role to play. Faith leaders—and many of them are doing fantastic work in challenging extremism and challenging ideological narratives using theology. I have seen that in practice and I have seen how effective that is. Government, of course, have a role to play. The Government published a counter-extremism strategy back in 2015. There is the top-down approach but of course there is the bottom-up approach, which is the civil society response as well. What can civil society organisations be doing?

Again, I have met some incredible civil society groups who are either really actively exposing and challenging extremists, or those organisations that are working to build resilience.

What I would say is that having spoken to a number of different civil society organisations over the last few months just how much abuse they get for doing this work; the hostility, the backlash against people who are actively trying to challenge extremism, challenging bigotry and hatred. There is a really hostile climate out there facing counter-extremists, and others who then say to me, “We know that the work you are saying we need to do is important but when we look at the climate that exists out there we don’t want to put our head above the parapet.” I want to look at what more we can do to enable, empower and support counter-extremists, who I believe are the backbone of our country and our unsung heroes.

Q122 Kate Green: I would like to come back to that in a moment but, first of all, you talked about schools having a role, and education, civil society—all of which I think we agree with. You will be aware, I am sure, that in the report that was commissioned by Andy Burnham one of the things that his Commission identified was the real importance of investment in community resources that was highlighted in that report—for example, the lack of youth provision, which was having a detrimental effect on young people and therefore the potential for them to be drawn into terrorist activity. It noted the reductions in public services, of increased isolation and separation within and between communities. Do you agree that underinvestment in public services is an issue, and is that a point that you are raising with Government?

Sara Khan: I have obviously heard a number of these different concerns, particularly around youth. I was in Portsmouth recently where a youth worker was telling me that he worked with very vulnerable kids who are the type of kids who are going to be drawn into violence, knife crime, gang crime, possibly even being killed. He is working with those types of children and he said to me that he feels that organisations like his do not receive enough funding and enough support. He also felt that if the far-



right, “actually got their act together” in his particular area, he would have lost a generation of young kids.

This is something that I am deeply concerned about. One of the things that we want to examine as part of this study is a cross-cutting theme, which are the drivers of extremism. A lot of those issues will come up as we are gathering evidence over the next six months—something that we will be examining and looking at.

I have to say on the issue around poverty and things like that, the evidence shows us that the picture is very complex. There is no single answer. We have seen how people from middle class families who are very well-educated, who have been to university and are quite wealthy, have been drawn into extremism. Likewise, people who come from perhaps working class backgrounds or families do not necessarily end up in extremism. The picture is very complex but is something that we want to examine as part of our study.

Q123 Kate Green: When you talked a few moments ago about your five priorities, they came across as being very focused on behaviours around extremism and the ways in which people become drawn into extremist activity. There did not seem to be much focus on these community engagement strategies, and the way in which communities need to have the resources to support one another and to have confidence and trust between each other. You have now said that is something that you are taking an interest in, but why is it not explicit in these five priorities?

Sara Khan: I feel it is. I suppose, in terms of the idea around understanding extremist ideas and behaviour, I would put those under theme 1, which is the public’s understanding of extremism. The other themes, for example looking at the scale of extremism, is looking at particular indicators that will highlight to us, for example, the relationship between hate crime and extremism, understanding attitudes that people may have towards extremism, looking at incidences in regulated schools such as charities, and other regulated spaces, so trying to get that information in terms of scale.

In terms of community engagement, we are asking the public to contribute to our public call for evidence. We are launching the first ever consultation because I believe passionately that we should give the people in this country an opportunity to tell us what they are experiencing in their areas. What do they feel is contributing to extremism, either their experience as an individual but also what they are seeing in their towns and cities. We are going to be holding a number of different community engagement events and, as I said, I have been travelling around the country speaking to people because I feel very strongly that we need to hear from people themselves, and people have given me a whole range of different ideas of what they feel is driving extremism. Speaking to victims, speaking to counter-extremists, speaking to local authorities—I have had a number of productive



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meetings with the LGA, for example—is very important to me and we want to capture all that as part of the study.

Q124 Kate Green: Do you feel there is a lack of trust in authorities, in statutory agencies? I do not just mean criminal justice or security agencies, but perhaps other statutory agencies, for people to confide in or to raise their concerns not just about specific extremist behaviours but perhaps other risk factors that might lead people to feel isolated and become vulnerable.

Sara Khan: I think we are witnessing a growing distrust in our state institutions, and in our wider democracy as well. The Commission has begun an ongoing review of current academic literature into the harms of extremism. I have to say the evidence is quite limited, but what the evidence is showing us is that the harms of extremism are resulting in social exclusion, isolation, the breakdown of community cohesion—justification for violence but also a kind of distrust in our institutions. Particularly for the police and local authorities what concerns me is how extremists thrive in that particular situation, but also how they can drive extremism even further. Again, it is quite complex, but this is something that we want to examine as part of the study.

Q125 Kate Green: In your view, rightly or wrongly and I appreciate it is not specifically in your remit, how much damage to trust is the Prevent strategy doing in particular communities?

Sara Khan: The Prevent strategy is not part of my remit, as you have rightly pointed out. I do feel that if you engage widely and explain, and if the Government explain to people, particularly to those communities who have fear and concern about the Prevent strategy, and if they build trust with those communities, there will be greater support for Prevent and that is really important. I have heard this again from youth workers in Manchester who said to me that trust is really important, but also going and speaking to communities and explaining what Prevent is, showing how it is there to safeguard children, for example, is really important but having that engagement is crucial.

Q126 Kate Green: Why has that not happened yet? This has been said about Prevent for a number of years, that it is about safeguarding vulnerable young people, but it is not the perception of a number of these communities. Why is it taking so long and proving so difficult to build that trust?

Sara Khan: I think that is probably a question you would have to ask the Home Office and the Government.

Q127 Kate Green: What are you hearing from communities as you go around the country?

Sara Khan: Interestingly, when I have been going around and speaking to hundreds of people—I know Prevent is a very important and lively debate at this moment in time—the vast majority of people are not



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speaking to me about Prevent. They are talking to me about extremism, the harms that they are experiencing and how they feel it is radicalising young people. I feel that I understand the importance of Prevent, but I feel we have to take care to consider that we do not go so far down the Prevent discussion that we ignore the wider context of extremism and how it is increasing and having a negative impact on the lives of people in this country and on our society as a whole.

Q128 Kate Green: When you were appointed there was criticism from a number of quarters, to the effect that you were too close to the Home Office and that you would not have the confidence of communities whose trust you would need to deliver a strategy effectively. How would you reassure people who have those concerns and suspicions?

Sara Khan: There are two things there. I think the first is the independence question. Prior to my role, as I mentioned earlier, I was director of a counter-extremism organisation. I criticised Government when I did not agree with Government policy, and the best example I can give is the Government's Counter Extremism Bill. I gave evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights making clear my opposition to that Bill because of freedom of expression concerns.

Likewise, if there has been a Government policy that I feel is right I will support it, so the need to have a Prevent strategy—whatever flaws there are about Prevent—at a time when the terror threat is unprecedented, is a strategy, an approach and a policy that I support. That is the approach I have taken with Government in the past and that is the approach I will take in the future with the Commission.

In terms of wide engagement with Muslims in this country, as an activist I spent the last 25 years engaging with Muslim voices, particularly with young people and Muslim women, whose voices we often do not hear. It is usually community leaders' voices we hear and I have spent a lot of time speaking to people like that.

I was not shocked by the response that I received to my appointment. I was disappointed, but I was not shocked, because when I was Director of Inspire I learned pretty quickly that if you challenge extremism, if you defend human rights, if you advocate for gender equality, you will experience backlash and abuse. Some of the criticisms I received were from people from that same quarter, but what I would say is that over the last couple of months I have been engaging with Muslims across the country. I have been speaking to Muslim teachers, academics and civil society groups, women's groups and imams.

I was up in Liverpool recently where I spoke to 10 imams from 10 different mosques. I would also highlight that I have spoken to the breadth that exists among British Muslims. I have spoken to on one hand very conservative and orthodox Muslims and imams, but also I have spoken to liberal and progressive Muslims. I have engaged with ex-Muslims, I have spoken to a whole range of different voices including



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minorities within the minority of Muslims, such as the Shi'a community and also Ahmadiyya. I take that engagement very seriously, but I also point out that I am engaging across the board with different faith communities, and those with no faith communities, because that is important in my role as Lead Commissioner.

Q129 Kate Green: You mentioned earlier about the expert group that you have set up to advise and challenge the work of the Commission. Does that include people who have previously been critical of your stance?

Sara Khan: There are people on there who are critical of the counter-extremism agenda—people like Peter Tatchell, for example. He was part of the defend free speech alliance. He was very critical of the Counter Extremism Bill, as was Lord Anderson. He sits on there as well. I have chosen people—again both supporters and critics—who will advise and challenge me, but also who bring the whole breadth.

If I am calling for a whole of society response I want people on there who are going to understand that wide challenge, so people like the Chief Executive of ISD, Sasha Havlicek, Jamie Bartlett, who specialise in online extremism and technologies, as well as people like Sunder Katwala of British Future, who understand the overlap between integration and extremism. Individuals like Sir Mark Rowley who looks at the overlap between extremism and terrorism on the other spectrum, and then again academics who specialise in human rights—women activists like Pragna Patel who has been at the forefront of campaigning against fundamentalism and extremism as a whole for the last 38 years. I have thought very long and hard about the group of people who I want to advise and challenge me, and have brought some of the best minds to that table that will do precisely that: advise and challenge me.

Q130 Kate Green: Finally, do you feel you have adequate resources to lead the Commission and conduct the research and the work that you wish it to carry out?

Sara Khan: For the first year of the Commission I do have enough resources. I hope you will ask me that question next year when I have to put recommendations to the Home Secretary and, of course, a budget about what I feel the future Commission should be. I think that question will be a very important one when you ask me next time.

Q131 Stuart C. McDonald: Thank you for coming here today. To follow up on a couple of points that Kate Green asked you about, David Anderson was on record at one point as saying that he never really understood the intended purpose of your post. Why couldn't the Home Office just do the sort of thing that you are doing and assemble a panel of experts and produce policy? Why do we need a Commissioner?

Sara Khan: That is a good question. As you will be aware the Government published their first ever counter-extremism strategy in October 2015. I do feel the threat from extremism has evolved since that time and I believe that the Government felt it is good to have an



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independent person to look at this issue and also to bring a fresh pair of eyes. I do not think it is any surprise that extremism is a very complex and challenging issue, and that we are seeing a rise of extremism, I would argue particularly far-right extremism.

I think it is helpful and better for the Government if they have an independent voice that can advise and criticise and review their work. I am keen to assess whether the Government's counter-extremism strategy is effective. Is it making a difference? Is the Government's definition of extremism helpful or not? Is it working? These are things that I want to consider as part of the study to ensure that we do have the right response to extremism.

Q132 Stuart C. McDonald: You have mentioned that one of the reasons why you think this post has been established is because it brings independence but, as Kate Green said, one of the criticisms that has been made of your appointment is your perceived lack of independence from the Home Office and you have addressed that as best as you can.

The other line of criticism that came forward at that time was about whether you had the necessary expertise for the post—you do not have an academic background in this field, and have not conducted any research yourself, and someone in a letter suggested you had not had a proper credible impact assessment with the work that you have done with Inspire. How have you responded to those criticisms?

Sara Khan: Independence, again I have answered that question. I think the reason why that point kept coming up—again, I think it is from people who do not know about the work that we have done. Over 10 years Inspire only had one project that was funded by the Home Office and that was in 2015, an anti-ISIS making a stand campaign, and over 10 years' worth of work—I find it interesting that people think that somehow does not make me independent.

We know that the Home Office over decades have funded NGOs supporting vital work, such as FGM campaigns or child exploitation, and a whole range of different issues. Nobody seems to question their independence because they have received a bit of funding from the Home Office.

On the issue of expertise, well, again I would push back. I have run and co-founded a counter-extremism organisation for the last 10 years. I have written a book about extremism. I have seen firsthand the tactics that extremists are using. I have written extensively about extremism. I have spoken to and delivered training to groups like Ofsted, and to around 5,000 teachers across the country, so I think my expertise speaks for itself, and anybody who looks at the work I have done over the last 10 years will know that is the case. I cannot remember what your last point was.

Q133 Stuart C. McDonald: Neither can I. Could I ask you about the panel that



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you have appointed to provide independent criticism? You have explained why a lot of those appointments were made and the expertise that they bring, but I think the point that we were trying to get at was whether or not you had included in there any of the groups or individuals who had been critical of your appointment as well, and would that not have been a sensible move, if you have not done it?

Sara Khan: The expert group is there to provide a very particular need and service to the Commission. I have already met a number of my critics. I am more than happy to do so. I have written to many of them quite early on in my appointment saying that I am more than happy to talk to them, because I believe in engagement. I believe that if you have a disagreement with somebody you should bring them around the table and have that discussion. This really matters in terms of the counter-extremism space, because when I have spoken to former EDL supporters, for example, and they said, "When I did sit with a Muslim and had my views challenged I realise I can be swayed". I want to set a very important stance in saying "lead from the top" to ensure that we have that wide engagement and we engage with our critics.

I have held a number of workshops, for example, with free speech campaigners, human rights campaigners and organisations like Amnesty and others, who are concerned about this area, some of whom may have been concerned about my appointment as well. Again, I am more than happy to engage with them but I think the expert group plays a very specific role in terms of advising, bringing their expertise to the table. Again this issue is very complex and I want to ensure that I have the best brains at that table to ensure we do try to address and reduce extremism in our country.

Q134 Stuart C. McDonald: A final question is: how free do you feel to set your own agenda? In particular Prevent seems to be off limits for you. Does that not undermine the work of the Commission? That is central to this whole area of policy and yet you are not able to properly include it in your study.

Sara Khan: That is a very important question. The charter outlines our independence. We have the authority and the power to meet who we want, to set whatever questions we want, to ask whatever questions we want and to publish whatever we like. Prevent is obviously part of the Government's counter-terrorism strategy. My role is counter-extremism. Obviously in the real world we know it is not so black and white. Clearly, in some cases, extremism will lead on to violence and terrorism.

My feeling very much is that we also need to just step back and ensure that we are looking at that wide spectrum of extremism. I am concerned that we do often get bogged down around the terrorism issue. Yes, of course that is important, but there is a wider spectrum and I do not think we understand the wider harms that extremism is having in our country. So stepping back and ensuring that we are looking at that properly is important.



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As I mentioned I know there is a lively debate about Prevent. My concern—I talked about the academic review we are doing—is that what we found so far is there is very limited evidence on extremism. There is insufficient research about the scale of extremism and the harm it is having. I am seeing a gap where we do not have enough evidence. We do not have enough evidence that is highlighting the scale, the harm, what is effective, what is not, yet at the same time we are seeing rising extremism.

For me, my focus has to be addressing the wider challenge of extremism, which I think for quite a long time we have not looked at properly and sufficiently. That includes looking at the Government's work, which includes reviewing the Government's definition of extremism. I think that is quite a sufficient and significant amount of work that needs to be focused on first and foremost as my primary role.

Q135 Chair: It was not your decision, obviously, to rule Prevent out of your remit but is it not a bit ridiculous? Your remit includes to, "identify and challenge extremism in all its forms and provide the Government with advice on the policies needed to tackle it". How can that be possible if one great chunk of Government policy that is designed to tackle it is off your agenda and if you have to, "Engage widely and be prepared to work with those committed to confronting and responding to extremism in their communities"? For a lot of those people the issue of Prevent is at the heart of what they are trying to do, either positively engaging with it or being troubled by it. I just do not see how you can do your job if Prevent is excluded.

Sara Khan: I agree with you. I think it is confusing and complex. I find it confusing when I speak to people on the ground. They find it confusing. You are right, I have not set that. What we have said is that in the short-term, as part of the study, we want to look at what lessons can we learn from Prevent. That is something that we are keen to do as part of the study. In the long term, as part of me putting recommendations forward, this is one of the issues that I want to be considering and to put forward.

As I mentioned earlier, when I have been going around the country most people have not been speaking to me about Prevent. Ordinary people have wanted to speak to me about extremism. I agree with what you are saying—I think it is confusing, but this is something that I do want to consider and I will put forward as a recommendation.

Q136 Chair: If you had to think about one thing that you think the Government are doing best on counter-extremism and one thing that they are doing worst, what is the best and worst thing that you think the Government are doing at the moment?

Sara Khan: I have to say it is quite a mixed bag. When I speak to local authorities and councils, they are very supportive of the local community co-ordinators that are in-post that are working with local civil society organisations. Some have said to me that they found the role that they



play is invaluable. The funding that the Home Office provides, the BSBT funding, the Building a Stronger Britain Together funding, which I think now funds around 230 civil society organisations, is a good thing. My concern is, as I mentioned earlier, that the strategy was put together in 2015. I think the threat from extremism has evolved. I am not sure whether the strategy that was written then is appropriate for the time now. Is it addressing the challenges? How much of that work is countering online extremism, the scale of which I cannot even describe?

Also, are we doing enough in terms of countering extremist narratives and ideologies effectively enough? There are certain questions that I certainly have but there are certainly some good practices, and I feel that we need to ensure that that strategy is fit for the time and the place and the challenge that is now in front of us.

Q137 Douglas Ross: There have been a lot of questions and discussions about the criticism your appointment has received. If, say, at the end of your term in office those criticisms still exist has your time been a failure?

Sara Khan: I have already been meeting critics and I have already been having constructive discussions.

Q138 Douglas Ross: Do you think you are changing opinions?

Sara Khan: Some people who are critical have met me and said they are very keen to get involved, to submit evidence to us. That is very important to me.

Q139 Douglas Ross: That does not mean you have changed their opinion, though.

Sara Khan: No, it is, because if people are saying they do not want to engage with me and now they are saying they want to engage with the Commission, they want to work with us, they want to submit evidence, they want to organise round tables for us to come and speak to people in their area, that is changing minds and attitudes.

Q140 Douglas Ross: If you cannot, will your time in office have been a failure?

Sara Khan: Well, let us see what happens.

Q141 Douglas Ross: If that is the outcome—

Sara Khan: I think we have to be very careful on whom we are basing the criticisms from. One of the points I have made before is that we should not necessarily take the view of those who shout the loudest. Anybody in public life will always have people who are critical of them and people who are supportive of them. That is the nature of public life. All I know is that I have a very important and serious job to do. Looking at extremism, we are working to engage widely, including with critics. We are working on bringing much more evidence to the table about extremism and helping and encouraging people to work with us. That is



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my agenda. That is what I am planning to do, and if people have criticisms by all means that door is open. Please engage with me. Submit evidence to me. I want to have that dialogue and discussion with you.

Q142 Douglas Ross: Do you think social media platforms are contributing to the normalisation of hate and extremist views?

Sara Khan: I am deeply concerned about online extremism that we are seeing. I know this Committee, and I know the Chair in particular, has highlighted things like the National Action videos, which have still not been taken down. Of course illegal terrorist content has to be taken down. My particular concern is extremist content that is legal. So on the one hand we have issues like the Darren Osborne case, in which his trial showed that he had been consuming legal extremist content by groups, like Britain First and others and how that was a motivating factor for him. He had consumed a significant amount of that content. Now, that content is legal.

On the other hand, Sir Mark Rowley mentioned on the "Today" programme on Friday about how if you put into YouTube and Google "UK Muslim spokesperson" on YouTube the top four searches is Anjem Choudary. Again, at what point does that encourage somebody to take that step into extremism because they are being exposed to that material?

There are other examples. I do not know if you recall Tommy Robinson. After the Westminster Bridge attack he went to Westminster Bridge, filmed a very inflammatory video and that video received millions of views in the space of 72 hours. There has been research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue who undertook a study where they examined 162 public Facebook pages of extreme right-wing groups and found that around 40,000 people were actively engaging with that group, thousands of whom were putting up extremist and hateful content. The scale is mind-boggling and I am not sure if the tech companies and the social media companies genuinely understand the breadth and scale. From our part, understanding that we have a challenge where extremist content is currently legal, how do we address and challenge that issue?

Q143 Douglas Ross: That is an excellent answer, and I appreciate that, but do you think social media platforms have to accept responsibility—

Sara Khan: Of course.

Q144 Douglas Ross: —and do you think they do?

Sara Khan: They do to some degree. We have seen some change. We have seen how Facebook have employed 3,000 more people, but I think there is a lot more that they can be doing.

Q145 Douglas Ross: Did you hear the evidence session prior to yours?

Sara Khan: No.



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Q146 **Douglas Ross:** There was some evidence from the Assistant Commissioner—some very positive comments about the progress that has been made but still more to be done. Would you agree with that?

Sara Khan: With the tech companies taking responsibility?

Q147 **Douglas Ross:** Yes, sorry, with social media companies dealing with these types of images and videos. I am not sure I am on the same page and I think the Chair alluded to this as well as the Assistant Commissioner, about the companies working together to tackle this.

Sara Khan: It depends on which content and imagery you are talking about. The Minister of State for Security and Economic Crime has highlighted this, and we know that they have improved and got a lot faster in taking down illegal terrorist content. My concern is the extremist legal content where the threshold is not high enough for it to be taken down. Are they doing enough to address that, whether it is taking it down or whether it is devising new technology where there is a better response to challenging conspiracy theories or fake news or disinformation campaigns, which are the bread and butter tactics of extremist groups? I do not think they are. Are they doing enough to ensure that we have better conversations on social media?

We have had some interaction with them already and they are saying that this is something that they do want to look at, so I support that but we want to continue to have a productive conversation with them.

One of the reasons why I want to do the study is to try to gather the evidence about scale and harms in particular, to show them, "Here is the evidence. This is what the evidence is telling us. For you to turn around to say, 'We are not going to take this seriously' is no longer sufficient because here is the evidence".

Q148 **Douglas Ross:** You mentioned conversations there twice, and in one aspect it was about better conversations with the social media companies. I understand that, but you also said, "better conversations on social media". What do you mean by that?

Sara Khan: My staff have been having some helpful conversations with them and how—

Q149 **Douglas Ross:** Sorry, I want to focus about better conversations on social media.

Sara Khan: This is something that some of the companies are now looking at, for example Twitter. We see, for example, how you can be on Twitter having a conversation with somebody, having a perfectly legitimate, healthy debate, and before you know it a third person has jumped in and has turned that conversation very toxic, where previously two of you have been having quite a healthy debate. My staff have been speaking to the staff at Twitter about how to prevent things like that happening, to ensure that debate is not toxified. How can we try to



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ensure that we have better conversations online? I know that they are looking at this. That is something that we encourage and applaud. We want to see that. This is a much wider problem than extremism, because I think this is a much wider societal issue but that is something we need to see more of.

- Q150 **Douglas Ross:** Just staying at the very individual element of this, in terms of extremism, is it better to remove these images immediately before people see them, or is there a case for allowing them to be on social media and for these conversations to exist so that people can see how outrageous they are and how they are deplored by the majority of people? Is there there is an element of usefulness in that?

Sara Khan: That is a very difficult and complex question because if that content is legal we have to be mindful of freedom of expression, legitimate freedom of expression in our country. We know that freedom of expression is a cornerstone of our democracy. That includes the right to mock, to ridicule, and to offend. That is a very difficult question. You have to look at it on a case-by-case scenario, so I cannot answer that question unless there are specific examples, but I think that is a very important point that you have raised and is something that I am certainly going to consider.

- Q151 **John Woodcock:** I will not ask the question of whether you think that a man over the age of 40 who had written a book on extremism would have had their credentials questioned in the same way, but I suspect most of the panel would guess at the answer.

I wanted to ask you about what you said in terms of the black and white way in which counter-extremism and counter-terrorism can be defined. Are you keen that your work gets into what you seem to be suggesting is the artificiality of that division and whether you believe that that division is in itself dangerous?

Sara Khan: I have obviously come from outside of Government, so when I started the role and I saw, for example, that the Government have an integration or a proposed integration strategy and a counter-extremism strategy, I was very clear from the start that I want to look at the issue of extremism with a very wide lens. For me the interest that I particularly have is the overlap between integration extremes, the overlap between extremism and terrorism, and of course the wider extremism space, so I am keen to ensure that we do look at that. I feel if we do not look at it that way we are not really going to understand extremism properly. We have a lack of consensus about extremism in our country because we are not looking at it through that wide lens, and that is not helping us in developing the robust response to extremism that we need.

I have taken the approach that you need to have a wide lens to look at this issue and to look at those two grey areas of overlap.

- Q152 **John Woodcock:** Were you given a reason when you took on the role as to why formerly Prevent was hived off it?



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Sara Khan: I cannot remember. I think it is because the Commission came out from the counter-extremism strategy and from that counter-extremism unit.

Q153 **John Woodcock:** It was a silo thing rather than an—

Sara Khan: Yes. I think so. I would have to check.

Q154 **John Woodcock:** No, that is fine. You talk about the whole societal approach. I wonder what you thought about this place.

Sara Khan: About Parliament?

Q155 **John Woodcock:** Yes, and how Parliament is geared and the conversations we have. You say you were not shocked, you were disappointed. I have to say I was shocked by the reaction from some of the prominent people in this place to your appointment. Do you think there is a problem with the way that counter-extremism is discussed within Parliament?

Sara Khan: I think there are two issues there. There is a wider civility issue and also I know we are talking about Parliament, but when I go to speak to people in towns and cities across the country, people are describing to me increased division and polarisation. I went to one very multicultural city, which I will not name, where they even said different Asian communities used to live together quite peacefully.

Now, the division between Hindus and Muslims, Muslims and Sikhs and so forth is on another scale that was not there 30 years ago. I think we are as a whole in political discourse but also in our community seeing that greater division, and how extremism can thrive in that climate. It can also drive that climate, so I think there is a wider question about civility. What has happened to our civility? Where has it gone? How can we reclaim it?

I do feel that there is a very hostile climate around counter-extremism. As I mentioned at the beginning, I have been really dismayed and upset to hear the experience of counter-extremists in the sense of the bullying, the abuse, the lack of support and even people who I know support Prevent—I know Prevent is not my remit, but when I have spoken to imams, for example, or women's groups, people say they support Prevent but then say to me, "You know, Sara, I'll never say that publicly, because, if I do, I know I'm going to get so much abuse". There is no space to even say, "Well, actually, as a Muslim, I do support Prevent".

I know there are people who do not support Prevent, but the fact that people feel they cannot even express support for a counter-terrorism strategy, or even say, "I can't openly talk about this"—I think that is really disheartening. I have obviously spoken to a number of academics and academics have said to me, "Yes, I want to share this information with you but please don't put my name down because I know if I talk about this, it is going to have a very negative impact and I am going to



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experience bullying, backlash and abuse". This is from academics. This is in a country where we support academic freedom and academics are telling me, "I get abused" and on the other hand, we are getting death threats from extremists.

Q156 John Woodcock: You have had Britain's first female Muslim Cabinet Minister, a Conservative, the same party as the current Administration, criticising you for being too close to the Government. That is a problem, isn't it?

Sara Khan: I have had a very constructive conversation with Baroness Warsi. I reached out to her after my appointment. I have had a very helpful conversation with her. Clearly, there are lots of things we agree on. There are issues around extremism that we disagree on. That is absolutely fine.

Baroness Warsi had never met me prior to those comments. As I said, I am very keen to engage and to have those conversations and to try to bring more people together around what is a very important topic.

Q157 John Woodcock: My final question is about how much of a challenge you find it and how you are trying to overcome that challenge, having those conversations within conservative, Muslim circles, which may still be highly male dominated. How much of an issue do you find that to be?

Sara Khan: It is probably the same when I speak to Orthodox Jewish communities. I don't think it is particularly different with regard to the Muslim context. It is fruitful. I have to say that it is constructive. When I am speaking to imams, whether it is in Portsmouth or Liverpool or Manchester or elsewhere, when that conversation is opened up I often feel that there is not a safe space for them to talk about it.

When you talk to them, they will say to you, "Yes, on the one hand our mosques are being targeted by far right extremists but on the other, you know, we do know we have a problem of religious extremists and hardliners who are trying to radicalise our young people". It has been amazing how, having won their trust, the people are telling me about religious hardliners and extremists within their own communities, and about how they fear that they are powerless against the internet radicalising their young congregations. Imams are saying to me, "We want help, Sara. We don't know how to deal with this. We wish we could have more imams coming together and looking at this issue and supporting each other".

Those conversations are very important to me but I also think they are very important for them, to be able to come and say, "This is a longstanding problem; we need support and we need better ways of addressing it".

John Woodcock: Thank you.

Q158 Chair: You raised a point about people's fear of bullying when it comes to



trying to speak out about counter-terror work. Why do you think that is happening? Do you think it is a direct consequence of the difficult debates around counter-terrorism or is it happening for some other reason and is feeding into the counter-terror work?

Sara Khan: It is probably a combination of different things. These things are never black and white.

The lack of civility is a problem, is an issue. I see how that, and the way we talk to each other, and the very abusive climate we all live in now does have an impact. When I am speaking to people, they are making quite clear to me that there are those whose interest is in not countering extremism, and how it is extremists themselves who are at the forefront of ensuring that they close down the debates, who deliberately attack and abuse, and create a climate where you do not want to do this work. That is the overriding message I have heard over the last couple of months.

On the one hand there is the wider problem but, on the other hand, there is an organised and active lobby of extremists and extremist sympathisers, who know it is not in their interests to have counter-extremism or counter-terrorism work because it is fundamentally in opposition to what they stand for.

Q159 **Stuart C. McDonald:** There are obviously lots of people who fully support counter-extremism work but have significant and perfectly reasonable problems and challenges with Prevent, as well.

Sara Khan: Yes. I agree with that. I also have concerns about different aspects of counter-extremism and counter-terrorism—that is why I oppose the counter-extremism Bill—but they do not necessarily contribute to the climate of abuse and intimidation and the chilling impact on the freedom of expression of certain people. I agree with what you are saying, but if the question is about the abuse and the direct harassment and the horrendous tactics that I hear about, including death threats, those things are coming from a very particular lobby whose interest is in not countering extremism.

It goes back to the point of this being the climate that counter-extremists, or those who are involved in counter-terrorism, are operating in. The sad truth is that a lot of them are operating on a shoestring. A lot of charities do not really have counter-extremism funding streams. There is very little recognition of the importance of the work. So funding is poor, resources are poor, many of the organisations I have spoken to are pretty small, yet we have this huge problem of growing extremism. On the other hand, we have counter-extremists who are struggling with lack of resources and are operating in a hostile climate, and they do not feel they are getting support—even organisations that have been around for a significant amount of time.



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I was quite amazed when we put a workshop together and brought a number of the organisations round the table, how they felt just to be sitting together in the same room and having that conversation. It was so fruitful. They find the work is isolating, it is not easy, and everyone has a criticism, which is very personal and abusive. That climate really worries me. I want to look at what more we can be doing to support counter-extremists who are doing such vital work at such a difficult time.

Q160 Kate Green: Forgive me if you can challenge this, but quite a lot of what you are saying does feel a bit anecdotal. What is the evidence of rising extremism? What is the evidence of this bullying behaviour? Could you give us some really specific examples of where it is coming from and how it manifests itself? Also, what, in your assessment, are the most effective interventions to tackle rising extremism?

Sara Khan: There are a number of different indicators that are telling us that extremism is rising. First, when I have gone round the country and people are sharing those experiences with me, those experiences are very real—when local councils and authorities are telling me about the increase in the number of far right marches, for example, or, for example, how Ofsted will tell me about the number of books that they are finding, since 2014, in particular faith schools, which are advocating stoning and execution or promoting homophobia—

Q161 Kate Green: Are you able to publish those numbers?

Sara Khan: This is part of the evidence that we want to gather as part of the study, to try to build that entire picture. Of course, when I am speaking to academics, one of the things that we found from the ongoing review of academic literature was that they cite this increasing extremism but are obviously not able to indicate to what extent.

Then there are polls. The BBC, for example, did a poll that showed that 73%—I think it was three-quarters—of the British public feels that we have become increasingly more divided. Hope not Hate has done research that has shown there are concerns around that division.

The types of incidences we are seeing, in particular of far right extremism—I believe we are at the beginning of a new wave of far right extremism in this country. I speak to experts and practitioners on the ground and find that they are deeply concerned. Initially we thought the far right was declining. That decline has now gone into reverse, again because of online influence, but also because of the repackaging and new breed of far right extremism.

We are seeing how far right extremists have become modernised, how they have become professionalised, how they are misusing and deliberately adopting the language of human rights as a cover for their extremism and the reach that they have now. I think this is a significant problem. Of course, we are seeing this across the world in many different



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countries and I do not think Britain is immune, but I do think that we need to understand that we are seeing growing extremism.

On the Islamist side, we understand that there is growing activism around Hizb ut-Tahrir which is targeting young people in places like Bradford, Birmingham, and Stoke-on-Trent. It had slightly dipped over the last couple of years. It is now having a resurgence. On both the far right and on the Islamist side, there is clear evidence and signs that we are seeing a resurgence.

Q162 Kate Green: Are you gathering, or have you gathered, evidence of effective strategies to tackle this resurgence?

Sara Khan: This is what we are looking at. As part of the evidence, that is very much the fifth theme, the response—what is Government's response, how are others dealing with it? One of the key issues that I want to look at is also the current legal toolbox. What measures do we currently have in place and are we using them effectively.

Q163 Kate Green: Are they working? Is that one of the questions you are asking?

Sara Khan: Well, are they working and are we using them effectively for the time and the era that we are living in? There is a range of different issues. We want to speak to counter-extremists, think tanks, and academics, and for them to tell us—you tell us what is working—whether it is a very local civil-society based example, an approach, which is somehow shared with us, to much larger national schemes, to online initiatives—that is something that we are very keen to collect.

We also want to understand what doesn't work. I think it is very fruitful to also know what doesn't work in countering extremism. If we are going to spend lots of money on it, we need to ensure that we are not spending money on projects that are not having an impact and are not working.

Q164 John Woodcock: In your last answer, you mentioned looking at the legal toolbox. Given that you are clearly really alive to and interested in exploring further the interplay between non-violent extremism leading to violence, and you mentioned Hizb ut-Tahrir, why did you oppose the idea of a counter-extremism Bill? Is your view on that open? Or do you remain of the view that that is a bad move?

Sara Khan: Hizb ut-Tahrir has clearly stated that it does not support violence. Hizb ut-Tahrir is very much in the non-violent extremism space. It is quite difficult. Although from their wider preaching and their views, it is quite clear that it is an extremist organisation, I want to be driven by the evidence. My view now is obviously going to be different from my position in 2015 because what I want to do now is collect all the evidence. I want to understand where the gaps are. I want to understand things like the Darren Osborne case to see if there are legal gaps. That is the stage we are at, at the moment, where we are collecting that evidence in order to examine it.



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That is probably a good question to ask me next time, once the study has come out. At the moment, I just do not know. Is the problem that we have the legal powers in place but we are not using them or is the problem that we do have gaps in our legislation? That is something—

Q165 **John Woodcock:** You thought you knew the answer in 2015 when you said that the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister were wrong.

Sara Khan: From what I was seeing at that point in terms of freedom of expression concerns—my position has not changed on that. I still have those concerns around the disruption orders, the banning orders, and so forth. I agreed with people like Lord Anderson on that. My view about that particular piece of legislation has not changed. That may be very different to what we see in the future.

John Woodcock: Thank you.

Q166 **Chair:** When do you expect to produce any reports, interim reports or responses based on the work you are doing?

Sara Khan: The study we are hoping to publish in the spring of next year, but we are hoping to perhaps publish other things, some of the evidence, along the way.

Q167 **Chair:** What would you like to be different by this time next year as a result of your work?

Sara Khan: I guess greater confidence and people feeling more confident that they understand extremism better and they feel that they have greater confidence to challenge extremists, that we have moved away from—I have heard a lot of this, that if someone challenges Islamist extremists, they get labelled an Islamophobe, so I hope we do not have that kind of shutting down of the debate type of approach, and that people have bought into the counter-extremism agenda a lot more.

One of the reasons why I have been engaging widely is because I do feel sometimes that there is a small group of people involved in the counter-extremism tent and there need to be many, many more people. I want teachers to be involved. I want more young people to be involved. I want to see much more mainstreaming of counter-extremism work. That is something that I would like to see but it is not going to be something that changes overnight.

This is a problem that we have had for a long time, it is a growing problem, but I do think we are on the steps to trying to understand extremism in a better way, to building better understanding and consensus around extremism and hopefully, eventually, in the long term, a better response to it.

Chair: Sara Kahn, thank you for your evidence this afternoon. We appreciate your time. Thank you very much.