

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Global Islamist Terrorism, HC 735

Tuesday 29 January 2019

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Leo Docherty; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Graham P. Jones; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar.

Questions 54-77

Witnesses

I: Dr Afzal Ashraf, Centre for Conflict Security and Terrorism, University of Nottingham, and Nikita Malik, Director of the Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism, Henry Jackson Society.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Nikita Malik](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Ashraf and Nikita Malik.

Q54 Chair: Good morning. Welcome to the second session of the House of Commons Defence Committee's inquiry into global Islamist terrorism. I am absolutely delighted to welcome two experts on these matters, one of whom, I believe, has given evidence to the Committee on a previous occasion, on a not unrelated subject. That is you, Dr Ashraf. Nikita, I think it is your first time in front of the Committee, although we have heard you speak in other venues on many occasions. We are extremely grateful to you both for coming and sharing your expertise with us. For the sake of the record, would you just like to say—perhaps you first, Nikita—a word or two about yourself and your background? Then, Affi, if you would do the same please.

Nikita Malik: My name is Nikita Malik. I am the director of the Centre on Radicalisation and Terrorism at the Henry Jackson Society. The Henry Jackson Society is a think-tank that focuses on countering extremism and terrorism. My own research looks at technology and terrorism, as well as deradicalisation of youth. I am also a columnist at Forbes.

Dr Ashraf: Good morning, my name is Afzal Ashraf. I have been a member of the UK Armed Forces for over 30 years. I served in Iraq and Afghanistan on counter-terrorism-related operations. I have served in various Government Departments in the UK dealing with counter-terrorism—the FCO and other UK Departments. I have a PhD, on “Al Qaeda's ideology through political myth and rhetoric”. I am currently assistant professor of international relations and politics at the University of Nottingham.

Chair: Thank you very much. Madeleine will start.

Q55 Mrs Moon: A lot of the briefings that we have had in advance of this session have pointed out the growth in far-right terrorism, so I wonder is Islamist terrorism the—or an—existential threat to the UK? How would you phrase it now?

Nikita Malik: When we examine the threat to the United Kingdom, if I may I would like to quote some statistics. A recent report released by our Centre on Radicalisation and Terrorism looked at terrorism in the West. It found that for the first time in recent years the UK has become the No. 1 location for terrorism in the western world. It accounted for a fifth of all western terrorist attacks, and Britain saw 693 people injured or killed by terrorism in 2016 and 2017.

In terms of the Islamist and far right breakdown, 84% of all terrorism attacks in the West were caused by Islamists, despite security services warning about the rise in far right terrorism. In the UK, there were 18



attacks in the past two years, and 13 were Islamist and six were far right. When we consider the threat, I argue that the Islamist threat is still a huge threat. It is perhaps not an existential threat, but when we look at the breakdown it is an important threat. More specifically it is advancing to become not only a threat outside the United Kingdom and something we need to monitor from our defence perspective, but it is also a threat within the United Kingdom in terms of individuals who are committing attacks not just here but in the West as well.

Dr Ashraf: If we define “existential” in the literal sense, then terrorism is not an existential threat, in the way that perhaps a nuclear conflict with Russia would be. If you define it by asking whether the nature of UK political and social systems will be changed by it, then the answer is very likely, and indeed we have already seen some changes. There is a symbiotic relationship between the Islamist threat and the far right. They feed off each other, and they have interesting communalities of view. They are aware of each other’s existence, and know that they benefit from that.

What looms over the horizon is the possibility that if either one of those threats, but particularly the global Islamist threat, is not contained, then in circumstances—God forbid—of the UK going through an economic slump or other political issues, we will have created a brittle environment in which those two opposing threats will try to fracture social community cohesion. Hopefully that is not likely, but it is a real possibility, given the issues around the political system and the fact that the public’s confidence in politics right now is not the highest. If that were to continue, there are opportunities for major harm to social cohesion having an impact on the economy and on the political strength of the democratic system within the country.

Q56 **Mrs Moon:** When you were talking, I wondered whether there has been any suggestion or links made with some of the attempts to fracture social cohesion in the UK, particularly on social media, that we have seen particularly targeted from Russia. Do you see any links there with the far right or Islamist terror groups? Have you come across that at all?

Dr Ashraf: Yes. This is the whole nature of ideology—we can talk about that in more detail. All ideologies define a group that they support, and a group or identity that they are against. If we go back to the mid-2000s, Ayman al-Zawahiri attempted to fracture American society along black and white lines. There is some very interesting stuff that I could bore you to death with, but he was trying to suggest, with some very strong evidence, that the American system was against the blacks, and that they needed to work against the American system to liberate themselves. These ideas have been developed continually. If you look at the rhetoric of Daesh—of al-Qaeda—they talk about the economic, political, religious and social injustices in society. That is the core theme of their narrative. In terms of Russia, and other countries, yes, they understand the threat better than we do in some ways, certainly at the state level. They, like other countries, use these groups as proxies. They use the narrative for their own purposes. I do not want to be unfair and say that it is only the

Russians who do it. Many people have done it, some of them very close to home.

- Q57 **Mrs Moon:** There is one thing that I would like to clarify. In terms of a lot of the threats coming through social media, is there a particular problem that the UK has, in terms of a lack of resilience and understanding, in particular about the existential threat that is on social media? There seems to be an almost passive belief in what is read on social media. Is that something that we are failing to address?

Nikita Malik: Our department does a lot of work with social media companies. We work very closely with Google, Facebook and other companies, informing them about extremist material. The way that it has been addressed is very interesting. The first is through the algorithms that these companies are making themselves to recognise this material. 98% of material to do with terrorism on YouTube is removed by a computer programme.

What role does that leave for us? As human moderators with trusted flagger status, our role is to take it a step further than a computer would be able to and tap into exactly what Dr Ashraf was saying. What kind of grievances, conspiracy theories or background knowledge are these individuals using? It is absolutely fascinating and very difficult for the UK to stay on top of this, because extremists are extraordinary in the way they are able to reach out to their insider communities, using specific language or symbols, and almost game computer systems through things like flipped imagery or echoes in their messaging. Perhaps what we need in the UK is a continued role for human experts, who have background knowledge on the way that these individuals and groups reach out to their followers. In my experience, they have always been one step ahead in doing so. They are able to use the latest technology and the most unmoderated forums, or to direct followers to those forums and use that to communicate with them, in a way that, perhaps, the private sector companies are so far unable to address directly, although I think they are trying.

Dr Ashraf: I come to this slightly differently, because I have been looking at the internet in the context of extremism since 1998, when I started looking at al-Qaeda. I have it from various sources and on reasonable authority—I am not sure how accurate—that in 2003 GCHQ had me tagged as somebody to worry about, because for my research at the University of St Andrews I downloaded a huge amount of material. Luckily, I am not in prison because I had just cause.

I have been looking at social media, and one of the things I would suggest to the Committee is that a lot of very young, talented researchers have come into this and the Government has also been dazzled by aspects of social media. I am not suggesting that they are not relevant, because they are, or that we don't do anything about them, because we should. However, in the wider context, there is a lot more that drives radicalisation; social media is a small element of it, which we are in danger of exaggerating. That is all I am saying. I am not saying we ignore it.



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It is not true to say that Daesh or Isis is a digital terrorist group. I will not go into too much detail, but if this Committee wants to explore it, I recommend a closed session with the intelligence services to find out exactly what was happening on the internet before they came along.

A lot of this material relies primarily on world events—we know that without doing any major research. We saw a spike in radicalisations immediately after 9/11, because 9/11 was broadcast across mass media. We saw a spike in radicalisation immediately after the declaration of the caliphate in 2014, because it was broadcast through mass media. Social media just magnifies that; some very elaborate studies that the Americans have done show that the majority of youth and social media during the Arab spring magnified what was on mass media and spread it. We must not underestimate the power of the ideologue, both through face-to-face contact and through mass media, by which I mean small channels that Ofcom tries to regulate. There is a lot of scope for tightening that up.

If I may add one small thing, I was probably the first person to classify and try to define lone terrorism—solo terrorism. I was working in a Government Department at the time, and I classified three individuals—Nicky Reilly; Andrew Ibrahim; Roshonara Choudhry, who stabbed Stephen Timms—as falling into that category. I did that because there was no evidence of direct contact that we found through police interrogations and so on, not because I believe that they worked alone. Somebody like Nicky Reilly, who has a mental age of about 10, is effectively a child; my gut instinct is that he was definitely groomed by an individual, but we just do not have the evidence to know who that was. So if I may put into context the very good comments that Nikita and others have made, let's not use social media as an excuse to deflect the problem. I think there has been a temptation within the institutions to do that, but the problem is much wider.

Q58 Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am glad you mentioned the ideologue—we might come back to that later. You also mentioned Russia being ahead of the game. Could you expand on what you meant by that?

Dr Ashraf: In some ways, they are ahead of the game, in that they have spent a lot of time within the Government structures on understanding the terrorism threat. I am not suggesting that their understanding is superior to ours, but because of their experience in Dagestan and Chechnya—in Afghanistan they also have a very good understanding of the culture, at a great cost to them—they have taken that threat a little more seriously. That threat, particularly from Isis, has threatened their national interests and their bases in Syria, so they are much more focused on it, although that does not prevent them from exploiting it politically whenever they can. I am just guessing—I have no data to back up my judgment—but my instinct is that they are less likely to empower and embolden that threat, because they have learned their lessons.

Q59 Martin Docherty-Hughes: In Chechnya, are you saying that the Russian state is in some sense allowing a toleration, not of fanaticism but of a certain ideology, as long as there is a sense of acquiescing with the



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Russian Government and accepting it as the main pillar of authority in the state?

Dr Ashraf: No, I don't think so. I am probably saying the opposite of that: I think they are less tolerant, in the instances I know of. Possibly they are working, and perhaps in their equivalent of covert operations they are empowering some extremists for short-term gain. I don't know about that, but I have not seen any significant evidence of them tolerating extremist ideology. To be honest, I see quite the opposite, certainly on the surface. I think they are taking this threat much more seriously, I think for understandable reasons. They have a very large Muslim population within the country, from central Asia. They have a large diaspora immigrant population. I was in Kyrgyzstan last month, at a conference about this relation between the secular state, security and religion. There were a couple of very capable Russian analysts, who displayed remarkably sound, and some of the best, understandings of the ideology of these groups that I have come across anywhere. So my impression is that they are taking it seriously. I couldn't say whether they are running some covert operations to the contrary.

Q60 **John Spellar:** When you talk about Islamism, are you saying in that context that that is basically just a Sunni phenomenon, or is it also a Shia phenomenon? In which case, would you describe the ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran as Islamist, and in which case, given what you have said about the Russian position, why do the Russians tolerate that Islamist philosophy coming from Tehran, whereas they are more critical of it from elsewhere?

Dr Ashraf: The definition of Islamism is the French definition of the political version of Islam. In that context, the Shia version of Islamism and the Sunni version of Islamism join together along that definition. There are two differences between the strands. One is at the political, theological level: the Sunni version of Islamism talks about establishing a system of governance based on the sharia of Islam. The word "sharia" means the law—so when people talk about sharia law, that is tautologous. The sharia of Islam implies direct conversion of law, textually from the scripture. The Shia Islamists have a system that they describe as "Velayat-e faqih", where "velayat-e" means governance and "faqih" means jurisprudence. It is governance through jurisprudence, which implies an element of interpretation of text. The significant difference is that when, as in the case of Iran, they discovered that their religious laws on divorce led them to have one of the largest populations of single mothers, they changed their law. In an equivalent Sunni Islamist environment, you cannot change the law because it is God's law, so you get a very unstable system. That is one of the reasons why many people have said it is a great pity that the Islamist party, democratically elected in the '90s in Algeria, was not given the opportunity to come to power and fail, because intrinsic in that is instability.

The other difference between the two systems of Islamism is that the Shia Islamists are very much part of a Church system, because the Shia have a clergy system in a much more Christian sense than any clergy that exists



in the Sunni sense. So you have state control, centralised control of theology, ideology and politics. Iran only represents a threat in the sense that it has supported other groups, such as Hezbollah. It doesn't represent a threat in terms of what might be described as franchised groups of Islamists, operating under this amorphous Sunni version. I don't know if that explains the situation.

I have a little humorous anecdote. I can't vouch for its accuracy, but it has come from a very good friend of mine—a reasonably reliable source—who wrote one of the first books on Hezbollah. They tell me that on the day after 9/11, the Head of State in Iran rang Nasrallah in Lebanon and the conversation began with words along the lines of, "Now, tell me you had nothing to do with this." How true that is, I don't know, but knowing the person I am confident that it is likely to have more than a grain of truth in it. The point is that there is control. Those people will not do things that harm the direct interests of their states, as they see it.

Those other groups are fighting one another. Daesh came from al-Qaeda and has killed al-Qaeda members. That is the difference, in essence. The Russians are pragmatic realists. With Iran, their interests coincide, because they are both in competition with the West and feel that the West is a threat to them. For those reasons, they feel that there is an opportunity for an alliance on a number of issues.

- Q61 **Chair:** Are we flattering ourselves that these organisations regard us as a target and that they would want to pose an existential threat to us? After 9/11, it was said that we shouldn't be under any illusions that although that had been carried out against a western target, the real target of al-Qaeda was the Islamic world and they were hoping primarily to seize power and pose, if you like, an existential threat to the Governments of middle eastern countries, not least Saudi Arabia itself. To what extent are there central guiding brains behind what these organisations are doing, particularly the Sunni ones, which are the ones that concern us most directly in the UK? Do they really have an aim to overthrow western Governments, or rather to provoke western Governments to do things that will help to solidify their position, in the vanguard of an Islamist revolution, in their own countries?

Nikita Malik: That is a very interesting and important question. It can be approached both by the factors that are happening on the ground, which are causing these issues, but also—irrespective of the role that the online space plays—one of the greatest assets in research is the ability to look at the propaganda that they put out on these issues. In my opinion, there is definitely a distinction between the near enemy and the far enemy. As you stated at the beginning, Julian, probably the primary concern of many al-Qaeda organisations and their affiliates, is for the near enemy. One could argue that some of the concerns of Islamic State were about the near enemy, and the situation that was happening in Iraq and Syria.

However, researching and examining Islamic State propaganda shows that they are massively interested and concerned with the West: in the coalition, in the role that the West plays in interference and in its military



presence. When you dig deeper into the propaganda that is released to a western audience, which is in English, it is unlike that in Arabic and other languages. It is hatred for the West and what it represents, such as its treatment of women and Muslims who live in these countries. When we go back to ideology and we talk about Islamism, it is very much about the incompatibility between being a Muslim and being able to live in a western country. This is precisely the kind of mood music that is set in the propaganda that is used to incentivise many foreign fighters to go and join a group like the Islamic State which, as we all know, was the first group really to have its own physical territory, and very much based its propaganda on the idea of a state-building project that it had created, with a governance system and a schooling system for its children—a superior state to any other in the world, including many of the Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, which it saw as inferior to what it represented, which was the Islamic state.

Going back to your question about the role, and whether we flatter ourselves by thinking that it is all about the west, I do not think that we do, because so much of what the Islamic State produces is centred on the destruction of western countries, and so much of the home-grown threat that we are facing now, or that has been amplified now, is based on putting out this propaganda that individuals who live in these countries, if they cannot travel to join the Islamic State, should be basically destroying what they can here.

- Q62 **Chair:** But do they actually think that they will succeed in overthrowing Governments in western societies by these means?

Nikita Malik: Absolutely. If you look at the violence and what they are saying in their propaganda, it is based on this ideology that if they provoke the West enough there will be a war, and the war will happen in Dabiq—hence the name of their magazine “Dabiq”, which is where they will meet. That is when they will be able to completely destroy these western civilisations and be the inherent rulers of the world, so to speak.

When looking through this propaganda online, or even what is sometimes passed in universities and prisons in the UK, one can see that narrative—that there will be an ultimate war and they will meet us in Dabiq, where they will destroy us. It is based on that kind of ideology.

Chair: An Armageddon scenario.

Nikita Malik: Exactly, yes.

- Q63 **Chair:** Can I ask Afzal, before you come in on that, do you think that the ISIL/Daesh group are rather untypical of Islamist terror groups, in that they, in a relatively early stage of their revolution, went for the physical seizure and holding of territory, thus in some ways propelling themselves to the centre of attention, but on the other hand giving up the great asset that terrorist groups normally have, which is invisibility?

Dr Ashraf: That question falls very much at the end of the answer to the previous question. I think Nikita has given a very good explanation. Bin



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Laden was directly asked this very question: "Are you going to attack and try to destroy the West?" He said, "No. Who are we going to sell the oil to?" That was his response, so the idea of the near enemy and far enemy evolved simply because, as you have said, they wanted to establish what they considered to be just Islamic Governments, because they see the Governments in Muslim countries as being unjust and tools of the West that are actually harming the interests of Muslim people.

Bin Laden's strategic reasoning was: "Look at Vietnam. Look at Beirut. Look at Somalia. Every time the West was attacked, it ran away." Those were virtually his words. Based on that reasoning, the attacks in the twin embassies in east Africa, USS Cole and, ultimately, 9/11 happened. That strategy was flawed, for reasons that we can discuss in detail if you like. It has not worked.

Now the targeting of the West is simply to stop it spoiling their project. What has been happening is that you have this usurper organisation, Daesh/ISIS, taking the shortcut to establish an Islamic state, rather than making the West withdraw and then having internal revolutions in the states, and occupying them with their version of government. All along, Zawahiri and others were saying, "This is not the right thing to do." Their plan was originally to fall under the caliphate of Mullah Omar, who was anointed the Amir al-Mu'minin—the Commander of the Faithful—but would be promoted to caliph once they had an Islamic state in Afghanistan that they could perpetuate, and from there the revolution would be exported to different countries. What has happened to Daesh and ISIL has basically strengthened the rhetorical arguments of Zawahiri, and he is basically saying, "See? I told you so. You're not ready. Let's do this thing properly." So the threat is transforming.

Is it targeting the West? Yes, it is targeting the West to stop the West interfering and targeting it, but within the West we have ideologues who, for their own purposes, are spreading their own version of propaganda. For example, we have people like Anjem Choudary deliberately provoking the thought among the people here that there is going to be a Daesh flag or an ISIL flag flying over Downing Street. Their objective is to replace the government system in Britain with their version of an Islamist system. Most of them realise that this is not going to happen, but it is a good tool of provocation and a good tool of recruitment.

Q64 Gavin Robinson: Good afternoon to you both. That was a very helpful canter through the significance or otherwise of the Islamist threat here in the United Kingdom. Can I ask either or both of you to give your assessment of our counter-terrorism strategy? What do you believe its strengths to be, and what do you believe its shortcomings, limitations or weaknesses to be?

Nikita Malik: As we know, the CONTEST strategy is going to be reviewed, and individuals will be able to give their thoughts. It is broken down into four parts—the Four Ps—of which the most controversial is Prevent. In my opinion, it started out as and continues to be potentially one of the best programmes we can implement to stop individuals engaging in terrorism.



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We were one of the first countries to do this and have set the precedent for many other countries. Having said that, it has failed to engage a lot of individuals we have wanted to engage with, particularly in the Channel aspect, with people turning down deradicalisation programmes or lying through those deradicalisation programmes, so I do think the Prevent aspect of our counter-terrorism strategy needs renewal or reinvigoration.

On our strengths, the protection of critical infrastructure and the CBRNE threat have been handled exceptionally well by the UK. Defence has had a role to play. From what I understand, it was involved twice—once in the Manchester attack and once following the Parsons Green attack, both in handling potential chemical agents and in bringing in troops to assist the police.

Chair: Nikita, I will just stop you for a moment. One of our other questions, which will follow very shortly, is about the role of defence in this, so do not fire off all your shots on that point at the moment.

Nikita Malik: Okay. On weaknesses, I touched briefly on the weakness of Prevent, which has been approached with multiple criticisms. It has had a lack of legitimacy and much criticism from those in the Muslim community. However, I work with a number of Prevent practitioners—a number of people who are involved in the Home Office in the deradicalisation mentorship programme for Channel—and it has done very well with those it has engaged with positively. We do not see those stories enough. We see more of the negative stories about those it has not engaged with properly. I think we are approaching and changing Prevent.

Another area that I would perhaps think of as a potential weakness is the ability for intelligence to feed through in the different strands and different Ps. We have such a large list of individuals whom we are monitoring, not under Prevent, but under Pursue. At what point is that intelligence fed from Prevent to Pursue and, more importantly, are we feeding that intelligence toward the protection of critical infrastructure? Particularly in 2017, we have had a few incidents that had to do with our underground system and our critical infrastructure, and it is important to ensure that we have all the intelligence we need.

The Parsons Green attack was a crucial one, because that individual had an Islamic State flag in his room, and somehow there were several gaps and we had been unable to assist that individual in time to prevent him from doing what he did. There are obviously a lot of areas that we can be focusing on more proactively and improving, but all in all in the last year we have not seen a terror attack like we did in 2017. We are doing those reviews; the terrorism legislators' job in this is to come in and provide an appraisal that is often available to the public following an attack, so researchers such as me can look at that information and see exactly at what point the police were involved or what happened, and crucial areas or meetings that were missed. That transparency is important to ensure that we are able not to repeat those same mistakes again in our CT strategy.



Dr Ashraf: As Nikita said, CONTEST is a very good system. It is not perfect—no policy of any Government is perfect—but it is one of the areas of thought leadership. When you look at the strategies that the EU and many other countries have developed, they are modelled either overtly or implicitly on CONTEST. One of the big problems with CONTEST is that it has become a political football, but the good thing is that each Government tries to revise it and, hopefully, draws out some of its weaknesses and adapts it to the environment, which is also changing. One of the big problems that the word Prevent implies something that is misleading. You cannot prevent radicalisation; you can contain it and you can mitigate it. You cannot prevent criminality, drug abuse or other things; you can only try to contain them. There is a lot I can say about that, but on the whole I think it is a good system and, provided that the people in this House deal with it with a sense of unity of purpose rather than point-scoring, it can evolve and will continue to evolve.

The big problem or weakness with it is that it does not deal with the causes. The causes, as we have already described in our answers, are to do with the narrative around the inaptitude, corruption, etc.—perceived or otherwise—of Muslim Governments. There are three areas that I can talk to you about that might help to illustrate it. About three years ago, I was at a conference in Doha with a 90% Arab audience from the Gulf, and I made the silly mistake—because I was only given about 45 minutes' warning that I was going to talk on this august panel—of speaking my mind. It was just after that image of the baby, whose name I have forgotten, who had been drowned, and I got a little bit emotional about that and I said, "Look, isn't this disgraceful that Muslims from this part of the world are risking their lives and the lives of their children to go to Europe, when here in this part of the world there is more wealth than anywhere in the history of mankind and there is more space than anywhere? There is a need for jobs for immigrants to come and help the economies of these countries; why are you not doing anything about it?" There was a stunned silence, and I realised it was a big mistake.

Incidentally, I was rescued somewhat humorously by the fact that I made some allusion to Martin Luther King and to President Obama, and on the panel was Jesse Jackson, who warmed to my positive comments on those two individuals. He stood up, and I then received the most reluctant, but polite, standing ovation I think anyone has ever received. Two or three days after, it was drawn to my attention that the Saudis had sent out a press release—in Arabic, not in English—to say that they had taken one point something million Syrian refugees. The figures from the UN, which I had already consulted before my talk, were that they had taken a very heavily caveated 160-something.

The point is that there is a big question of what these Governments are doing for the Muslims at large. Look at Yemen: according to the UN, 80% or more of that country is in need of humanitarian assistance. That country has been bombed by a coalition comprising almost exclusively Muslim countries. Children are dying, and the biggest outcry is from countries such as ours, where organisations such as Save the Children are



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doing a lot of good work to highlight the suffering of innocents. Yet instead of helping, those countries are causing a humanitarian disaster that, viewed by the ordinary person on the streets in those countries, is highly emotive.

Look at the Rohingya; we have heard a lot of criticism of Myanmar, but not much from the Muslim world. From the perspective of these young Muslims, these Governments, who have money and who pay more for weapons than anyone else in the history of mankind, are not doing anything for their people, as they see it. That is one of the weaknesses of our system. For very good, understandable reasons, we have a system that tries to contain the problem, but we have very little that deals with the causes of the problem.

Q65 Gavin Robinson: What if there was a greater role for diplomacy, encouragement and engagement from countries more locally in the Middle East, so they deal with the causation rather than let it reach our shores?

Dr Ashraf: Those are all capabilities that we need; we have them—they are very good. What we do not have is a change of approach and attitude in parts of the Government. There is a short-sighted belief that we have a common interest—yes, we do, and it is important, economically and otherwise—but that brings with it a huge amount of leverage, which I think the UK has lost confidence in. If it does not start to use it, it will lose that leverage.

For reasons we can discuss at leisure some other time, these regimes are highly dependent on the good will and support of the West—the UK and the US in particular, and the French to some degree. Many of these regimes could not operate their weapons systems, particularly aircraft systems, for more than about 36 or 48 hours tops, if the west decided to turn things off. That is something we should bear in mind, and if we do not choose to use those leverages, we will lose them.

Nikita Malik: I want to comment on what you said, Dr Ashraf, because respectfully I do not entirely agree. I think the foreign policy is definitely one aspect utilised by individuals to galvanise, and it is perhaps used in propaganda here in order to go and join an organisation that perhaps is at war, or is doing more for the ummah than the United Kingdom is. However, as we said at the beginning, there are multiple reasons why individuals join terrorist organisations. One piece of work that the Henry Jackson Society is known for is our examination of Crown Prosecution Service court cases from 1995 to 2015, which we are updating. You can look at the background of these individuals. Many form networks, have a history of violence and are attracted by the violent aspects of these groups. In a lot of these cases, the young women who go actually want to go for some kind of freedom or marriage. It sounds bizarre, but when you actually look into the court cases, they know that they will be going to serve some purpose for a terrorist organisation by becoming mothers.



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Going back to your question on Prevent, which is a core component of our counter-terrorism strategy, I think that these kinds of things can be prevented with mentorship and the engagement of very talented individuals, who are often able to engage with entire families. We have seen cases of families with four or five children who are all radicalised to the point that they have all downloaded something from the internet or have been given a handbook from a friend about what they should pack, how much cash they should take and what route to take to get to Syria.

Using the expertise of SO15 and Channel mentorship, we are able to stop a lot of people. The first point is stopping these people going to Syria and Iraq. However, what do you then do with them if they are still in the UK? I think our Channel programme, which has been criticised by so many, is actually one of the strongest programmes in the world in engaging with these individuals.

One can question whether one can deradicalise someone—whether they still believe in an ideology or have changed their views on it. However, we can certainly reduce their obsession with an organisation or with wanting to commit acts of violence. We have used similar approaches to those we used with gangs and integration and inclusion to feed into these things, and we should be proud of having this system in place.

Dr Ashraf: There is no disagreement. We are talking about separate things. Nikita is absolutely right that there are a whole number of other psychological and sociological factors that make people vulnerable to radicalisation. Many of them have no idea about foreign policy; many could not point to Yemen on the map. However, we are talking about two different things: the vulnerabilities of individuals and a movement that inspires or exploits those vulnerabilities.

The point I am making is that, having looked at and read everything that bin Laden and others have written since 1998, it is about Islamic Governments not fulfilling their responsibilities to their people, so far as they are concerned. It comes down to that. I would love to argue that point if we had the time, because I have read it and looked at it from different people over 20 years.

We are highlighting the very useful point that there are confusions here. Studying and understanding terrorism is like a journey. I always thought as I went along this journey that I had the answer. I was a great champion of counter-narratives, because I could see how flawed the terrorist narrative was. I could quote chapters and verses from the Koran to counter those narratives, if necessary. However, if counter-narratives worked, everybody would be a Christian or a Muslim or so on.

You as a group know better than anybody else that, from one set of beliefs and facts, two parties or two people will give three or four different interpretations. To get people to agree on something is very hard. It is all to do with belief. I am not saying that we should not deal with counter-narratives.



I totally agree with Nikita that our CONTEST programme is very effective. One reason we were able to prevent the suicide vest of Andrew Ibrahim from actually being detonated was because the system worked. Members of the Muslim community highlighted to the police that they had suspicions and they stopped it just in time. So there are strengths, and I think we should continue it. What I am saying is that there is a strategic weakness that I believe is not being addressed.

Q66 Leo Docherty: What role does UK defence play in our counter-terrorism strategy and should it play a greater role?

Nikita Malik: As I mentioned in the previous question, we have had instances of UK defence assisting police, particularly when the threat levels are very high. The first instance, as I mentioned, was Parsons Green and the second, I believe, was the Manchester bombing, simply because of the chemicals involved. In terms of the role that UK defence can play at home, beyond assistance, it is also the monitoring of the threat abroad, in the sense of what I believe will be one of the crucial aspects that we will be facing in the next few years, which is the return of foreign fighters. While not only do we have to be playing a role in the countries of conflict where these fighters currently are, and even though they may have been stripped of their British citizenship and we may have been targeting them, they are still alive and they want to return to the UK, I think there is a role to be played in the monitoring of borders and in the prosecution and the capturing of these individuals.

In terms of statistics, I believe there are 850 British individuals who went to join Islamic State and about half of them have returned. This is open-source data. It is not intelligence, but it is what is available to researchers such as myself. Of the half who have returned, many of them have been prosecuted or have engaged at some level with our deradicalisation programme. My concern is those who remain there, coupled with individuals who have been born in the Islamic State to British people. That will be a huge area to be looking at and, to be fair, already we have an extraordinary legal tool kit that we can employ. Control orders, temporary exclusion orders, TPIMs—these are all areas that we can use for these individuals, but it is something we really need to monitor.

Dr Ashraf: As Nikita said, there is quite a lot of good work going on at home. One of the evidences of that good work is the response time in the London Bridge shooting. I think that what has happened behind the scenes is that certain military units in the UK have trained the police to be able to respond very quickly, with very impressive response times to engagement. There are a lot of exercises—we hear about them in the news—where British military and the police work together in certain scenarios. As an observation—and this is nothing more than an observation—those are good, and it is in areas such as command and control where the police could benefit from greater training and experience from the military, in terms of how you manage information in an operation centre, changing information and so on. Those initiatives, I am sure, will continue.



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As far as defence is concerned, primarily its contribution is broad, and a lot of it is in the sense of capacity building. Here there are a number of programmes, all very different across the world. The impression I have is that they are very impressive. Some very good people are doing a lot of good work. Again, at the risk of sounding pessimistic, I am afraid I do not know whether the impact they have is sustainable over a period of time. I base that comment on the fact that I was involved in security sector reform and other capacity building measures about a decade and a half ago. A lot of time, money and talent were thrown at it, particularly in Iraq. No less a person than General Petraeus was in charge of building the capacity of the Iraqi army and police. We know what happened in 2014. There are some very good lessons to be drawn there.

My view, having looked at it in some detail over a bit of time, is that we make some assumptions about capacity building—that, once you have skills and institutions, they work magically. What we don't see, and are not very conscious of in the British environment, is the invisible culture and belief systems that we carry with us and are not even aware of. Those belief systems and values take time to grow.

What is particularly important is the growth of organic leadership. That is where we would probably get the greatest investment. There have been programmes of mentoring leaders. They are largely ineffective because we send out the wrong sort of mentors. Typically, we have a minister, who is usually a male in their fifties or sixties, and we send out a 24-year-old graduate to mentor them. There is no experience, and experience is a huge issue here.

I think the contribution is good and, from what I've seen, it is very sincere on the part of defence. There are a lot of people doing some very good work. Because the structural issues around capacity building are not fully addressed in terms of leadership, ethos, values and culture, their impact degrades over time quite considerably.

Coming back to the UK side, let me make some minor comments. In my experience, I am very impressed with how local commanders are doing community outreach. Sometimes that community outreach is far more effective and better than that even of the police. For example, the two recent commanding officers of the reserve units of the Royal Marines based in Southfields, Wandsworth have done amazing things at a local level to reach out to various communities. That is very impressive, as far as I can see.

Many other units, particularly the recruitment units in all three services, make a point of turning up to cultural events, usually in Muslim communities, and non-Muslim communities. Although they sadly do not have a huge recruitment impact, what they do have is a great public relations impact. It brings our defence forces together in contact with our community. There have been some very good successes, and I think we should build on those on a community level. The major thrust abroad is sadly—I'd like to say otherwise but experience has told me—that our results are not sustainable until we have a radical rethink of how we do it.



Q67 Martin Docherty-Hughes: What should the UK Government, and UK defence in particular, do to counter the ideology of Islamist terrorist groups? I use the word “groups” in the widest sense.

Dr Ashraf: I do not think we should necessarily counter an ideology, because I don’t think ideologies are easy to counter. I can’t think of one that has been very effectively countered. The reason I say that is that ideologies are belief systems. We need to look at the Islamist ideology in the context of ideology in general.

The most deliberately constructed ideology was Marxism, communism, which came into existence as a set of writings, which were debated for a couple of decades or more by hundreds of elitist people throughout Europe. It was only when the Kaiser needed his friend the Tsar to be preoccupied with some trouble that he sent a train ticket to a chap called Lenin to go and cause some trouble in Moscow.

The result, as we know, led to the Bolshevik revolution. The important thing, ladies and gentlemen, is that the success of the Bolshevik revolution led to the greatest occurrence of radicalisation that we have ever known. It is very important: we had radicalised groups, individuals, terrorist cells and insurgencies that took over a huge number of countries across the globe. It was the success of the Bolshevik revolution, not the ideology of Marx, that caused radicalisation.

What was at the centre of that ideology was a superior socioeconomic system. It took 75 years to show that that was not achievable, and that is what has led to the collapse of communism as a political force. Now, we have millions of ardent communists throughout the world today; the difference is that they have learned failure. They have learned that they cannot impose communism, certainly not through the means of violent overthrow, which is why we do not have many communist or left-wing-inspired people going around the world, trying to blow things up.

If you look at a much simpler level, the central idea of the Nazis’ ideology was a superior race—a superior power. Thankfully, it took just a few years to show that that was a failure. We have not got rid of neo-Nazis—there are a lot of them out there—but what has happened is that their belief in changing the world has changed. When you look at people like Timothy McVeigh in the US or Anders Breivik in Oslo, and you look at why they did it, they did not do it to change the system. They were reacting to Waco, to immigration policies, and so on.

When you come to the Islamist ideology, as we describe it, I don’t think that ideology is going to go away. What will go away is their belief that they can successfully introduce their version of an Islamist regime, which can provide a just, non-corrupt, and free system in which they can practise what they want to believe—they talk about freedom of belief, which is ironic. It will deliver the opposite. What we have done with bin Laden is to show that the operational element within his organisation, which was to be able to attack the West and make it withdraw, failed.



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What we have done with Daesh or ISIS is to say: "You said you had a caliphate, that you had a state. It ain't there anymore. It has failed."

There are a number of other failures that have to be demonstrated. Their ideological, political and economic promises have to be demonstrated to fail before these people turn away from violently imposing their ideology. Sadly, I think there will always be some who will want that system, but if they do not do it violently, they are not a threat to us.

Q68 Chair: Nikita, before you come in with your answer, can I ask you particularly to address one aspect? We have seen that all this ideological, aggressive outreach by the masters and strategists of these terrorist groups has produced only relatively tiny numbers of people who are prepared to go out and commit acts of terrorism in western societies—albeit there would have been more, but the security services have foiled them.

What I personally find really frightening is that every so often, a survey is done of the wider Islamic community in a western state, including Britain, and we find that even though these people are not likely to go out and commit violent terrorist acts, they nevertheless subscribe in very large numbers to extreme views such as, for example, "9/11 was a Jewish conspiracy"—notwithstanding that bin Laden himself claimed credit for it. Can you consider that dimension of the threat, not just the violent terrorist aspect?

Nikita Malik: Sure. I would break this ideology question down into two parts, and Dr Ashraf has addressed the issue of demand. There will always be a demand for this ideology. How do we stifle that demand or reduce it? Yes, we can show failures on the part of these individuals or these strategies. We can also, I would argue, reform. We can reform many aspects or use the legitimacy of credible imams to reduce, directly engage with or criticise some of the texts these individuals use that are based on violent aspects of the Koran. In that, we can reduce demand, but when we look at supply, particularly in the UK, in what spaces and areas do we allow the promotion and spread of this kind of hatred or of an Islamist ideology?

To go to your question, I think we are still struggling with understanding the relationship between extremism and terrorism, and how it manifests itself. Does extremism directly lead to radicalisation? Is it violent extremism? Does non-violent extremism play a part in this, and how is that different from conservative ideas and backgrounds? Violence has a huge role to play in this but, in the UK, for too long we have allowed, or turned a blind eye to, spaces that have been completely usurped by extremist individuals who are spreading these ideas. One very good example of that, which Dr Ashraf mentioned, is Anjem Choudary. For a very long time this person held very extreme views. We thought he was an extremist but we did not realise the level of harm he had caused in leading al-Muhajiroun and having so many individuals recruited to and joining this organisation. It was not until he pledged allegiance to Islamic



State on YouTube that we could find a reason to arrest him. He has now been released.

There are many spaces. I can give some examples. Universities are spaces where extremists are allowed to speak. No one is saying they should not be allowed to speak, but there should at least be an individual on the panel who can contest some of these ideas. A lot of these institutions that have links to terrorist organisations are given charitable status. Ofcom tries to monitor that, but extremist speakers such as Zakir Naik and Bilal Philips are given radio or TV time.

We really need to examine the link between extremist ideas, conspiracy theories like the ones you mentioned—we see them so much in the material we observe online—and violent extremism, and how that leads to terrorism. I am very much looking forward to the Commission for Countering Extremism report on defining what extremism is, because it will be crucial in understanding this link between extremism and terrorism. A very important next step for the commission is listing groups and individuals, if they can, or examples of what they believe extremist behaviour to be. Unfortunately, by the time we are able to approach it and combat it, it is often too late and we wish we had done something or refuted these ideas earlier.

- Q69 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Correct me if I am wrong, but my assumption is that most Islamist terrorist atrocities take place in Muslim countries. We can look at Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and many other countries and, this is important in terms of the defence and the security of the UK, areas of instability around the world. On the wording we use, I never hear the word “fanaticism” these days. I wonder how you deal with a fanaticism that views the others as “insufficient, insignificant, unworthy in relation to an ideal society”. That is a quote from Dominique Colas. How do we, here in the UK, assist those dealing with that intolerance? It is not as if European Christians do not know what intolerance is about; in some senses, we even invented it. How do you deal with that in relation to other regimes within the Muslim world, such as Saudi Arabia and its idea of Islamic faith—because I have not heard anything about the Wahhabi element and its links to Daesh and al-Qaeda or its funding of the ideologue that Afzal mentioned earlier? How do we undermine their ability to continue to fund the ideologue? I am mindful of the reformation and the counter-reformation, and Calvin’s “City of God” and exporting his ideas of Presbyterianism. This is not new.

Nikita Malik: May I make two points? I completely take on board the idea that these ideologies are being funded abroad, but they are also being funded here in the UK, and we have a huge amount of investment being given by Saudi Arabia. One of the things we propose is more transparency, so if we are getting funding from Saudi Arabia to certain universities, for example, so that they are able to host speakers, we should be able to have a transparent process so that we know where the funding has come from and students are aware that they are being exposed to this individual, and the same for mosques. There is definitely that idea.



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The second point is that when we speak about fanatics and extremism, one of the things that we are really lacking in the UK is support for those who speak out against those individuals, particularly Muslims, when it comes to Islamist extremism or Islamist terrorism, as you would define it. There is a specific part of Islam, calling someone an apostate or takfiring them, treating them as though they are not Muslim enough or not a good Muslim, which has in many cases led to extreme forms of violence or death in the United Kingdom. When we talk about definitions, that is one of the biggest risks we have in Muslims essentially policing one another. When we talk about extremism, it is important to give support to those who are speaking out against fanaticism or extremism.

Dr Ashraf: There are a couple of very good points that Nikita makes, which I would like to reinforce for impact. On the control of ideologues and the control of movements that are perpetuating these ideas, there is an overt link between the far left and Islamist movements here in the UK. There is a debate going on about whether or not that is a wise thing within that organisation, but they are empowering each other and supporting each other. They are very carefully working below the threshold of what is legally accepted, but having a huge impact. This is an area that we should address, whether it is through Ofcom empowerment or through other means at universities and so on. I wanted to reinforce that very good point Nikita has made.

Going back to the Chair's point about conspiracy theories, they work; if you look at any right-wing stuff from the US, it is all about conspiracy theories. They work in the West because there is a lack of faith in Governments, because Governments have historically kept secrets from their people, sometimes for very good reasons. In the non-western world, they work because conspiracies are a reality. Sykes-Picot was, in a literal sense—in every sense—a conspiracy. Certain nations conspired to make the world in a particular way, so in a literal sense it was a conspiracy. There is a lot of traction for alternative views, no matter how fanciful. I am not sure we can or should spend a great deal of time looking at them, but there are reasons for those conspiracies.

Q70 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I know we are running close to time, but we have spent a lot of time on some other issues. I mentioned specifically Saudi Arabia in my questions, and its approach to fanaticism and the funding of fanaticism, not only in the UK—with the instability that creates—but in the rest of the Muslim world. In terms of the UK's defence, in our relationship with Saudi Arabia, how do we square that circle?

Dr Ashraf: It is because religion has been politicised, not just in Saudi Arabia, which is the first case of a state religion in Islam that I have come across, but in the Deobandi, which is a very major school that came into existence in the 19th century as an anti-imperialist project, so it was political at inception. The Al-Azhar University is political.



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Martin Docherty-Hughes: This question is about anti-colonialist revolutions. My question was about the UK today and our specific relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Dr Ashraf: The Saudi Arabian relationship is very problematic, partly for historical reasons. It served the West's purpose for the Saudi Arabians to create and empower militant jihadi ideology, in order to mobilise people against the Russians in Afghanistan. It has been more difficult to rein that in. The Saudis have tried. There is a very interesting relationship between the politics of the House of Saud, as a political organisation, and the ulama, which is the clergy as it were. There is a tense relationship there.

One of things that they have done to roll it back is to say that jihad is not valid until you have a legitimate Government. Well, if you don't think the Saudis are legitimate, that doesn't work. What they have not done directly, but what it has resulted in, is fanaticism. They have put out lots of books and interpretations that drive people in that direction. Another point that Nikita touched on, which is worth emphasising, is that what we used to see about a decade ago was what we call the Wahabi Salafi threat. Through the Taliban, we are now seeing the Deobandi version of that threat. What we are seeing already—and I think Nikita was alluding to this—is an emerging threat around the idea of who is a Muslim and around blasphemy. That is coming from the Barelvi groups, who have traditionally been out of the picture. They have seized this as an opportunity for politics. We have had two murders in the UK resulting from that threat. It is one that I don't think is understood or recognised very well.

What do we do? Very briefly, we need to stop these people coming into our country. Too many people come in. An organisation called Khatme Nubuwwat sends preachers here to raise funds and make do speeches. They should not be allowed to come in. Freedom of speech is a privilege that we should grant to UK citizens alone, and not to anybody else. That is one small but very impactful thing that we can do.

Another is to look very critically at broadcasts on minor channels. There was one broadcast on a channel that talked about magic, and how magic was an evil. It told an audience, which included children, it had to be punishable by death. It gave stories about one individual who decided to behead a magician. When you know what these people are about, what was happening there was desensitisation to violence at a young age. Their defence was that it was an academic and historical point. Do you really need to talk about that to children? That is something we should allow only in academic circles. If adults want to study that at university for their PhD, that is fine.

We know what they are doing—and they know that we know what they are doing; they are trying to use our freedoms as cover for spreading their nefarious ideology. I think there is a huge amount that could be done in the areas that Nikita just mentioned, to tighten it up. It does need a little bit of articulation though legal means, but there is a lot more that we can do through education.



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Chair: We have to move on a bit, because we have got just under half an hour left, and three topics to cover. About 10 minutes per topic should be a good guideline.

- Q71 **John Spellar:** I would like pursue the analogy about how we dealt with communism during the pre and post-war period, not least because one of the jokes was that the biggest party in the UK was the party of ex-communists, those who had been through the party and also through Trotskyist groups. Some of them went into other Leninist groups, like Trotskyist groups, and others became virulent anti-communists. Clearly, the contestability of communism even before the Soviet Union visibly failed had managed to turn a large number of people, in the same way that the agitation and propaganda into the countries of the Warsaw pact also had a big impact. There may well be lessons to draw from that. However, the question I want to ask is slightly more specific and relevant to the Committee. Does the UK explain properly why it undertakes military interventions against Islamist terrorist groups, and does it win that narrative? If not, how could it?

Nikita Malik: One specific example is its communication on Twitter, which is used by many young people. UK Against Daesh is a good example, where the Government used statistics and material to explain the role of UK Defence in Iraq and Syria and the approaches it was taking to assist the civilians there. That continues to be a very good communications effort, engaging in a space where a lot of young people would be looking for that material or looking for justification. That is one specific example of something we have done well.

Dr Ashraf: It probably explains it. Whether it is believed is a different matter. Anything that the Ministry of Defence puts out is regarded as an official statement—"They would say that, wouldn't they; they obviously have other motives." Telling it like it is on the purposes we are there for, for example, would probably make a big difference. "We are empowering this nation with its counter-terrorism policies rather than another nation because we have economic interests."

Honesty, even if people do not like it, is much more persuasive than euphemisms about how we want to make the world a better place. People outside the UK realise that the UK and most of the world—east and west—is a realist world. Self-interest drives international relations. Let us call a spade a spade.

- Q72 **Gavin Robinson:** It looks as if we do not need 10 minutes per question, which is good.

We had a brief discussion about social media, algorithms and the need for human moderation. What have been the most important technological advances in counter-terrorism? I assume the interaction on social media is only one small part of it.

Nikita Malik: I will divide the answer into two parts, in terms of success. The first is reactive responses and the second is proactive responses.



Irrespective of whether we classify Islamic State as a digital caliphate, for the first time we saw a huge amount of propaganda and material put online, which was often very sophisticated. Given that a lot of the fighters were British, videos were often modelled on things that were happening in the UK. For example, the Islamic State's video on its medical care system was based on the UK's NHS. Even the branding was similar.

Material was put out in vast amounts, in English, for a specific target audience. Different media offices and media branches were able to release this material and use it in both violent and non-violent ways. The negative messaging was very violent and graphic, but there was positive messaging on how great it was to live in the state. As we discussed earlier, that was picked up by both social and traditional media.

After 2015-16, we began to see more reactive approaches from both streams in how they would broadcast that material. The mainstream media—

- Q73 **Gavin Robinson:** Forgive me; I have probably taken you down a rabbit hole, particularly with social media. I was talking about the algorithms as a small subset of technological advances. The question was, "Where have the most important technological advances been?" It was not about how we deploy methods of responding, reactive and so on. Where have the technological advances been in how we deal with counter-terrorism? I am saying that the social sphere is only a small part of that.

Nikita Malik: Understood. As I said, the algorithms—the feeding in of specific words, images, faces and music—have been very important in the removal of this material online. Other approaches that I am aware are being taken in the technological space in the UK include things like facial recognition, which has been used in the crime space. There is a huge amount of literature on whether that facial recognition software is effective or not; whether it is biased or not; and whether one can actually police this material in the pre-crime space, as one would call it. It has been used in the terrorism space, as well.

One of the other approaches I have been reading about is in sentencing and evaluation frameworks. That is another technological advancement that has been used in crime, which could perhaps be used in terrorism as well: asking "How likely is this person to reoffend?" or "What risk do they pose to society once we release them?" based on evaluative feedback and evaluative frameworks. Those are three examples of artificial intelligence being used in the Prevent or pre-crime space.

Dr Ashraf: It is a very difficult question to answer, because it depends on what is important, but a huge range of technologies are working together to provide a whole range of solutions. Some of them we won't know the exact nature of, but we can judge: if you look at the figures regularly put out by the intelligence services on the numbers of plots they have disrupted, they have almost certainly been disrupted because of technology, through intercepts and other means.



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Facial recognition could be one of those, but for obvious reasons we don't know and we shouldn't know what those are. What we should know is that we have some very bright people working in that area, who are working day and night to use and exploit technology beyond the normal technological horizons.

In the open space, there are things that most people do not think about: things as obscure as developments in medicine and first aid treatments and the development of bandages that can stop blood flow. I am pretty certain—I don't have any data—that in the London Bridge attack, for example, many lives were saved through having those developments. They stopped people dying who in other circumstances would have died, or would have suffered more severe injuries.

Areas of technology are emerging all the time: UAVs and mini UAVs are areas that I understand are being exploited. I have looked at this issue—the relationship between terrorism and technology—in some detail, and published on it. It is difficult and not very helpful to say that one is more important than the other, but it might be useful for the Committee to consider how we can speed up and streamline the authorisation and regulatory frameworks and the procurement systems associated with technology.

For example, Daesh/ISIS has been using UAVs to drop IEDs. They can trial it; they can do it. We have, for very good reasons, very strict controls on trialling things. There are some very obscure things that I do not think it is appropriate to go into any detail about, but it means that in some cases, it takes years to get urgent equipment authorised, developed for use and acquired through procurement systems. We need to make those systems more agile, and that is probably where you would help the system most. Procurement and clearances are the areas of technology that can help.

Q74 Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Now we are on our last topic, but it is a big one: how our military forces should be employed to counter a geographically dispersed Islamist terrorist threat. We have learned the hard way, both in Iraq and in Libya.

In the case of Iraq, we intervened and then, as a result of having removed one power structure, found ourselves sucked in and, effectively, having to support the whole basis of the Iraqi state if we were to get, after about 15 years, to some sort of acceptable and semi-stable outcome. In Libya, we intervened again—more decisively, it must be said, than Parliament had been led to expect when we voted on the subject. We did not allow ourselves to get sucked in militarily. So in the one case, we broke it and it took us a very long time to fix. In the other case, we broke it and we haven't fixed it.

Is there some other way of dealing with this matter? Dr Ashraf, our first contact was as a result a few years ago of me hearing you on a radio broadcast talking about a concept of what you called "boots with wings" and what I have subsequently called "swoop-in, swoop out". That is, the idea that you do intervene militarily but you do not get sucked in. You do



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what you have to do. You then withdraw, but you make it abundantly clear that if there is any sign of a friendly Government being overthrown, you will intervene again on a time-limited basis as often as it takes.

Has that theory been adopted anywhere and has it stood up to the passage of time since you first put it forward, or have you modified your views?

Dr Ashraf: The answer is no on all those areas. The reason is that I was talking about an operational methodology. What I think is required is a different strategic approach to accommodate that operational methodology. The points you mentioned: effectively, you talk about stopping regime change. Once you have regime change—and we have never had a successful enforced regime change—you create ungoverned space where these organisations can flourish and it is much harder to deal with them then. It is much easier, no matter how despicable a regime may be, to contain the security of those people.

In a wider sense, coming back to both ethics and radicalisation, if you look at these monsters, as we like to call them, these dictators, and the brutality they have inflicted, and we then look at the number of people who have died or suffered injury as a consequence of liberation, I am afraid there is a very uncomfortable truth. That is, it is better for more people if they live under a regime that is not to our liking than if we liberate them and cause the chaos and mayhem that we have seen.

The other thing we must not do is empower groups that might help us with our global politics. This is where I think the Saudi Arabia issue comes in. Both Saudi Arabia and another Gulf country have accused each other of supporting Daesh. One of them at least—if not both—is telling the truth. The point is, in Syria the priority was regime change and they empowered these extremists, either directly or indirectly. They now have the weapons and know-how that is going to cause us harm for a long period.

Now we see the US embarking on a different version of that project with the YPG. They are, just like the mujaheddin were in Afghanistan, very cuddly, very nice—that is the way they have been presented. But they are a group that has used terrorist tactics, or their parent organisation has. They are a group that is going to leave a residue of instability there, because they have territorial claims around the sovereign state.

Those two things—no regime change, no proxy warfare—are the strategic environment in which the operational aspect that I was talking about would work. What I was talking about, for those who don't know, is essentially that we should not have expeditionary forces that are inefficient, because about only 20% of our forces in Afghanistan and Iraq actually do the fighting. The rest are supporting them. All of them are nothing more than target practice for the insurgents for a lot of their time. They have failed to deliver success.

Our strength lies in our mobility as conventional forces. The strength of conventional forces lies in power projection. As you have described: find a target, deal with the target, walk away. In warfare, there are two



elements that work. One is coercion and the other is deterrence. Both of them are psychological. Both are about making the other believe that there are consequences and that they have no resort to your power.

What we have done is deliver the opposite. We have made people in these terrorist organisations believe that they can defeat the West: that they can defeat superpowers, as they believe they defeated the USSR. In order to reverse that, I suggest that we use our forces—to some degree we are, I would guess—covertly. We have an enormous capability, both overt and covert, to find targets throughout the globe, identify them, hit them, walk away. Psychologically, that leaves a greater impact than any invasion would.

Q75 Chair: Would either of you comment on some of the other specific scenarios? For example, there is Boko Haram. Is there any way in which we could apply that technique in African countries, for example, to try to prevent weak states from being captured by radical movements, but without our getting sucked in? Nikita, do you have a view on that?

Nikita Malik: Sure. I am not an expert on warfare, so the techniques to be employed would probably not be my area; I am sure Dr Ashraf would be better versed on that. There are specific risk areas where, with the decline and reduction of power of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, we have a stronger presence in the Middle East. One could argue it is reducing.

Several experts have argued that we should now pay more attention to south Asia and the rise of particular groups there. In the written evidence that was submitted, there were a few other areas where I felt that perhaps UK Defence could pay greater attention.

The first was the Philippines. One of the groups in the Philippines that could potentially offer shelter to Islamic State is Abu Sayyaf. They have had many kidnap-for-ransom activities and they have also welcomed many foreign terrorists.

The second is Singapore. We have seen old Islamist groups, such as Jemaah Islamiyah, taking on new significance. Al-Qaeda are regrouping and continuing to attract supporters online. Of course, we also have Afghanistan and central Asia. In Afghanistan, we have al-Qaeda—and in the Indian subcontinent, as we know, which could be taking more prominence. Its system for attracting support is very different from Islamic State in the Khorasan province. That should also have particular attention.

We talked at the beginning of the evidence session about central Asia. There are areas there where Islamic State, in very recent times—July last year—claimed responsibility for killing foreigners in Tajikistan, and it continues to target those areas; it is also including Rohingya Muslims in refugee camps in Bangladesh. They have been targeting them as potential new recruits.

I cannot answer the question of the kind of strategy we should be employing in these areas and whether one specific strategy would be



better than another, but given the reduction in power of the group that we have been focusing on very much for the last few years, it is of critical importance that we focus on new or newly emerging threats, or the resurgence of old groups, in areas where we could perhaps play a role.

Dr Ashraf: Nikita has given you a broad spectrum of possibilities, but sadly we have to recognise the limitations of resources. Our military is overstretched as it is. Places like Nigeria with Boko Haram and east Africa with al-Shabaab might be areas of priority for the UK, however, in which case our capability in terms of intelligence fusion and using specialist units to interdict and take out particular individuals and groups is something that we could teach and share with those Governments to empower them. We could also offer some assistance in the planning of operations and by way of our capabilities in technology.

One solution is to encourage those countries at the governmental level to accept British expertise. There are a lot of companies in the UK with retired intelligence and special operations specialists who can offer that capability. That is not just against the groups; it could be against maritime terrorism as well, where we have particular expertise.

That is an area well worth exploring. By working with Governments such as Nigeria, who want to deal with the problem, with the right level and blend of expertise and the right individuals, we can probably demonstrate some significant successes that will encourage an indigenous capability to overcome them.

Q76 **Chair:** In the end, we are always reliant on local or indigenous forces on the ground.

Dr Ashraf: Absolutely, and we would be wrong to do it otherwise.

Q77 **Chair:** That was our problem in Syria, because there was a lack of acceptable local forces on the ground. Unless my colleagues have a final point, I will ask one last question. We have heard about Saudi Arabia, with which we are supposed to have an important strategic relationship. Are you worried about our other allies, Pakistan and Turkey?

Nikita Malik: Certainly, when we go back to the idea of extremism and the importing of extremism and extremist thought, Pakistan has played a huge role in doing that. Having said that, I may be wrong, but there is also the massive presence of Deobandi and extremist speakers in India. There is a huge area for us to continue to foster those relationships with India and Pakistan to ensure that there is not only stability in those countries, but key intelligence that we could benefit from.

On Turkey, again I go back to the idea of foreign fighters and their capturing and prosecution, and the way that many foreign fighters and their wives and children are essentially waiting to come back to the UK, because many have not actually been granted refuge in Turkey. It will be key for us to continue to work with Turkey in the way that they monitor their borders and provide us with information on those individuals who are



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now there from Syria and Iraq and who originally reached Syria and Iraq through Turkey.

Dr Ashraf: Pakistan is a very worrying case in some respects, because it has legalised the means for its own downfall by introducing concepts into its constitution that encourage the discrimination of people it considers not to be Muslims. Ironically, that was not produced by religious fanatics but by arch-secularists such as Bhutto.

I could be wrong, but I understand that the current Government were brought into power by a very clever deal that meant that Maulana Rizvi, who was a bit of a troublemaker, was encouraged to sit for elections in 500-odd seats. That split the vote between Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan's party and allowed Imran Khan's party to come to power. The big problem is that when you empower these people, they become emboldened.

It is no surprise that a few weeks ago, this organisation, which ironically includes a deputy called Afzal, declared the Government to be apostate. They openly called for a rebellion by the chiefs of the army against the head of the army and the judiciary. They have been put into prison. They did that because they are confident they have power in the streets and popular power behind them. Given its nuclear weapons, its division of power between the army and civilian networks and the very loose-form criminal networks within the country, there is no central control, so I am afraid that Pakistan could flip at any time. That is a source of worry. One hopes that it does not happen.

With Turkey, it is very difficult to tell except that Mr Erdoğan, so far as I can tell, is the most agile world leader around. He can flip alliances overnight to suit his interests. If he does that, he will be active in the best interests of Turkey, which is what we would expect any head of state to do. He is not—so far as I can tell, and certainly up to now—aligned with any particular ideology, although he does subscribe to some form of Islamism, according to some people. He is very much a realist politician. He will fall out with the Israelis one minute and be friends with them the next. He will fall out with the Russians one minute and be friends with them the next.

Mr Erdoğan has a very particular concern. It seems to me that he is in strong conversations with President Trump over what for him is a very serious threat, which is the threat of a pseudo-Kurdish state around his southern border. That to him is unacceptable, and we will see the transformation of the conflict in Syria to an insurgency-versus-state affair. If it is done with co-ordination with the Russians, it may well be successful, but if the Russians or others get involved against the Turks, it could lead to some major problems, given that Turkey is a member of NATO.

Chair: On that sombre note, we have to bring matters to a conclusion, which is unfortunate, because I would have loved to have kept you here another hour, although I think I would have had a mutiny on my hands. I



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thank you both very much indeed for your excellent testimony, which will greatly help us in the preparation of our further hearings and our ultimate report. We are most grateful to you both for coming today.