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Measuring British Intelligence Against Islamist Terror Threats

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EMILY CLEWS, MAR 25 2013

How Well Have Britain's Intelligence Agencies Performed Against the Islamist Terrorist Groups Since the End of the Cold War?

Introduction

Terrorism, in the British context, is not new. Developed over a century ago in response to Irish terrorism, Britain's current counter-terrorist strategy embodies elements of both continuity and change.[1] With no fundamental change to their structure, the British Intelligence Agencies carry out broadly the same functions in response to the new challenges of globalization and Islamic radicalism. The question therefore becomes how well are the agencies' *modus operandi* fit for purpose when countering these 'new' threats.

The answer to this question is not as straightforward as it seems. The Government highlights quantitative evidence as its marker for success, emphasizing attacks that were aborted or intercepted by Government action as a measure of counter-terrorism effectiveness.[2] To date the agencies have prevented twelve terrorist plots in Britain, and claim to have identified 2,000 terrorist suspects and 200 networks operating in Britain.[3] Despite this, when the 'intelligence failure' is considered, such as failing to prevent or be aware of the 7th July 2005 suicide bombings on the London transport system, and the failure of two other attacks for technical reasons rather than agency intervention,[4] this clear distinction between success and failure becomes decidedly blurred. As Eliza Manningham-Buller, ex-Director General of MI5, articulates 'We are judged by what we do not know and did not prevent'.[5]

Mark Phythian explains this is further complicated when the link between policy and intelligence is considered, resulting in 'policy failure' leading to 'intelligence failure'. This questions explores the extent that policy decisions, including but not limited too military intervention in Afghanistan (October 2002) and Iraq (March 2003), have created or enhanced the threat of mass radicalization of British Muslims to such a level that the existing intelligence structures are overwhelmed, resulting in the 'inevitability' of intelligence failure.[6]

To address these core issues, this essay is structured into three main parts: the first looks deeper into the differing concepts of intelligence failure; the second a chronological assessment of the British agencies and their involvement with Islamic terrorism before, between and after the defining events of 9/11 and 7/7, which are analyzed in the final section where a conclusion is drawn of just 'how well' the intelligence agencies did.

Part One – Conceptualizing Intelligence Failure

There exists no accepted definition of 'intelligence failure' as it comes in many forms and can occur at many levels. Michael Herman simply refers to it as 'warning failure', that, at some point in the intelligence cycle, intelligence collected, analyzed or disseminated did not provide sufficient warning of a future attack.[7] During initial collection and analysis, issues such as assuming the reliability of sources, falling foul of denial and deception techniques, and the impact of linguistic barriers on resources and translation, can all contribute to an intelligence failure occurring. Organizational structure and inertia can also contribute through the failure to see beyond or challenge dominant

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assumptions, and this was recognized in the 9/11 Commission Report.[8]

Intelligence failure can also occur at the level of dissemination, where the finished product is circulated to other intelligence agencies, liaison partners, external bodies and policy makers. According to Richard Betts, the most crucial mistakes have 'seldom been made by collectors of raw information, occasionally by professionals who produce finished analyses, but most often by decision makers who consume the products of intelligence services'.[9] It is at this point that the failure becomes essentially a political one, in that the failure is not primarily one of the intelligence communities beyond that of failing to convince the policy maker of the validity of its analyses.[10] As such, these terms are considered mutually constituted, as failure in one will be in part down to failure in the other.

Notwithstanding this, it is equally important to recognize the limits of intelligence when considering intelligence failure. The limits of intelligence dictate that agencies cannot prevent intelligence failure in all cases. Gill and Phythian warn that 'intelligence is not the Holy Grail; it cannot, and should not claim to, offer a crystal ball for seeing the future clearly.'[11] Betts equally argues that failure and success are intermingled: the glass is either half empty or half full depending on your viewpoint.[12] Michael Herman expands on this point, adding that 'arguably the accounts of intelligence failure might be re-written as accounts of 'security success' recounting the detailed ways in which secrecy was maintained'.[13] In short, this line of argument says that depending on the capabilities of your opposing security network, you are only going to know 50% of what you want to, and thus only have a 50% success (or failure) rate.

This argument provides a solid starting point for the assessment of the British intelligence community's experiences with Islamic terrorism. Although not a 'security agency', such terrorist groups did and still do enhance their security capabilities with the use of deception techniques and knowledge of US and UK signals intelligence (SIGINT) operations. Furthermore, evidence of intelligence failure can be seen at every level discussed above, all of which contributed to the 7/7 bombings and subsequent intelligence failures.

Part Two - British Intelligence and Islamist Terrorism Pre 9/11

Mark Curtis notes that British Governments, for decades, have colluded with radical Islamic forces in order to promote specific foreign policy objectives.[14] This began during the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89) in which military, financial and diplomatic backing was covertly given by the United States and Britain to militant Islamist organizations.[15] It was in this conflict that the perpetrators of the September 11th attacks forged links with Osama Bin-Laden's Al Queada before returning home and orchestrating attacks on the West.[16]

At the time, British counter-terrorism was overwhelmingly focused on Irish terrorism and overseen by Police Special Branch. Before the end of the Cold War, this reflected that terrorism was considered predominantly a criminal act and that other priorities, mainly counter-espionage, was the role of the British intelligence agencies.[17] This focus shifted in the decade following the end of the Cold War, where the intelligence agencies – the Security Service (MI5), the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) and Government Communication Head Quarters (GCHQ) – changed more than they had done since 1945.[18]

Primary to this change was the ASCRIBE initiative launched by the Security Service to gain domestic responsibility for counter-terrorism. When approved by the Major Government, resources were shifted to T and G Branch, which focused on Irish and international terrorism respectively.[19] This marked part of a wider shift within the intelligence community to redefine roles, and maintain their budgets, in the post-Cold War era. By the mid 1990s, this new direction was orientated towards counter-proliferation and the prevention of serious organized crime.[20]

In 1995, the first unit to assess the threat of Islamist Terrorism was created within MI5. Initially it was believed that the greatest Islamist counter-terrorism threat came from state-sponsored terrorism.[21] Although aware of Bin-Laden's activities, the Service initially considered him as a terrorist financier rather than organizer.[22] They were, however, aware of his aims to purchase weapons of mass destruction, fuelled by a fear of the sarin gas attack which took place on the Tokyo subway in the same year.[23]

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More alarmingly were later trends that developed with extremist groups in the UK. The creation of what has since been called 'Londonistan' in the late 1990s rested on a covenant of security in which radical Islamist groups could reside in London and operate normally in exchange for not launching attacks against UK targets.[24].

Recruitment by MI5 of key perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks such as Abu Hamza, Abu Quatada and Omar Bakri Mohammed demonstrate the length to which the Security Service would go to retain an informant.[25] Reda Hassine, another MI5 informant, reported frequently to his handlers that Abu Hamza was operating a network out of the Finsbury Park Mosque, radicalizing young British Muslims and sending them on camps. This information was ignored, which indicates the Service were already well aware of it.[26] Similar allegations were made about the service facilitating the 'escape' of Abu Qutada following the 2000 Terrorism Act, in that avoiding arrest would prevent revealing the extent of their relationship with him.[27]

By the millennium, acts of Irish Terrorism were fading through the results of diplomacy and human intelligence. The Terrorism Act (2000) defined terrorism and banned extremist groups, although extremist activity was not ended abruptly, with individuals like Abu-Hamza and Abu-Qutada continuing their activities up to the eve of 9/11.[28]

An intelligence failure can be attributed to the stages of collection and analysis. Although Ireland dominated the terrorist scene throughout this period, there were important warning signs that Al-Queada and transnational terrorist groups were emerging as an increasing threat. It was only after Al-Queda's first attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in July 1998 that the service began to reassess this threat.[29] A policy failure can also be considered to have taken place regarding extremist safe havens at the end of the decade, a policy that has since been widely criticized as harming Britain's national interests. Allowing such networks to operate freely allowed MI5 greater ability to monitor them, but they and the Government were ignorant to the possibility of the radicalization of British Muslims – a possibility that wasn't fully considered until after 7/7 – despite already emerging evidence of British suicide bombers operating outside of the UK.[30] The recruitment of Islamic radicals may have produced some intelligence on their overseas activities, but it is impossible to judge how useful this was domestically or for their foreign counterparts.[31]

Part Three - From 9/11 to 7/7

Steve Hewitt argues that the Blair Government's response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington revealed a 'reactive, short term and politicized mentality'.[32] Here he refers to the Government's response, which was chiefly to legislate, with the introduction of the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act (2001). The main feature of the Act was that it allowed internment and deportation of non-UK citizens believed to be involved in terrorist activity.[33] Considered alongside border controls and stricter immigration measures, this perpetrated the view that terrorism was primarily a 'foreign' entity to be dealt with through 'foreign policy'.[34]

As part of the Government's CONTEST strategy, intelligence fell under 'pursue', which after 9/11 was facilitated in two forms: through the greater allocation of resources and the structural extension of the intelligence community.[35] In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, resources were increased, although the main budgetary rise for the expansion of the agencies' capabilities or personnel did not come until 2004.[36] This expansion was focused on external threats and put the intelligence agencies on a back foot when they later came to pursue domestic counterterrorism.

This resource allocation arguably disadvantaged GCHQ, who received only 6% of the 2004 allowance, and was 'being outstripped by the global communications revolution.'[37] Indeed, the new nature of transnational Islamic terrorism served to highlight weaknesses with SIGINT agencies worldwide, especially in regards to the 'analytical deficit' that existed between the amount of information GCHQ collected and the amount it could analyze. Nevertheless, GCHQ immediately doubled the number of counter-terrorist personnel, shifting resources so that 30-40% of its total effort addressed this crisis.[38] Yet despite this, once the 'war on terror' and military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq started in earnest, GCHQ was effectively fighting on three fronts.

MI6 also doubled its resources devoted to counter-terrorism, including transferring some of its personnel back to

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London, in most cases to work with MI5 counter-terrorist teams. Overseas, its main role in the counter-terrorism strategy was to 'collect' by recruiting agents, run 'disruption' operations and build and maintain effective liaison arrangements.[39] Finally, MI5 which received the lion's share of the 2004 budget increase (76%), directed funds towards collection (surveillance, interception and agent running), investigation and dissemination – but not analysis.[40] This contributed to the effective 'regionalization' of the Service, in which six (later extended to eight) regional offices were established to move analysts closer to the 'hot spots' of terrorist activity, and to match and better coordinate with Special Branch.[41] Successful arrests and prosecution in Operation RHYME (gas-litmus plot) and CREVICE (Fertilizer Plot) demonstrated MI5's effectiveness in its limited law enforcement role.[42] In addition, the Service got acceptance to double its employment capacity from 2004-8.[43]

Furthermore, 'fusion' bodies were established to facilitate and pool intelligence on counter-terrorism across institutional boundaries. The Joint Terrorism Analysis Center, established in June 2003, is the main authority on this point in setting threat levels for the UK, but smaller bodies also exist including the Police International Counter Terrorist Unit that facilitates the continued coordination between the agencies and police.[44] These bodies both greatly enhance coordination between the intelligence community as well as the dissemination of operational intelligence related to terrorism. Furthermore, 'protective' security bodies, such as the National Security Advice Center and National Infrastructure Security Coordination Center were enhanced to maintain protection over core utilities.[45]

Nevertheless, British involvement in suicide attacks outside of the UK brought the services to soon reassess the terrorist threat as exclusively foreign. Infamous 'shoe-bomber' Richard Reid and his accomplice Said Badat, as well as the attempted bombing of a Tel Aviv nightclub by three British Muslims in 2003, alerted the intelligence community to the 'threat from within'.[46] As such, between 2003-5, there was a 300% increase in MI5 domestic targets, with Head of Terrorist Command, Peter Clarke admitting that the UK was a 'net exporter' of terrorism.[47]

However, this realization came too late, as on the morning of 7 July 2005, the London transport system was hit by four suicide bombers – the first instance of its kind to take place in the UK or Europe. Two weeks after the initial attacks, on 21 July, a 'copy-cat' attack was unsuccessful when their explosives failed to detonate. Most shockingly of all was that MI5 did not have any prior knowledge of this attack; indeed, initially they believed the culprits had escaped.[48] Furthermore, a month before the incident, JTAC reduced the threat level from severe-general to substantial, claiming to judge that 'at present there is not a group with the current intent and capability to attack the UK'. This can only been deemed as a serious intelligence failure as the nature of the analysis was moving in the wrong direction, raising fundamental questions over the way intelligence was codified and analyzed.[49]

Part Four - 7/7 and its Aftermath

Mark Phythian argues that 7/7 cannot be viewed as an intelligence failure, as because of 9/11, British authorities were to an extent pre-empting it.[50] Hewitt argues that, in this way, 9/11 can be viewed as positive as it allowed the Governments time to devote resources to counter-terrorism.[51] However, when one considers Herman's definition of 'warning failure', it arguably becomes a greater intelligence one, as despite increasing resources and structure of the intelligence community, it still failed to prevent or even *pre-empt* the attack.

It subsequently emerged that two of the bombers, Mohammad Sidique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer, had been placed under surveillance temporarily when linked to the perpetrators of Operation CREVICE. MI5 argued, and the ISC initially accepted, that this intelligence gap was down to MI5 operating with limited resources, requiring it to make assessments based on risk factors.[52]

However, subsequent evidence that emerged from the Operation CREVICE trial indicated that surveillance was actually much more substantial than previously assumed (up to 18 months). Furthermore, it emerged that Khan, Tanweer and lead CREVICE bomber Omar Khyam all travelled at the same time to Pakistan in 2002, probably to attend the same camps of which the Security Service appeared unaware.[53]

This highlights intelligence failure at the collection and analysis levels, and the Intelligence and Security Committee

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was challenged over whether it was fit to oversee the intelligence and security agencies. Nevertheless, Blair rejected the call for change and an independent inquiry, instead asking the ISC to re-investigate.[54]

Since 7/7, a potentially fatal 'aircraft bomb plot', in which liquid explosives were hidden in water bottles, was thwarted.[55] Indeed, one of the greatest problems in dealing with domestic Islamist terrorism following 7/7 is that the threat 'kept on expanding'. By 2008-9, three-quarters of MI5 resources were devoted to countering terrorism, up from two-thirds the previous year.[56] Alongside the failure to win the 'hearts and minds' of British Muslim communities and gain valuable human intelligence, recent polling results have demonstrated the alienation second and third generation Muslims experience in Britain. Most notably was the response that 100,000 British Muslims believe the 7/7 bombings justified, with 18% saying they feel no loyalty to the country.[57]

It is in this situation that one has to consider policy alongside intelligence failure. As Seamus Milne correctly emphasizes; 'Britain was not a target until it attacked the Muslim world'.[58] Unsurprisingly, neither the ISC nor the internal Government report into 7/7 focused on this matter. Furthermore, the nature of the threat is changing, particularly in accordance with how young British Muslims are being radicalized. Suspicions are that this is less a product of mosques than private homes, which places an even higher premium of intelligence and cooperation within these communities.[59] Furthermore, one of the more recent plots – the 'doctors plot' – involved the incident of an Iraqi national attempting to suicide bomb a British target, effectively linking both the external and domestic threats of terrorism even more directly to UK foreign policy.[60]

Conclusion

In evaluating how well the British intelligence community has coped with the threat of Islamist terrorism, intelligence failures of varying extents can be found chronologically and at all stages of the intelligence cycle. Although, arguably, some intelligence failures, such as those in initial collection and analysis and problems faced by SIGINT agencies, could be leveled at any Western intelligence and security agency, other such failures are more strictly British in fashion.

Analysis through the past two decades shows that the British intelligence community did not only act slowly to the emerging threat of Islam, but rather characterized it externally, despite evidence by both individuals (Richard Reid) and informers (Reda Hassine) that young British Muslims were becoming radicalized *before* travelling abroad, mainly to Pakistan, to attend terrorist training camps.

Despite this, and as Dame Manningham-Buller highlights, it is what you don't prevent that you will subsequently be remembered by. Due to the agencies' fore-knowledge of the Islamist threat from 9/11, and its failure to prevent it despite the largest post-cold war surge in the community's funding and expansion, failure to prevent and pre-empt the 7/7 and 21/7 attacks can only be regarded as a serious intelligence failure. As Paul Wilkinson highlights, 'fighting terrorism is like being a goalkeeper. You can make a hundred brilliant saves but the only shot people remember is the one that gets past you'.[61]

Nevertheless, this pessimistic conclusion is greatly softened when the attacks of 7/7 and 21/7 are interpreted in the wider context of policy failure. This, too, is evident throughout, from harboring Islamic extremists and protecting them from early prosecution, largely alienating the British Muslim community through repeated rounds of legislation, to military occupancy in Afghanistan, Iraq and measured support for Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon – no other factors beyond British foreign policy can account for the exponential expansion and persistence of the threat from Islamic terrorism.

As such, no independent inquiry was launched into the causes of 7/7, and thus questions over the exact relationship between intelligence and security failure in this case will never be answered. Overall, despite the impressive expansion and coordination of the British intelligence community, the failure of fore-knowledge of three attacks – technical failure resulting in the other two – can only lead to failure as an overwhelming conclusion, although the issue of whether this represents more of a policy than intelligence failure is still open to interpretation.

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[3] Curtis, M. (2012) Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam, Serpents Tail pg. iv

[4] The two other attacks of which the intelligence community had no fore-knowledge was the Copy-cat suicide

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bombing on 21st July 2005 and the driving of a burning vehicle into the terminal at Glasgow airport in an attempted suicide car bombing on 30th June 2007. Both attacks failed due to technical malfunction.

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[6] Ibid, pg. 42

[7] Herman, M. (1996) Intelligence: Power in Peace and War, Cambridge University Press pg. 221

[8] Gill, P. & Phythian, M. (2006) Intelligence in an Insecure World, Polity Press pg. 106

[9] Ibid, pg. 104-5

[10] Ibid, pg. 113

[11] Ibid, pg. 104

[12] Herman, M. (1996) Intelligence: Power in Peace and War, Cambridge University Press pg. 225

[13] Ibid, pg. 226

[14] Curtis, M. (2012) Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam, Serpents Tail pg. x-xi

[15] For example the British Government had covert dealings with Pakistan's Harkat ul-Ansar, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and the Kosovo Liberation Army.

[16] It is at this juncture that it is important to highlight the diversity of Islamist terrorist groups in both geographical, motivational and religious terms. Such motivations are never monocausal, with issues of nationalism and separatism playing a strong role. The threat is also largely decentralized, as attacks are not just carried out centrally by Al Queada, but of others inspired by its influence and message. Hewitt, S. (2007) The British War on Terror: Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism on the Home Front since 9/11, Continuum pg. 57

[17] Ibid, pg. 21

[18] Andrew, C. (2010) The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5, Penguin Books, pg.779

[19] Ibid, pg.775

[20] Ibid, pg. 778

[21] In particular the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), before the focus was switched to Algerian extremists operating in Europe.

[22] Ibid, pg. 801

[23] Ibid, pg. 807

[24] This mirrored an agreement with Russian and German revolutionaries in the early Twentieth Century

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- [27] Curtis, M. (2012) Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam, Serpents Tail pg. 275
- [28] Ibid, pg. 258. Also see Walker, C. (2009) Blackstone's Guide to The anti-Terrorism Legislation, 2nd ed, Oxford University Press, Oxford pg. 23-4
- [29] Andrew, C. (2010) The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5, Penguin Books, pg.804
- [30] Already before 9/11 warning signs existed of the involvement of British born terrorism, albeit outside of the UK. 8 Britons arrested in Yemen bomb plot (1998), Britain killed when the us blew up a AQ training camp (1998), suicide bombing by a British Muslim at Indian military base in Kashmir (2000).
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- [32] Hewitt, S. (2007) The British War on Terror: Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism on the Home Front since 9/11, Continuum pg. 92
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- This was replaced in 2005 with the Terrorism Act which replaced internment with control orders, comparable to house arrest
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- [35] Walker, C. (2008) 'The Pursuit of Terrorism with Intelligence' in J. Moran & M. Phythian eds. Intelligence, Security and Policing Post 9/11: The UK's Response to the 'War on Terror', Palgrave Macmillan pg. 54
- [36] Where the intelligence community received an an emergency budget rise of £54 million.
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- [39] Ibid, pg.95
- [40] Bamford, B. (2010) 'The United Kingdom's "War Against Terrorism", Terrorism and Political Violence, 16:4, pgs. 743
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- [42] Hewitt, S. (2007) The British War on Terror: Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism on the Home Front since 9/11, Continuum pg. 96
- [43] Ibid, pg. 97

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[44] Walker, C. (2008) 'The Pursuit of Terrorism with Intelligence' in J. Moran & M. Phythian eds. Intelligence, Security and Policing Post 9/11: The UK's Response to the 'War on Terror', Palgrave Macmillan pg. 54-5

[45] These bodies were merged in 2007 to create the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (CPNI).

Andrew, C. (2010) The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5, Penguin Books, pg. 818

[46] Phythian, M. (2008) 'In the Shadow of 9/11: Security, Intelligence and Terrorism in the United Kingdom' in J. Moran & M. Phythian eds. Intelligence, Security and Policing Post 9/11: The UK's Response to the 'War on Terror', Palgrave Macmillan pg. 49

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[49] Ibid, pg.122

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[53] Ibid, pg. 39

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