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Islamic Radicals in the UK - A Double-Edged Sword

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ABSTRACT

Experts have long contended that the UK is a safe haven for radical Islamic terror networks, which exploit British freedoms to further their goals. Britain has in the past upheld the rights of individuals, including the right of radical individuals to orchestrate the eradication of the rights of their opponents.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

Islamic Radicals in the UK - A Double-Edged Sword

Security experts have contended for many years that the UK is a safe haven for radical Islamic terror networks, which exploit British freedoms to further their goals. Among the factors contributing to the ease with which these groups operate is the UK's liberal immigration policy, the many flaws in the border control system, and freedom from the obligation to carry identity cards. Britain has in the past meticulously upheld the rights of the individual, including the right of radical individuals to orchestrate the eradication of the rights of their opponents. Such individuals are protected from prosecution in their countries of origin by British legislation that inhibits the extradition of suspects. At the same time, prosecution in the UK, with its large and influential Muslim community, is fraught with risks of internal strife, or accusation of racism.

As a rule, Western security services have been inadequately equipped to expose and thwart Islamist terrorist activity. This often stems from a lack of familiarity with the ideology and thought processes of the Islamist groups, and their means for translating their beliefs into actions. Intelligence gathering is difficult where such groups are concerned, as they tend to operate in small cells whose members are well known to one another.

It has never been much of a secret that an extensive radical Islamic infrastructure was operating on a large scale in the UK; Islamic charity funds, bank accounts, Islamic web sites, and newspapers in Arabic all serve as legitimate and legal platforms for illegal activities and incitement.

Of the 21 organizations outlawed in Britain since February 2002, 16 are Muslim. In the past, these groups have used London as a headquarters for recruitment and fund-raising only, and for all their fiery rhetoric against the West, they have been scrupulous in not actually targeting British interests on British soil. However, as Britain has come to be seen as the primary ally of the United States in its war on terrorism, radicals have been increasingly open in their intention to attack local targets.

“Londonistan”

While London has been a center for Islamic extremism for years, it was only after the September 11 attacks in the United States that the activities of militant Islamists began to be taken seriously by British security services. In the past, it was common practices for MI5 and Special Branch to keep a close watch on their activities, but not to interfere in any way. The firebrand clerics who preached jihad and hatred of the West were dismissed as “armchair warriors” by British intelligence and security services.

Nor was the British legal system equipped to deal with British citizens whose only offense was the support of violence in other countries. Under human rights laws, British courts would not allow dissidents who had sought sanctuary to be repatriated to countries that might kill them.

The United Kingdom's generous asylum laws were often exploited by radicals who fled their homelands to settle in London. These radicals and their supporters raise funds and preach their

causes from Islamic centers, mosques, and nondescript offices across the country. The literature of all brands of Islamic political thought is printed, distributed, and read throughout London. Much of it is given out on Fridays at the 100 or more mosques in the city. In some areas of London, videotaped sermons are on sale calling for the killing of all infidels and Jews; leaflets are distributed on street corners urging Muslims to travel to various hotspots around the world to wage Jihad; while radical preachers incite the faithful to take up arms against the “Crusaders and the Jews”.

Militant groups from Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Egypt, Algeria and Turkey all raise funds, forge links and disseminate propaganda in the UK. British laxity in pursuing those known to be inciting violence elsewhere enraged the French and Algerian authorities, who coined the term “Londonistan” to refer to a city which harbored known terrorists, allowed the dissemination of their propaganda and the recruitment of zealous new “holy warriors.” Britain is routinely asked by countries such as Sri Lanka and India to help cut off the millions of pounds raised annually from sympathetic migrant communities in the UK and laundered through London financial institutions.

After the attacks of 11th September 2001, Great Britain began to come to terms with the fact that its legal network was outdated and unable to meet the emerging threat. In February 2001, 21 international terror organizations were declared illegal in England, most of them Islamist. New legislation was put into effect enabling the authorities to place suspects under unlimited administrative detention, and banks were empowered to freeze assets and bank accounts of individuals and organizations suspected of involvement in terrorism.

Domestic groups

Britain currently is host to members of Egyptian terror organizations such as Islamic Jihad and al-Gamaa al-Isaamiya, or the Algerian Groupe Islamique Armée, and the Palestinian terror groups Hamas and Hizballah. But these overt terrorist groups do not operate openly in London. Instead, they have links with more visible outfits that function as recruiting centers in London. These organizations include:

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Al-Muhajiroun, a virulently anti-American and anti-Semitic radical group headed by Egyptian dissident Omar Bakri Muhamad. Al-Muhajiroun openly calls for the murder of Jews and the institution of a worldwide Islamic religious regime by violent Jihad. After the atrocities in the US he was among the first to praise the attack publicly.

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The Supporters of Sharia’a, based in North London, and headed by Egyptian Sheikh Abu Hamza al-Masri. Abu Hamza was until recently the Imam of the Finsbury Park Mosque, which under his leadership became a center for the recruitment to Jihad of young British Muslims.

Terrorism exported

Britain has often served as a base for recruitment of would-be Jihadis, who are then sent to other countries to operate terror cells as part of a network of hard-core radical Islamic activists.

In May 2003, two British citizens carried out a suicide attack on behalf of the Palestinian Hamas organization, targeting a popular jazz-pub in Tel-Aviv. Assif Muhammad Hanif and Omar Han Sharif were indicative of the use made of the Jihad recruitment centers in London, which have supplied fighters for Islamist struggles worldwide, from Chechnya to Afghanistan. Shiekh Omar Bakri-Mohammend said that the Islamic Front recruited volunteers in Britain and sent them to Jordan, where they awaited opportunities to infiltrate into the West Bank and join the uprising against Israel.

Abu Hamza Al-Masri is wanted in Yemen for his involvement in dispatching eight British Moslems to perpetrate terror attacks against Western targets in Yemen. So far, the UK has refused all requests from the Yemeni government for al-Masri's extradition.

After Abu Hamza, welcomed the massacre of 58 European tourists at Luxor in October 1997, Egypt denounced Britain as a hotbed for radicals. The Egyptian State Information Service posted a "Call to Combat Terrorism" on its official web site. Of its 14 most wanted terrorists, seven were based in Britain. Foremost amongst them was Yasser al-Sirri, sentenced to death in absentia for plotting the failed assassination of an Egyptian prime minister, who headed the Islamic Observation Centre in London, a mouthpiece for Egyptian rebels, and for al-Qaida.

The Algerian and French intelligence services were particularly concerned that Abu Hamza's Finsbury Park mosque was becoming a focal point for Algerian exiles, many of whom remained politically active. Agents who infiltrated the mosque claimed they had evidence of criminal and terrorist activity in addition to the volatile preaching of the imam. One source close to the French investigation said that before the events of September 11 noted that "Britain acted—and, to some extent, may still act—as a kind of filter for parts of al-Qaida," adding that "the main European centers for spiritual indoctrination were London and Leicester".

Plots believed linked to British Islamic groups include:

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A plan to bomb the US embassy in Tirana, Albania. Documents prepared for the trial of Misbah Ali Hassanayn, an Egyptian, quote a message from Rome police saying he was suspected of being in touch with "a group of terrorists living in London that was about to carry out an attack on the US embassy in Tirana."

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A planned attack on the 2000 Christmas market in Strasbourg. Initially, this has been ascribed entirely to a Frankfurt-based group but a Milan police report indicates that hit men sent from Britain were to have played the key role.

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Italian court papers point to the involvement of Abu Doha, a London-based radical in a prospective attack on the US embassy in Rome. In January 2001, the embassy was closed. Court papers say the US had been tipped off to a possible attack. Doha was described as “the person in charge.”

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A suicide attack by helicopter or lorry on the US embassy in Paris was planned by a group linked to al-Qaida, which including Djamel Beghal and Kamel Daoudi, who had lived in Britain.

Jihadis head for home

After 9/11 the British security services woke up to the possibility that the same militants who were exporting terrorism to other countries could just as easily turn their weapons upon their host country. Parliament passed a new anti-terrorism act, reversing centuries of tradition and making it illegal for anyone in Britain to promote armed struggle abroad.

In January of 2002, British military intelligence searching Osama bin Laden’s cave complex in the mountains of Tora Bora eastern Afghanistan found the names of 1,200 British citizens, all Muslims, who trained with the Al-Qaida network in Afghanistan.

The discovery was made public in January of 2003. Many of those who survived the defeat of the Taliban are now believed to be back in Britain and some may have formed terrorist cells. Many have gone underground to avoid detection.

The two British suicide bombers sent to Israel are part and parcel of the same phenomenon currently sweeping the Muslim world, in which young Muslims are induced to sacrifice their lives in the name of Jihad. Al-Muhajiroun activist Hassan Butt, who returned to Britain during 2002 from Pakistan, said that he estimated the number of suicide bombers waiting to carry out operations as more than fifty. He added that most of them are currently in Britain, although not necessarily active members of Al-Muhajiroun. He did state, however, that most of them had received religious lessons in Britain and that they had been taught that jihad was a priority. According to Butt, British Muslim volunteers in Afghanistan would return to the U.K. to “strike at the heart of the enemy”.