



## A Counter-Terrorism Analysis of WikiLeaks\* – The United Kingdom

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### Introduction

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was marked by a series of deadly terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom (UK). The country, still recovering from the global shock of the September 11 terrorist attacks in America (9/11), was rocked by a string of explosions on its public transit system on July 7, 2005. The London Metro Bombings (or 7/7 as it is also known) ushered in a new era in British domestic security. The sudden rise in Islamic terrorism led the government to react to the new challenges with the development of ad-hoc legislation in order to prevent future incidents. Considering the similar nature of the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, it is important to understand how the United States (US) government views the British counter-terrorism (CT) strategy juxtaposed with its own. This is now possible through analysis of reports between the US Embassy in London and the Department of State in Washington D.C. The release of these documents by the whistleblower website WikiLeaks in 2010 allows us a rare glimpse into the still classified nature of the security relationship between the two powers.

The WikiLeaks reports shed light on the less public side of the UK's strategy to combat Islamic terrorism domestically. This paper will focus on three main aspects of the CT effort within the United Kingdom. The first section will analyze studies provided by the British government on the state of affairs of the Muslim population in the UK. Next, it will proceed to examine the dimension of the terrorist threat faced by the United Kingdom. Finally, the study will conclude with US commentary on the UK government's "CONTEST" counter-terrorism strategy, and criticism thereof.

\* *Disclaimer:* Although we do not condone the actions of WikiLeaks, its staff and its sources, the information is now in the public domain and therefore it is important for a research institute to analyze the contents of the materials.

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## Background

To begin, it is important to provide an overview of the current situation in the UK. The 2009 State Department cable titled “UK Muslim Demographics,” - classified as Secret - provides a wide range of interesting data regarding the economic and social makeup of the Islamic Community within the United Kingdom.

The findings of a British study show that the Muslim population in the UK has jumped in seven years (2001-2008) from 1.6 million to 2 million. The British government estimates that at the current rate of increase, the Muslim population of the UK will exceed 2.1 million in 2011. In April 2008, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced that a government census estimated the Muslim population at 3.3% of the UK total<sup>1</sup>. As we can see from the data, in overall numbers the Muslim population is rapidly increasing, though there are initial signs that the rate of growth is gradually slowing. Changes to UK visa rules announced in 2008 may limit the increase further. Regardless, at more than 3% of the total population, this is the largest non-Christian minority in the country; a disturbing number considering most communities are young, tightly clustered, and often disadvantaged

The UK’s Muslim population is mostly concentrated in London (38% of the total UK Muslim population) and other large urban areas including the West Midlands (14%), the North West (13%), and Yorkshire and the Humber (12%)<sup>2</sup>. Breaking these numbers down further, as of 2001, nearly 74% were of Asian descent (Pakistani - 43%, Bangladeshi - 16%, Indian - 8%, Other Asian - 6%). and nearly 90% were below the age of 50 with a median age of 28 - 13 years below the national average.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> London US Embassy. (2009, 01 09). *UK Muslim demographics*

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Open Society Institute. (2004) *Aspirations and Reality: British Muslims and the Labor Market*



Despite the presence of a large, youthful labor force, the Muslim minority experiences unemployment levels three times higher than their Christian counterparts (38%) and have the highest proportion of children in workless houses (30-40%). This is partly due to employer labor practices and a lack of faith-friendly work environments.<sup>4</sup>

The same cable reports an interesting poll conducted on 600 Muslim and 800 non-Muslim students at thirty universities throughout the UK by the Centre for Social Cohesion (CSC). Results showed that 32% of Muslims students polled believe that killing in the name of religion is justified, 54 % wanted a Muslim Party to represent their world view in Parliament, and 40% want Muslims in the UK to be subject to Sharia law<sup>5</sup>. In comparison, only 2% of non-Muslims felt killing in the name of religion could be justified and none believed it was acceptable for Muslims in the UK to have a religious-based party or to be under Sharia law. A total of 73% of the Muslim students are at least occasional participants in Friday services while only 2% of non-Muslim students attend any religious service at all.

Moreover, the cable reports that, in 2006, a controversy arose in the United Kingdom after it was discovered that 100 Islamic private academic schools were ignoring government required curriculum in favor of religious studies. These schools were quoted as being "little more than places where the Koran is recited."<sup>6</sup> A review, scheduled for 2010, would examine the quality of instruction following promises of reform.

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<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> London US Embassy. (2009, 01 09). *UK Muslim demographics*

<sup>6</sup> ibid



This data suggests that the situation in the United Kingdom is dangerously ripe for radicalization. The presence of a young, underpaid or unemployed youth cohort that is highly religious and poorly integrated into society fits well into organizational theories of Islamic radicalization. Extremist elements within the Muslim community have traditionally looked to such groups as a source for recruitment<sup>7</sup>.

## The Threat

The cables leaked from the US embassy in London, show that US counter-terrorism officials are highly concerned with the threat faced by, and potentially exported from, the UK.<sup>8</sup> According to US officials, Britain currently faces a multi-faceted threat from Islamic terrorism – specifically, a commitment to global jihad among homegrown terrorists elements.

The message does not appear to have been lost on the British Government. In a 2008 cable, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith argues that the government repeatedly tries to convince the British public of the importance this threat poses to the UK<sup>9</sup>.

Mrs. Smith argues that the number of young people who may be susceptible to extremism and terrorism is growing, as is the likelihood that they will turn that aggression against the UK. According to US officials, the British government had determined several indicators that make people susceptible to this type of radicalization. These indicators have been derived from highly classified analysis carried out by the British government on individuals detained for initiating or

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<sup>7</sup> London US Embassy . (2008, 12 22). *United Kingdom: 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism*.

<sup>8</sup> London US Embassy. (2008, 04 24). *Reports that Britain is importing Pakistani Imams*.

<sup>9</sup> London US Embassy. (2008, 06 06). *Home Secretary Sells the Counter-Terrorism Bill*.



supporting terrorist acts in the UK. The findings of the report indicate that for immigrants from the Middle-East and North Africa, immigration itself, plays a strong role in radicalization. Moreover, the report argues that immigrants that suffered personal disappointments or traumas such as loss of job, divorce or death of a close family member are more likely to become radicalized.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, those individuals who hold a British passport are able to travel more freely abroad, thus increasing their access to targets in Western countries as well as reducing scrutiny when traveling to their home states. This was a contributing factor in several instances which are listed in the 2008 Counter-Terrorism Report on the UK. The two following cases exemplify the risks associated with homegrown terrorism.

In December 2009, British born Muslim, Rangzieb Ahmed was convicted by the Manchester Crown Court of being a member of Al-Qaeda and of being the leader of a terrorist organization in the Britain. The court convicted Rangzieb to life in prison and he is expected to serve a minimum of ten years. An associate of Rangzieb, also a British Born Muslim - Habib Ahmed, was also found guilty of being member of Al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, the court found Rangzieb of being the leader of a three-man terrorist cell that was planning an attack overseas. The conviction marked the first of its kind in the United Kingdom since the introduction of the Terrorism Act of 2000 and inciting and planning terrorism became an offence. The prosecution presented evidence that Rangzieb was in close contact with high ranking Al-Qaeda members. The conviction was the result of a three-year international investigation conducted by Scotland Yard and Interpol<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> London US Embassy. (2008, 06 06). *Home Secretary Sells the Counter-Terrorism Bill*.

<sup>11</sup> London US Embassy . (2008, 12 22). *United Kingdom: 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism*



Another example of home-grown terrorism is the conviction in 2009 of Bilal Abdulla. Abdulla, is a British-Iraqi doctor who had been a physician in Scotland for several years. The Scottish police convicted him on several charges of murder and conspiring to cause explosions. In 2009 Abdulla was found guilty of the June 30, 2007 car bomb attack at Glasgow International Airport and the car bomb attacks in London on June 29, 2007. The Woolwich Crown Court sentenced Abdulla to life in prison and he is expected to serve at least 32 years before being eligible for parole.<sup>12</sup>

The second main concern voiced by the US in the leaked cables is the presence of radical foreign members of Islamic organizations in the UK who fall under "asylum status". Unfortunately, the WikiLeaks cables do not specify which organizations are being singled out for greater scrutiny, but they do refer to the following case mentioned by US officials in the 2008 Country Report on Terrorism.

The case that exemplifies this concern, involves a Jordanian radical cleric and terror suspect Abu Qatada whom is accused of being Osama Bin Laden's "right-hand man in the UK" and an Al-Qaeda recruiter in Europe. Abu Qatada's role in supporting Al-Qaeda cannot be overstated, he was a major terrorism financier, and his sermons were found in 9/11 terrorist Mohammed Atta's apartment in Hamburg<sup>13</sup>.

In 2008, Abu Qatada had been released from prison to serve his sentence in house arrest after successfully contending his deportation to Jordan. Abu Qatada was sentenced in absentia by a Jordanian court to life in prison for planning several terror attacks on tourists traveling to Petra. Nevertheless in 2008, according to US officials

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<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1939057/Profile-Abu-Qatada-An-al-Qaeda-lynchpin.html>



“Qatada was re-arrested after the UK’s special immigration appeals commission

revoked his bail due to concern that he was a flight risk and that he might potentially breach his bail conditions”.<sup>14</sup>

## The Response

According to a cable from the US embassy in London dated 2008. Home Secretary Jacqui Smith argues that the terrorist threat facing the UK is severe and growing. This statement runs parallel to similar reports from US officials regarding the issue. In an attempt to address these warnings, the UK government began to push legislation aimed at combating international terrorism through its "CONTEST" counter-terrorism (CT) strategy.

The CONTEST strategy divides government resources under four thematic response areas: Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare. The main aspects discussed in the WikiLeaks cables – and the one which will be addressed here - is the "Prevent" aspect. Following its implementation, it has since been updated by the Cameron Administration in 2011 in an attempt to address some deficiencies that were identified since its last revision in 2009.

In a cable from 2008, US officials argue that the UK is actively promoting strong preventative measures. The forefront of these initiatives is an attempt by the British government to bring forward several anti-radicalization programs<sup>15</sup>. This has been expanded under the revised *Prevent* Strategy to give more authority to local

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<sup>14</sup> London US Embassy . (2008, 12 22). United Kingdom: 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism

<sup>15</sup> London US Embassy. (2010, 02 05). Engagement with Muslim communities in the UK.



communities and prevent national governmental officials from micromanaging operations. A broad range of guidelines have been implemented to ensure that communities are able to address their specific needs and to handle the issue. The previous strategy confronted the problem according to race/population density rather than identifying potential threats *within* those communities. This strategy acknowledges the fact that the entire Muslim community as a whole does not condone or support terrorism, but a small microcosm within society must be identified and monitored. This will include building on the multi-agency "Channel" program which will help to identify young people who are at risk of radicalization.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, according to US officials in order to stem radicalization, the British government has increased the role of primary and secondary teachers and school administrators in anti-radicalization. Teachers and public administration officials are required to develop class discussions, short courses and anti-hate seminars. These programs' goal is to empower young people to expose and refuse the ideology preached by extremist clerics. Moreover, the British government guidance requires teachers to report to the home office, students if there is suspicion of them being drawn to violent extremism. Similarly, the British Home office requires universities to monitor attendance of international students in order to prevent foreign extremist from entering the UK with student visas.<sup>17</sup>

These measures notwithstanding, US officials report concerns about the reputed British efforts to import moderate Pakistani Imams. According to a 2008 cable, this project worried US officials and required further clarification from the Home Secretary. The concerns were rebuffed by the Home Secretary, who, instead, argued

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<sup>16</sup> Review of 'Prevent Strategy'. (2011, 06 07) Office of British Home Secretary Jacqui Smith.

<sup>17</sup> London US Embassy . (2008, 12 22). United Kingdom: 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism.





that the British government hopes to foster local Imams who are already “rooted in the community”<sup>18</sup>. Consequently, the UK’s Home Office has supported Muslim communities’ efforts to form an association (The Mosques and Imams Advisory Body, called MINAB) which would lead in the development and self-regulation of Mosques in the United Kingdom. Moreover, the Home Secretary argued that the UK’s position was to not actively interfere with Muslim communities. The communities should lead the effort themselves as “it is not the government’s role to dictate to people how to practice their faith”.<sup>19</sup> Following the creation of MINAB, accusations arose that several of its members were preaching violent extremism and hate. As of 2011, greater oversight has been implemented to ensure that funding does not reach these individuals or organizations who condone terrorist ideologies. The Cameron Government has made it very clear in the revised strategy that it will increase monitoring and evaluations for all future projects funded through *Prevent*.<sup>20</sup>

In a cable dated 2007, US officials present several joint programs with UK officials aimed at reducing the ability of extremist preachers to radicalize British-Muslim youth. According to the leaked cables, US embassy employees are working closely with their British counterparts in shaping projects that will encourage Muslim communities to reject violent ideologies and resist recruitment by extremists. These programs are outlined in the 2009 Strategic Action Plan, developed jointly by the US and the UK.<sup>21</sup> US officials argue that the strategic plan is consistent with the overall US counter-radicalization strategy. Nevertheless, these projects are fine-tuned to fit the particular context of radicalization in the UK.

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<sup>18</sup> London US Embassy. (2008, 04 24). Reports that Britain is importing Pakistani Imams.

<sup>19</sup> London US Embassy. (2010, 02 05). *Engagement with Muslim communities in the UK*

<sup>20</sup> Review of ‘Prevent Strategy’. (2011, 06 07) *Office of British Home Secretary Jacqui Smith*.

<sup>21</sup> London US Embassy. (2010, 02 05). *Engagement with Muslim communities in the UK*



An example of these initiatives is outlined in another cable dated 2010. The US embassy in the UK requested that Washington send a scholar to study former extremists who have rejected their violent ideology. The results of the study would help develop programs shaped to fit particular neighborhood needs and dynamics, recognizing that the diversity of Muslim communities precludes a monolithic set of responses<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, US officials argue that the plan (in order to be cost-efficient) should focus specifically on the most at-risk Muslim populations and youths, targeting engagement and community-building. These programs, however, are not to be used for the purpose of any clandestine intelligence gathering and any data obtained through their implementation is to be safeguarded against its misuse. The strategy of integration of at-risk and isolated communities is not to be securitized. Previous versions of the *Prevent* Strategy have attempted this, resulting in a misperception of the program among the individuals it was meant to help. Above all, trust in *Prevent* must be maintained if the program is to have any effect on the community.<sup>23</sup>

The internet is also an arena that must be addressed individually. British CT efforts must continue to combat terrorist propaganda and recruiting on the internet by monitoring known extremist websites and disrupting the flow of radicalizing material. However, a new effort must also be undertaken to utilize the internet as a forum for rational argument and as a challenge to terrorist ideology. *Prevent* information can be easily transmitted through online channels where it can serve as a counterweight to radical Islamic views by providing positive messaging from credible sources and critical analysis of extremist propaganda.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> London US Embassy. (2008, 04 14). *Proposal For Ambassador's CT Fund*

<sup>23</sup> Review of 'Prevent Strategy'. (2011, 06 07) Office of British Home Secretary Jacqui Smith.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*



The 2009 plan shows that US involvement in anti-radicalization efforts is strong and pro-active. In fact, the US not only helps the capacity building of UK counter-parts, but also takes an active role itself. The cables mention an important aspect of the US

Strategic Action Plan, which is to enhance the opinion of the US among the British Muslim youth through the cultural exchange of American Muslims. This specifically involves participation of American Muslim organizations in the British Ramadan Festival and other events.

Leaked cables also show that US officials praised the UK's Home Secretary announcement of measures aimed at strengthening the government's power to exclude foreign extremists from entering Britain. The so-called "preachers of hate" rules are expected to extend to anyone suspected of advocating illegal activity which would stir tensions in the UK. In fact this legislation empowers the Home Office to "name and shame" extremists blocked from entering Britain and to share their details with other countries. Nonetheless, US officials are unsure whether this approach will survive a court challenge. The approach taken by the UK is similar to the French approach, in that both allow authorities to prevent radical Imams and other extremist individuals from preaching their messages of hate within their borders.

The 2011 *Prevent* revision has also addressed the accusation that aspects of the previous Strategy have limited the right to free speech among British citizens. The Office of the Home Secretary states, in no uncertain terms, that the Government of the UK is fully and completely committed to protecting the free speech of its citizens, yet,

"Universities and colleges have a legal and moral obligation...to ensure that the place of work and study is a tolerant, welcoming and safe environment... [They]



have a clear and unambiguous role to play in helping to safeguard vulnerable young people from radicalization and recruitment by terrorist organizations."<sup>25</sup>

This responsibility is enforced through the act of issuing charters to student organizations. In order to be considered a charity in the UK, an organization must demonstrate a dedication to the public good. Student unions and other organizations within higher education can be challenged by the school regarding the merit that their association has within society and - if a message of violence or hate is found to be in conflict with its charter - that charter may be revoked. This action was emphasized as an effort to reduce the opportunity for at risk youth to be exposed to the radical influence of some campus organizations.<sup>26</sup>

Another example of the inner working of US and UK cooperation is the request by British officials for intelligence regarding several individuals listed as terrorist financiers. The request specifies that this intelligence is necessary to convince cautious lawyers that sufficient evidence exists under UK law to pursue action against these individuals. Moreover, the cable claims that the British government is optimistic that it will have sufficient information on the others still under review, but would appreciate anything further the US government has not yet shared<sup>27</sup>.

Discussion in the leaked cables do not focus solely on aspects of cooperation between the US and Britain. Criticism of the UK government's CT efforts also emerges as seen in the following instances.

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<sup>25</sup> Review of 'Prevent Strategy'. (2011, 06 07) Office of British Home Secretary Jacqui Smith.

<sup>26</sup> ibid

<sup>27</sup> London US Embassy. (2010, 01 22). UK Domestic Terrorist Finance Review



The US officials in the London embassy sent several reports back to Washington discussing the problems faced by the Gordon Brown Government in regard to the CONTEST strategy. The main issue was the inability of the British government to push forward a bill in 2006 that would allow the prosecution to detain without charge suspected terrorist for up to 42 days. Within the WikiLeaks cables, which were drafted before the voting, US officials claim that they were assured by the British government that the bill would pass. However, following its presentation before Parliament, the measure failed by 20 votes. This sparked intense criticism from US officials who expressed a loss of confidence in the government of Gordon Brown.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

The WikiLeaks cables analyzed in this paper do not reveal the full extent of British CT efforts. Nevertheless, some interesting facts and opinions emerge. According to the cables, the British and the US governments see domestic radicalization as the primary trigger of terrorism. Two important examples have been brought forward in the Department of State's 2008 country report. Both examples address radical Muslim individuals who aided terrorists and perpetrated attacks on British soil. Additionally, the US government is concerned about the presence of foreign terrorists living in the United Kingdom under the shield of asylum seekers. There is a danger to both the UK and the US that these individuals are able to recruit and radicalize British citizens as well as travel internationally with all the advantages and protections provided with a UK passport. The response to this threat has been the CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy. The *Prevent* aspect of this strategy has been

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<sup>28</sup> London US Embassy. (2008, 06 06). Home Secretary Sells the Counter-Terrorism Bill.



revised, as of 2011, in an attempt to increase its effectiveness and efficiency through greater accountability, increased data collection, specific targeting of at risk individuals, and by making greater use of the internet. The US and the UK are working closely to find approaches that are specifically honed to the local communities with the US having direct involvement on the part of the embassy in both public and governmental arenas. Cables reveal that cooperation and efforts by

American authorities are strong and pro-active. Nonetheless, US officials remark that by 2008 the British had not transposed the strategy into clear policy for all levels of the bureaucracy and they express their desire to see significant changes put into effect.



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