



Background Briefing: Modern-Day Britain's Terror Threat

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This briefing explains the nature and threat of terrorism in modern-day Britain by drawing on existing government data. Historical evidence demonstrates that while the threat posed by far-right extremism is growing fastest, Islamist extremism remains the prevailing terror threat in the UK – a conclusion previously stated by the head of counter-terrorism policing, Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu.ⁱ

An individual is being held under terrorism legislation following the killing of long-standing Member of Parliament Sir David Amess. While investigations are continuing, early investigations have identified a potential motivation linked to Islamist extremism.ⁱⁱ If confirmed, this would highlight the anti-democratic brutality contained within the UK's main ideological terror threat.

This briefing argues that there is a fundamental disconnect between the ideological breakdown of cases referred to the UK's counter-extremism Prevent scheme (and those which are eventually adopted as Channel cases) and the ideological composition of the UK's overall terror threat. While jihadists pose the greatest terror threat to the UK, more right-wing radicalisation cases than Islamist radicalisation cases, are discussed by a Channel panel and eventually adopted as a fully-fledged Channel case.

This briefing argues that this mismatch in resource allocation and the ideological composition of the UK's general terror threat needs to be explained by the relevant state agencies. Public trust in our counter-terrorism structures is otherwise likely to be further undermined due to the potentially terror-related killing of Sir David Amess. This briefing also suggests that there is a culture of identity politics and political correctness which is paralysing national efforts in tackling Islamist extremism. This is demonstrated by the current discourse surrounding the killing of Sir David Amess, which is being dominated by discussions of Britain's (traditionally) adversarial political culture (largely stemming from our historically two-party system) and social media anonymity, rather than the only potential motive so far identified.

With a recent statement published by Southend Mosques demonstrating the fact that Sir David Amess was a much-adored public figure among his local Muslim constituents.ⁱⁱⁱ This would be primarily designed to support British Muslim civic associations and grassroots community groups who are courageously dedicated to promoting inclusive community relations, civil democratic participation, and anti-extremist attitudes in their local communities.

Defining Terrorism

In the United Kingdom, terrorism is legally defined as:

“the use or threat of action, both in and outside of the UK, designed to influence any international government organisation or to intimidate the public. It must also be for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause”.^{iv}

The UK’s Proscription of Islamist Organisations

The Terrorism Act 2000 gives the Home Secretary the power to ban organisations who are believed to be involved in terrorism.^v Current Islamist organisations which have been proscribed by the UK include Al-Muhajiroun, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Al-Shabaab.^{vi}

Al-Qaeda, proscribed in March 2001 and formerly led by Osama Bin Laden, has main aims including the expulsion of Western military forces in the Middle East region, the destruction of Israel, and the eradication of Western influences in Muslim-majority societies. Al-Muhajiroun, which was proscribed back in the summer of 2006, is an Islamist group which seeks to create a state ruled by sharia law. Al-Shabaab, proscribed in March 2010, is an extremist organisation which strives to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state in Somalia and has attempt to radicalise members of Somali-origin communities in other parts of the world – including the UK.

Islamic State was proscribed in June 2014 (abbreviations include ISIS and ISIL). It is a genocidal Islamist terrorist group originating in Iraq and Syria, with affiliates, operations, and supporters around the world. The group ultimately adheres to a global jihadist ideology. Islamic State Khorasan Province (more commonly known as ISIS-K) consists of former members of the Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). It considers the current Taliban administration in Afghanistan as overly moderate (as it is ultimately focused on sharia-inspired governance in the Central Asian country - not beyond their national borders).^{vii}

Prevent and Channel Cases: Ideological Breakdown

There is a fundamental mismatch between the ideological composition of referral cases to Prevent, the cases which are discussed at a Channel panel, and the cases which are adopted as a Channel case, and the prevailing terror threat in the UK – Islamist extremism.

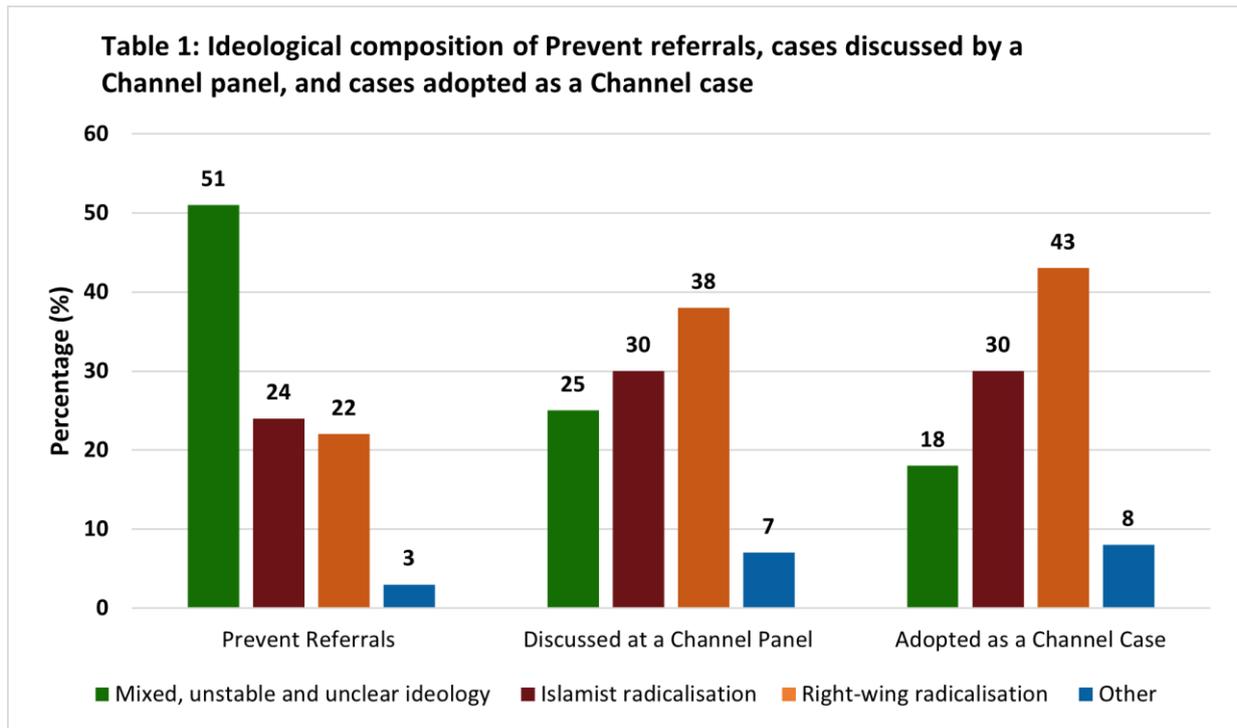


Table 1 presents an overview of the ideological composition of cases referred to the Prevent programme, discussed at a Channel case, and eventually adopted as a Channel case between April 2019 and March 2020.^{viii}

The data shows that for this period, over half of Prevent referrals fell into the ‘mixed, unstable and unclear ideology’ category (51 per cent). The percentage of Islamist radicalisation cases referred to Prevent (24 per cent) was slightly higher than the share falling into the right-wing radicalisation category (22 per cent). When cases referred to Prevent are ‘upgraded’ and discussed at a Channel panel, right-wing radicalisation and Islamist radicalisation account for 38 per cent and 30 per cent respectively.

This gap widens further when we move to cases adopted as a Channel case. For this period, 30 per cent of cases adopted as a Channel case were associated with Islamist radicalisation

(210 cases), and 43 per cent associated with right-wing radicalisation (302 cases) – a difference of 13 percentage points. While the country’s prevailing terror threat is represented by jihadists, Islamist radicalisation trails some way behind right-wing radicalisation in the ideological composition of those diverted for de-radicalisation.

Accordingly, Home Office data reveals that far-right extremists outstrip Islamist extremists in terms of referrals to the Government’s Prevent scheme which result in the offering of counter-radicalisation support and monitoring.

Terror-Related Prisoners In the UK

As of 31 March 2021, there were 215 persons in custody for terrorism-connected offences in Great Britain. Of those in custody, nearly three in four – 73 per cent - were categorised as holding Islamist-extremist views.^{ix} This dwarfs the one in five people in custody for terrorism-connected offences who were categorised as holding extreme right-wing ideologies. A total of 40 prisoners held for terrorism-related or terrorism-connected offences were released from custody in Great Britain in the latest year for which figures are available (year ending 31 December 2020).^x

MI5 Watchlist

The MI5 watchlist of terror-related suspects is on record to have risen to 43,000 in recent times. In 2020, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that “the vast majority of the suspects on the lists – as many as 39,000 – are jihadists, compared to a few thousand right-wing extremists”.^{xi} According to the HMG Transparency Report (Disruptive Powers 2018/19), there was a total of 3,000 subjects of interest (SOIs) across a total of 600 priority investigations.^{xii} Commenting on the broader watchlist of terror-related suspects, Richard Walton, a former head of the Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command, expressed his concerns over the “scale of the problem” – with nine in ten people on the list being “Islamist extremists”.^{xiii}

2019 Independent Review of Terrorism Legislation

The 2019 Independent Review of Terrorism Legislation by Jonathan Hall Q.C., which was published in March 2021, concluded that “Islamist terrorism remains the principal threat in Great Britain”, with the majority of terrorism convictions in 2019 relating to Islamist terrorism.^{xiv} The independent review also referred to cases before the family courts, which revealed parents seeking to indoctrinate their children – often very young – “with (mainly Islamist) terrorist sympathies”.^{xv}

Conclusion and Recommendations

This briefing is firmly of the view that the effectiveness of the UK’s counterterrorism structures in reducing the national terror threat must be rigorously scrutinised. This includes a forensic analysis of cases where an individual has been referred to Prevent, left the scheme, and gone on to be convicted of terrorism-related offences.

There must also be a clear explanation issued by the relevant public authorities as to why right-wing radicalisation cases represent a larger slice of cases than Islamist radicalisation when it comes to Prevent referrals discussed at a Channel panel and adopted as a Channel case – even though Islamist extremism very much remains the UK’s most significant terror threat. There is all too real prospect of Islamist extremists who present a significant security risk, not being sufficiently monitored by the public authorities.

There is a national discussion to be had over the discourse and narrative surrounding the potentially terror-related killing of Sir David Amess. It should be noted that robustly debating the ideological underpinnings of the UK’s prevailing Islamist terror threat is not a form of anti-Muslim prejudice. In this context, it must be recognised that British Muslims are broadly in line with the general population when it comes to being concerned over the dangers posed by Islamist extremism. Indeed, according to a survey commissioned by Crest Advisory, British Muslims are more likely to report a radicalisation risk to the relevant authorities than the wider public.^{xvi}

The UK cannot afford to be paralysed by political correctness and tribal identity politics in the fight against Islamist extremism – a terror threat that concerns both Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain to similar degrees.

The briefing presents the following recommendations:

- Public authorities of relevance must provide a comprehensive explanation for forms of disconnection between the ideological composition of referral cases to Prevent (and cases which are eventually upgraded to the Channel component of CONTEST) and terror-related offences (including terrorist attacks). Even though Islamist extremism very much remains the UK's most significant terror threat, this is simply not reflected in the ideological breakdown of Prevent referrals transferred to Channel. To heighten the accountability and legitimacy of the UK's counterterrorism structures, such disparities ought to be explained in official documents which are open to public access.
- It is thought that the suspect detained for the killing of Sir David Amess was referred to the Prevent scheme but did not spend long in the programme and was never a formal subject of interest to MI5.^{xvii} If this turns out to be correct, then with the Prevent scheme currently being independently reviewed, it highlights that it is vital that cases where someone is referred to Prevent, leaves the voluntary-participation scheme, and then engages in terrorist activity, are forensically examined. Analysing how effectively police forces, educational institutions, social services, and healthcare agencies are cooperating to help prevent at-risk people from being drawn into extremist activity is of paramount importance.
- Following the killings of Labour MP Jo Cox and now Conservative MP Sir David Amess, UK Members of Parliament should have a professionally trained security guard for constituency surgeries and other public engagements where they are potentially exposed. Those who can fill such security roles can include former military veterans - as a means for some to take on positions that nestle in with their existing skills sets and provide them with the opportunity to take on a protective role in British democratic life.

- The UK Government must continue to oppose the problematic ‘Islamophobia’ definition produced by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims.^{xviii} This definition not only dangerously conflates genuine cases of anti-Muslim discrimination with perfectly legitimate criticisms of religiously-inspired ideology – it has the potential to empower identitarian organisations who wish to ‘police’ much-needed debates on the prevailing terror threat of Islamist extremism. This ultimately weakens counter-extremist efforts – much of which includes the fostering of counter-ideological narratives.

Endnotes

ⁱ BBC News (2019), ‘Fastest-growing UK terror threat ‘from far-right’’, 19 September. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-49753325>, last visited: 19 October 2021.

ⁱⁱ Jackson, M. & Lee, D. (2021), ‘Sir David ‘Amess: MP murder suspect held under Terrorism Act’’, BBC News, 18 October. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-58943184>, last visited: 19 October 2021.

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- iii ITV News (2021), 'Muslims in Southend call Sir David Amess killing an 'indefensible atrocity'', 18 October. Available at: <https://www.itv.com/news/anglia/2021-10-18/muslims-in-southend-call-sir-david-amess-murder-an-indefensible-atrocity>. Last accessed: 19 October 2021.
- iv Crown Prosecution Service, n,d, Terrorism, available at: <https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/terrorism>, last visited: 19 October 2021.
- v [Terrorism Act 2000 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)
- vi UK Home Office (2021), 'Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations', 16 July, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2>, last visited: 19 October 2021.
- vii Jadoon, A. and Mines, A. (2021), 'What is ISIS-K? Two terrorism experts on the group behind the deadly Kabul airport attack and its rivalry with the Taliban', 26 August. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/what-is-isis-k-two-terrorism-experts-on-the-group-behind-the-deadly-kabul-airport-attack-and-its-rivalry-with-the-taliban-166873>, last visited: 19 October 2021.
- viii Home Office, 'Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent programme, England and Wales, April 2019 to March 2020', available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-april-2019-to-march-2020>, last visited 19 October 2021.
- ix UK Home Office (2021), 'Operation of police powers under the Terrorism Act 2000 and subsequent legislation: Arrests, outcomes, and stop and search Great Britain, year ending March 2021', 10 June. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-financial-year-ending-march-2021/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-and-subsequent-legislation-arrests-outcomes-and-stop-and-search-great-britain-year-ending>, last visited: 19 October 2021.
- x Ibid.
- xi Mendick, R. (2020), 'Stabbing suspect was assessed by anti-terror programme', The Telegraph, 23 June. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/22/number-people-mi5-terror-suspect-watch-list-doubled-year/>, last visited: 19 October 2021.
- xii HM Government (2020), 'HM Government Transparency Report: Disruptive Powers 2018/19', March. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/919625/CCS0320317274-001_HM_Government_Transparency_Report_Web_Accessible.pdf, last visited: 19 October 2021.
- xiii Mendick, R. (2020), 'Stabbing suspect was assessed by anti-terror programme', The Telegraph, 23 June. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/22/number-people-mi5-terror-suspect-watch-list-doubled-year/>, last visited: 19 October 2021.
- xiv Hall QC, J. (2021), 'The Terrorism Acts in 2019: REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWER OF TERRORISM LEGISLATION ON THE OPERATION OF THE TERRORISM ACTS 2000 AND 2006', March. Available at:

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^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} Crest Advisory (2020), 'Listening to British Muslims: policing, extremism and Prevent', 2 March. Available at: <https://www.crestadvisory.com/post/listening-to-br2itish-muslims-policing-extremism-and-prevent>, last visited: 19 October 2021.

^{xvii} Jackson, M. & Lee, D. (2021), 'Sir David 'Amess: MP murder suspect held under Terrorism Act', BBC News, 18 October. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-58943184>, last visited: 19 October 2021.

^{xviii} APPG British Muslims, 'Islamophobia Defined: The inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia', available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>, last visited: 19 October 2021.