

Security Minister speech to the Royal United Services Institute

Thank you for the kind introduction.

It is a huge privilege to speak at RUSI again – albeit this time not in your wonderful library – but rather from the more functional backdrop of my Home Office office – although that in itself may well be a first!

I have always valued the research, analysis and unique insights which RUSI provides and I could not think of a more appropriate place to make my first speech having returned to the role of Security Minister after a 5-year gap.

In doing so, it provides me with perhaps a unique opportunity to reflect on what's changed in the threats we face and how we have adapted and adjusted our strategies and our response to meet the challenges from the changing face of terrorism.

Sadly, what hasn't changed is the enduring threat it continues to pose.

We have felt the impact of terrorism in this country on several occasions in recent years, such as the attacks in London and Manchester in 2017, and more recently Fishmongers' Hall, HMP Whitemoor, and Streatham. The attacks in France and Austria in the last few weeks underline the sickening and lethal intent from those intent on using violence and intimidation who want to change our very way of life and the values we hold as liberal, democratic societies.

Earlier this month, the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre independently raised the UK national terrorism threat level from substantial to severe. This means that a terrorist attack in the UK is now highly likely.

I should stress that this change should not be a cause for immediate alarm. It is a precautionary measure and is not based on any specific threat.

JTAC keep the threat level under constant review based on the very latest intelligence and analysis of both internal and external factors such as terrorist capability, intent and timescales.

Our resolve to combat and confront these threats remains utterly steadfast and national security rightly remains at the centre of all that we do.

We have also remained alive to any impact from the coronavirus outbreak.

And we continue to work closely with our operational partners to ensure vital national security activities are maintained.

I pay tribute to the outstanding work of our police, security agencies and officials for all that they are doing and they have our full support in keeping our country safe.

We will always take the strongest possible action to protect our national security and be clear about the threat that we face from terrorism.

Undoubtedly, the threat landscape has become more diverse and challenging.

When I was last in post our focus was on combatting the directed threat from structured terrorist groups with a clear command and control, tasking out operatives to commit atrocities.

With Daesh having been driven from all territory in Iraq and Syria and the senior leadership of Al Qa'ida diminished, the Jihadist threat has changed – with terrorists advancing less sophisticated but still lethal attacks off their own initiative. Now, strangers are radicalised rather than subordinates.

This makes the task of spotting and disrupting these plots that much harder – and I will come back to this a little later when discussing how we are changing our approach to counter the threat from those who take the path to terrorism with a simple 'just do it' type mentality.

Equally, the balance of the threat picture has altered.

When I reflect back on my previous time in the role it was dominated by Jihadist-inspired plots.

Now as I've said, it is much more diverse – much more complicated.

For two decades, Islamist extremist terrorism has been the greatest terrorist threat to the UK. It remains relentless, and by a long way the most common type of investigation managed by our security services.

As the Director General of MI5 set out last month, tens of thousands of individuals are committed to this ideology – meaning there is a need to constantly scan this larger group for the smaller numbers who could be mobilising towards attacks.

The atrocities in France and Austria have, once more, underlined the enduring danger from Islamist terrorism – and our continuing need to challenge, counter and disrupt it at every turn.

But as I look at my weekly security briefings, the threats now come from a more varied range of directions.

Not only the threats from Daesh or Al Qai'da inspired groups and individuals but the growing threat from right wing terrorism, as well as risks from the far left and single-issue extremists.

And as a former Northern Ireland Secretary, I remain incredibly conscious of the risk from terrorism by Dissident Republican groups, notwithstanding recent important disruptions by our security agencies.

Our priority is to keep people safe and secure right across the United Kingdom.

This diversity of terrorist threat also needs to be seen within the context of the broader national security and homeland resilience landscape:

- of malign external activities by other States seeking to amplify disinformation and division
- of cyber-security and organised crime seeking to exploit our weaknesses and exploit the vulnerable *and how COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscape further and undoubtedly will continue to do so

As Government we must adapt to this internal and external threat environment – and that is precisely what we are doing.

This week, this government announced the launch of the Counter-Terrorism Operations Centre. The new centre will be truly collaborative, and will unite partners from Counter-Terrorism Policing, the intelligence agencies, and the criminal justice system, coordinating their expertise, resource, and intelligence.

The centre will be fully delivered and operational within the next 5 years, with the first parts of the building complete and operational as early as next year. It will enable the UK to respond more quickly and effectively to help tackle terrorism and play a key role in tackling other threats including hostile state activity and organised crime.

Last Thursday saw the official launch of the National Cyber Force to further extend the reach of our cyber capabilities to provide greater resilience and to combat the growing threats we face. The NCF will deliver cyber operations to support the UK's national security priorities as a responsible world leading cyber power, from supporting military operations to countering serious crime to combatting terrorism.

Building on the success of the National Offensive Cyber Programme, the NCF will transform capacity and capability under a unified command.

As set out in the Spending Review yesterday, we are maintaining the budget for counter-terrorism policing in England and Wales, including continuing the additional £70 million provided for 2020-21 in 2021-22. And we will ensure that our domestic nuclear security capabilities are even more robust than they are already.

On the issue of hostile activities by foreign states, we will have more on this to say very shortly on the actions we intend to take to strengthen our laws to make them even more resilient to the risks posed by the potential impact of malign external influences.

I also want to say to those concerned about our security position as we come to the end of the EU transition period: the safety and security of our citizens is our top priority, and the UK will continue to be a global leader on security and one of the safest countries in the world.

We are focused on reaching an agreement with the EU and there is a good degree of convergence in what the UK and EU are seeking to negotiate in terms of operational capabilities. In the event that it is not possible to reach an

agreement, we have well-developed alternative plans in place. We will also continue our cooperation and information exchange through existing, non-EU channels, such as the Counter-Terrorism Group of European countries and INTERPOL.

On the central theme though, of our work to combat terrorism, it is worth underlining the significant actions which have been taken to respond to the challenges we face.

We have introduced the Prevent duty, an essential tool for safeguarding individuals that are vulnerable to radicalisation, ensuring they get support as early as possible.

The Operational Improvement Review, overseen by Lord Anderson of Ipswich in the wake of the series of attacks in 2017, set out a wide-ranging improvement plan for operational partners.

The strengthened counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, outlined a multi-agency response to all forms of terrorism, regardless of ideology.

And this year, we have taken further steps to ensure our outstanding police and security services have the necessary powers and tools to keep us safe.

In response to the shocking attacks at Fishmongers' Hall, HMP Whitemoor and Streatham last winter, we acted swiftly to pass emergency legislation to end the automatic release of terrorist and terrorism-related offenders.

And we have brought forward the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill, which strengthens every stage in the process of dealing with terrorist offenders.

The Bill introduces new tough sentences, increases existing maximum penalties, extends licence periods and strengthens the tools available to operational partners.

But we continue to challenge ourselves as to what more we need to do.

This includes responding to the findings of the Public Inquiry into the attack on the Manchester Arena.

I recognise that this will be a painful time for many as the Inquiry continues to take its detailed evidence from the events of that appalling night.

It is vital that those who survived or lost loved ones get the answers they need and that we learn the lessons whatever they may be.

In the light of the horrific attacks in France and Austria, the Home Secretary and I have also tasked officials to review existing and proposed powers to consider what more may be required.

We will be introducing legislation early next year that will extend the tools available to Counter Terrorism Policing as part of the Government's response to Jonathan Hall QC's independent review of multi-agency public protection

arrangements.

This will include new powers of premises and personal search and a new urgent arrest power.

Earlier this year, I announced our plans to consult on introducing a legal 'Protect Duty'.

This will require certain owners and operators of premise to consider their preparedness for, and protection from, a terrorist attack and apply certain minimum standards.

This government supports the Martyn's Law campaign that seeks to improve protective security arrangements at publicly accessible locations. COVID has regrettably meant that progress has been slower than any of us had hoped or anticipated.

It has made consultation with industry and other partners more challenging and changed the nature of the locations the duty was intended to be focussed on.

But I want to be clear that our determination to deliver remains undiminished and we will follow through in bringing the Protect Duty into effect.

It also reminds us that the task of combatting terrorism extends beyond government, law enforcement and our security services.

It must also include the private and wider public sector.

In fact, everyone has a role to play in tackling terrorism.

In the evolving threat landscape which I have highlighted, one of the most fundamental shifts we have seen in recent years has been the prominence of what is often referred to as the 'lone actor' threat.

Not so long ago, we were mostly occupied with the risk posed by individuals or groups who were trained by terrorist organisations, provided with funds or weapons, and directed to carry out specific attacks.

Now, the primary threat is posed by those who mobilise to violence independently.

Technological changes, permissive online spaces and low sophistication attack methods have lowered the bar to entry into terrorism.

While this shift has been well-documented in recent years, I want to set out why it is essential that we think extremely carefully about the language we use when discussing it.

Specifically, the term 'lone actor'.

It implies that these individuals are isolated from society.

That they never tell anyone else about their views or ambitions.

That they have no interconnections with friends, family or others around them.

And that, as a result, they cannot be stopped from taking the path to terrorism.

Yet this paints a false picture.

In fact, we know research demonstrates that in many cases, there is communication with others.

There is research. There is planning. And there is preparation.

These individuals, or small groups of two or three, can be spotted.

They are not alone. They talk.

We must be careful not to minimise the complexities: the formal and informal networks, the online radicalisation, by labelling a spectrum of terrorists with a term that accurately describes none of them.

This isn't some pedantic tautological point.

The language we use, in communities of experts like this and with the public, helps cement a viewpoint and an approach to dealing with the threat. The language we use matters. These terrorists can be spotted. They can be stopped.

For those working in frontline services, and the wider public, it is crucial to have absolute clarity about the reality of the threat, and the role they can all play in helping counter it.

Now, more than ever, the authorities need communities and families to come forward if they have concerns that someone they know is at risk of being drawn into terrorist activity.

Of course, investigations by the police and security services are central to the counter-terrorism effort.

But a friend, a relative or a colleague will often be best placed to spot some of these warning signs and vulnerabilities at an early stage.

We also expect social media companies to play a role in identifying and flagging both illegal glorification content and the potential terrorist grooming of vulnerable individuals.

That is why we are so concerned when companies like Facebook take a unilateral decision to apply end-to-end encryption in a way that wholly precludes any access to the content of users' messages.

These companies must continue to take responsibility in tackling illegal behaviour. And we remain committed to working with them to ensure we continue to protect the public, without compromising user privacy.

And the threat from the far right provides further significance to the need to be vigilant to the ways in which the online space can be misused for radicalisation.

As a politician reflecting back on the things you've said in the past isn't always the most encouraging or comfortable of exercises and normally a past-time reserved for your opponents looking for ways of catching you out.

But in preparing for today, I did look back on a speech I gave in March 2013 to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King's College London.

It was the first time a government minister had spoken about the worrying growth in right wing extremism and the ways in which we had adjusted our CONTEST counter terrorism strategy to adapt to all forms of terrorism – including from the far right.

In the speech I said:

The far right is not as widespread or systematic as the Al Qa'ida inspired threat – and operationally there are vast differences.

But we also notice at the same time, at its core, the far right appeals to people who share many of the same vulnerabilities as those exploited by Al Qa'ida inspired extremism.

It feeds off the same sense of alienation and questions around identity.

And it has the same ambition to reshape the world in an impossible way.

Now 7 years on a lot of what I said holds true – but what has undoubtedly changed and increased the challenge is the way in which social media and other communication platforms have influenced our cultural reference points, our social interactions, indeed the way we live our lives, and COVID has accelerated those trends.

It has provided a means for extremists – including those from the far right extremists – to challenge mainstream messaging and promulgate twisted perversions of the truth.

To amplify conspiracy theories and spread sickening and divisive images, messages and themes intended to stoke anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and racism as well as distrust in systems of government and governance.

Terrorism, in whatever form, seeks to divide us and undermine our shared values.

But that is not to say our response can be exactly the same.

We need to ensure that the powers and capabilities developed to counter other forms of terrorism are fit for purpose for the way that far right terrorists radicalise, recruit, mobilise and target.

Of the 27 plots foiled by UK police and security services since March 2017, 8 were motivated by far right extremist ideologies.

We have already taken several steps to combat far right terrorism.

In 2016, we proscribed the first far right terrorist group, National Action, following their appalling glorification of the murder of Jo Cox.

In 2017, we proscribed Scottish Dawn and NS131, as aliases of National Action.

Earlier this year, we proscribed Sonnenkrieg Division and Feuerkrieg Division and added System Resistance Network as a further alias of National Action.

As a result, being a member, or inviting support for these organisations is a criminal offence, carrying a sentence of up to 10 years' imprisonment.

Proscription has led to members of these terrorist groups being sentenced and taken off our streets. It has also supported the take down of material associated with these groups from online spaces.

It's another important step but we are doing more, as part of this, earlier this year MI5 became the lead UK agency for detecting and countering far right terrorism, bringing parity to our investigative approach to all forms of terrorism.

This threat is also transnational.

So, we are working with international partners to share best practice with the aim of reducing the risk far right terrorism poses to the UK and UK interests.

Some of the poisonous ideas promoted by far right extremists can manifest in involvement in terrorism, but in some instances it can take other forms – including hate crime.

We have a strong legal framework in place, with criminal penalties, for hate crime offences, including incitement to racial or religious hatred.

We support victims and engage with networks of organisations working to tackle hatred in communities.

All forms of hatred are unacceptable and will be tackled.

And preventing hatred and extremism from taking root remain an essential part of our strategy.

On this theme of prevention I was reminded of one of the conclusions in former FBI agent Ali Soufan's instructive book 'The Black Banners' about the

rise of Al Qa'ida.

In it he says:

To ever fully defeat Al-Qa'ida, or the subsequent new groups that emerge, we need to realise that military operations, interrogations and intelligence successes are only half the battle.

The other half is in the arena of ideas – countering the narratives and recruitment methods that extremists use.

We can keep killing and arresting terrorists, but if new ones keep joining, our war will never end.

That is why for me Prevent is such an important and essential strand to the work we do, and one that I want to see greater emphasis given to.

It is about intervening early, before someone goes down the path to terrorism.

It's about defending our freedoms; to enable communities to live without fear and for freedom of speech for all – even when it is unpopular and uncomfortable for some. This is the only way we will win the battle of ideas.

It is about challenging the twisted ideologies that provide the underpinning of the violent actions which are triggered.

But at its heart, it is about supporting vulnerable individuals, steering them away from terrorism, and protecting our communities.

The work done through the programme is complex and varied and rightly tackles all forms of terrorism including Islamist and far right terrorism.

And the value of this work has been underlined again today with the publication of the latest Prevent statistics.

Since the introduction of the Prevent duty five years ago, 2,352 referrals have resulted in individuals identified as vulnerable to radicalisation receiving support to turn them away from a dangerous path.

The statistics demonstrate a continued increase in those referred for right-wing radicalisation concerns receiving support, and we are determined to continue supporting communities and vulnerable individuals to reject these hateful narratives.

It is important to note that these latest statistics cover a period before coronavirus fully took hold in the UK.

However, over the last few months we have seen how opportunistic extremists have exploited the pandemic to promote their hateful propaganda and attempt to recruit people to their causes.

With children and young people spending more time online, there is a risk they will be targeted and groomed by these extremists.

This government is committed to making the UK the safest place to be online.

Through the introduction of new legislation, we will establish a legal duty of care on companies towards their users overseen by an independent regulator.

Shortly, we will be publishing the full government response to the Online Harms White Paper detailing our plans for this new legislative framework.

At the same time, we will also publish interim codes of practice setting out our expectations of what companies should be doing now to address child sexual exploitation and abuse as well as terrorist content and activity.

Separate work continues to be led by the Department for Digital Culture Media and Sport to tackle misinformation and disinformation.

Last week Counter-Terrorism Policing launched Act Early – a new website and advice line for anyone concerned that someone they know is at risk of being radicalised by terrorists or extremist content online.

Access to that help, support and expertise is more important than ever before.

Like other efforts in the safeguarding space, the coronavirus emergency has meant Prevent has had to adapt.

But thanks to the excellent work of our dedicated local networks and partners, the programme continues to operate.

The priority remains to ensure that vulnerable people get the tailored support that they need.

Of course, we are always looking at ways we can make the programme more effective, and the government is fully committed to the Independent Review of Prevent.

Since I took up my ministerial post earlier this year, the world has changed in ways that we could scarcely have imagined.

However, one thing that has remained constant is the professionalism and determination shown by our world-leading police, intelligence services and security officials.

They work around the clock to keep us safe and I am immensely proud of their contribution.

The challenge to be one step ahead of those who seek to do us harm is an immense one.

It is one that we do not underestimate.

But it is one that we are confronting with all the determination, focus and expertise that the public would expect.

Whatever their ideology or motivation, terrorists seek to threaten our very way of life.

But our message is clear: we will never compromise on those values that they hate.

We will never be cowed by their attempts to sow fear and division.

And we will never waver in our commitment to tackling terrorism in all its forms.