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An analysis of the UK's Counter-Terrorism Strategy, CONTEST, and the challenges in its evaluation

by Erika Brady

The UK's Counter-Terrorism strategy, known as CONTEST, is recognized as one of the most successful soft-focus strategies in the world, with an intended emphasis on community support and what have become known as 'Prevent' (or counter-extremism) measures. In all, there are four limbs to CONTEST: PREVENT, PROTECT, PURSUE and PREPARE. While there is much crossover between these areas, for example policing activities take place in all four limbs, each one has a specific focus with its own intrinsic goals. This article intends to provide an overview of CONTEST, and to explore the challenges of evaluating counter-terrorism strategies in general. In doing so, I intend to show that while robust and independent evaluation of CONTEST has not been undertaken from a quantitative approach, some level of evaluation has taken place and can be taken into consideration when moving forward with future analysis of the strategy.

The UK has had a long history of counter-terrorism, particularly relating to nationalist terrorism coming from Northern Ireland and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the 1970's. Just before the events of 9/11, the Terrorism Act 2000 was adopted, and was the first piece of legislation to recognize the changing landscape of terrorism, particularly the rise of Islamist terrorism, in the UK and globally. The urgent need to deal with the challenges posed by Al Qaeda following 9/11 resulted in a succession of counter-terrorism legislative actions in the UK over the next few years. In 2003, [Sir David Omand](#) was tasked with developing a counter-terrorism strategy to address these challenges, and the result became known as CONTEST. Updates on the strategy were published in 2006, 2009 and 2011, providing some level of oversight.

With this extended history of development, and a steady stream of annual reports and reviews of the strategy, CONTEST is a very useful model to look at in order to evaluate its successes and its failings. This has never been more important, as the current climate of terrorism seems to be intensifying. According to the [Global Peace Index 2016](#) *"The world is now less peaceful than it was in 2008 . . . with year-on-year levels of peacefulness having declined in five out of the last eight years. Given the increasing levels of terrorism and large population displacement caused by internal conflict, this trend is likely to continue into at least the near future."* The shift in the Islamic State's focus to international terrorism far beyond its territorial borders in Syria and Iraq, as well as its different approach to terrorism from that presented by Al Qaeda, has seen a dramatic increase in what has become known as 'home-grown' terrorism. By making a number of 'calls to arms', inviting Muslims around the world who have not received training or specific direction to attack the 'unbelievers', even in their home countries, the Islamic State has placed a duty on the global Ummah which has been taken up by many, to lesser or greater success. Specifically, the countries seen to be leading the 'War on Terror' and with the most visible involvement in the Middle East are of particular focus, and the Islamic State's astute use of social media is increasing their reach, even when militarily they are losing territory in Iraq and Syria. The UK is therefore a target and its Terror Threat Level, set by MI5, has been at Severe since 2014.

The UK has experienced relatively few 'successful' attacks relating to Islamic terrorism. In 2005, a coordinated attack on the London transport system resulted in the death of 56 people, with an additional 700 injured. This event has become known as the 7/7 attacks. Since then, there have been four attacks which have been attributed to Islamist extremism, three of which had no fatalities (the only incident to result in a fatality was the bladed weapons attack on off-duty soldier Lee Rigby in 2013 in Woolwich, London). Beyond these four attacks, at least nine Islamist-inspired or motivated plots have taken place in the UK. In summer 2015, Mark Rowley, "[the UK's most senior counter-terrorism police officer has said that up to 50 deadly terror attacks have been stopped since 7/7.](#)" The [Europol Report 2016](#), reflecting data from 2015, states that 103 attacks took place in the UK in 2015, with 134 arrests. The figure of 103 attacks is the highest in the EU for 2015, with 73 attacks taking place in France as the next highest. Again, many of these attacks resulted in no fatalities in the UK, and the majority of them are related to nationalist terrorism, focused on Northern Ireland.

So, with a large number of attacks taking place in the UK in 2015, although resulting in very few fatalities, and largely attributable to nationalist terrorism, can the UK's counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, be seen as a success? This is a challenging question, and one which inevitably depends on what constitutes success. When compared with the high death count resulting from attacks in the US and France throughout 2015 and 2016, it seems that CONTEST must be having some impact on mitigating attacks taking place in the UK.

However, in evaluating the UK's success in its fight against terrorism, one need only look at the data laid out above to see the inherent challenges with establishing parameters and metrics for evaluation. A successful attack, thankfully rare, is an easy metric to evaluate. Have attacks taken place? Were they Islamist or Nationalist (depending on the evaluator's focus)? Were there casualties and if so, how many? Were there wounded and if so, how many? These are all open and transparent metrics to look at, because, if nothing else, the media will provide coverage on these. Yet, when we try to go beyond this and look at how many attacks were foiled, the data becomes incredibly complex, as can be seen above. Essentially, depending on who is assessing the data, numbers of foiled plots can range from 9 to 50 to 103 in one year alone. How is one to assess which of these figures is correct? The truth is, they are all accurate, but from a particular perspective. When looking at the data, one needs to consider the time frame under consideration, the perpetrators, the geographical location of the attacks, and who is providing the data. Does the person providing the data have an agenda? What could that motivation be? And what is that individual's definition of a plot or an attack? Indeed, what constitutes a foiled plot? All of these elements are subjective, and skew available data on terrorism and counter-terrorism statistics, making evaluation incredibly challenging.

[Frank Foley](#) states in his book "*An effective counterterrorist strategy needs to be able to monitor, investigate, capture and prosecute the adversary in order to prevent attacks, imprison those who pose a threat, and reduce levels of terrorist activity. But it must do all this without raising the political temperature in a way that could contribute to radicalization.*" (pg 317) This is a useful insight into the complex and delicate balance that must be struck by a counter-terrorism strategy. In the UK, by all appearances, this balance has been maintained. However, the balance is on the edge of a knife, and in the wake of the Brexit referendum, and a building home-grown radicalization threat in the face of a significant rise of hate crime against Muslims following the referendum, one must wonder if CONTEST is up for the task and whether counter-terrorism measures have indeed been successful, or just lucky. Only robust evaluation of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy can answer this question, and we are some way from being in a position to do this, particularly given the challenges mentioned above.

Evaluation of counter-terrorism strategies is underdeveloped and daunting, not least because of the 'national security' issues surrounding the data. The fact that many ongoing investigations operate in secrecy has resulted in few details becoming public, and general statements being the norm. This has led to inconsistency, as can be seen from the data laid out above. These vague statements attempt to inform the public that counter-terrorism measures are successful, often identifying a vague number of foiled plots in a given year, or since a given time. However, until evaluation of these measures can take place, through independent investigations, it is difficult to accurately assess whether the various measures are working.

While there are inevitable challenges in evaluating counter-terrorism strategies, there are other means of evaluation when it comes to counter-terrorism strategies. Just as CONTEST is multifaceted, so too can the metric for evaluation. Community activities, education and health sector policies, critical infrastructure protections and transportation developments can all be evaluated and assessed for their performance. The UK has accrued a sizeable amount of information on CONTEST, primarily in the form of annual government reports and the reports of the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation. While academic analysis is lacking, there are an increasing number of experts and scholars willing to undertake the task, and each effort brings us closer to a more comprehensive overview of what specific policies with counter-terrorism are working, which are not working and where improvements can be made. The UK is a highly valuable source of information for evaluation, and while evaluation of CONTEST has not yet been done to the robust level required, what has been done so far has provided a basis from which to move forward.

What has proved most challenging, and has indeed been highly criticized, is CONTEST's 'Prevent' limb, which focuses on dealing with causal factors for terrorist activities, and attempts to address radicalization. With an increasing number of young people, both men and women, travelling to Iraq and Syria to join the ranks of ISIS, the motivations for these actions needs to be assessed and dealt with. Evaluating counter-terrorism policies aimed at these issues is, again, challenging and the current popular opinion holds that Prevent has been a failure. However, until an empirical evaluation, based on consensus data and open to analysis by academics and experts alike can be undertaken, the apparent failures are likely to be compounded, with a growing lack of trust in government policies escalating to an unsavoury and dystopian future in the UK, the beginnings of which can be seen in the Brexit referendum, but which is by no means isolated to the UK. Until we can assess why people become radicalized, what motivates them to take the next step into criminality and what leads them to fight for a cause on distant territories, potentially bringing that fight back to a host state where their families live and work, we will not be able to completely negate the radicalization process. The sooner academics and experts can develop a framework for evaluating counter-terrorism strategies, the sooner policy-makers can focus on what is effective within the given strategy. Until that time, we will continue to be perplexed at what motivates someone to become a terrorist. Until that time, we will have to focus on the apparent successes, a clear example of which is the absence of successful attacks in the UK in the past number of years. Until that statistic changes.



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