




# BENEFIT CONCERT IN THE MANCHESTER ARENA: THE TERROR THREAT AND PEACEFUL PROTESTS

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*by Magdalena von Drachenfels*

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On 22 May 2017, the suicide bomber Salman Abedi killed 22 people and injured many more after an Ariana Grande concert in the Manchester Arena. On 9 September 2017, the Manchester Arena was reopened with a benefit show labelled as a [“We Are Manchester” concert](#). The concert’s aim was to raise money for a place of memorial for the victims of the attack. “We Are Manchester” is only one of the many

peaceful responses to the attacks: In contrast to the heated debates on increasing security, they reveal different ways of standing together for a liberal and diverse society against the fear caused by terrorism.

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## THE ATTACKS IN LONDON AND MANCHESTER IN SPRING AND SUMMER 2017

In recent years, British authorities have disrupted several terrorist plots and the threat level was high. Nonetheless, the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2017 was a shocking day when 52-year old Khalid Masood drove a car through the crowds on Westminster Bridge hitting and killing pedestrians before proceeding to then attack a police officer with a knife at the House of Parliament in London. Exactly two months later, on 22 May, 22-year old Salman Abedi exploded a self-constructed bomb in a crowd of families and children after an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester. Hereafter, the terrorist threat level was raised to its highest level. Less than two weeks after the Manchester bombing, three men, Khuram Butt, Rachid Redouane, and Youssef Zaghba, rented a van and drove it into the crowds gathered near London Bridge, before exiting the vehicle and attacking people at Borough Market in London. All the three attackers wore **leather belts with bottles strapped to them**. It remains unclear, if they wanted to prolong the attack by increasing the fear of an explosion or if they had already decided to die as martyrs and hoped to commit suicide-by-cop. In any case, it seemed

like they wanted to keep up the visual “aesthetics” of jihadi fighters as their fake bombs referred to other suicide bomb attacks like the Manchester attack. Some attackers were already known to the police for jihadi activities: Masood was investigated by the MI5, Abedi was reported to have connections to radical circles in Manchester itself and Butt was well-known in the [al-Muhajiroun network of extremists](#). The latter had even been featured prior to his attack in a Channel 4 documentary by Jamie Roberts called the “[The Jihadist next door](#)”. Last Friday, on 15 September 2017 Great Britain faced another attack. A self-constructed explosive device partially exploded at morning rush hour in a train at Parsons Green in London. At least 29 people were injured and by now [two young men have been arrested under the terrorism act](#).

In his article “[Britain on alert](#)”, Raffaello Pantucci, the director of [International Security Studies at the Royal United Services Institute](#), states that all three attacks were carried out by small cells or individuals that might have been inspired by the Islamic State, but if at all, were only loosely connected to this extremist organization. With this increased tempo of attacks, Prime Minister Theresa May stated that “[terrorism is breeding terrorism](#)” which also implies this sense of being inspired by an extremist organization without necessarily being a member of it. While ISIS was at its territorial zenith and even after having lost territory, it has encouraged attacks in Europe. As travelling to Syria has become increasingly difficult, not only returning fighters but also [aspirant foreign](#)

fighters pose an increasing threat as pro-active measures of preventing their travels do not necessarily de-radicalize them. With attacks in Europe, the extremist organization wants to divide the population into believers and unbelievers. Thus, security discussions that relate terror attacks to cultural differences and a lack of integration help the terrorist organization in reaching their aim of weakening the country by creating societal division.

## **CHALLENGING MULTIETHNIC BRITAIN: THE 'WAR ON TERROR' AND THE '7/7 ATTACKS'**

The recent terror attacks brought back the memory of the terrible London suicide bomb attacks on 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2005 ('7/7 attacks') during which 52 people of 18 different nationalities were killed. As the four suicide bombers were British Muslims from Yorkshire, the attacks spurred a public debate on 'home-grown terrorism' and the 'enemy within.' However, the 7/7 attacks also revealed a link to the British involvement in the Iraq war as the videotaped statements by two of the 7/7 bombers revealed. The statements show that the controversial British foreign policy was used for jihadi justification narratives. The recent jihadi attacks can be less related to specific British foreign policy misdeeds; moreover, the attackers did not leave any video testimonies. However, Britain's participation in the 'war on terror' remained controversial which was further highlighted by the Iraq inquiry published in 2016 describing the war as unnecessary

and criticizing the lack of post-war planning. Not only British foreign policy but also domestic counter-terrorism policy in Britain reinforced a division of the country's population in the aftermath of the 7/7 attacks. Racial profiling became acceptable for security reasons and policies that allowed an extended pre-charge detention and deportation, resulted in some Asians and Muslims in Britain starting to perceive themselves as outsiders to the nation where they were stigmatized, associated with terrorism and "subject to constant surveillance and suspicion." Moreover, multiculturalism was held responsible for creating a breeding ground for terrorism which enforced the understanding of a "clash of civilizations" rather than understanding it as a political crisis. During this time, the mere existence of British Muslims was often described as a challenge for secular and liberal politics. Thus, by discussing the terror threat based on cultural differences beyond shared values, political and media representatives fell into the trap of further enforcing a division in the population that the terrorists wanted to create.

## **THE MANCHESTER BEES AND PEACEFUL PROTESTS**

In addition to the acrimonious political polarization, peaceful protests have also shown that the terrorists' aim of dividing society remains largely unachieved. Instead, people have confronted the threat of terrorism by showing that a liberal and diverse society is crucial for social cohesion. It was in this

spirit that hundreds of people got the symbol of the Manchester bee tattooed as part of a fundraising campaign for those affected by the dreadful terror attack. The bees refer to Manchester's industrial past as the workers in the textile mills were often referred to as "hives of activity". This symbol includes everyone who self-identifies with the city of Manchester and its hard-working population. Moreover, a week after the attack many young Muslims from Manchester protested against terrorism by marching and holding up colorful "We love Manchester" banners. The march was organized by the leaders of Manchester's Jamia Mosque as a response to the demand to combat the influence of extremists within Muslim communities and as a response to the danger of being put under general suspicion as a community. Apart from confronting the danger of stigmatization, the march was a chance to show how disturbing the attack had been for everybody living in multiethnic Manchester. The "We Are Manchester" concert was yet another event that was conducted in this spirit of standing together in the aftermath of the attacks showing that despite the terror threat, there is "no fear here" as the bee graffiti reveals. Even after the recent Parsons Green explosion, Londoners offered cups of tea, hugs and use of toilets to people caught up in Parsons Green. By consequence, these peaceful activities and movements are also a way of confronting terrorism as they maintain and create a social cohesion that is sometimes endangered by terror threats and security responses.



**Magdalena von Drachentels** is a Research Associate at PRIF. During her Master's at the Cluster of Excellence Asia and Europe in a Global Context at Heidelberg University she worked on South Asian diaspora communities in England with a focus on protests and radicalizations.

Tags: islamism london Manchester terrorism

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