



Counter-Productive Counter-Terrorism: The Legacy of George Bush and Tony Blair

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IT is proving difficult for President Barak Obama and Prime Minister Gordon Brown to progress from the legacy of the war on terror inherited from their bellicose predecessors. Just as Obama deals with Bush's counter-productive rendition programme which has witnessed extraordinary human rights violations at Guantanamo Bay and around the world, so too Brown has been saddled with Blair's flawed notion that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are proportionate and effective responses to a small but dangerous terrorist threat in the UK -- something that he might privately wish that had never been started. Never has the old adage that 'a sledgehammer cracks more than the nut it is aiming at' been more graphically illustrated!

In truth though, there is a strong case for the opposite analysis having more credence. Al-Qaïda (AQ) strategists are no different to strategists in all other terrorist groups in terms of their propaganda and recruitment strategy: governments should adopt military tactics and go to war against them harming and consequently re-energising the very same communities from which they seek recruits and derive support. In academia, the prospect that governments might overreact and introduce counter-productive counter-terrorism measures that unintentionally boost support for terrorists is well understood.¹ According to the AQ propagandist Saif al-Adl, 9/11 was intended to provoke the US to 'lash out militarily against the Ummah' in the manner if not the scale of 'the war on terror'.² 'The Americans took the bait' he continues, with the benefit of hindsight, 'and fell into our trap,' doubtless using hindsight to describe AQ's ability to predict the massive scale and range of the response to 9/11.³

Apart from falling for this familiar terrorist ploy⁴, the war on terror response fails to distinguish between inveterate AQ

ideologists⁵ who may well be beyond the scope of immediate negotiation and local activists who may instead be susceptible to skilful intervention strategies. Nevertheless, Brown continues to argue that the war in Afghanistan is helping to reduce the terrorist threat in Britain.

However, when Blair first supported the bombing of innocent Afghan and Iraqi civilians in 2002 and 2003⁶ no one appears to have asked for a community impact assessment to be conducted to assess the potential impact of the war on AQ's prospects for recruitment and tacit support in the UK. Indeed it is reasonable to ask if Blair was ever aware of the potential for boosting not reducing the terrorist threat by taking military action in Muslim countries. Perhaps this will be a question put to him when he attends the Iraq War inquiry.

CONTEST FOR 'PREVENT'

Brown also inherited Blair's flawed response to 7/7 in terms of a 'hearts and minds' response to 'home-grown' terrorism. By insisting that the London bomb attacks had nothing to do with Iraq but instead were the product of 'an evil ideology' Blair opened the door for 'counter-extremist' and 'counter-subversive' experts and programmes aimed at combating 'Islamists' and not simply AQ.

Thus both the Sufi Muslim Council (SMC) and the Quilliam Foundation (QF) were launched to tackle the 'home grown' threat on the basis that it was inspired and nurtured by 'Islamists' and 'Salafis'. This was rather like saying the Provisional IRA was inspired by Catholicism, which is a flawed diagnosis of the problem and one, like the war on terror, that is proving to be counter-productive. Instead, in the author's experience, the most effective domestic Muslim community projects tackling the adverse influence of AQ propaganda, were the ones run by groups

that were regularly castigated by the new counter-extremist experts as 'subversive' and 'sectarian'⁷.

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Regrettably, on this crucial topic, Brown appears disinclined to depart from Blair's precedent, perhaps still hoping to regain favour with Rupert Murdoch's media empire. Reference to Blair's deference to Murdoch is important because effective counter-terrorism is always going to be difficult to sell in a market that chooses to conflate the terrorist threat to Israel with the terrorist threats to the US and UK.

As most police officers will testify, preventing crime is generally harder and less rewarding than detecting crime. It is nevertheless an important aspect of police work that is often shared with youth workers in projects that are designed to encourage young people to move out of, or away from gun, gang and drug crime. However, under Blair's guidance the notion of prevention was adopted as part of the UK counter-terrorism strategy (known as 'Contest') and is described as 'Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE)' or 'Prevent' for short. If it is managed in partnership with experienced and capable local Muslim groups then there is no reason why Prevent cannot succeed in the same way other local crime prevention initiatives have achieved success. Unfortunately, Prevent is in danger of being undermined by so-called expert 'counter-extremists', most notably QF, who are more interested in 'counter-subversion' than 'counter-terrorism' or 'preventing violent extremism'.⁸

THE QUILLIAM FOUNDATION

A preliminary analysis of the work of the government funded QF reveals how their work is more concerned to alter beliefs than to tackle terrorism. In their first strategy report QF recommended 'the immediate setting up of well-resourced de-radicalisation

centres in key cities across Britain, staffed by mainstream Muslim scholars...who counter Islamist ideology with traditional, pluralistic Islam'.⁹ The QF report argues that 'the period spent in these centres must be substantial and exposure to genuine piety intense, to the extent where residents question... and are unable to defend...' [Islamist ideology].¹⁰ Of course this predilection for brainwashing was the stock in trade of the QF leaders when they belonged to the extremist Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). It therefore appeared that QF had renounced HT's aims but not their methods! 'Rather than arrest upon suspicion of crime, we should identify potential terrorists (with support from family members and mosque congregations) and expose them,' the report continues, 'hopefully voluntarily, to genuine religiosity, and explain to them their misunderstanding of Muslim scripture.'¹¹ Thus the question to ask is 'if not voluntarily, then attendance by force?'

As Professor Gwen Griffith-Dickson has noted, these kinds of intensive 'interventions' are not original:

"Other such interventions, dubbed 'deprogramming', were attempted in the USA for members of religious cults in the 1970s and 1980s; but ran aground in legal and ethical quagmires and were replaced with the milder versions like 'exit counselling'. But these [QF] proposals in fact raise more ethical questions, 'deprogramming' itself because they go further. The American deprogrammers simply wanted to deconstruct and get rid of the undesirable religion. Here the [QF] proposal is to instil a religious attitude, interpretation or set of beliefs not held by the subject at the start of the intervention ('exposure to genuine piety' and so on).The legal and ethical implications are serious. But the likely effectiveness of the technique is also fatally compromised."¹²

Alan Johnson, Home Secretary, was forced to reprimand QF when its co-director Ed Husain identified Prevent as a vehicle for spying on Muslim communities.¹³ However, what Johnson failed to acknowledge was the extent to which QF's whole ethos is tantamount to creating 'suspect communities' and that by funding it the

government endorses and legitimates QF's counter-subversive agenda. It is insufficient for Johnson to argue that QF has departed from Prevent policy. Moreover, for Johnson to insist that QF shares the same Prevent goal is disingenuous. QF has no expertise or interest in countering violent extremism and is ill-equipped to do so.

Nowhere is QF's counter-subversion strategy more apparent than in their recommendations for monitoring students.

"University authorities should actively monitor which Muslim faction controls the Islamic society and content of Friday sermons...; Radical sermonizers should be actively rejected by Muslim student bodies, and not given succour...; Leaders of FOSIS have a duty to help integrate its student population into British life, not encourage Saudi-style gender segregation...; Muslim students should not takeover multi-faith prayer rooms and then create 'Muslim-only areas...; University authorities should ensure prayer rooms do not become an 'Islamist underworld'...; University management should conduct spot checks on the content of lectures/sermons until sufficient trust in the Islamic society is re-established"¹⁴

This is classic counter-subversion work that should not be sold as counter-terrorism. It is about altering young people's thinking not their actions. There is so much pejorative conflation of routine Muslim behaviour with a terrorist threat in this report as to reveal QF's fundamental unsuitability for a role in Prevent, and the government funding that goes with it¹⁵.

SPYING

Ed Husain's comments on Prevent as a vehicle for spying are revealing:

"It is gathering intelligence on people not committing terrorist offences. If it is to prevent people getting killed and committing terrorism, it is good and it is right. Prevent was created to increase the security services' knowledge of extremism in Britain... If those thoughts and beliefs are linked to killing people in a democracy, the state is the only actor in a democracy that can prevent violenceIt would be morally wrong of a taxpayer-funded programme designed to prevent

terrorism if it was not designed to gather intelligence in order to stop that terrorism from happening. The alternative is to let the buggers do what they wish, until they appear on the violence radar, which is too late. If you are in the business of counterterrorism, you must want your intelligence services to know what is going on."¹⁶

Again this highlights QF's implausible conception of the terrorist threat in the UK. QF's only claim to significance in the counter-terrorism arena is in its persuading the government that HT (where its leaders grew up) and other more mainstream Islamist groups, are a conveyor belt to AQ terrorism. This is unproven and unlikely. As respected terrorism scholar Martha Crenshaw argues, AQ 'is by no means a mass popular movement but it is a complex, transnational, and multi-layered organization with both clandestine and aboveground elements'.¹⁷ This is so far removed from the QF analysis as to raise the prospect that QF is fighting a different enemy for a different purpose altogether. "That's the name of the game" Husain declared, "It's not about doing the right thing by Islamists or by liberal do-gooders, it's about creating a society where liberal do-gooders survive freely."¹⁸

Client confidentiality is a basic rule of youth work in inner city areas that applies equally well to government funded projects aimed at tackling gun, gang, drug and other kinds of street crime. Youth workers do not reveal details of their clients to police (still less to local government) unless there is reasonable suspicion of criminal activity. It would take more than an 'Information Sharing Agreement' contained within government-funded Prevent programmes to persuade an effective Muslim youth worker to abandon this golden rule of effective

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community engagement in dangerous environments. It is one thing for Husain to justify spying on “radical” Muslims from the comfort of a Westminster office, quite another for Muslims working on dangerous streets to be wrongly smeared as “informers” when their integrity deserves to be bolstered not undermined.

Good Prevent work takes place on poor urban British streets every day and helps reduce the influence of violent extremists. However, it owes everything to the integrity of youth workers, police and local government officials who focus wholly on their original remit. Their work should not be jeopardised by government support for QF and the counter-subversion strategy it embodies.

POLICY EXCHANGE AND COUNTER-SUBVERSION

So far as QF’s backers in the think tank Policy Exchange (PE) are concerned they are right to undertake a counter-subversion strategy against Islamists. Charles Moore, Daily Telegraph columnist and chairman of PE, invoked the memory of a 1980s Thatcherite counter-subversion strategy against arch subversive Arthur Scargill, when warning a right wing audience in 2008 of a similar threat to democracy posed by Islamist groups including those who had worked successfully against al-Qaida influence.¹⁹ Moore claims that a subversive threat licences a counter-subversive strategy every bit as clandestine and ruthless as the threat it seeks to undermine.²⁰ Now as then when combating communists like Scargill, embedded supporters within the ‘enemy camp’ would, Moore believes, be crucial players in efforts to undermine ‘the extremists’.

Thus Moore and Dean Godson of PE identify Ed Husain playing a similar role to Frank Chapple, the ‘moderate’ trade union leader who was willing to tackle, discredit and undermine the ‘extremist’ trade union leader Arthur Scargill:

“One of the most powerful lessons from Ed Husain’s remarkable book, *The Islamist*, is that the people most intimidated by Islamist extremism in this country are Muslims themselves....We need to realise that every

time the wider society enters into dialogue with the extremists we are not only dealing unwittingly with bad people, we are also empowering them against good people.”²¹

Husain, they argue, can help defeat Islamists in the same way. For Moore, now as then, there is an overriding need to confront a subversive ideology:

“The difficulty for the government in confronting Scargill was that he was the authentic, indeed the elected, leader of the miners. He did express some of their hopes and fears. He was one of them. But on the other hand, he was an extremist and a megalomaniac and a destructionist, a man who wanted the last battle with the evil Tories and was uninterested in what it might cost his own people. He could prevail only by suppressing dissent from his own members. This is not, perhaps, so different from some of the extremists who claim to speak in the name of Islam today.”²²

Most worryingly, Muslim community groups who have been successful in confronting AQ propaganda and recruitment in London, are at the centre of Moore’s target for counter-subversion. Significantly, Moore in driving his agenda, has also targeted key figures in the Stop The War alliance that brought young Muslims safely into the realm of democratic activism. Interestingly such figures like Ken Livingstone, Jeremy Corbyn and George Galloway were also arch opponents of the Thatcherite campaign against ‘extremists’ in the 1980s. For Moore, Ken Livingstone was the epitome of a ‘fellow traveller’ of secular subversives in the 1980s and was reprising the role in the post 9/11 world as ‘cheer leader’ for Islamist extremists:

“We can reach out to all those who see themselves not as Muslims who happen to be in Britain but as proudly British *and* proudly Muslim — and also, indeed, to all those people of Muslim origin who dislike having their place in British society defined by their religious identity. In doing so, we should bear in mind the great Tory words of Edmund Burke about revolutionary agitation: “Because half-a-dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their

importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field.²³

For the government to allow QF and Policy Exchange to cast brave and effective Muslims in the role of ‘extremist’ and ‘subversive’ is to deny the major role they have played as partners in tackling violent extremism. It is also to overlook its negative impact in sections of the community where alienation is rife. Prevent funding to QF should be stopped forthwith – or put in an envelope marked ‘counter-subversion’ instead.

FUTURE COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGY

If a Conservative government is elected in 2010, then there is a real prospect that the QF’s counter-subversion role will be expanded and not wound-up. It fits perfectly with Policy Exchange recommendations and the analysis set out in Michael Gove’s book, *Celsius 7/7*.²⁴ According to Gove, a senior member of the Conservative shadow cabinet and a former chairman of Policy Exchange, all ‘Islamists’ pose a subversive and sectarian threat. ‘The demands of national security’ he warns, ‘are different from those of criminal justice’ and require ‘exceptional legislation and the temporary curtailment of liberties’.²⁵ More especially, what is needed, he argues, is ‘an ideological effort’ to challenge and reject what he calls ‘divisive separatist identities’.²⁶ That is the ill-conceived work QF undertakes. To demand that effective and civic-minded Muslims be included as targets to be ‘challenged’ ensures this counter-subversion work will be unfair as well as counter-productive in terms of counter-terrorism.

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Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.270.

2 Ibid. p.270.

3 Ibid. p.270.

4 And thereby boosting Al-Qaida propaganda and recruitment strategy

5 Such as Saif al-Adl

6 Under the premise of regrettable but necessary collateral damage

7 For example, in London, success against convicted violent extremists was achieved by brave, civic-minded Muslims who had to face down violent threat for the benefit of fellow Londoners only to be recast by QF and the influential Policy Exchange think tank as dangerous subversives

8 Counter-subversion is defined as ‘that aspect of counterintelligence designed to detect, destroy, neutralize, or prevent subversive activities through the identification, exploitation, penetration, manipulation, deception, and repression of individuals, groups, or organizations conducting or suspected of conducting subversive activities’ - US Department of Defence Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.

9 Quilliam Foundation, 2008. Pulling Together to Defeat Terror. Recommendations for Uprooting Islamist Extremism. April p.3.www.quilliamfoundation.org accessed 12.01.09.

10 Ibid. p.4.

11 Ibid. p.3.

12 Griffith-Dickson, Gwen, 2008. Countering Extremism and the Politics of “Engagement,” Gresham College lecture, Allen & Overy, London Docklands. 29 April.

13 Johnson, Alan, 2009. Letter to Guardian, 20 October.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/oct/20/prevent-terrorism-muslims-radicalisation> accessed 13.11.09.

14 Quilliam Foundation, 2008. pp.10-11.

15 Moreover, if the government had stuck with the proven method of giving funding to community groups with a track record of working effectively against violent extremism in a dangerous arena without funding then QF (and SMC) would have been disqualified in the first place.

16 Dodd, Vikram, 2009. “Spying is morally right, says think-tank,” Guardian. 16 October.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/oct/16/spying-morally-right-says-thinktank> accessed 2.11.09.

17 Crenshaw, Martha, 2009. Communication with author.

18 *Op. cit.* Dodd, Vikram, 2009.

19 Moore, Charles, 2008. “How To Beat the Scargills of Islam,” The 2008 Keith Joseph Memorial Lecture. Centre for Policy Studies, 10 March.<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/libimages/362.pdf> accessed 02.12.08.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 *Op. cit.* Moore, Charles, 2008.

23 Ibid.

24 Gove, Michael, 2006. *Celsius 7/7*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.

25 Ibid. p.137.

26 Ibid. p.138.

ENDNOTES

1 Gerges, Fawaz A., 2005. *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*.