

Police Responses to Islamist Violent Extremism and Terrorism

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Police Responses to Islamist Violent Extremism and Terrorism: A Critical Analysis

BY

TIMOTHY F. PARSONS

Liverpool John Moores University, UK



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For my wife Karon and children, Katie and Morgan.

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Contents

About the Author	<i>ix</i>
Preface	<i>xi</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xiii</i>
Introduction	<i>1</i>
Chapter 1 The UK Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST) Evolution and Development	<i>5</i>
Chapter 2 A Critique of CONTEST: Weaknesses, Vulnerabilities and Omissions	<i>23</i>
Chapter 3 Orientalism: Legacy and Influence on UK Security Policy	<i>39</i>
Chapter 4 Cannabis, Converts and Kinships: Recurring Aspects of Violent Extremism	<i>55</i>
Chapter 5 Politics, Religion, Community Complexity and Public Safety	<i>71</i>
Chapter 6 Policing: Culture, Leadership and Performance	<i>89</i>
Chapter 7 Policing: Next Steps	<i>103</i>
Chapter 8 Where Next for Counter-Terrorism Policing?	<i>117</i>

viii *Contents*

Appendix	<i>133</i>
References	<i>135</i>
Index	<i>141</i>

About the Author

Timothy F. Parsons has 40 years of experience in policing, first as a serving officer and later as an adviser to foreign governments. He has taught and lectured on police matters in 25 countries across four continents and continues to work as a research fellow at Liverpool John Moores University. He has an education doctorate from King's College London and was a chief inspector in the City of London Police.

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Preface

This book is the culmination of over two decades of study; a study that began when I was a serving police officer in London in the early years of this century. After the audacious and shocking terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda on the United States mainland in 2001, later to be followed by other devastating attacks in Bali 2002, Madrid 2004 and later London itself in 2005, United Kingdom law enforcement had to refocus on the terrorist threat posed by Islamist terror groups such as al-Qaeda and much later Islamic State (IS), sometimes referred to as Daesh by the United Kingdom Government.

Beginning from a point of no knowledge and gradually building an awareness of the many facets and complexities of this emerging threat, I consulted many figures within London's large and diverse array of Muslim communities. Visiting masjids (mosques), Islamic centres and prayer rooms, I listened, asked questions and reflected on the many deep and insightful conversations that I was grateful to have had with members of mosque management committees, community groups, scholars, fellow police officers and security professionals.

Later, my research and enquiries led me to meet officials or representatives from the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Hamas, Hezbollah and former members of al-Qaeda. I sat on two Prevent Boards, one for the police and one for the local authority. I have little memory of anything that was discussed, agreed or acted upon. At the time, I was of the view that too many meetings in both the police and local government simply became exercises in exchanging platitudinous nonsense about aims and objectives, performance indicators, consultations, reviews, action plans and policies. Out in the community things were a bit different, I enjoyed a free-ranging brief which allowed me to test out the appetite for police recruitment in local masjids, this proved to be immensely popular although the many barriers to entry became a major source of frustration. The exercise in listening continued apace. One day I would be having dinner with the Bishop of London, the next I would be attending a Shavuot dinner in a tiny synagogue in Bucharest, sandwiched between the Labour peer, Lord Janner and a senior member of the American Jewish Committee (AJC).

Working closely with colleagues in the Metropolitan Police (MPS), provided an opportunity to broaden my perspective and to challenge some stereotypes. Meeting and subsequently befriending, British Muslims with long beards, turbans and flowing robes, who were Special Branch officers with the highest level of security clearance, was an enlightening experience. As was the occasion when I attended a police retirement party on the upper floors of New Scotland Yard.

After listening to a short and uninteresting speech by Commissioner Sir Ian Blair, I was more than a little surprised when Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens), wandered in clutching his guitar. He proceeded to sing a number he had composed specially for the retiring Muslim Contact Unit (MCU) Detective Inspector.

Outside the United Kingdom my ongoing work as a police officer took me to Bosnia and Kosovo then later, having left the service and become an academic and research scholar, I worked in the United Arab Emirates, Rwanda, Nigeria and Burkina Faso. I also made a point of visiting Beirut and the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories. Throughout, I have always sought to look, to learn, to listen to people and to ask questions. Of course, my knowledge is far from complete. I have reached certain conclusions that many will take issue with and fervently disagree with. Such is the nature of academic study. I have a wider background in police reform and education having designed and delivered police training programmes in Croatia, Armenia, Georgia, Poland, Hungary and Ukraine.

In the section on policing, I talk briefly about class. My comments are observational rather than analytical, I am not a sociologist or social anthropologist, neither am I a student of Marx, Gramsci, Foucault or Hayek. I was born the son of a penniless immigrant although for reasons not elaborated here, I grew up in a solidly middle-class household. My brother went to public school and Oxford, I went to a secondary modern and joined the police. So, I think, I hope, that I can offer some very personal insights into how class operates both in the police service and in wider society.

This book is provocative, not I should stress for the sake of being so, but rather because I feel strongly that some of the policies being pursued by successive UK governments are plain wrong. Grounded in a false analysis of the problem, based upon Orientalist and thoroughly outdated perceptions of Islam and majority Muslim countries in the Middle East, as well as Muslim communities here at home, I argue that the UK's counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) is deeply flawed and that it should be the subject of a major rethink and overhaul. I readily accept that this is a controversial view and that many of my arguments will be quickly dismissed by scholars in the field, as well as security professionals.

Nevertheless, I hope to contribute to the wider debate around terrorism, Islamism, extremism and policing. I should make clear this is not a book about Muslims or about Islam. My knowledge of both is strictly limited. Where I have ventured into some of the detail about Muslim organisations and religious communities it is simply to illuminate the worrying degree of ignorance that pervades so much UK security policy and the CONTEST itself.

To conclude, I take a positive view of the future. Ultimately the threat from Islamist violence and terrorism will diminish and finally disappear. That is a long way off at the moment, but a combination of well thought out policy interventions, organic and unforced integration and longer term demographic change will all serve to mitigate the threat.

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Over the course of two decades of what at first was rather haphazard and ill-defined research, I have met and spoken at length to many experts and practitioners but have benefitted in particular from long associations with Dr Robert Lambert MBE, former Detective Inspector in SO15, Mr Tarique Ghaffur CBE, QPM, former Assistant Commissioner in the Metropolitan Police (MPS) and Commander Central Operations, Professor John Grieve CBE, QPM, former Deputy Assistant Commissioner (MPS) and National Co-ordinator for Counter-Terrorism in England and Wales, Frank Armstrong QPM, former Assistant Commissioner of the City of London Police, Mr David Clarke, former Chief Superintendent and Director of Intelligence at the City of London Police, Major General Ahmed Naser Al-Raisi, President of Interpol and former Inspector General of the Abu Dhabi National Police. I am also extremely grateful to two dear friends and colleagues who still serve in SO15 but who I will not name here. I must also thank Dr Abdul Wahid from Hizb ut-Tahrir¹, Daniel Pipes, President of the Middle East Forum and Dr Khalid Hroub who provided interesting critiques of some of the issues covered within this book. Likewise, I have benefitted enormously from attending lectures by eminent Orientalists, Professors Gilles Keppel and Olivier Roy. I have at various times had the privilege of sharing a platform with Professor Tariq Ramadan and Dr Anas Altikriti. Perhaps the person who I am most indebted to is Mr Mehmood Naqshbandi who over a period of nearly 20 years has generously donated his time to me, answering questions, clarifying points of fact and accuracy and instilling in me a fascination and enduring respect for Islam and its followers and devotees. During the writing of this book, I have also been indebted to Mr Steve Clarke, a close friend and former colleague who has provided great assistance in reviewing and editing my numerous drafts. I must also thank Katy Mathers, Senior Commissioning Editor at Emerald Publishers and her most helpful and supportive staff.

¹In January 2024 the Home Office announced that Hizb ut-Tahrir was to be added to the list of proscribed organisations under the Terrorism Act 2000.