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Community-Based Counterterrorism: What French Security Forces Can Learn from the British CONTEST Model

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ABSTRACT

France has been the victim of twelve high-profile terrorist attacks since 2012, despite its heavy-handed, legalistic approach to counterterrorism. The United Kingdom, in comparison, has undergone only one major attack since 2007. Is the British counterterrorism model, which focuses on engagement with community organizations and non governmental organizations (NGOs), proving more successful than the French approach? This paper proposes that France's security forces should consider adopting aspects of the British community-based counter-radicalization model.

KEYWORDS

radicalization, counterterrorism, CONTEST, United Kingdom, France

INTRODUCTION

Great Britain and France and their security forces have long dealt with acts of terrorism, whether through combating domestic terror groups or conducting counterinsurgency operations in former colonial possessions. Given their vastly different historical experiences, it is not surprising that the two countries developed different approaches to combating terrorism. For years, the French model of counterterrorism was regarded as being superior to the British model. Immediately following the 7/7 London bombings, France's policies were lauded by American neoconservatives as a shining example of effective counterterrorism. However, recent Islamist attacks across France raise the question whether the French model is failing, and whether the lack of large-scale terrorist attacks against the United Kingdom (UK) over the last several years sheds proof that the UK's community-inclusive model is, in fact, superior? This paper argues that the British approach to counterterrorism has, over time, proven to be more effective in combating extremism than the French approach, and that applying several aspects of the United Kingdom's model to France's own efforts would be beneficial to their current counterterrorism initiatives.

THE BRITISH MODEL: CONTEST IN ACTION

The attacks in the United States on September 11th, combined with the rioting witnessed throughout the summer of 2001, forced London to reevaluate its response to terrorism. Until this point, the perspective of British anti-terrorism experts was primarily outward looking and did not properly address the role that the UK's disenfranchised Muslim populations could potentially play if the UK decided to participate in the United States' Global War on Terror (GWOT). The post-9/11 environment exacerbated the British Muslim sense of oppression originating from Western capitals, leading to a rise in vulnerability to radicalization within the Muslim community. According to a Pew Research Center poll conducted in 2006, of Britain's 1.8 million Muslims, 47% reported feeling that "there was conflict in being a devout Muslim and living in a Western society." John Mackinlay, a British counterterrorism expert, believes that this conflicting identity provides ample opportunity for violent organizations to find new recruits (2009, p. 206).

Realizing the increasingly volatile sentiment developing within the UK's Muslim population, Whitehall began to investigate options for countering the extremist threat. In a letter from the Foreign Office, British diplomatic officials expressed their concerns on the issue to the Cabinet Office:

"This disillusionment may contribute to a sense of helplessness with regard to the situation of Muslims in the world, with a lack of any tangible 'pressure valves,' in order to vent frustrations, anger or dissent. Hence this may lead to a desire for a simple 'Islamic' solution to the perceived oppression/problems faced by the 'Ummah (Geive, 2004, p. 3)."

In order to inculcate a feeling of inclusion among these marginalized communities and provide 'pressure valves' in response to potential radicalization, the Home Office introduced a program titled Operation CONTEST, which became public knowledge in 2006.

CONTEST innovatively establishes a community-based approach to counter-terrorism. According to the Home Office, the Prevent strategy, a key element of CONTEST, aims "to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism." It does so by combat-

ing extremism at its roots by facilitating cooperation between state services, such as police forces, recreational centers, social services, and probation programs, and local community trend-setters, including religious groups, youth-focused charities, and educational institutions, among others. By coordinating their efforts with civil society, the Home Office is able to compete for the “hearts and minds” of at-risk communities. By equipping local organizations, particularly those of a religious and charitable nature, with the resources they need to stand up to extremist propaganda, violent ideology is countered on ideological and theological levels, thereby lessening the impact that terrorist recruiters may have on disaffected youth (Home Office, 2011). The Prevent strategy has proven to be successful in its outreach efforts. According to a 2008 report from the Department for Communities and Local Government, as many as 44,000 at-risk individuals had been engaged by the Prevent strategy in 2007 alone, primarily through youth activities and cultural outreach programs (Thomas, 2012, p. 64).

Additionally, as part of the Prevent strategy, disaffected segments of the population are given a local voice concerning potentially volatile actions perceived to be anti-immigrant or anti-Muslim. For instance, during the December 2008 – January 2009 Israeli military actions in Gaza, protests and town hall meetings by activists were organized with the foreknowledge and acceptance of borough council level services, including local police. Cooperation with community activists gives those with grievances a greater sense that the government considers their complaints to be legitimate, and thus their protests enter into the wider stream of British political discourse instead of remaining on the ignored fringes. The vast majority of those who participate in these meetings “return to normal life” and “the community resumes a calmer tempo,” thus demonstrating that the legitimizing nature of CONTEST’s Prevent strategy provides a “pressure valve” for actively disaffected segments of the community (Mackinlay, 2009, pp. 214–215).

In response to criticisms that Prevent’s outreach programs did not facilitate contact with wider British society, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has gradually expanded the opportunities for at-risk youths to participate in organizations such as *Army Cadets*, the *Scouts Association*, *Girlguiding UK*, and *Together in Service*, an organization that facilitates connecting youth interested in faith-based social action. By making involvement in such institutions more widely available, the DCLG hopes to show to these communities that “British values are Muslim values,” and, “Islam and its message of peace and unity makes our country a better and stronger place” (Dawson, 2016, pp. 11–12). Demonstrating the positive contributions these communities can play in the political and social life of the UK creates a desire for participation instead of opposition to British society.

The Prevent strategy is not without its critics. The program has opponents on both sides of the political spectrum. Some on the political right resent the idea of community engagement in counter-radicalization operations, and believe that a more heavy-handed approach ought to be implemented. Those who raise these objections should be directed to the successes of CONTEST. Government and private reports show that support for violent extremism has waned in recent years. Both the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism and the International Center for the Study of Radicalisation have stated that they have noticed a decrease in sympathy for Islamist terrorism among migrant communities.

This decrease is reflected in conviction records. In 2011, only four people were convicted of terror-related crimes, down from 19 in 2010 and a high of 51 in 2006. While other factors (including the Arab Spring) may have eroded support for violent extremism,

the fact that such a remarkable decrease has been observed since CONTEST went public supports the postulation that it has been effective in undermining and countering extremism (Vaz, 2012, p. 7). Additionally, the United Kingdom has only experienced one large-scale terrorist attack since the introduction of CONTEST, namely the botched 2007 Glasgow Airport attack. A decrease in violent extremism and the prevention of mass-casualty attacks suggest that, despite protestations from those wanting more crackdowns and less integration, CONTEST does indeed work. It works for two reasons.

First, the British government is correct in believing that violent extremism can only be properly countered through winning over the hearts and minds of disenfranchised communities. Within such populations, in which the state has lost (or never had) a degree of its legitimacy, solutions to communal problems are most effective when they are organic and originate from the community in question. British counter-radicalization efforts would not enjoy the same success if British Muslims were not provided the space and resources through which “bad” interpretations of Islam can be discussed and confronted on the local level. It would not be nearly as effective if the only counter-argument to extremist ideology came from the same (typically white, Christian) authorities with which disgruntled youths are frustrated in the first place.

Second, the Home Office is wise in implementing an approach to counter-radicalization that seeks prevention before prosecution. The CONTEST model’s ability to distinguish between prevention and pursuit (wherein law enforcement works to disrupt active terrorist cells and operations) facilitates a greater sense of belonging and inclusion into the culture of the modern United Kingdom. It seeks for (and succeeds in developing) a feeling of ownership of British society, thereby mitigating the risk that violence will be used in response to perceived oppression. While kicking in doors and conducting arrests may ensure public safety in the short term, it does not change the culture of at-risk communities for the better. When used in isolation, these tactics serve to further alienate potential extremists. Unfortunately, the French counterterrorism model focuses on precisely these tactics.

THE FRENCH MODEL: PROSECUTION FIRST, INTEGRATION SECOND

The French approach to counterterrorism, in stark contrast to CONTEST, is overwhelmingly judicial and legalistic. French security forces and the judiciary have historically treated terrorism as a serious crime, but as essentially nothing more than crime. The bellicose rhetoric commonly associated with the GWOT in English-language media has only begun to be used in the wake of the November 2015 Paris attacks. In explaining his government’s refusal to use the term, François Thuillier, a counterterrorism official in the French Ministry of the Interior, said of the language of the GWOT that, “to be at war gives to the enemy the status of a genuine army, the status of a partner on the battlefield, which means that it gives to these people a rationality, a strategy...that’s exactly what they want us to think of them. They want to be seen as an international army, and to be at war with these people is already their first victory” (Thuillier, 2014). To do otherwise would risk legitimizing the identity terrorists seek.

By using strictly legal speech and tactics in addressing issues of terrorism, France departs from the American expeditionary model, and the British, quasi-counterinsurgency model. France, instead, pursues domestic terrorists in much the same way it handles organized crime. Security forces utilize sweeping powers of surveillance and human intelligence. The judiciary exercises very permissive rules of preventative arrest, extradition, and sentencing.

Counterterrorism is a legal affair, and French civil society, particularly Muslim civil society, has no official role to play. Security services may reach out to organizations such as the French Muslim Council, but not out of a desire to form a formal partnership. Francesco Ragazzi of Sciences Po, a leading political science university, stated that

“In practice, Metropolitan intelligence services can form close bonds with ‘community’ representatives, but these are just informal exchanges from positions of unequal relationships of power, which do not imply official recognition of their role as representatives” (2014, p. 10).

Human Rights Watch and other rights-focused NGOs have heavily criticized this approach, saying that it promotes the feeling of exclusion that already characterizes the prevailing attitude of French migrant communities.

While it’s difficult to attribute stability to one policing program, France, nevertheless, was spared the kind of large-scale attacks that traumatized Madrid, London, and Moscow. Between 2001 and 2012, France did not experience a single massive terrorist attack. Because of this success, the French model was held up as an example of effective counterterrorism for years, including by US neoconservatives and British critics of CONTEST. These security policies have, however, left the communities from which terrorists draw their recruits feeling even more marginalized and oppressed.

Currently, unlike what is intended to occur under the British CONTEST model, the disaffected French Muslim’s only interaction with the Ministry of the Interior is likely to be with law enforcement (Klausen, 2009, pp. 403–420). Growing frustration has provided fertile ground for radicalization. Polling shows that support for violent extremism in France is prevalent. A 2006 Pew Research Center poll of the attitudes of young French Muslims found that 42% of those between 18 and 29 years old believed that suicide bombings were justifiable (2006, p. 60).

Since 2012, France has been the victim of twelve high-profile terror attacks, several of which caused mass casualties. The majority of those who carried out these attacks were French or Belgian citizens, meaning that the terrorist threat to France more often than not originates within its own borders, and not some distant safe haven. This uptick of attacks leaves open the question of this policy’s long-term effectiveness. Can such a model, which leaves marginalized communities without a peaceful “pressure valve,” continue to serve France, especially in the wake of the terrible unrest experienced by the Middle East following the Arab Spring? Can France protect itself from extremism while continuing its military operations in Muslim-majority nations? Following Mohammed Merah’s rampage through southern France in 2012, many wondered if Paris should double down on its methods and increase its powers of surveillance and arrest. It was postulated that such abilities would have allowed French authorities to become aware of Merah’s radicalization before he could strike. Perhaps a better question to ask would be, “if Merah had had access to the services offered by British Muslim civil society, would he have been radicalized at all” (Cazi, 2012).

THE ARGUMENT FOR FRENCH CIVIL SOCIETY IN COUNTER-RADICALIZATION

The recent tragedies in Paris indicate that the French counterterrorism model is failing to adequately protect France. Security officials have been forced to reflect on how to improve their methods. As authorities reevaluate their approach to violent extremism, they

should consider what aspects of CONTEST might help to ease the social pressure that is building in disaffected migrant communities.

Connecting with and strengthening Muslim civil society can aid France in its fight against terror in several ways. Encouraging outreach programs will provide an alternative to the extremist ideology that is commonly spread through France's prison systems. Strengthening faith-based NGOs can give moderate viewpoints a greater voice in the religious dialogue. In times when France is engaged in armed conflict within the Muslim world, community organizations can provide the disaffected with a constructive method of protest that does not involve violence. In short, moderate Muslims would have a greater ability to dissuade would-be recruits from becoming involved in extremist violence.

There are two primary obstacles to the implementation of a Prevent-like policy in France. The concept of *laïcité* makes French lawmakers very wary of allowing the state to wander into matters of religion. Ragazzi states that *laïcité* makes it difficult for "politicians to make the distinction between "good" and "bad" Islam, contrary to the United Kingdom, which does not hesitate to describe bad interpretations of Islam in its official documents." (2014, p. 10) The encouragement and funding of faith-based NGOs may be interpreted as a violation of the separation between church and state. It may create tension with other religious organizations that may question why the government is upholding one strain of religious thought over others. But Paris has shown a high degree of flexibility with questions of *laïcité* in the past. As part of regaining control of Alsace-Lorraine in the aftermath of World War II, France agreed to continue state support of the Catholic Church, including being responsible for the income of the Church's priests in the region, despite this being an obvious breach of the political norm. In considering strengthening faith-based NGOs that work in the Muslim community, France would be wise to exercise a similar degree of flexibility. France would benefit from exercising a similar degree of flexibility by strengthening faith-based NGOs whose work focuses on the Muslim community.

The second obstacle to a Prevent-inspired program is the overarching distrust of civil society that characterizes French politics. Interest groups are viewed with suspicion. In a culture that emphasizes the common good, they are viewed as seeking undeserved private privilege for a limited few. Jonah D. Levy points out the ways that this distrust of civil society has stunted the growth of France, stating that the lack of a developed civil society has

"deprived French officials of valuable policy resources: information for effective policy design; mobilization of participants who may be wary of government initiatives in a flexible, decentralized manner; diffusion of responsibility... and political legitimation in support of painful but necessary reforms." (Levy, 2009, p. 10).

The Muslim immigrant communities and security forces of France would greatly benefit from a blossoming of civil society for the reasons listed above. In the eyes of a disenfranchised community, state-centered initiatives will not dissuade youth from turning to violence. Community-based outreach programs, staffed by locals, will have greater success in countering extremist propaganda than any government office or official. Allowing civil society to play a greater role in countering extremism will also free up state resources, which could be redirected to other counterterrorism initiatives. For these reasons, Paris should consider cooperating with and encourage the development of civil society within at-risk

communities.

CONCLUSION

The success of the British CONTEST program, with its emphasis on the Prevent strategy, has suggested that community-centered counterterrorism may be a healthier way to tackle extremism over the long-term. Providing disaffected communities with a voice of protest and a platform from which they can openly counter Islamist propaganda has helped to reduce the number of successful terrorist attacks carried out in the UK, which has not had a large-scale incident in over a decade. In comparison, the French counterterrorism model has failed to prevent (and may partly be to blame for) an uptick in terrorist activity over the last several years, in which attacks have become more sophisticated and deadly. Changing strategy and implementing community-based counter-radicalization policies would give moderate voices more of a chance of succeeding in the war of ideas currently being waged in the streets, mosques, and chat rooms of France.

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