

Britain briefing: July 2022

Reporting period: 8th July - 7th August 2022

I. Counter-terrorism and Counter-extremism

Independent Reviewer report warns of the dangers of current approach towards counter-terrorism online

- Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation Jonathan Hall [released a report](#) on the approach taken by police towards terrorism offences for online activity.

While Hall has been among the more hawkish of Independent Reviewers, and has been supportive of much of the government's approach to counter-terrorism, this report took a critical perspective on the issue of 'online terrorism'.

- In it, he warned of the overly broad definition of terrorism law as applied to the online space, which risks catching 'keyboard warriors', whilst also stating that *'[G]overnment-sponsored research on convicted terrorist offenders in the UK suggests that those who were primarily radicalised online are least likely to be attackers.'*

Of particular concern to the report is the over-representation of children in counter-terror arrests for online activity recently.

- Interestingly, the report also concedes to the discriminatory nature of counter-terrorism, stating that *'The consequences of deploying counter-terrorism powers only against those who match the image of the 'terrorist' must be squarely acknowledged. Irrational discrimination, with bias against racial or religious minorities based on whether a suspect fits into certain stereotypes, would be all too likely.'*
- The report urged a new approach to dealing with suspicious online activity for youths which leans more on disruption than criminal investigation - which suggests an approach that leans more towards a Prevent-style model or behavioural orders akin to ASBOs.



Intelligence and Security Committee report on far-right extremism warns of far-right groups recruiting military and police personnel

- The Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) published a report on an [inquiry into far-right](#) 'extremism'.
- News coverage of the report [focused on its findings](#) that the army and police had lax policies on vetting and managing recruits and personnel with regards to membership of far-right groups, particularly groups which aren't currently proscribed as terrorist.

The report highlighted the *'fact that the Armed Forces do not provide clear direction to service personnel regarding membership of any organisation – let alone an extremist one – ... [could be a] somewhat risky approach, given the sensitive roles of many service personnel.*

- The inquiry also noted institutional measures taken in recent years with regards to anti-far-right-extremism work within MI5 and Prevent, and expressed concern at the under-resourcing of MI5 in this respect, describing it as 'untenable'.

This investment in far-right 'extremism' puts those agencies further at odds with the current political direction of travel of Prevent, with its [expected shift away](#) from combatting far-right 'extremism' and back towards an overwhelming focus on Muslims.

Robin Simcox appointed lead commissioner for the Commission for Countering Extremism

- On 27th July, Robin Simcox was [formally announced](#) as lead commissioner for the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE), for a period of 3 years.
- This follows an extended 'interim period' where he served as temporary commissioner from April 2021, after ex-commissioner Sara Khan completed her term in March 2021.
- Robin Simcox has been a fellow at the hard-right Henry Jackson Society and the Heritage Foundation, a US thinktank with close ties to Donald Trump, as well being Director of the Counter Extremism Group thinktank.

He has previously [gone on record](#) advocating a freeze on engagement with "extremist groups" like Mend and MCB, and has criticised concessions made by the Conservative Party with regards to investigating Islamophobia within the party.

- His background in the security field, alongside these statements, indicate a shift of CCE strategy towards a more hardline approach to extremism in line with the current government, and away from the strategy taken under Sara Khan, of trying to build consent for counter-extremism among civil society.

His work in the role during his 'interim' period - [prioritising engagement](#) with government bodies, security thinktanks and academics - also indicate that Simcox will be using the CCE as more of an internally-facing advisory body to government policy than his predecessor.

- Simcox is [accused of having links](#) to far-right ideologues, including those promoting the 'Great Replacement Theory' - such as academic Lorenzo Vidino, whose work was instrumental to the [crackdown on Muslim society](#) in Austria.

Indeed, during his interim term [Simcox has engaged](#) with the Austrian *Documentation Centre on Political Islam*, which is a core part of the Austrian state's Islamophobic apparatus and on whose [advisory council](#) Vidino sits.

Rishi Sunak proposal to expand Prevent to those with 'extreme hatred of Britain'

- Conservative Party leadership contender Rishi Sunak issued a pledge to [expand the definition of extremism](#) to include those with an "extreme hatred of Britain", and therefore making such individuals vulnerable to Prevent referrals.
- The proposal was widely ridiculed, with even [figures from within the counter-terror](#) world attacking it.
- Sunak's pledge appeared more to be a desperate and opportunistic attempt to appeal to a Conservative party voting base with an appetite for 'culture war' concessions like these - rather than a thought-through policy position, or something emerging from within the counter-terror industry.
- However, the fact that Sunak felt comfortable to make use of Prevent in such a cavalier manner speaks volumes to the dangerously malleable nature of the policy.

II. National Security

Rishi Sunak issues pledge to deepen anti-China policies

- Another [pledge issued](#) by Rishi Sunak as part of his leadership campaign was a vow to ‘get tough’ with China if elected party leader, and to deepen anti-China policies currently undertaken by Britain and other Western governments.
- He described China as “the biggest-long-term threat to Britain and the world’s economic and national security” and accused it of “infiltrating universities”.

The pledge included vows to close down ‘Confucius Institutes’ - Chinese-language teaching centres in universities sponsored by the Chinese government - as well as to ‘build a new international alliance of free nations to tackle Chinese cyber-threats’.

He also [reiterated](#) discredited theories of Chinese ‘[debt trap diplomacy](#)’.

- Unlike his reviled proposal to expand Prevent, this pledge chimes with the hawkish approach towards China that the security services have been pushing for, and is therefore likely to accord a friendlier reception if instituted.

UK strengthening economic and security ties across Middle East, South-east Asia and Africa to project power

- The UK has signed a number of agreements and partnerships strengthening its economic and security ties with the governments of the UAE, Qatar, Kenya, Ghana, and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).
- These include strategic security agreements with [Ghana](#), moves to scale up security links with [ASEAN nations](#), ties with [Qatar and UAE](#) for securing ‘regional stability’, and funding Anti-Terrorism Police headquarters in [Kenya](#).
- These agreements form part of the government’s ‘Global Britain’ agenda outlined in its 2021 [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#).

The strategy emphasised expanding Britain’s global presence through nodes of influence across the Middle East, Indo-Pacific region and Africa to project military and economic power, and secure political influence.

Through this, the British government would also export its security policies worldwide, as indicated by these agreements.