

Britain briefing: November 2022

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Counter-terrorism and Counter-extremism

Second Commission for Countering Extremism conference keynoted by Michael Gove, signals its interest in environmental activists, Barelvi community and Leicester unrest

- The Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE) [held its conference](#) in early December, addressing the topic of 'how best to tackle extremism in our communities'.
- After a quiet transitional period from Sara Khan's tenure of the CCE, this is Robin Simcox's second conference as commissioner this year alone.

While the first conference [featured then-Home Secretary Priti Patel](#) as keynote speaker - a signal that her office was finally warming up to the CCE after having stonewalled it under Sara Khan's tenure - this conference included a keynote address from Michael Gove - further indicating the hardline tilt of the CCE that Simcox has been expected to bring to the role.

- Panels at the conference pointed at the areas of interest for the CCE, including 'Radical environmentalism; Barelvi extremism, blasphemy, and free speech; How grievances are exploited by extremists and effective ways to respond; and The personal[sic] costs of countering extremism and potential solutions.'

It also touched on issues such as the unrest in Leicester earlier in autumn and [protests against the 'The Lady of Heaven' film](#) over summer.

- These suggest that the CCE would likely be working on reviving the nexus between 'community cohesion' and extremism that has previously been a feature of British counter-extremism policies, and which opens the gateway for greater social management and policing of communities.

The definition of climate activists - particularly direct action activists - as 'extremist' [has also been developing](#) over a [number of years](#) as the question of climate action has become particularly salient in the public consciousness.



New rules on prosecuting offences committed while in jail exceptionalise terror offenders, add to punitive drift of government

- New rules introduced by Justice Secretary Dominic Raab will [allow for terror convicts to be automatically fast-tracked](#) for investigation and/or prosecution for offences committed while in jail.

This follows recommendations made by the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation Jonathan Hall.

- Under existing rules, offences committed by prisoners are dealt with in-house by governors, and liable for a penalty of up to 42 days' extension on convictions. Under the new rules, full prosecutions would allow for much longer increases on sentences.
- This latest rule fits with a wider pattern of moves across 2021/2022 to crack down on individuals for terror offences, before and after conviction - including by expanding the scope of offences prosecutable under terror laws, increasing the length and condition of sentences, subjecting offenders to increased scrutiny and possible segregation within prison, and now creating an exceptional prosecution system for 'terrorist' prisoners.

Measures in the now-shelved Bill of Rights also [sought to drastically reduce](#) the scope for human rights appeals for terror offenders.

- These moves have little to do with tackling the risk of violence - this much is clear from the petty examples given of prosecutable offences in the press release, such as vandalising cells - but serve to create a secondary class of prisoners who are subject to an increasingly draconian parallel justice system, which may then be expanded to the rest of the prison population.

The encouragement of further prosecution of prisoners also avoids dealing with the conditions in prison that enable or encourage infractions by prisoners - thereby shifting the blame on to them, and engendering a more punitive approach, which has become emblematic of recent governments.

National Security

Defending Democracy Taskforce formed to 'tackle state threats' as National Security Bill moves closer toward becoming law

- In late November, the [‘Defending Democracy Taskforce’ held its first meeting](#), convened by Security minister Tom Tugendhat.

The primary purpose of the Taskforce is to ‘to protect the democratic integrity of the UK from threats of foreign interference’, and its work will span government, local authorities, intelligence agencies and the private sector, while it reports to the National Security Council.

- The formation of the Taskforce comes as the National Security Bill approaches its final stages in Parliament, and is set to introduce and/or update a swathe of offences related to supposed foreign interference being carried out in Britain.
- The issue of supposed foreign interference in British democracy entered the public consciousness early in 2022 with the [high-profile story of Christine Lee](#), allegedly working on behalf of the Chinese government to ingratiate herself with MPs, being pushed by MI5 as part of its more hardline approach to China.

Since then, and particularly after the start of the Russo-Ukraine war, this issue has been brought to the forefront, and this latest Taskforce indicates how an institutional architecture is forming alongside legislation like the National Security Bill - as the threat from ‘hostile’ foreign states comes to supplant terrorism as Britain’s primary security issue.

Other

Sunak’s first major foreign policy speech steps back from brink militarily, but largely follows path set by Boris Johnson

- Towards the end of November, Rishi Sunak delivered a [speech at the Lord Mayor’s banquet](#) which served as his first major speech on his government’s foreign policy stance.

The speech was largely unremarkable and did little to differentiate his positions from his predecessors in its condemnations of Russia, military support for Ukraine, its steadfast backing of NATO and so on.

- However compared to the some of the [hardline pledges](#) Sunak issued during his summer leadership election, and some of the more [brash positions](#) taken by [Liz Truss](#) in her [short tenure](#), the speech did strike a tone of moderation in



other respects - representing something of a step back from the more hawkish approach adopted by elements of his party.

This included labelling China as a “systemic challenge” - an upgrade from its designation as a “systematic competitor” in Britain’s 2021 Integrated Review, but falling short of the “threat” designation that Liz Truss had announced.

In terms of Europe the speech outlined Sunak’s approach as “foster[ing] respectful, mature relationships with our European neighbours”, as part of a gradual shift away from the party’s hardline rejection of Europe post-Brexit - as evidenced by Britain’s decision to attend [the new European Political Community](#) initiative spearheaded by Emmanuel Macron.

- In the speech, Sunak rejected a dependency of “on Cold War arguments or approaches, or mere sentimentality about our past” and spoke more in terms of domestic economic development and expanding international partnerships and alliances - rather than an emphasis on military confrontation.
- The foreign policy position of the Conservative Party, especially with regards to China, is fiercely contested internally and liable to change based on factors internal and external to the government.

With the somewhat restrained nature of this speech, however, it appears that Sunak is seeking to hold at bay some of the more hawkish elements within his party, while still making enough gestures to appease them - for now.

Britain signs Plan for Defence Cooperation with Saudi Arabia to deepen security operation, affirm Saudi as key regional partner

- On 13th December, Defence Minister Ben Wallace met with his Saudi counterpart Prince Khalid bin Salman to [sign their Plan for Defence Cooperation](#), to deepen bilateral defence and security coordination.
- The agreement augments the long-term partnership between Western powers and Saudi Arabia, but comes at a time when US influence over the kingdom appears to be growing fragile under President Biden’s tenure.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has sought to assert a more diversified international relations profile in recent years, including through adopting a neutral position on the Russo-Ukraine conflict, building greater [economic ties with US rival China](#) - and pointedly refusing to accede to US requests to [increase oil production](#) in order to increase supply, and to therefore reduce oil costs to the US and other importers.

- The agreement - with reinforces Britain's 'commitment to working with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on promoting regional security and stability' - also comes as Saudi's truce with Yemeni resistance forces [has expired](#), with the possibility of Saudi returning to the worst excesses in its brutal war against the Yemeni people, with British and US support.

Britain leaves MINUSMA operation in Mali, following French ejection

- Minister for the Armed Forces James Heapey MP [made a statement in Parliament](#) announcing that Britain would be leaving the UN-mandated MINUSMA mission in Mali earlier than planned.

This follows shortly after France's withdrawal from Mali and the end of its parallel, eight year-long Operation Barkhane counter-terror operation in the region - following anti-France agitation by the Malian people and its current government, which came to power in a military coup last year.

- In the speech, Heapey repeatedly placed the blame for Britain's move on the Malian government and its collaboration with the Russian 'Wagner Group' mercenary force.

Wagner has a relatively small mercenary force in the country - likely numbered in the hundreds - but has been [repeatedly invoked](#) in Britain's [international speeches](#) as the supposed source of conflict and destabilisation in the region.

- Mali and the wider Sahel region of Africa have been a theatre of the War on Terror and have become particularly fraught after the fall of the Libyan government in 2011 and the subsequent fallout, with France leading on Western military interventions in the Sahel through a number of its former colonies.

Britain and France have made it clear that their withdrawal from Mali forms part of a reorganisation of their presence and approach to the Sahel and West Africa rather than a permanent retreat. As Heapey put it in his announcement, Britain will be "rebalancing our deployment alongside France, the EU and other like-minded allies"