

The Pluscarden Programme for the study of Global Terrorism and Intelligence

A Report of the conference on

"The future of international cooperation in countering violent extremism"

October 8th-9th 2010

Oxford, Great Britain

NB: The meeting and this record are subject to the Chatham House Rule

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Rapporteur's Note

The report has been organised into eight main sections, according to the structure of the conference program. Each provides an accurate record of the comments and matters discussed over the course of the two day period. Hyperlinks are inserted when other works or organizations are referenced.

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Executive Summary

This section provides a brief summary of the conference, and the core themes identified during the course of discussion. It also includes an analysis of each panel, including the matters discussed, the key themes identified, and the outstanding questions raised. Reference to the full summary of each panel is advised for a more complete record.

Overview

A number of themes emerged during the course of the conference. Each of these warrants greater attention and further analysis. It was broadly agreed that radical groups were in a period of flux, in which experimentation with new tactics and forms of operation is being actively employed. It was considered essential that counter-terrorist efforts respond to such developments with sufficient agility. These themes have been developed below, and have been divided between those developments being undertaken by radical groups and terrorist organizations, and those actions and methods that ought to be adopted by counter-terrorist practitioners.

Violent groups in flux

- 1) The role of safe havens was stressed. Repeated references were made to the need to limit the freedom of action enjoyed by Taliban groups in the North West Frontier Provinces of Pakistan. However, further references were made to the largely unimpeded development of safe havens in areas in which stability was weak and where local counter-terrorist efforts were poor. Somalia and Yemen were regularly identified as the prime example of such areas, though regions in West Africa were also deemed to be cause for concern.
- 2) The ties between radical and terrorist groups and non-ideological criminal groups were identified as a major area of concern. It was noted that co-operation between these two forms of group were presently at a low level, but were developing rapidly. Concern was expressed that co-operation would enable ideological groups to gain access to potential recruits, secure much needed finance - often from drug money, and gain access to black market smuggling routes that might allow access to western societies.
- 3) The willingness and determination to adopt new and more sophisticated tactics was also considered across a number of the panels. The Mumbai attacks orchestrated by Lashkar-e-Taiba were considered a model for future operations in Western countries, even though undertaking them would pose a greater challenge than it had been in India in 2009. The willingness to use conventional arms in commando style attacks on multiple locations was considered a strong possibility, in part due to the acute difficulties associated with pre-empting such attacks.
- 4) The strategic weakness of al-Qaeda was recognized with near uniformity. Setbacks in

Afghanistan, Iraq, and failure to demonstrate the salience of its core narrative were identified as the cause of this decline. However, it was also stressed that this situation had precipitated the emergence of other threats, such as leaderless radical groups, and self radicalized individuals. It was also noted that the strategic decline of al-Qaeda could just as easily provoke an escalation in violence as it could the elimination of the group as a credible threat to national security.

Required counter-terrorist responses

1) The need to place engagement at the heart of counter terrorist strategy was cited in numerous panels. Though there was disagreement as to the root causes of radicalization, there was strong belief in the need to engage communities that had produced violent or radical individuals, and to counter a sense of exclusion that had been exploited by recruiters. It was stressed that shared practice in this area was poor, and that more needed to be done to ensure that those nations that had succeeded in implementing successful engagement strategies increase their co-operation with other states.

2) The need for a more effective counter-terrorist narrative. It was noted across multiple panels that insufficient resources had been devoted to countering the ideas that helped drive radicalism and extremism. A more effective message, coupled with a concerted effort to promote it, was encouraged. This included recommendations to support voices within the Muslim faith that ran counter to those preaching violence, as well as efforts to intervene in jihadi websites to counter material that had succeeded in radicalizing individual actors over the internet.

3) The need to develop greater domestic resilience against individual terrorist attacks was highlighted. This theme was stressed in two distinct regards. It was noted that insufficient attention had been devoted to responding to the changing tactics of violent groups, and that this would be essential if the effects of an unorthodox terrorist attack were to be minimized. It was also stressed that more needed to be done to prevent political and societal over-reactions to terrorist acts, as had already been done in other countries. The Indian reaction to the Mumbai attacks was frequently identified as an effective model for responding to such events.

4) Greater international co-operation. In all discussions, the transnational nature of radicalism and terrorism were stressed. Whilst transnational terrorist groups themselves were adjudged to be weak compared with those located within one area such as Hezbollah and Hamas, the international dimensions of finance, recruitment, and overall terrorist operations were not disputed. Increased co-operation on all of these fronts, both within individual countries and across national lines, was advocated as an effective response.

Detailed Overview

Panel One

'Countering extremism in Western democracies: Balancing pre-emption of attacks against winning hearts and minds'

The first panel focused on the counter-terrorist polices of the UK Government, and the experiences of the troubles in Northern Ireland. It was noted that there was a considerable distinction to be made between groups such as the IRA and al-Qaeda, and that counter-terrorist efforts had adapted to this fact. However it was also stressed that the UK's efforts in confronting the threat posed by the IRA could provide valuable insights.

Key themes discussed included:

- The need to forge greater co-operation between individual intelligence agencies, and with the police. Doing so was considered essential if intelligence was to be converted into evidence that would be admissible in court.
- The impact of intervention by law enforcement in cases when convictions were unlikely to be made. The speakers noted that there was a trade off in such instances, between disrupting plots and undermining the campaign to win hearts and minds.
- Time was also devoted to the importance of engaging communities that had produced radicalized figures, and the need to identify the core grievances of such communities. It was deemed vital that engagement efforts be placed at the heart of counter-terrorism strategy, in order to counter non-violent extremism. Reducing broader extremism was considered a useful means by which to minimize the potential for radicalization of individuals who might be prepared to embrace violence.

Questions arising from the first panel:

Should an effective engagement policy focus on non-violent extremism as well as violent extremism? Should engagement seek to focus on individuals or communities as a whole? Should it seek to address the root causes of grievances, or should it simply try to contain the symptoms that those grievances produce? How best can the criminal justice framework address violent extremism? Can greater co-operation between law enforcement agencies and intelligence agencies improve the ability of terrorism to be tackled within the rule of law? What is an 'acceptable outcome' when confronting violent extremism - disruption of a specific plot, or conviction of the individual responsible? How can groups which seek isolation be engaged? Is engagement best pursued on a local or national level?

Panel Two

“How technology and adaptation among violent extremists are changing the nature of the threat: How to meet them?”

The second panel addressed the importance that technological advances have made and could make to counter-terrorism strategy. It was noted that while concern about terrorist use of cyber attacks had grown in prominence, most terrorist uses of the internet were more conventional. It was also stressed that technological advances equipped counter-terrorist practitioners with at least as many advantages as it did terrorists themselves. The success of the Predator program was cited as an example of this fact.

Key themes discussed included:

- The means by which terrorists organizations and radicalized individuals use the internet to recruit others, either through direct communication or through the distribution of extremist material. While it was noted that most violent actors had received direct training, the threat of 'distance radicalization' was highlighted as a growing strand, and one that would need to be countered effectively.
- Unrealized opportunities for counter-terrorist officials to disrupt the process of radicalization through direct intervention in online forums. It was noted that more could be done to challenge the narrative propagated by al-Qaeda and other groups through corresponding efforts by Western intelligence agencies. Opportunities to further ideological disputes that challenged the ideas underpinning radical groups were also identified as being of central importance to future counter-terrorist efforts.
- Increased opportunity for intelligence gathering and analysis. The suggestion that counter-terrorist actors should undertake a broad effort of online activity to take radical websites 'offline' was rejected. The availability of information about radical ideas and preachers in open source arenas was considered an essential resource in the effort to determine the individuals and ideas that motivated radical groups.

Questions arising from the second panel:

How can counter-terrorist efforts keep pace with technological advances that can be exploited by radical groups? To what extent should counter-terrorist efforts seek to disrupt internet sites that are used to radicalize? How could the West respond to a Cyber attack effectively? Does the balance between the Government and the press need to be redrawn with regards to 'new media'?

Panel Three

“Dealing with aftermath of attacks: Lessons from Mumbai and elsewhere on what to do and what not to do”.

The third panel focused on the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, both in terms of the tactical advances that had been made by the perpetrators, and the operational response of Indian counter terrorist forces. Attention was also devoted to the broader impact of the attacks (or lack thereof), and the lessons that could be learned by counter-terrorist officials in other countries.

Key themes discussed included:

- The tactical strength of the commando style assault on the city of Mumbai. The vulnerability of large cities was discussed, as were the careful planning that the terrorists themselves had undertaken. It was noted that foreign command and control was employed during the attacks, and that those operating in Mumbai were equipped with Voice over IP, sufficient food to last a lengthy standoff, and access to Global Positioning Satellites. It was agreed that similar attacks could be equally effective in Western cities.
- The relatively slight impact the attacks had on domestic Indian society and Indo-Pakistan relations was also a central theme of the discussion. The role played by the Indian Government in response to the attacks was evaluated, as was the unique status of terrorist attacks of this kind in South Asia. A firm distinction was made between the conventional attacks that had been carried out by Indian and Pakistani military forces during armed conflict and the acts of violence carried out against population centers undertaken during the Mumbai siege.
- The lessons to be learned by counter-terrorist practitioners elsewhere were also considered in depth. The importance of adjusting to the changing tactical methods of terrorist groups was stressed, but so too was the importance of building resilience into the political system and society in order to guard against counter-productive overreactions India's reaction to the Mumbai attacks was praised, and considered a model for responses to unexpected, mass casualty attacks.

Questions arising from the third panel:

How well prepared are Western cities for a Mumbai style attacks involving simultaneous commando assault at multiple locations? To what extent are terrorist tactics shared across different groups? Does one group's innovation encourage others to adopt similar tactics? If such attacks were to occur, how should the respective Government respond?

What would the response of the domestic society be? What can be done to ensure a concerted Government response but a calm response from the public?

Panel Four

"The Changing Character of Militant Groups: Implications for counterterrorism"

The fourth panel considered the ideological underpinnings of the 'Islamist' Universe', and in particular the charismatic ideas that fuel radicalism and violence. Particular attention was devoted to the different 'generations' of jihadi struggle, in order to demonstrate that while the doctrinal arguments that formed the foundation of radical thinking remained constant, the operational tactics of groups that embraced such theoretical pillars did not.

Key themes discussed included:

- The role played by inspirational leaders in radical jihadi movements and the policy that counter-terrorist officials should adopt with regard to prosecution and or elimination of them. The execution of Sayyid Qutb by Egyptian officials in the 1960s was seen as a strategic blunder, and was considered in reference to how Western officials might respond to possible capture of al-Qaeda leaders.
- It was recommended that attention focus on de-legitimizing the 'charismatic ideas' that inspirational leaders espoused, rather than on neutralizing those leaders themselves. Caution was expressed in this regard. While it was noted that efforts to promote alternative ideologies were important, care should be taken so that those alternatives retained their credibility, and were not perceived to be the product of Western initiative.
- The ability of radical Islamist groups to adapt to setbacks was highlighted through the discussion of numerous historical events. Concern was expressed that radical groups would turn to new approaches such as cyber-attacks or partnership with criminal organizations. In this context, future attacks were considered to be inevitable, demanding an increased ability to absorb them with minimal disruption. This underscored the need to invest in domestic resilience. A tendency to blame Western intelligence agencies when plots were successful was identified, and was strongly criticized.
- There was wide agreement that al-Qaeda was in 'strategic decline' having suffered setbacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, and due to Western intervention that had dispelled its core narrative. Nevertheless, this was contrasted with an operational resurgence by groups and individuals. Franchise groups such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and individuals who had sought out training themselves without having been recruited were identified as considerable threats. It was also noted that strategic decline could result in efforts to escalate through renewed

campaigns of violence.

Questions arising from the fourth panel:

How can the charismatic ideas that drive violent extremism be de-legitimized? How can radical leaders who promote charismatic ideas be neutralized without creating a sense of martyrdom? How can local grievances be addressed in such a way as to insulate them from exploitation by transnational terrorist networks? How can the strategic decline of al-Qaeda and groups like it be translated into a reduced threat at the operational level? How can the strategic decline of al-Qaeda be made permanent, and its effects accelerated so that its resonance dissipates as quickly as possible?

Panel Five

"Countering extremism in the frontline: What can be done in Afghanistan and Pakistan?"

The fifth panel focused exclusively on the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the US-led presence of Nato forces. Attention was devoted to efforts that would be required to reduce the training of those intent on launching attacks against Western nations, as well as the broader approaches that would be required to invest the region with a new degree of stability.

Key themes discussed included:

- The lack of order in the North West Frontier Provinces was considered in detail. It was noted that insufficient police resources had all but undermined the writ of Islamabad, despite successful interventions by the Pakistani Army. It was also stressed that the increase in Taliban backed attacks against Western targets such as the attempted Times Square bombing were directly attributable to the greater freedom of action enjoyed by Taliban operatives in Pakistani safe havens.
- Discussion also focused on the need to establish approaches that were based upon realities in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was stressed that stability would only be brought to Afghanistan if a system of governance that accorded with the country's historical experience was adopted. This led to the recommendation of a mixed sovereignty system, in which power was largely decentralized. It was also noted that Western interaction with Pakistan had, historically, been undertaken with a view to broader objectives. Greater appreciation of Pakistan's national interests, particularly its perception of the situation in Afghanistan as an extension of traditional Indo-Pakistani conflict, was advised.
- Lastly, 'strategic patience' was encouraged with regard to Western strategy in the region. It was noted that efforts had thus far focused on short term aims, and that a reduced focus on immediate priorities needed to be adopted. A long term approach to the distribution of foreign aid, prioritizing local counter terrorist

efforts, was strongly recommended.

Questions arising from the fifth panel:

Where should Western nations invest foreign aid money in order to maximize the chances of counter-terrorist success? How could Islamabad's fear of Indian cultivation of the situation in Afghanistan be addressed? What steps could be taken to limit Taliban freedom of action in the North West Frontier Province?

Panel Six

"Potential new hotspots for extremism and opportunities to mitigate the danger".

The sixth panel evaluated the possibility of terrorist groups fomenting radicalism in Northern African states. The connection between radical groups and criminal cartels was considered in detail, as was the role played by drug money in corrupting law and order.

Key themes discussed included:

- The growth of safe havens in a number of African countries was identified as a cause for considerable concern. Areas in Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria were cited. It was noted that radical groups had established areas in which the Government no longer had a strong or enduring presence, in part through deliberate efforts to inter-marry into the local population.
- The ties between radical groups and criminal bodies were stressed repeatedly. It was noted that terrorism in North Africa included a much greater commercial strand than in other parts of the world. The role of drug money was singled out as the primary cause for this, though the role of kidnapping for ransom was also identified as a contributing factor.
- China's presence in Africa was also evaluated. It was noted that Beijing had not undertaken major efforts to improve stability and security in the areas in which it had established large commercial ventures, and that its role had had a negative effect on local governance. There was broad agreement that Chinese policy would only be modified when instability began to affect the profitability of its economic investments.

Questions arising from the sixth panel:

What can be done to incentivize African nations to undertake a greater focus on counter-terrorist efforts? How can the corrosive effects of drug money in West Africa be reduced? Under what conditions would Beijing consider bolstering domestic African counter-terrorist efforts to it to be in China's own national interests?

Panel Seven

The seventh panel considered the means by which individuals are radicalized, and the steps that should be taken by counter-terrorist officials to minimize the chances of such individuals turning to violence. Though there was broad agreement on the need to engage with communities that had developed a sense of exclusion, conflicting views were expressed as to the root causes of radicalization.

Key themes discussed included:

- Competing theories were advanced as to the root causes of radicalization. Strong support was expressed for the view that radicalization is a process which develops from a sense of exclusion, and is exploited by recruiters who champion religious tradition and solidarity as the cure for isolation. However, alternative sentiment was voiced which stressed the importance of specific grievances such as conflicts in the Middle East, which prompted violent reactions.
- Consensus was reached on the need to engage communities that had come to feel isolated. Reference was made to the approach undertaken by the Government of The Netherlands, which had established an engagement policy that had resulted in a lower threat level than in any neighboring country.
- The importance of countering radicalism in all parts of the world was underscored. Exchanges questioning whether individuals representing a diaspora should be discouraged from returning to their native countries to preach violence were held. There was broad agreement that whilst not explicitly posing a threat to the west, such figures could easily go on to radicalize others who might take a more aggressive view.

Questions arising from the seventh panel:

What are the root causes of radicalization? Does a sense of exclusion or a response to political events initiate a process of radicalization? Where should a successful engagement policy focus its efforts? Should non-violent radicals be engaged? Should those who wish to undertake violence in non-Western countries also be the focus of Western engagement efforts?

Panel Eight

'The future framework of international co-operation - unilateral, bilateral and multilateral options'

The eighth panel focused on international counter-terrorist co-operation, and the steps that needed to be taken to continue the good progress that had already been made on this front. Co-operation between governments on intelligence, financial, judicial and law enforcement matters were stressed as being of the highest importance.

Key themes discussed included:

- The need for proactive co-operation was stressed. It was noted that there was tendency for specific organizations to only share information when it was requested from them. It was recommended that all bodies that might have an interest be included, and that the circulation of documents and information be enhanced both between domestic intelligence agencies and across national boundaries.
- A greater focus on how terrorism ends was also recommended. It was advised that countries with experience in this regard share information and experiences with those engaged in going campaigns, so that a more effective effort bring those campaigns to an end could be adopted.

Questions arising from the eighth panel:

How can countries better share information, and be incentivized to do so? What can be done to establish bilateral intelligence sharing arrangements with countries that are historically unwilling to enter into such agreements?

Requests for the full Conference Report can be made to Mrs Kirsty Norton
pluscarden.programme@sant.ox.ac.uk

Requests will then be considered by the Director of the Pluscarden Programme.