

Research Note

"What I have learned About Countering Terrorism in the UK: A Conversation with Robert Spencer".

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Abstract:

Bob Spencer served as senior investigating officer and a specialist senior investigating officer for terrorism for the West Midlands Police in the UK. Almost immediately after the 7/7 attacks in London, he was made Head of Intelligence for the West Midlands CTU. West Midlands being assessed at the time to have had the highest terrorism threat in the UK outside the capital, Spencer was invited to head the delivery of the governments Prevent agenda within the Regional Counter Terrorism Unit, with responsibility for embedding the strategy across four regional forces. Spencer retired from the force in 2012 but continued to advise various organisations around their compliance with terrorism regulations and particularly their organisational security and preparedness. In June 2016 he was appointed the Prevent Coordinator for Walsall Council in the West Midlands, retiring from the role in 2019.

Where were you on July the 7th, 2005?

I awoke on the morning of 7th July 2005 in the Crown Plaza Hotel at the John Lennon Airport in Liverpool. I was attending a national police seminar on the use of criminal intelligence in tackling serious and organised crime. Little did I know, the events of that morning would impact not only my future policing career, but British society in general for many years to come. Before breakfast I made my customary phone calls to my local police station back in Birmingham, where I was the operations manager. These were the days of 'Performance Policing,' an unrelenting regime of crime management introduced by the then Labour Government, led by Tony Blair. Reducing crime and increasing 'detection rates' were paramount and at times, they seemed the only measures of policing that mattered. On the face of it, no one could argue with a strategy that sought to reduce crime and catch and convict more criminals. During the late 1990's the approach delivered outstanding results, literally halving the levels of some crime; but ten years on, most of the big wins had already been achieved and the all-consuming focus on performance now created perverse incentives around the deployment of resources and the use and abuse of some very specialist skills and tactics. I was also aware this was the second day of

the 31st G8 Summit being held in Gleneagles, Scotland. Like most police forces we had sent significant numbers of police officers in 'mutual aid' and such were the demands around performance policing I was apprehensive about the impact this would have on our 'figures.' This almost transactional style of policing found little if any traction in local communities and as a result the community engagement and social capital that would later be critical to tackling the terror threat was, at this time, largely absent.

During breakfast, our attention was increasingly drawn to several TV's around the room. All showing smoke and injured people emerging from several London tube stations. Initial reports suggested gas or electrical fires, or even tube trains colliding. At 9.50am, attention switched to the now iconic scene of Tavistock Square and a London bus ripped apart by an explosion. It quickly became clear this was a coordinated attack on commuters using London's transport system. Within the hour, the seminar had been abandoned and delegates were quickly making their way home. As I drove back to the West Midlands the full horror of the mornings' events began to emerge. At lunchtime I received a call from a member of the West Midlands Police senior command team asking me if I would take up the role of Head of Preventing Violent Extremism for the West Midlands Counter Terrorism Unit. I accepted."

Tell us more about the Prevent strategy, which was launched in the wake of the 7th July bombings, as part of CONTEST (UK's Counter Terrorism Strategy). What were the challenges of your new role in such a dangerously volatile security environment?

Within the week I took up my new role. Although I was extremely proud to be offered the job, the considerable challenges of delivering it would quickly become apparent. The Prevent strategy itself was nothing new. Prevent is one of four elements that make up the governments overarching counter terrorism strategy, 'Contest.' Contest had been introduced some two years previously and was designed to bring together what became known as the four 'P's.' Pursue, investigating, detecting, prosecuting and if that failed, disrupting those plotting to carry out terror attacks. Protect, building resilience and improving all security arrangements, particularly our national infrastructure. Prepare, to mitigate the effects of an attack. Prevent, simply to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terror organisations. Three immediate challenges quickly became apparent. Firstly, the strategy itself. Despite being relatively new it was already viewed by some, with great suspicion and simply seen as spying on certain communities, groups and faiths; unfortunately, accusations it rarely escapes, even to this day. Working strategies at the time often labelled offenders as misfits or mentally ill. As today, when we struggle to understand such socially abhorrent behaviour, we default to the time-honoured explanation of social

deprivation or societal disenfranchisement. Whilst some offenders were undoubtedly mentally unwell, we struggled to accept the truth that the majority were not ill or from disadvantaged backgrounds, on the contrary, they were more likely to be well educated and came from some of the most unlikely backgrounds. Within a year, we would witness the 2007 attack on a London nightclub that finally culminated in a spectacular attack at Glasgow airport. The attackers were a Doctor and a PhD student. A theme that would recur time after time.

Secondly, and largely because of how the strategy was viewed, the partnership structures designed to deliver it were weak and poorly resourced. Importantly, the strategy called for a regional response, pulling together the efforts of not only the West Midlands but Staffordshire, Warwickshire and West Mercia. Initially, most forces simply had a liaison officer with little real influence over operational delivery. In addition, given the sensitivities, there was a general reluctance to accept the problem, often simply preferring to suggest the issues were harmless individuals or community grievances that could be resolved with a visit from the local neighbourhood officer. I learned very quickly that if the threats were to be taken seriously and tackled effectively, there had to be a strong partnership commitment to resolving what were naturally difficult and at times contentious issues. Without the necessary robust 'top cover,' when the inevitable conflicts arose, the partnerships quickly fractured as individual resolve and commitment weakened. We should also remember, our early responses were based on a very poor understanding of the threats and for some time, the concept of the 'enemy within' was both difficult to understand and accept. Whilst not suggesting the police were any better equipped or placed to deal with the emerging threat than the other partners; given such critical community safety threats, the police often provide the lead for others to follow. Thankfully, the head of the unit at this time was an extremely charismatic and influential figure who organised numerous briefings of the regions senior police leaders and within a relatively short period, most had identified members of their strategic leadership teams as Prevent leads. Other agencies quickly followed and although there are always understandable tensions and challenges when managing such large partnerships, the commitment and delivery of the strategy was significantly improved.

The third and perhaps most important challenge concerned community tensions which existed during the summer of 2005, particularly in Birmingham. For some time, we had become increasingly familiar with endless news reports covering blocked streets in early morning terror raids by the police. We should not underestimate the impact of the 7/7 attacks, not simply for the huge loss of life and injuries caused, but importantly, this was the first time we had experienced, on such a scale, 'home grown' terrorists, or what would become seen as the enemy

within. There had been several terror incidents within the UK, or involving UK nationals prior to this including, Richard Reid attempting to bring down a passenger aircraft travelling between Paris and Miami in 2001 with a bomb in his shoe, The Wood Green ricin plot in 2002, Asif Hanif becoming the first British suicide bomber in 2003 when he, with other, attacked a nightclub in Tel Aviv and the 2004 fertilizer bomb plot, 'Operation Crevice' that allegedly planned to attack the Bluewater shopping centre and synagogues in Kent. However, given the media coverage and huge devastation caused, the impact of British nationals hitting at the heart of our nation was profound. People became suspicious of their neighbours and there seemed to be a perceived threat around every corner. Muslim communities were naturally the focus of much of this suspicion. Historic events took on a new and often more sinister interpretation. We should also remember, just two weeks later, a similar but unrelated attack, again on the London underground system would further heighten those fears and concerns. Thankfully, on this occasion the devices failed to detonate. Within a year we would go on to witness an attempt to bring down transatlantic aircraft and an attack on London nightclubs that ended spectacularly at Glasgow Airport. Each time, suspicion and the focus of attention would fall on the same communities.

I know this is rather sensitive but can you provide some details about the West Midlands Counter Terrorism Unit?

In an attempt to tackle the very real challenges, the West Midlands Counter Terrorism Unit would adopt an unusual and innovative approach. For obvious reasons much of the work of the unit was highly sensitive and/or secret. However, the unit would deploy uniformed police officers who would work exclusively in local communities and would be completely honest and candid about who they were and importantly what they were trying to achieve. They would introduce themselves as counter terrorism officers working to the Prevent agenda. They were there to gather information and importantly an understanding of all our communities in order to safeguard the vulnerable from the dangers of radicalisation and protect communities from extremism. The approach proved a great success, not least of all because it made the accusations of spying far more difficult to sustain. Following the subsequent launch of the Channel programme, a process designed to address and tackle radicalisation and extremism, Prevent officers would prove invaluable. The role was not without its challenges and the officers, who were all volunteers, often working alone, delivered the strategy in communities where considerable time and effort was devoted to making and sustaining relationships, sometimes with groups and individuals such as those on the periphery of far right organisations, who held some

particularly abhorrent views and it was at times, not only challenging but a threat to personal safety. The work of these officers enabled us to gather a rich and detailed picture of our communities, their threats and fears and importantly opportunities for intervention and where necessary direct challenge.

The strategy seeks to tackle the threat of extremism in the UK with two broad approaches. Firstly, to raise awareness in the general population in order to encourage people to look for signs and clues and secondly to offer specific and bespoke help and support to those who intentionally or inadvertently become involved. Although delivered locally, the strategy is led, coordinated and financed centrally. The Home Office govern much of the Prevent delivery. That central control has both significantly enhanced and significantly hindered its delivery over time. The provision of regular informative updates and guidance has been particularly helpful, and I believe the Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent or WRAP programme with its multi-discipline application was singularly the most effective and impactful initiative practitioners were given. A measure of which is it's continued current use, some years after it was formally withdrawn. I also believe the Channel programme, a multi-agency safeguarding process dedicated to providing support to individuals in danger of being radicalised or otherwise being encouraged into extremism has been, and continues to be hugely successful and has undoubtedly saved many lives. However, that central control, particularly around finance has proved challenging to those tasked with delivering the strategy. A common mantra around terrorism is, 'we cannot arrest our way out of this problem' and eventually it's local communities who will defeat the threat. Working closely with local communities I was greatly encouraged to discover numerous local groups and organisations who were both ideally placed and motivated to help. Unfortunately, we were unable to financially support them, the Home Office preferring to fund a small number of national products. I had no criticism of the products themselves, they simply had little credibility or relevance to the local threats. From my experience, without doubt the most successful interventions were not the sophisticated deradicalization programmes but simply encouraging participation in local organised youth or sporting activities that achieved two main aims, firstly to break the control and influence of the radicaliser, there was almost certainly always one, and secondly provide those natural peer interactions, discussions and relationships that allow alternative narratives to be heard. By the time I retired from the Police service in 2012 there was an extensive and well-established network of police and other agencies working to deliver the Prevent strategy.”

In 2010, a new coalition government led by the Conservative party leader, David Cameron, was formed. How did that impact on the country's counter-terrorism strategy? How different, if any, was Cameron's approach to that of his predecessor?

David Cameron lost little time in setting out a new approach to tackling terrorism and importantly identifying what he saw as the cause, the failure of 'state multiculturalism.' He was not alone; in October of that year the German Chancellor Angela Merkel described multiculturalism in Germany as having 'utterly failed.' David Cameron used the 47th Munich Security Conference 2011 to make precisely the same claim of failed multiculturalism for our perceived inability to tackle the threat, particularly the 'home grown' threat of violent extremism. Within the speech he described a 'sick world view' that encourages intolerant ideas in which extremism flourishes. He went on to suggest this creates a climate of 'hands-off passive tolerance'. Not only had multiculturalism failed but he felt it actually encouraged segregation. He made it clear, by taking a tough stance against those groups promoting Islamist extremism and by greater scrutiny of those Muslim groups who take public money but do little to tackle extremism, we could create a sense of 'shared national identity. It was a populist view that gathered significant support. The fact that it coincided with one of the largest EDL rallies in the UK was not lost on some commentators. Following on from this speech, we would see the promotion of British Values, particularly in schools. Muscular liberalism would significantly change the delivery of Prevent. What had formerly been largely a supportive process was now one that also sought to call out and challenge those individuals and groups that had been described by the prime minister. From my experience much of the network struggled with this. I tried on numerous occasions, but the inevitable conflict created problems that some partners were not willing or able to overcome. I finally resorted to robustly supporting organisations, mainly schools who bravely made a stand. I was particularly impressed with the tough stance taken by some schools in challenging inappropriate behaviour, from stamping out homophobic bullying to tackling some self-appointed religious enforcers. There were also some community successes, particularly in Birmingham where some local, determined individuals within those communities particularly effected, had a significant disruptive impact on what were seen at the time as 'preachers of hate.' There are numerous examples of this but perhaps the most notable was the community response to public addresses made by Anjem Choudary. Choudary, was an extremely well known and outspoken figure. He was the co-founder of an organisation called Al-Muhjiroun and was a spokesperson for another organisation Islam4UK until it was proscribed. He was largely denounced by mainstream Muslim groups. He would later be convicted for inciting support for a proscribed organisation."

In 2015, having left the CTU, you took on the role of Prevent Coordinator for Walsall Council in the West Midlands. What was the rationale behind the government's decision to expand the network of Prevent Coordinators and what did you learn from this role?

Unfortunately, despite the new approach and everyone's best efforts, the threat of terrorism continued to develop and, in an attempt, to tackle the issues in 2015, the government extended its network of local Prevent Coordinators. This role was crucial in pulling local groups and activity together, reinforcing the belief that it's local communities who defeat terrorism. I was extremely pleased and privileged to be asked to take up the role in Walsall in the West Midlands. Coordinators were also appointed, or were already in place, in Birmingham, Coventry, Sandwell and Dudley. I had worked extensively as a police officer at various ranks in the town and I knew the area and the people well. The latest development to the network was designed to focus the resource in those areas that unfortunately had the greatest risk. Although the means of assessing this was far from perfect, there was no getting away from the fact that Walsall had been the focus of some worrying activity over the preceding years and had seen a higher number of arrests for terror related activity than its neighbouring towns. Just 12 months earlier, regrettably two young men from the town had lost their lives on Syrian battlefields. Having said this, Walsall was not unique, and the issues that conspired to create the problems there, were common to most towns and cities in the West Midlands and for that matter nationally. Walsall has areas of considerable wealth, particularly where the borough borders Birmingham. In the south it's similar to its neighbours, Wolverhampton and Sandwell. The north of the area has a long history associated with the Staffordshire mining and other heavy industries and consists of predominately white working-class towns that, given the demise of the mining and other industries, suffer significant levels of unemployment and deprivation. In contrast the south of the borough has a very diverse mix of communities with one of the highest Muslim populations outside Birmingham and significant other, largely Eastern European communities. In 2017, a school in the south claimed to have over 50 languages spoken by its children. From my previous experience as a police officer within the area I was aware that far right and extreme far right groups had a history in some of these towns and as a result of national or local events their activities again began to surface. At the height of the English Defence League's popularity, a significant amount of the midland's events would take place in Walsall and some of the later arrests for far-right activity would again focus on the town or have links to it. Unfortunately, some of this activity would play out in education settings. For this reason, most Prevent initiatives would focus largely around school, colleges and universities.

There have been several acts of parliament attempting to deal with the various threats posed by terrorism. Of particular importance to the Prevent strategy is the Counter Terrorism and Securities Act 2015. Part 5 of the act outlines what is commonly referred to as ‘The Prevent Duty.’ This is the first time that a legal obligation is placed on; “*specified authorities, in the exercise of their functions, to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.*” Nowhere has this obligation been more impactful than in schools. It is worth a moment of reflection to properly understand and appreciate both the challenges some schools face and precisely what’s being asked of them. Thankfully, most will only ever have the dilemma of how they deliver the sometimes controversial ‘British Values’ requirement. But some will deal with far more. The open expression of extremist narratives, in school religious conversions, assaults on female students who are not seen to be sufficiently conservative in their dress, verbal and physical abuse of students who simply choose to express more religiously devote opinions, openly wearing clothing and insignia of prescribed and far right organisations and on occasions, a worrying fascination with the various shootings in American high schools and much more. Against this backdrop, most teachers, particularly in the West Midlands are well aware of the accusations around what has become known as the ‘Trojan Horse’ incidents and the fact that two subsequent enquiries reached different conclusions and importantly, in 2016, at their national conference, teachers voted overwhelmingly to reject the governments Prevent strategy, claiming it leads to, “suspicion in the classroom and confusion in the staffroom.” Given this context, the role of coordinator was to prove important, not only in raising awareness but also in playing a part in facilitating a more holistic approach to critical challenges. Previously, that approach was largely a policing response. However, this was not always the best outcome for the small but significant proportion of those suffering mental illness, or acting out of abject fear. Given the increasing operational demands being made on the police and their continually diminishing resources, better collaboration between the partners, particularly with regard to the use of the Channel process, produced far better outcomes with dramatically reduced police involvement. I must stress, none of these outcomes would have been possible without the hard work and commitment of the partner agencies, particularly the local authority and specifically children’s and adult services. I found their commitment and dedication to safeguarding the young and vulnerable, sometimes in extremely challenging circumstances, simply outstanding. The health service, education establishments and local community groups all working quietly in the background made Walsall a beacon of best practice and I wasn’t surprised when the many reviewers of the strategy looked to the town when assessing its positive impacts.

The West Midlands region has experienced the last few years a significant rise of far-right extremism. Walsall, where you took up a role as a Prevent Coordinator for the City council after you left the CTU, is a particular case in point.

Although we are hopefully moving in the right direction, a substantial threat remains. Nowhere is that threat more evident than the increasing prominence of the far right. In my dealings with this threat, essentially around schools where there is generally far more willingness to identify and challenge the issues, than that associated with the Islamist threat, two issues quickly became apparent. Firstly, the temptation to simply include it as another form of radicalisation, when its causes, drivers and manifestations are very different from other, largely religious based threats, and secondly, linked to the first point, a significant lack of understanding around the problems. Distinctions are made between the far right and the extreme far right, yet there are numerous organisations and groups that fit neither description. The historic issues faced in towns like Walsall find their genesis in organisations such as the British National Party, whereas most of the activity seen today is probably more inclined to be associated with the various 'Defence' leagues. They take on many forms, either national groups or local affiliations. They often brand themselves as 'Patriot' groups. They generally have a short history and unfortunately almost always align themselves to football clubs, usually lower league teams who don't have the more organised antiracist or 'kick it out' campaigns. More worryingly some turn to the more recent, Britain First or National Action groups and surprisingly a small number demonstrate an obsession with American High School shootings. In an attempt to better understand the threats, I sought expert advice from several academics, which led to the production of an interactive resource that was shared, mainly with schools to help staff understand the various groups, spot the signs and importantly help with interventions and support. I am aware, the resource is still used today. It proved particularly important since, at the start of the defence league activity it was almost exclusively parades and marches with allegiances openly demonstrated via tee-shirts and insignia. Over time these would grow and attract the attention of antifascist groups and often then result in violence. Within a short while the marches and displays of associated insignia stopped, as they realised the far greater impact they could have online. The propaganda and recruitment are now far more subtle and sophisticated and this resource became a valuable tool in spotting signs and clues. If we are to continue to address this continually changing threat the strategy also needs to be flexible enough to change and adapt to counter it. The strength of many of these groups lies in their secrecy and building networks of small local affiliations of likeminded individuals, that have a natural suspicion of others trying to join. Whilst these localised secretive networks are strength, they also create vulnerabilities for carefully thought

through interventions. Contrary to the Islamic terror threat where there is undoubtedly some local support, most take their guidance, encouragement and motivation from abroad. For this reason, and from my experience, carefully thought through, holistic local interventions are far more impactful against the far right threat. We should not underestimate the serious threat posed by these groups and our vulnerabilities, given our serious lack of knowledge and intelligence around them.

I have known you for a number of years, you have contributed to some of my academic projects, you have given keynote speeches to conferences I have organised, you have even taught some of my students. How important do you think academic research is in helping to deal with terrorism and politically motivated violence?

“As the strategy has developed, one critical area that has largely been neglected and at times simply ignored, is the commissioning and use of academic research. Over the last fifteen years there has been and continues to be a wealth of peer reviewed studies, some having had unprecedented access to the most sensitive information and data, that despite the sharing and showcasing of results has had little impact on practical delivery. Some of this research fundamentally challenges our preconceived ideas of the threat and particularly how we assess risk. Given the dire consequences of getting it wrong, the process of risk assessment must be a primary concern. Many of the organisations I’ve helped to prepare assessments and plans, as a requirement of the 2015 Act, consistently remain committed to the familiar ‘slips, trips and falls’ health and safety formula that uses severity of injury as one of the components. Wholly inappropriate when assessing the risk of extremism. Similarly, previous assessments focused rightly on ‘capability to harm’ as a component, but as the sophistication and complexity has moved from IED’s to the use of knives and vehicles, capability becomes far more difficult to assess and importantly, far less important in the calculation. Recent research suggests we should now concern ourselves almost exclusively with measures of psychological preparation and fixation, concepts that, to the trained eye are far easier to spot. We also have our own fixation with mental illness as a constant contributing factor and research does suggest a higher frequency of mental illness amongst those who choose violence. However, the highest estimate I’ve seen is around 30%, which means 70% of attackers do not suffer or demonstrate mental illness. When considering potential interventions this distinction is crucial. Some research, particularly around the far right threat suggests there are distinct personality types, categorising them as either ‘schizoid’ and ‘Narcissistic’. The former requiring almost continuous support and encouragement to act while the later doesn’t. Again, presenting opportunities to identify victims and intervene.

There is currently understandable concern around the dangers posed by returning foreign fighters, especially when we know plots that include them have a far greater likelihood of success and are more likely to cause loss of life. However, there is research to suggest the dangers of returnees' may not be as great as feared, and importantly those that do return offer far greater intelligence and preventative opportunities. There are interesting developments around the importance of grievance, sexual identity, social skills and what are described as 'safe spaces', again more prevalent in the far right threat. Sadly, in my experience, as good as I feel Channel panels are, most are unaware of this research and the opportunities it provides. If we consider the fact, Channel panels and other agencies are tasked with organising and delivering often complex support plans and given the greatly increasing role they will play in managing what are referred to as extended 'subjects of interest', this is an area that needs urgent review. ”

Looking back at Prevent, and the overall trajectory of terrorist violence in the UK since its launch back in 2003, do you think it has been a success or a failure?

The problem, as with all preventative initiatives, is no one will ever know how successful it's been, since we will never know what has been prevented. From my own experience, I am convinced, without countless interventions over many years, significantly more lives would undoubtedly have been lost. There have certainly been mistakes made in its delivery and it would be significantly more effective if local delivery was better financed. Whilst David Cameron's muscular liberalism had some limited success, it was a bridge too far for most. However, if we are to continue to suppress, disrupt and ultimately prevent future atrocities and of course if we hope to 'discourage and dissuade' individuals, we must do more than simply raise awareness. None of this works without strong and committed strategic partnerships and managing and maintaining these can be a huge undertaking. Professionals in a large variety of settings are now well versed in their responsibilities under the Prevent Duty around spotting 'signs' and making the necessary referrals, however, despite extensive training, most remain confused about precisely what they are being asked to 'spot' and even fewer have the courage and confidence to 'put their head above the parapet.' As we have slowly and rightly moved away from those concepts, we previously placed great faith in, such as constantly searching for evidence of grievance or expressions of extreme views, we need to move away from simply identifying vulnerabilities and encourage the search for the much more concerning evidence of exploitation of those vulnerabilities. At the same time, the strategy, sadly, has largely failed to recognise the findings of numerous research projects including several carried out by CTU's in conjunction with academics. Such collaborations provide unprecedented access to sensitive data and

therefore we have a unique opportunity to learn and crucially test and challenge those theories and beliefs we base our activities on.”

As we look to the future, do you still think Prevent is still the right way forward and does it realistically relate to the current level of the threat?

“Most of us are blissfully unaware of the threat, since prevented and disrupted activity is hardly ever reported. However, we are occasionally allowed rare glimpses of the scale of the challenge. In June 2017, following the horrendous terror attacks in London and Manchester over a three-month period, in a speech by the then Prime Minister Theresa May, she confirmed that in addition to these attacks, during the same period, a further five credible plots had also been disrupted. In May of that year the security services reported they were ‘juggling’ 500 investigations into more than 3,000 individuals with a further 23,000 ‘subjects of interest’ in communities the width and breadth of the UK. The numbers speak for themselves, don’t they?. There certainly remains a need for a robust and effective preventative strategy.
