

Is there a 'light' and 'dark' side to British counterterrorism?

John Bahadur Lamb considers a long running theme in the history of dealing with terrorism

Great Britain has a long and varied experience of dealing with terrorism, spanning some 400 years from the time of Guy Fawkes. This experience ranges from dealing with small anarchist groups in the 1800s, full counter-insurgency campaigns fought during the withdrawal from Empire in the 1940s and 1950s and the long running efforts to stop violence associated with Northern Ireland. Such a varied nature of threats means that the British response has been continually adapted at policy, legislative and policing levels. Despite this adaptation and change, there seems to be a constant theme running throughout the history of British counterterrorism.

This theme is duplicity in how counterterrorism is presented to the public. It seems that, since at least the 1800s, British counterterrorism has had a carefully managed public face or 'light side' and a secretive, hidden 'dark side'.

Far from being incompatible opposites these two sides are inherently linked and mutually reinforcing.

Public light, hidden dark

In the mid-1800s a series of bombings, aimed at gaining independence for Ireland, erupted

across London and caused the first counterterrorism body to be formed. Special Irish Branch, as it was then called, differed substantially from the normal police inasmuch that its officers worked out of uniform, sought to infiltrate groups deemed to be subversive and made use of informants (Porter, 1987). However, such methods were deeply unpopular with the Victorian public as they were seen to be too restrictive of the liberty of citizens. Thus the use of such measures by the Special Irish Branch was kept hidden behind a veil of secrecy. This early counterterrorism was further obscured from public view by the deployment of uniformed, armed members of the Royal Irish Constabulary. Used as static guards

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across the capital, these officers were explicitly described as being the response to the Fenian bombing campaign (Allason, 1987). Thus the Royal Irish Constabulary guards in London can be seen as the 'light' side of Victorian counterterrorism. As a highly visible, uniformed presence they provided a publicly acceptable facade behind which the 'dark' side of counterterrorism, the Special Irish Branch, could continue to operate.

This obfuscation of publicly unpalatable methods behind a

publicly acceptable facade continued during the withdrawal from Empire in the 1940s and 1950s.

During this time many of what are now called counter-insurgency wars erupted as those governed under the empire sought independence (Mockaitis, 1995). These wars gave birth to what is arguably the most well known counterterrorism tactic, the attempt to win the 'hearts-and-minds' of a population. Developed during and made famous by the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), the key idea of winning 'hearts-and-minds' is fairly simple. 'Hearts-and-minds' requires the addressing of low level grievances in order to undermine popular support for the terrorists. In Malaya, this undermining of support for the terrorists was achieved through the distributing of food and provision of health care to local populations. Such efforts were depicted by both the colonial administration and parliament at Westminster as a less coercive response to the terrorists than a traditional war fighting model. However, it seems that the 'hearts-and-minds' methods utilised in Malaya were, like the use of the Royal Irish Constabulary above, a facade behind which publicly unacceptable counterterrorism methods were used. In contrast to the 'light' counterterrorism pursued through 'hearts-and-minds', was the 'dark' counterterrorism of forced resettlements, arson against terrorist homes and villages and detention without trial for up to two years of suspected terrorists (Dixon, 2009). The use of such 'dark' counterterrorism tactics was made easier by the distance of Malaya from Britain and the lack of media coverage, but the widespread use of such measures set a precedent for counterterrorism which continued through the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland

During the British Army's deployment in Northern Ireland counterterrorism became a tripartite business, with the Royal Ulster Constabulary, MI5 and Army Intelligence all working together. Due to the high level of

media scrutiny surrounding the conflict many of the measures which the army had used in Malaya became unsuitable. In Northern Ireland the public image of counterterrorism was maintained by regular army patrols and police checkpoints. This provided a visible, if not always publicly acceptable, form of counterterrorism which served as both a show of force and as a means of disrupting the opponents.

Yet, most of the development of counterterrorism in Northern Ireland took place on the 'dark' side. Due to negative public responses to acts such as internment, which was the wholesale detention of suspects without trial, MI5 and the army developed an intelligence driven counterterrorism model. Using a mixture of technology to eavesdrop, informers and covert surveillance, MI5 and the army built fairly comprehensive pictures of the combatant structures on both sides of the loyalist/nationalist divide (Taylor, 2002).

Such secretive measures clearly developed the 'dark' side of counterterrorism but, potentially (also due to the intelligence often being inadmissible in court), caused the 'dark' side to become more coercive than it previously had been. For example, the shooting of three Provisional Irish Republican Army members in Gibraltar by the Special Air Service in 1988 is just one of many instances which led to the belief that a 'shoot-to-kill' policy had been adopted. Whilst it is impossible to determine whether such a policy existed, due to the Stalker/Sampson inquiry into it never having been made public, the nature of 'dark' counterterrorism makes it for many a distinct possibility.

Today

This use of a secretive, 'dark' counterterrorism and a publicly visible, 'light' counterterrorism continues today. With the introduction of the CONTEST strategy in 2003 these approaches were officially described for the first time. Under the original CONTEST and the subsequent developments of it in 2006, 2009 and 2011 four work streams were outlined, which can be seen as fitting the pattern identified above. 'Pursue', 'Protect', 'Prepare' and 'Prevent', as they are known, each detail a separate section of the strategy and are implemented with differing levels of public

visibility. Due to 'Prevent' being aimed at community engagement and partnership it can be considered the most visible of the streams. 'Prevent' officers wear uniform and announce their counterterrorism role to the communities they interact with. Second in terms of visibility is the 'Prepare' stream, which details how emergency services should respond to terrorist instances and other emergencies. The high level of co-ordination required between agencies and the generic nature of the preparation dictates that 'Prepare' is visible. As such 'Prepare' and 'Prevent' could be conceptualised as being the 'light' counterterrorism, whilst 'Pursue' and 'Protect', which detail respectively how to catch terrorists and measure to protect critical infrastructure, could be conceptualised as potentially 'dark'. 'Pursue' almost certainly falls on the 'dark' side of counterterrorism as it requires close co-operation between the police and the intelligence services (Home Office, 2011). Whilst 'Protect' has

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published guidelines for the design of public spaces, the actual steps taken to secure critical infrastructure and landmarks are kept secret so as to not provide terrorists with a list of where Britain is vulnerable to attack (ibid).

To close, whilst the need for operational secrecy, to protect officers and ongoing investigations is understood, the existence of secret or 'dark' counterterrorism potentially provides space within which rule breaking and unethical behaviour can occur. Also, the apparent trend of visible and secret British counterterrorism being interdependent suggests that government utilises the 'light' counterterrorism as a screen behind which 'dark' counterterrorism can occur. This has serious repercussions for accountability and public oversight as actions which are hidden, by their very nature, cannot be democratically debated and decided upon. ■

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