Blurred Lines and False Dichotomies: Integrating counterinsurgency into the UK's domestic 'war on terror'

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Abstract

The UK's counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) seeks to pursue individuals involved in suspected terrorism ('Pursue') and seeks to minimise the risk of people becoming 'future' terrorists by employing policies and practices structured to pre-emptively incapacitate and socially exclude them ('Prevent'). This article demonstrates that this two-pronged approach is based on a framework of counterinsurgency; a military doctrine used against non-state actors that encourages, amongst other things, the blanket surveillance of populations and the targeting of propaganda at them. The use of counterinsurgency theory and practice in the UK's 'war on terror' blurs the distinction between Pursue and Prevent, coercion and consent, and, ultimately, civilian and combatant. This challenges the liberal claim that counter-terrorism policies, especially Prevent, are about social inclusivity or 'safeguarding' and that the UK government is accountable to the people.

Key words

counterinsurgency, counter-terrorism, Prevent, Pursue, strategic communication, surveillance

Introduction

The UK's official counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) is divided into four policy strands – *Pursue, Prevent, Protect* and *Prepare*. The two last strands are premised on increasing the resilience of the UK through enhanced protective security measures (Protect) and working towards mitigating the effects of a terrorist attack, lest it cannot be thwarted (Prepare) (HM Government, 2009, 2011b). Pursue is concerned with subjecting suspected terrorists at home and abroad to military, policing, intelligence, and judicial measures. Prevent is the strand that deals with countering the ideology and grievances propagated by terrorists and their alleged supporters through counter-propaganda or 'hearts and minds' activity (HM Government, 2009, 2011b).

When Prevent was publicly introduced in 2007, the focus was largely on targeting 'violent' extremist ideology but since 2010, the programme has been widened to include 'non-violent extremism' on the basis that it is 'part of a terrorist ideology' (HM Government, 2011a: 6). Individuals who propagate a 'terrorist ideology' or 'non-violent extremism' are claimed to act in a manner that reinforces and legitimises terrorism. They are 'the pool in which terrorists will swim', claims Charles Farr, the Head of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, and thus enable terrorists to 'operate with a degree of impunity' (House of Commons, 2009: Evidence 29). 'Draining' this pool is what Prevent seeks to do in three ways: by dis- rupting individuals believed to propagate violent and non-violent extrem- ism, by promoting a mainstream or 'moderate' form of Islam to act as a bulwark against 'extremist' Islam, and by challenging those individuals who have internalised, or are likely to internalise, extremist ideology via the Channel 'de-radicalisation' programme. In order to ensure this triangu- lar approach is fruitful, Prevent has two 'enabling' objectives – to collect and develop intelligence, and to craft and improve 'strategic communica- tion' (HM Government, 2009: 14). The integration of these two practices into the Prevent programme, as this article will demonstrate, suggests that the dichotomy between Pursue and Prevent is false. This is because sur- veillance has long been recognised to be a part of a coercive infrastructure used to socially control individuals and communities because of the 'pan- opticon' and 'disciplinary' effect it gives rise to (Foucault, 1977). This is why 'information-gathering and espionage organisations [are] added to the [state's] investment in the means of violence' (Wrong, 1979: 43–44). The same logic applies to 'strategic communication' too; a propaganda practice that aims to communicate messages not only through words and images but through 'aggressive' and 'manipulative' action for the purpose of induc- ing behavioural change (Ministry of Defence, 2009: 6–5). Since strategic communication is undertaken through Prevent, and since this communica- tive practice relies on 'aggressive' and 'manipulative' methods, this article

argues that a coercive underbelly to Prevent is revealed as well as a direct connection with counterinsurgency theory and doctrine.

Counterinsurgency-infused counter-terrorism practices are being increasingly used in a domestic setting largely because political Islamic groups such as al-Qaida are claimed to comprise a global jihadist insurgency that threatens Western nation-states and their interests at home and abroad (Mockaitis, 2003; Cassidy, 2008; Mackinlay, 2008; Kilcullen, 2010). Those who view al-Qaida (and more recently the Islamic State group) in such a way contend that the group brings together a set of 'loosely allied insurgents and terrorist groups' who operate across the globe, in various different theatres and arenas under their respective banner but employ tactics and methods that are tailored to a specific environment (Kilcullen, 2010: 198–199, 190; 2007a). The 'global jihad', writes the influential counterinsurgency soldier and theorist David Kilcullen, represents 'a federated virtual state' and even though al-Qaida 'controls no territory or population, [it] exercises control … that … represent[s] many elements of traditional state power'; though it is a type of '*pseudo*-state' (2010: 200). In countering this pseudo-state, counter-terrorism techniques, though important, are limited in what they can achieve (Kilcullen, 2010: 190). This is because counter-terrorism is largely understood to be a 'kinetic' (i.e., violent) affair whereas counterinsurgency seeks to disrupt and undermine the strategy and support of the insurgency by winning over the acquiescence of the population by employing both violent and non-violent instruments of state power – civil, political, and military (Mackinlay, 2008: 6). Because of this all-encompassing approach, especially the focus on non-violent or 'non-kinetic' activities, using a counterinsurgency framework to deal with political Islamic groups is increasingly being supported by some military practitioners, government officials, and counter-extremism think tanks too (Mackinlay, 2008; Miliband, 2009; Kilcullen, 2010; Benotman et al., 2013; Quilliam Foundation, 2016).

With non-violent activity going to the core of counterinsurgency doctrine and counter-terrorism debates in the UK largely focusing on Prevent, it is possible to view such techniques, especially 'de-radicalisation', as an extension of social welfare policies that aim to reform lawbreakers, insurgents, and terrorists into positive and productive members of society. Since the 1970s, however, criminal justice policies have, in the name of reform and support, largely been framed around trying to pre-emptively incapacitate and exclude lawbreakers (Garland, 2001; Moore, 2014), especially suspected insurgents and potential terrorists (Hocking, 1988, 1993; Miller and Sabir, 2012). Current counter-terrorism policy and practice is no different. Indeed, exceptional counter-terrorism laws that have pre-emptive incapacitation and social exclusion at their core form a critical part of contemporary counter-terrorism policy and practice; suggesting a securitisation of social policy (see Ragazzi, this issue). Take 'Terrorism Prevention Investigative Measures' (formerly known

as 'Control Orders'), for instance. The purpose of this measure is to pre-emptively incapacitate suspected terrorists on the basis of 'secret' intelligence before they have committed an alleged crime by subjecting them to a form of 'house-arrest'. This measure seems less about reform and inclusivity and more about punishment and exclusion. Similarly, a number of contemporary terrorism offences such as Section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000 have been introduced to criminalise the possession of documentation without due regard for the purpose or intent of the possession. The purpose here is to disrupt and incapacitate individuals who are simply in possession of information deemed useful to terrorists, irrespective of whether they intend to use the information for terrorism. Exclusion, risk-minimisation, and punishment, in other words, seem to be the objective of counter-terrorism; not social inclusion and reform. The same logic applies to Prevent too, where surveilling 'potential' or 'future' terrorists in order to subject them to Channel 'de-radicalisation', *in practice*, leads to a sense of exclusion and isolation; not a sense of inclusivity or belonging. Such exclusionary practices have a highly racialised component to them, and even though they may be seen as a departure from the assimilationist social policies of the 1970s towards what Gail Lewis (2000: 276–277) calls a 'cultural pluralist' approach that generates an impression of an 'inclusive multicultural society', *in practice*, they dictate the governance of 'others' based upon essentialised understandings of race, gender, and ethnicity. In counter-terrorism policies such as Prevent, we can see a continuation of such racialisation processes at play in the governance of the Muslim 'other' (see Ragazzi, this issue). At the same time, we see the institutionalisation of a policy that claims to be about social inclusion and 'safeguarding' but is, in practice, disciplining, excluding, and preventing individuals from articulating a distinctive Muslim agency and identity (Sayyid, 2010: 15).

The introduction of counter-terrorism policies based on an essentialist understanding of the Muslim 'other', this article argues, has permitted surveillance and propaganda to be targeted at Muslim communities in the UK in a blanket fashion, especially those Muslims who think and speak through, what Sayyid terms, 'the language of Islam' (2015: 17). Such methods and practices, I argue, not only blur the line between Pursue and Prevent or coercion and consent but ultimately fail to distinguish between civilians and combatants. In order to showcase how this blurring has happened, this article is split into four sections. The first section explains how counterinsurgency came into existence in the colonies and how this doctrine is a continuation of colonial warfare on the 'home-front'. The purpose of opening the article with this backdrop is to ensure the reader recognises how contemporary counter-terrorism policy and practice rather than being 'new' or 'unique' is in fact a continuation of historic practices and methods used to maintain social control against the racialised 'other' in the colonies. The second section employs a Gramscian framework to theoretically analyse the relationship between

coercion and consent. Such a framework will help reveal how the false dichotomy between Prevent and Pursue exists and operates in practice. The third and fourth sections demonstrate how these blurred boundaries exist and operate in practice by empirically examining two coercive practices undertaken through Prevent – surveillance and propaganda (termed 'strategic communication' in policy parlance). The article argues that the use of a counterinsurgency-infused counter-terrorism framework that targets surveillance and propaganda at Muslim communities en masse challenges the liberal claim that counter-terrorism policy is about social inclusivity and 'safeguarding', or that the government is accountable to the people.

Counterinsurgency and colonial warfare

Counterinsurgency is a form of low-intensity warfare that revolves around a set of unconventional military tactics and techniques used against armed non-state actors. It was first used by Western states to suppress the armed anti-colonial guerrilla movements ('insurgency') that emerged in the late 19th and early-mid 20th centuries. It was in colonial India around the mid 1800s that the UK first began using methods of repression and social control against indigenous communities fighting to liberate their homeland from imperialism and colonialism by using low-level 'hit and run' military tactics. These measures not only would go on to be applied to other UK colonies such as Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland but would eventually set the tone for contemporary counterinsurgency theory and practice too. The justification for using exceptional and highly militarised methods of social control and discipline in the colonies was based on an Orientalist discourse that constructed the non-European world to be inferior and prone to barbarism and was therefore in need of 'civilising' (Said, 1978). The UK's use of counterinsurgency in Northern Ireland during 'the Troubles' was in this sense quite unique since it was the first time that highly coercive techniques that had been reserved for racialised 'others' located on the periphery were now being applied to opponents within the metropole. At the same time, methods of surveillance and social control that had been mastered in the North of Ireland were slowly being integrated into everyday policing and criminal justice policies in the rest of the UK too. The main targets here would become dissidents and activists, trade unionists as well as those claimed to be 'subversives' allegedly conspiring with the Kremlin to overthrow parliamentary democracy (Schlesinger, 1978; Bunyan, 1980, 1981; Hain, 1986; Hocking, 1988, 1993; Milne, 2004; Whyte and Poynting, 2012). The use of highly coercive counterinsurgency methods and strategies in a domestic UK setting is therefore neither new nor without historical precedent (Spjut, 1978). What is new, however, is the manner in which UK counterinsurgency doctrine since

the mid 1960s has combined two 'models' of countering insurgency in order to fulfil its goal of maintaining power, disciplining particular communities, and socially controlling populations more broadly.

The first model, often termed the 'enemy-centric' approach, seeks to employ direct violence against the insurgency as a way of weakening and destroying it. The 'population-centric' model, on the other hand, contends that whilst employment of exceptional but limited levels of violence should be used against the insurgency, it is vital for the counterinsurgent to focus on providing security, governance, and jobs for the population as a way of securing their acquiescence and slowly working towards weakening and eventually destroying the insurgency (Chin, 2015: 97; Kilcullen, 2007c). From the 1960s until the present day, UK counterinsurgency doctrine has combined both models and focused on:

- Integrating civilian and military power more closely,
- Using limited but exceptional levels of force against suspected insurgents,
- Strengthening surveillance and intelligence networks and capacities,
- Using legal powers to pre-emptively incapacitate suspected insurgents ('lawfare'), and
- Directing propaganda at the population from which the insurgent stems through so-called 'hearts and minds' activity (Ministry of Defence, 1969a, 1969b, 1970, 1995, 2001, 2009).

What is evident from the combined models here is the synergy between violence and non-violence, or put another way, between 'hard-power' and 'soft-power'. 'Hard-power' is used here to mean force and violence that seeks to restrict the freedom of a social agent through confinement, injury, and/or the destruction of life itself (Wrong, 1979: 24). In a counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism context, the use of hard-power would constitute actions such as stop and search, arrest, detention, imprisonment, shootings, bombings, assassinations and so forth. 'Soft-power' is used to mean non-violent action that seeks to influence a social agent and make them change their behaviour. In a counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism context, the use of soft-power would typically involve the use of financial reward and inducements, developing a rapport with people/populations in order to develop intelligence, and the crafting and dissemination of propaganda or 'strategic communication'. What is worth emphasising is that even though soft-power may be non-violent, it can still be highly coercive and therefore, in practice, create the same outcome or effect as an act of violence. Exactly how both forms of power are combined in order to fulfil state objectives, discipline groups, and socially control populations can be better understood by drawing on Antonio Gramsci's (1971) seminal work on hegemony. Such a framework is

especially helpful in theoretically understanding the false dichotomy between coercion and consent, and ultimately, Prevent and Pursue.

Coercion, consent, and counterinsurgency

The government or executive (what Gramsci calls 'political society') maintains hegemony in two separate but intricately connected ways. The first is by having the capacity to employ violence and the second is through the manufacturing of consent through civil society (Buttigieg, 1995). State violence, it is important to emphasise, can be legitimately employed against one's own population but is rarely used by advanced capitalist nations such as the UK, especially on a large scale. This is because violence is almost always experienced by the recipient 'in alienating ways' and 'arouses feelings of hostility and acts of resistance' (Scott, 2001: 14). Indeed, even Gramsci himself recognised that violence was 'worse than ineffectual because [it was] conducive to reaction' (Buttigieg, 1995: 13–14). Whilst violence therefore has an ability to generate some level of obedience or compliance, it cannot generate consent, and certainly not in a way that grants the state widespread legitimacy. People who do not consent to a system of power, in other words, are not necessarily 'falsely conscious' and acting in a way that goes against their interests because they are duped. Rather, they may be being prudent and strategic out of fear of the consequences of non-compliance (Scott, 1990: 82–83). However, fear is not the only way through which states exercise their power. While compliance requires the internalisation of coercion to some degree, consent does not. Consent requires individuals to agree with a particular course of action. The way they come to agree or give consent to a particular course of action is by having their ideas and thoughts influenced by the state. This process of influence takes place by the state's piercing and manufacturing of civil society. Civil society is not therefore an absolute realm of 'freedom' that is separate from the state. Instead, it is the sphere in which consent for a hege- monic system is manufactured and maintained (Buttigieg, 1995: 6–7, 26; Gramsci, 1971: 243). This is not to say that by piercing civil society the gov- ernment becomes a 'puppet-master' that has an ability to control and dictate everything the population does, says or thinks. 'Power's third dimension', observes Lukes, 'is always focused on particular domains of experience and is never, except in fictional dystopias, more than partially effective' (2005: 150). Hegemony can be, and often is, subject to resistance and challenge. The state cannot therefore co-opt or interpellate counter-hegemony into its framework through civil society all the time. Instead, what the state does to undermine counter-hegemony is blunt the demands for social and political change. It does this by meeting the needs of the population to some degree, protecting the rights of the working classes, and allowing them some space to

organise and compete for power to varying degrees. It is precisely this type of activity that enables the state to generate a feeling of fairness and, ultimately, consent for its power (Buttigieg, 1995: 12). According to Buttigieg (1995: 12), Gramsci described such a course of action by the state as a sort of 'bour- geois state socialism – i.e., a nonsocialist socialism where even the proletariat did not look too unkindly on the state as government; convinced, rightly or wrongly, that its interests were being looked after'. It is not the sole capacity to use violence that gives the state its power to govern then. It is, instead, the piercing of civil society as well as the providing of social welfare and some political freedom that enable the state to maintain hegemony and be resilient in the face of counter-hegemonic resistance. However, if and when counter-hegemonic resistance threatens the state directly, the state always has the capacity to employ violence. Coercion, in other words, may only have a small role to play in a system of hegemony but it is always present in the back-ground, operating in conjunction with consent. It is neither separate nor too far removed from it. This is what Gramsci meant when he said 'hegemony is protected through the armour of coercion' (1971: 263). To talk of there being a difference between coercion and consent (or Pursue and Prevent) then is not only to misunderstand the nature of hegemony but to make something black and white that is fundamentally grey. I will now demonstrate how the grey area between coercion and consent articulates itself in practice by examining surveillance practices undertaken through Prevent.

Back-door surveillance

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the focus for the UK gov-ernment was on detecting, disrupting, and prosecuting suspected terrorists using hard-power or the Pursue policy. The main priority was not therefore on Prevent or 'de-radicalisation'. According to David Omand, the former Director-General of GCHQ and the architect of the CONTEST strategy, the focus was instead on overseas diplomacy, preventing al-Qaida from securing 'safe-havens' and then working towards developing 'counter-narratives' that would 'win back the hearts and minds of young British Muslims' (Omand, 2010: 101). The phrase 'hearts and minds' has become a central theme within the Prevent strategy and is cited in counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency discourse as well as being repeatedly (and alas uncritically) used by a range of (well-meaning) individuals when discussing security issues. But what does the phrase 'hearts and minds' actually mean? The phrase is constructed to mean cooperation and partnership and something that is largely non-threatening and non-coercive. As a practice, however, it is highly coercive. This is because 'hearts and minds' is based on *combining* the use of inducements and rewards as a way of securing the emotional support of social agents (their 'hearts') with

hard-power, including violence and threats of violence, to influence the cognitive faculties of social agents (their 'minds'). Even though the phrase 'may generally indicate a less coercive, conventional approach', observes Dixon (2009a: 378), who examines the multiple meanings and interpretations of 'hearts and minds', the phrase 'disguises the reality of high levels of violence and the alienation of the local population' caused as a result of such activity. The term may have a tendency to be used to describe so-called 'softer-edged' counter-terrorism practices that are claimed to be about persuasion, partnership, friendship and so forth, but in practice, the concept combines these with fear, threats, and coercion as a way of effecting behavioural change. A good example of coercion masquerading as persuasion under Prevent concerns surveillance and intelligence, and as the penultimate section in this article will show, propaganda and 'strategic communication'.

It is well-recognised in counter-terrorism practice and counterinsurgency theory and doctrine that subjecting suspected insurgents and terrorists to military force is dependent upon understanding *who* the insurgent/terrorist is and *where* they may be hiding. 'If it is accepted that the problem of defeating the enemy consists very largely of finding him', writes retired soldier and counterinsurgency theorist Frank Kitson, 'it is easy to recognize the paramount importance of good information' (1971: 95). There are, however, two types of information – background information and contact information. Background information is *overt* and is collected by police and military officers during the course of their duty, and through open-source intelligence (OSINT). Contact intelligence, on the other hand, is *covert* and 'enables security forces to find their enemies by knowing their intentions or likely actions' (Clutterbuck, 1990: 12). It is ultimately the former – *background intelligence* – that this arti- cle is concerned with here. This is because whilst a lot may be made of 'secret' intelligence, military theorists and members of the intelligence community reject the view that this is the most important source of information. 'Possessing secrets does not always confer advantage', writes David Omand (2010: 22). Kilcullen (2006: 123–124) similarly notes:

> in modern counter-insurgency, where there is no single insurgent network to be penetrated but rather a cultural and demographic jungle of population groups to be navigated, 'basic intelligence' – detailed knowledge of physical, human, cultural and informational terrain, based on a combination of open source research and 'denied area ethnography' – will be even more critical [than secret intelligence].

While much may be made of secret or covert intelligence, it is not the only manner, and certainly not the most important manner, through which an understanding can be formed of the opponent and the population against which force and propaganda should be targeted. Overt intelligence collection

has a vital role to play. This is significant where Prevent is concerned since most of the intelligence collected for Prevent purposes is collected by the police through *overt* mechanisms.

The police playing a lead role in the development of intelligence, with the military operating in a supporting role, is a counterinsurgency principle that was used by the UK in Northern Ireland (Dixon, 2009b: 448). Whilst the military were involved in intelligence collection and analysis, it was the police in the form of Special Branch and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), with input from the Security Services (MI5) that were primarily responsible for the collection of intelligence (Jeffery, 1987). Dixon (2009b: 448, 464–465) explains that there are three reasons why the police take primacy on intelligence matters. Firstly, they have a strong familiarity with a given terrain, culture, and population, which enables them to gather intelligence whether they are on or off duty. Secondly, police have a localised understanding of a given area or territory and can therefore develop more accurate and timely intelligence based on some level of trust that has been built up with the local population that would otherwise be difficult to achieve, especially for the military. Thirdly, compared to military units, who are often deployed to a particular territory for a set period of time and may be withdrawn on political grounds, the police are situated in a territory permanently. This has two benefits: the police can create an image of 'normality' in what may be a volatile and exceptional situation, and the collection of intelligence becomes a routine, everyday task. This is made more straightforward because the police are permanently based in a community and will not be withdrawn in the same way as the military may.

Continuity in intelligence and having a permanent presence, in other words, is invaluable for countering an insurgency. 'If a unit can stay in the same region for a long time', writes Kitson, '[it] is worth several times as many men who are constantly moved from one place to another, because of the background knowledge which the stationary troops can build up in a particular area' (1971: 92). Through the creation of a new network of 'Counter-Terrorism Units' (CTUs) and 'Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Units', CONTEST has very much put this counterinsurgency idea into practice. However, it goes one step further since the CTU network not only seeks to tap into already existing community policing processes but has worked to create Prevent policing roles whose primary role is to collect overt intelligence on suspected and potential terrorists as well as locations alleged to be used for 'radicalisation' (House of Commons, 2009: Evidence 14 by ACC Bob Quick; West Midlands Police Authority, 2010: 1). In addition to these new policing posts, Figure 1, which is taken from a classified strategic police document (Association of Chief Police Officers TAM, 2008: 11) that was leaked on to the internet, shows that intelligence is also collected for Prevent purposes through Schedule 7 and the (now defunct) Section 44 stop and search power
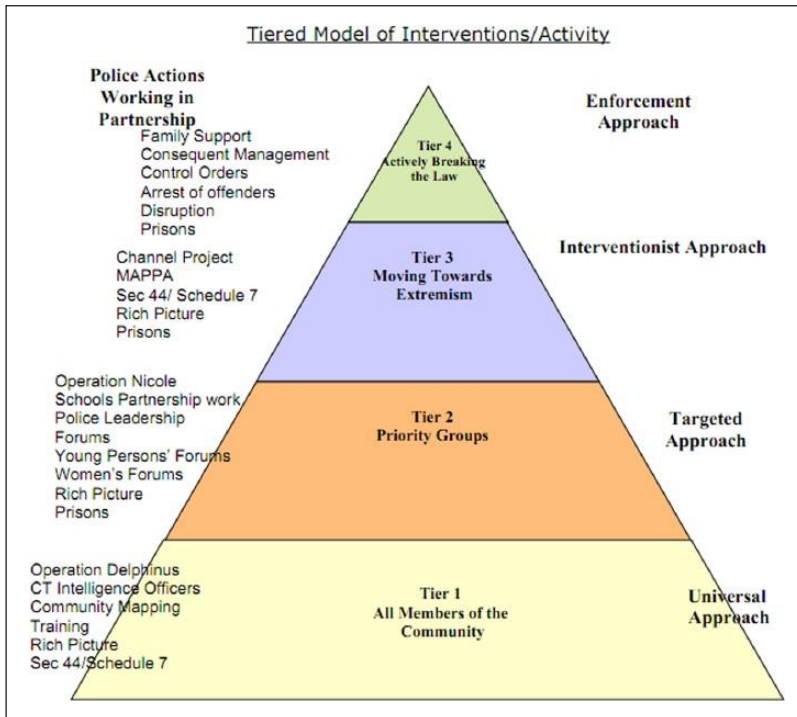
Figure 1. Pyramid diagram taken from a leaked classified document authored by the Association of Chief Police Officers showing the types of surveillance methods used to determine which types of Prevent activity should be directed at different individuals/groups.

Source: Association of Chief Police Officers (Terrorism and Allied Matters) (2008: 11) [http://www.scribd.com/doc/35833660/ACPO-Police-Prevent-Strategy].

too. Both of these methods of collecting intelligence, Figure 1 shows, are directed at 'all members of the community' (Association of Chief Police Officers TAM, 2008: 11).

This is significant not only because all members of the community are being surveilled and treated as suspected or potential terrorists but rather because these methods and tactics are claimed to be reserved for Pursue. There is therefore, in practice, a blurring of boundaries between Pursue and Prevent (i.e., coercion–consent or hard–soft power) which the authorities seem unconcerned by. Responding to written questions posed by the author, the Assistant Commissioner of Specialist Operations at New Scotland Yard, Cressida Dick (2012), explained that Prevent counter-terrorism neighbourhood policing programmes had been embedded at a local level in order to 'direct and influence local and national counter-terrorism … activities'. Prevent officers, in other words, are collecting intelligence for Prevent purposes but

are feeding their overt intelligence into a covert intelligence collection and analysis system (called 'Rich Picture') that subsequently influences all types of counter-terrorism activity, including operations and arrests. This idea of using Prevent intelligence for Pursue activities was corroborated by the for- mer Head of the West Midlands Counter-Terrorism Unit in an interview with the author:

> If as a result of Rich Picture and gathering community intelligence, a location or a place that requires further work [is identified], of course there is going to be an overlap […] between Prevent and Pursue. I'm not going to suggest that there is a world of Prevent over there and there is a world of Pursue over here. (Interview with Kenny Bell, 13 April 2012)

In practice then, both Prevent and Pursue are complementary and sup- portive of one another, especially where matters concern intelligence and sur- veillance. This is significant for three reasons which are worth emphasising. Firstly, surveillance generates fear and a threat of violence and therefore has an ability to discipline thought and control behaviour without directly employ- ing force (Foucault, 1977). Since surveillance goes to the heart of Prevent, a highly coercive underbelly is revealed. Secondly, Prevent operates in a com- plementary capacity to surveillance and intelligence collection that is claimed to be reserved for Pursue. This strongly suggests that the dichotomy between coercion and consent or Pursue and Prevent is false and irrelevant in practice. Thirdly, the surveilling of 'all members of the community' in order to deter- mine which form of activity (or propaganda – see Figure 1 and Figure 2) needs to be targeted at them suggests that Prevent perceives law-abiding Muslims to be somehow susceptible to supporting or becoming involved in terrorism. Such a perception not only has a strong stench of Islamophobia but also shows how the counterinsurgency principle of treating the wider population as an enabler and supporter of insurgency and terrorism has been integrated into contemporary counter-terrorism policy and practice. Such a practice erodes the distinction between civilians and combatants. This blurring is further revealed when we examine the role that propaganda and 'strategic communi- cation' play in Prevent, and those against whom it is targeted.

Propaganda as 'strategic communication'

It has long been recognised that due to the communicative characteristics of deeds, actions can have as much psychological impact on a target group as can information that is disseminated through, for example, leaflets and broadcasts (Ramakrishna, 2002: 13). Strategic communication is a communicative prac- tice that is concerned with precisely this – undertaking actions in order to
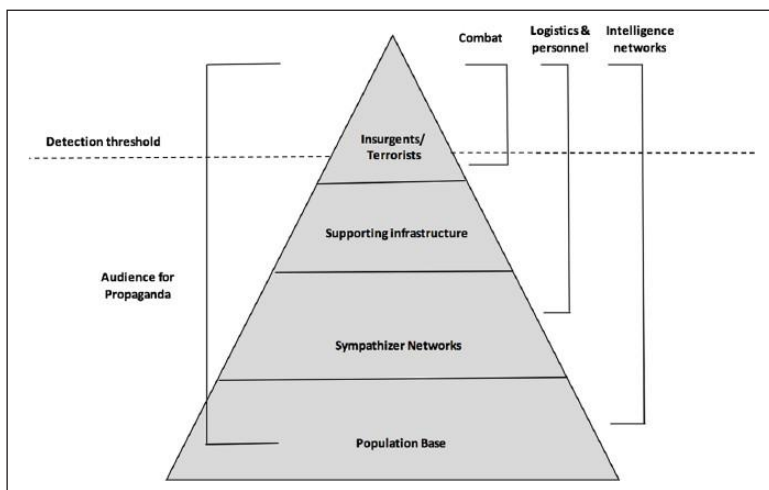
Figure 2. Diagram created by the author and based on Figure 1.1 from Kilcullen (2010: 8), specifying where surveillance and intelligence networks operate and who constitutes an 'audience for propaganda'.
Source: David Kilcullen (2010) *Counterinsurgency*, p. 8. C. Hurst & Co. Reproduced with permission.

communicate messages. According to official UK military doctrine, 'strategic communication' is defined as a 'philosophy' that is based on 'the alignment of words, images and actions' for the purpose of realising influence and causing behavioural change (Ministry of Defence, 2012: 1–3). Exactly how strategic communication operates is best explained by David Kilcullen, who is cited in the chapter on 'Influence' in the UK's latest Counterinsurgency Field Manual:

> Traditionally in the course of conventional operations we use information operations to explain what we are doing, but in counterinsurgency we should design operations to enact our influence campaign. (Ministry of Defence, 2009: 6-2)

This distinction between 'explaining' and 'enacting' is central to understanding the contemporary approach to information and strategic communication. Information is now viewed as *a weapon* of war in and of itself as opposed to being a *means* of *supporting* weapons of war. This is significant for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, it shows that the distinction between hard-power and strategic communication is false, and, secondly, since it seeks to influence behaviour through actions, strategic communication bears more than a passing resemblance to 'propaganda of the deed' or, as Kilcullen has described it, 'armed propaganda' (2007b, 2010: 222).

While information collected by the police through overt surveillance mechanisms feeds into the strategic communication process (Association of

Chief Police Officers TAM, 2008: 8), this is not the only way of inform- ing such activity. Of more value, argue Lee Rowland and Commander Steve Tatham[1] is social scientific research, or what they term 'Target Audience Analysis' (2010: 3; see also MacKay and Tatham, 2011). David Kilcullen (2007d) strongly encourages the use of social scientific research as a way of generating an understanding of the opponent's culture too, though he refers to it as 'conflict ethnography'. Under such an approach, he explains, the coun-terinsurgent works to develop 'a deep, situation-specific understanding of the human, social and cultural dimensions of a conflict' (Kilcullen, 2007d). This exact approach was used during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. In both cases, anthropologists (in the form of 'Human Terrain Teams') were used by the US military to study cultures within both countries in order to inform policy and practice (Miller and Mills, 2010; Ministry of Defence, 2013). What is noteworthy about such an approach is that, firstly, the integration of social science into the 'war on terror' mirrors the use of anthropology by colonial powers, which Chin (2015: 99) observes, was a discipline 'at the intellectual heart of the imperial project and was itself suffused with notions of a superior west facing an inferior Eastern enemy'. The parallels between contemporary counter-terrorism and colonial counterinsurgency are quite clear to see in this regard. Secondly, the integration of state-sponsored social science into the 'war on terror' does not only mean that entire populations and communities are targeted for information gathering purposes (as vividly shown by David Kilcullen in Figure 2) but rather that such research is becoming 'weaponised' within its own right. This is because research findings are integrated, espe-cially through strategic communication activity, with hard or 'kinetic' power. Though it may therefore seem innocuous and innocent, state-sanctioned social scientific research that seeks to study and understand the opponent's culture and society for the purpose of 'influence' through strategic communication serves coercion and therefore becomes coercive itself.

In the UK, the task of researching Muslim communities and their cul-tural practices for the sake of informing strategic communication activity has fallen to the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU). The RICU was established in 2007 by a number of influential civil servants and military personnel, including Commander Steve Tatham, who, until recently, led a psychological operations unit within the Ministry of Defence known as the 15 (UK) PSYOPS Group (Miller and Sabir, 2012). Since its formation, the RICU has undertaken a series of research projects as well as having com-missioned external agencies, including academics, to undertake research on UK Muslim communities (Powerbase, 2011). These projects were specifically designed to generate information on:

- 'how young British Muslims felt about their identity and sense of belonging'

- 'how young British Muslims use the internet'
- 'media consumption among British Muslims'
- 'how Government messages are perceived by Muslim communities'
- 'Islamic Blogs'
- 'The Language of Terrorism'
- 'why some voices are more credible than others to Muslim communities', and
- 'understandings of "Britishness" and terrorism and where these feelings come from within the British population' (Powerbase, 2011).

While the basic details of some of the research conducted by the RICU had to be dragged out of the Home Office through the Freedom of Information Act by the author and colleagues, significant details, including copies of research, even the titles of some projects, still remain secret. Whilst the RICU may not be a part of the security and intelligence services, observes Sayyid, it certainly is part of the 'secret state', much like its predecessor – the Information Research Department (IRD) – was during the Cold War (2013: footnote 1). Nevertheless, from two of the reports that were released by the RICU, and based on recent information that has surfaced in the media, one can see the types of propaganda the RICU has been responsible for producing.

In one of its research reports, the RICU sought to understand and identify individuals and groups who were considered to be 'vulnerable' to becoming future terrorists, and the channels or 'conduits' that could most effectively 'de-radicalise' them. It found that the most 'vulnerable' to terrorist messages were Pakistani, Bengali, and Somali males, aged 18–30; hence this group was selected as the 'core target audience' for anti-extremism messages and programmes (RICU, 2010a: 4, 13). Another research project undertaken by the RICU was premised on 'identify[ing] individuals and organisations Muslim communities find credible at local, national and international level' (RICU, 2010b: 1). It found that the most 'credible' conduits were family and friends, community figures, professionals, religious figures, and a small number of political figures, media personalities and celebrities (RICU, 2010b: 30). The research also found that an individual's 'appearance and manner' along with a series of 'qualities' were required for an individual to be credible (RICU, 2010b: 2). The appearance and manner related to an individual being well-presented, interested in Muslim community issues and concerns, passionate, charismatic, articulate, and from an ethnic minority background. The qualities s/he should possess included being knowledgeable, empathetic, sympathetic, kind, honest, reliable, Islamic, and strong in conviction (RICU, 2010b: 50). Islamic scholars seem to possess such 'qualities' and are claimed to be credible messengers for strategic communication or 'counter-narrative' activities (Marsden and Qureshi, 2010: 137). This finding seems to have been adopted by the government through, for example, the 'Radical Middle Way'

(RMW) project. Created in the aftermath of the London bombings with government funding worth £1.6 million (Khan, 2009), the RMW used a series of noted Islamic scholars and theologians to disseminate what RMW's web-site describes as 'a mainstream, moderate understanding of Islam that young people can relate to' (Radical Middle Way, 2013).

Whilst the involvement of the state has been public for all to see in the case of the RMW, it is not always so. Recent investigations undertaken by the advocacy group CAGE as well as by the *Guardian* have shown that the RICU has been responsible for outsourcing work to the public relations (PR) firm Breakthrough Media Network to conceal its involvement in the cre- ation of propaganda that targets Muslim communities in the UK and overseas (Cobain et al., 2016a, 2016c; Hayes and Qureshi, 2016). The former head of the RICU, Richard Chalk, has also worked for the UK PR firm Bell Pot- tinger, which was paid $500 million by the US military to produce 'black' propaganda videos falsely attributed to al-Qaida in Iraq (Cobain et al., 2016b; Black and Fielding-Smith, 2016). 'Black propaganda', according to Jowett and O'Donnell (2012: 18), is a communicative practice that seeks to disseminate information that 'comes from a source that is concealed or credited to a false authority that intends to spread lies, fabrications and deceptions'. Whilst some of the campaigns undertaken by the RICU seem not to entail outright 'lies' – for example, the emphasis on the participation of Muslim athletes during the 2012 London Olympics as a way of 'delegitimising the Olympic Games as a target for terrorism' (Cobain et al., 2016c) was not a 'lie' – the RICU has sought to deceive audiences by *concealing* its involvement in these propaganda campaigns. The lying here then is through 'omission' rather than 'commis- sion'. In his seminal study on propaganda, Ellul (1969: x) observes that rather than outright lies, propaganda operates on the basis of 'different kinds of truth – half truth, limited truth, [and] truth out of context'. Such practices show two things. Firstly, that so-called 'strategic communication' activity is a lot closer to classic definitions of ('black') propaganda than those who support the practice would like to believe (see, for example, Tatham, 2008: 20). Secondly, they show how highly militarised, deceptive, and manipulative communica- tive practices have been integrated into Prevent. While such practices may be an anathema to ideas around democratic accountability and transparency, this has not stopped the UK military from encouraging their use. The latest UK Counterinsurgency Field Manual, for example, states:

> Information operations will on occasions require an aggressive and manipulative approach to delivering messages (usually through the PSYOPS tool). This is essential in order to attack, undermine and defeat the will, understanding and capability of insurgents. (Ministry of Defence, 2009: 6-5)

The RICU's activities, however, go one step further since they target not just the suspected insurgent but the Muslim community more broadly.

This suggests a few things that are worth summarising at this point. Firstly, the RICU's research and activities, and its integration of counterinsurgency methods and tactics, reveal that it views Muslim communities, in typically Orientalist fashion, to be somehow predisposed to committing or supporting terrorism and therefore seeks to surveil them and subject them to manipulative and deceptive propaganda campaigns that are legitimised through talk of 'hearts and minds'. Secondly, since the RICU's use of strategic communication is based on integrating research data and intelligence with hard or 'kinetic' power, this strongly suggests that this form of propaganda is more about coercing individuals and communities into particular modes of thinking and behaving than it is about persuasion or 'consent'. Thirdly, the use of propaganda that seems to be directed at specific segments of the Muslim community as well as the Muslim community more broadly strongly suggests that in practice, the dichotomy between coercion and consent, Pursue and Prevent, and ultimately, civilian and combatant is false. Prevent, in other words, operates as a coercive policy masquerading as persuasion, social inclusion, and safeguarding.

Conclusion

The UK's CONTEST strategy has integrated key elements of counterinsurgency doctrine and practice into its remit, especially on matters involving surveillance and propaganda. Such ideas and practices have been integrated because groups such as al-Qaida and more recently Islamic State are claimed to constitute a global insurgency that uses not only terrorism and violence in the furtherance of strategic political objectives but also non-violent techniques and tactics in order to generate legitimacy, support, and consent for its actions and agenda. Whilst a counter-terrorism strategy is important, it is claimed to be limited in what it can achieve since it largely revolves around employing hard-power or violence. Since counterinsurgency seeks to employ limited levels of hard-power or violence and instead opts for 'non-kinetic' or 'non-violent' action that draws upon civil, military, and political power to destroy the insurgency by securing the acquiescence (or the 'hearts and minds') of wider communities and populations, it is claimed to be more appropriate for fighting the 'war on terror'. The use of non-violent or non-kinetic tactics, however, does not mean that counter-terrorism policy has somehow become about social inclusivity, welfare, and reform. As this article has demonstrated, counter-terrorism policy is about excluding and pre-emptively incapacitating individuals and groups by drawing on sophis- ticated and highly coercive surveillance and propaganda practices targeted at not only those considered to be 'future' terrorists but those individu- als and communities who speak through the 'language of Islam' (Sayyid, 2015: 17). What this ultimately reveals is that the often-made distinction

between Pursue and Prevent and combatant and civilian is, in practice, false. The use of 'soft-power' or 'hearts and minds' activity is also less about the persuading and 'safeguarding' of Muslims and more about disciplining and controlling those individuals choosing to exercise a distinct Muslim agency (Sayyid, 2010: 15). Such an approach challenges the liberal claim that counter-terrorism policy is about social inclusivity and 'safeguarding' or that the UK is a multicultural, post-racial society in which the demo-cratic government is transparent and accountable to the people.

Funding

Note

1. Commander Steve Tatham is a UK military officer well known for encouraging the use of strategic communication as a way of fighting and preventing conflict (see MacKay and Tatham, 2011).

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