



# Paul Stott: The counter-terror review. Incels, LASIT – and the changing threat from Islamists and the far right

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As politicians cast an eye towards their sun loungers and the approaching parliamentary recess, Suella Braverman has been hard at work. Tuesday saw publication of the [CONTEST Review](#) – a five yearly re-examination of our counter-terrorism strategy. Much of it was in many ways familiar – that Russia, Iran and China are nations we have poor relations with, and who seek to do us harm, is not news.

The times though, are changing. The challenge from new technology, such as AI, has been demonstrated by the recent treason conviction of Jaswant Singh Chail. A Sikh who wished to kill the Queen to avenge the 1919 Amritsar massacre, Chail appears to have been [encouraged](#) by an AI chatbot named Sarai, with whom he also swapped some ‘5000 sexually charged messages.’ Terrorism and political violence has clearly moved on from the days of collecting tins for the IRA at closing time in certain pubs in our big cities.

Passing references in CONTEST to Incels (involuntary celibate males who express anger and hatred towards women), the clumsily named LASIT (Left wing, anarchist and single issue terrorism) and the potential for conspiracy theories to lead to violence, all demonstrate a threat picture that is certainly evolving. The meat and potatoes though, really come down to two types of extremism – Islamist, and the far-right.

It is on Islamism where Braverman gets on the front foot, and where she best displays her grasp — clearly explaining both the challenge the country faces, and that the threat to our security primarily comes from Islamist terrorists who are [responsible](#) for “approximately 67 per cent of attacks since 2018, about three-quarters of MI5’s caseload and 64 per cent of those in custody for terrorism-connected offences” as of March 2023.

As Islamic State regroups, the potential for it to send fighters to Europe from territory they control in Africa – in the way they once sent terrorists from Syria into France and Belgium with deadly effect – is sobering. The [arrest](#) on Monday of Anjem Choudary, previously [convicted](#) of inciting support for IS, is a potential reminder that old problems of extremism have often not been solved, merely superseded by new issues.

The need to stress the centrality of the Islamist threat in CONTEST is familiar to anyone who followed the ups and downs of the drawn-out independent review of Prevent by William Shawcross, which eventually reported back in March. Shawcross’s text, designed to reset a counter-radicalisation strategy that had rather lost its way, was hardly greeted by cheering in the corridors at the Home Office. Nor is there much sign of police forces echoing the type of data Braverman quotes above.

The threat from the far-right is in many ways counter-intuitive. Weaker in organisational and electoral terms than at any stage since the formation of the National Front in 1967, Britain’s fascists and neo-Nazis are showing a predilection to flirt with terrorism not seen since the days of Combat 18 in the early 1990s. It is arguably because they are doing so badly, and their

ideas have such little resonance, that a turn towards deadly violence appeals. Whilst many far-right terrorist convictions have been for dissemination of extremist publications or attempts to repackage proscribed groups, the nasty terror attack at an asylum centre in Kent last October is the most recent example that aspirations to potentially deadly violence exist. CONTEST records that it is from the far-right we find “approximately 22 per cent of attacks since 2018” (p.10-11).

Perhaps the most significant section in CONTEST is the focus on the challenge posed by prisoner releases. When it comes to terrorism, the centre of gravity has a tendency to shift unexpectedly. As Islamic State lost territory in the Middle East, it was entirely logical towards the end of the last decade to focus on the threat of jihadist fighters returning to the UK and conducting attacks here.

Instead, 2019 and 2020 saw released terrorists Usman Khan murder two workers at a rehabilitation conference at Fishmongers Hall, and Sudesh Amman launch a stabbing spree on Streatham High Street. The authorities are clearly concerned the same could happen again, with a series of convicted jihadists due to be released in 2023 and 2024. It is notable that CONTEST talks of separating radicalisers from the wider prison population, although it has to be said that the Prison Service has made limited progress in establishing and fully utilising separation centres for the most dangerous inmates, that were envisaged at three prisons.

To this backdrop, MPs move on to their summer break, leaving Westminster behind for their beaches of choice. Braverman however, will continue to deal with one of the most challenging in-trays in government. We should all wish her well.

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