

UK revises counter-terrorism strategy ahead of Brexit

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The United Kingdom has revised its CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy ahead of its exit from the European Union. *Matthew Redhead* examines the fourth version of CONTEST against the backdrop of Brexit and uncertain EU-UK security co-operation

Key Points

- The UK government published a fourth iteration of its CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy in June, which placed a new emphasis on the role of regional 'Multi-Agency Centres' but offered no major departures from previous papers.
- The implementation of CONTEST will take place as the UK and the EU struggle to settle security issues arising from Brexit, with a 'no deal' scenario appearing increasingly likely.
- The use of bilateral and non-EU intelligence-sharing mechanisms, as well as the likelihood of some form of observer status for the UK at the European policing agency Europol, will limit Brexit's immediate operational security effects.

With little fanfare, UK Home Secretary Sajid Javid announced the publication of the latest version of the UK's counter-terrorism (CT) strategy, CONTEST, on 4 June. The document is the fourth version issued since CONTEST's creation in 2003, and did not depart substantially from its predecessors. Following previous iterations, it aims to reduce the risk to the UK from Islamist – and now also far-right – extremist terrorism through cross-government action. However, despite its familiarity, the latest publication of CONTEST has not been the subject of significant debate.

The document was published as the UK prepares to leave the European Union in March 2019, with Brexit a major factor in all policy decisions, including in the field of CT. Amid tensions with Russia and problems within NATO, Brexit is contributing to uncertainty in the international context that is so important to CT. "Terrorists know no boundaries," according to CONTEST, but the strategy could be undermined and terrorists could evade detection or capture if European partners are unable to co-operate effectively with the UK.

Senior officials in the UK CT community – consisting of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6), the Security Service (MI5), the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), and the National Counter Terrorism Policing Network (NCTPN) – have long been privately concerned about the potential disruption caused by a disorderly exit from the EU. On 18 June, GCHQ Director Jeremy Fleming made a speech to NATO in Brussels that highlighted the risks for both the UK and the EU. Fleming noted that the UK had helped to disrupt terrorist operations in four European countries in the past year, and said, "UK-European relationships and our ability to work together save lives."

The likelihood of the UK's full exit from all EU institutions, or a 'no deal' situation, appears to be rising. Amid this uncertainty, *Jane's* examines the prospects for the 2018 version of CONTEST, and how the UK's departure from European institutions will affect the fight against terrorism in the UK and across Europe.

Strategy background

The original version of CONTEST responded to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. The UK government adopted CONTEST in early 2003, but the strategy was not made available to the public – in a redacted and revised version – until July 2006.

Its proponents included Sir David Omand, UK Security and Intelligence Coordinator between 2002–05. Omand told *Jane's* on 14 July that there was a consensus that such large-scale attacks required “a whole of nation” approach, and noted, “The immediate response to 9/11 had been effective, and many immediate vulnerabilities addressed ... but the evolving threat needed a coherent longer-term response.”



Armed police officers look at messages left by well-wishers on London Bridge on 12 June 2017, following the 3 June terrorist attack that targeted members of the public on London Bridge and at Borough Market. The attackers killed eight people before being shot dead by police. (Adrian Dennis/AFP/Getty Images)

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Omand and other senior security officials previously worked on counter-terrorism in Northern Ireland, and Omand told *Jane's* that these experiences had indirectly influenced their approach. He said that it was important for the strategy to “reinforce, not undermine the values of a law-abiding society ... and avoid the temptation of extra-legal shortcuts”.

The strategic objective was therefore to reduce – not eliminate – the risk from Islamist extremist terrorism, in order to retain basic freedoms. Intelligence and policing would disrupt active terrorists in the Pursue strand of CONTEST, while community intervention and public diplomacy would counter radicalisation in the Prevent strand. To reduce vulnerability, the security of crowded places and national infrastructure would be improved (Protect), and contingency measures for responding to an attack would expand (Prepare).

To provide oversight and cohesion, the government created the Office of Counter-Terrorism and Security (OSCT) within the Home Office in July 2007, led until November 2015 by a former senior official from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Charles Farr. A refreshed version of CONTEST was released in March 2009, placing more emphasis on Prevent. The initial version of CONTEST

aimed to contain the threat, but its successor aimed to counter extremist ideology and Muslim grievances beyond the UK.

However, Prevent faced criticism from the political right for engaging with non-violent Islamists, and from Muslim communities and pressure groups such as Liberty for its perceived interference in civil liberties. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government announced a new Prevent strategy on 7 June 2011 that sought to divert funds towards more 'focused' interventions such as Channel, supporting vulnerable individuals at a local level rather than through community programmes.

A revised version of CONTEST, published just one month later on 6 July 2011, also reflected this change of emphasis across all four strands. Al-Qaeda's core leadership in Pakistan appeared to be in operational decline, with its regional franchises only slowly taking its place, and spending reviews in 2010 had called for restraint.

CONTEST 2018

The 2016–17 upsurge in terrorist attacks in Europe inspired or mounted by the Islamic State drove a further revision of CONTEST. The UK suffered five attacks in 2017 in London and Manchester, killing 36 people, which followed an apparent decline in the number and lethality of attacks between 2011 and 2015. The government announced an Operational Improvement Review (OIR) to address the resurgence, compounded by the increasing threat posed by lone-actor far-right extremists, who had conducted four attacks since 2013.

Raffaello Pantucci, director of International Security Studies at London's Royal United Services Institute, told *Jane's* on 17 July that, despite the shifting threat picture, "the strategy retains the overarching bureaucratic structure, and largely tweaks around the margins". It retains the 'four Ps' and proposes new CT legislation to support earlier detection, longer prison sentences, and better post-penal offender management. Increased funding will be available through to 2021, including GBP1.4 billion (USD1.8 billion) for new CT operations, 1,900 new security and intelligence officers, and an additional GBP50 million for CT policing in 2018/19.

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