Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Countering terrorism overseas

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“On January 16th a terrorist group linked to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb attacked a gas production facility in the Algerian desert.

Thirty-nine hostages from nine countries died, including six British nationals. It was the largest and most complex attack affecting UK citizens since the 7/7 bombings.

It naturally raises questions about the threat posed by Al Qaeda and its affiliates, and how we work with others to reduce that threat.

Foreign Secretary William Hague speaking at RUSI

The United Kingdom has a long experience of confronting terrorism, and we have some of the finest Intelligence Agencies and police forces in the world. They stop terrorists from entering our borders, they detect and stop terrorist attack plans, and prevent potential recruits from being radicalised. Thanks to their efforts there have been no successful attacks on our mainland since 2005.

But unless our foreign policy addresses the circumstances in which terrorism thrives overseas, we will always fight a rearguard action against it.

We will never give up for a moment of course our right to defend ourselves, including through military force if needed. But there is rarely, if ever, a purely military solution to terrorism.

And we are in a long, generational effort to deny terrorist groups the space to operate, to help vulnerable countries develop their law enforcement capabilities, to address the injustice and conflict which terrorists exploit, and to combat their ideology.

We must never forget that those who suffer the most are the citizens of countries blighted by terrorism and extremism: the women and children killed by Al Shabaab suicide bombings in Somalia; the girls who cannot go to school in Pakistan, because of Pakistani Taliban intimidation; or the communities devastated by Al Qaeda attacks in Iraq.

Muslim communities are bearing the brunt of terrorism worldwide, at the hands of people who espouse a distorted and violent extremist interpretation of a great and peaceful religion.

There can never be any justification for terrorism. The indiscriminate targeting of civilians is contemptible in any shape or form and our resolve to defeat it must never weaken or falter even for a day.

But in standing up for freedom, human rights and the rule of law ourselves, we must never use methods that undermine these things.

As a democracy we must hold ourselves to the highest standards. This includes being absolutely clear that torture and mistreatment are repugnant, unacceptable and counter-productive.

Our bottom line is always that we are determined to uphold the law. Any allegation of UK complicity in the sorts of practices I've just mentioned must be investigated fully.

So to tackle terrorism we need to combine creative work from our Intelligence Agencies and police with intelligent diplomacy. We have to help build stability and the rule of law in other countries, living up to our values at all times. And we need to make common cause with peoples and governments that reject this violence. This combination of intelligence, diplomacy, development and partnership with other nations is the only way to defeat terrorism over the long term. We must be resolved, decisive and principled.

Twelve years after 9/11 the greatest source of the terrorist threat to the United Kingdom remains Al Qaeda and its ideology. But the nature of the threat has changed, in three principal ways:

First, it is geographically more diverse. We face a determined 'Al Qaeda core' in Pakistan and Afghanistan's border region, and multiple groups inspired by Al Qaeda in the world's most fragile regions.

Al Qaeda in Pakistan is diminished and under severe pressure. Nonetheless, it is still capable of devising sophisticated attacks. As in other parts of the world, it exploits the presence of those Westerners drawn to the region for extremist purposes, and it abuses diaspora links, including to the UK, which are in other ways such an asset to our country. At the same time Al Qaeda affiliates in Yemen, Somalia and other parts of Africa are capable of mounting dangerous attacks. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has attempted multiple attacks on aircraft that would have caused mass casualties if they had been successful, such as the attempted printer cartridge bomb.

Second, the threat is more fragmented. Al Qaeda does not control a franchise of groups all operating to the same agenda, however much they would like us to think this. We should not make the mistake of overstating their support or coherence. Al Shabaab in Somalia for example ranges from those who object to the presence of African troops and aspire to establish an Islamist state, to others seeking 'a greater Somalia' in the region, to foreign

fighters who regard Somalia as a platform for global terror. However, this fragmentation of the threat means that each group has to be tackled separately and across a far wider area, making for a more complex effort and difficult choices about the prioritisation of resources.

Third, terrorism today is based even more closely on the exploitation of local and regional issues. Terrorists are constantly searching out new areas where they have the greatest freedom to plan external attacks. They take advantage of unresolved conflicts to infiltrate local communities who otherwise would be likely to reject them. In this way, like a virus, the threat spreads where local defences are weakest.

For example, since its emergence as an Al Qaeda affiliate in the middle of the last decade, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has exploited a sense of exclusion amongst the Tuareg people across the region. From northern Mali they plan and conduct terrorist operations, kidnapping foreigners for ransoms to fund their activities. Before the intervention of France we faced the prospect of the Malian state being destroyed by terrorists.

The Arab Spring revolutions were a grievous blow, of course, to extremist ideology. The idea that that change can be accomplished by the people of a country demanding political and economic freedom contains the seeds of Al Qaeda's irrelevance.

Creating the building blocks of stable democracy - the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, constitutions that respect the rights of women and minorities, security forces that can maintain order without repression, and economic development - all takes a long time.

The assassination of an opposition leader in Tunisia and the attacks on the US consulate in Benghazi demonstrate the security challenges in Arab Spring countries. And that is why we are providing the new Libyan government with advice and technical assistance on police and defence reform, public security, and building justice systems that protect human rights.

We should not lose faith in the people of the region. Any suggestion that the repression of the past would somehow be better for the region is wrong. The worst outcome of all would be a lapse back into authoritarianism or conflict. There is no substitute for painstaking work to build a new political order, so we are also devoting £110 million through our Arab Partnership Initiative to civil society and economic reform in the region.

But in the short term extremists and terrorists will take every opportunity to try to hijack these revolutions. Syria is the most acute case of all.

The vast majority of people opposing the Assad regime are Syrians, fighting for the future of their country. But Syria is now the number one destination for jihadists anywhere in the world today. This includes a number of individuals connected with the United Kingdom and other European countries. They may not pose a threat to us when they first go to Syria, but if they survive some may return ideologically hardened and with experience of weapons and

explosives. The longer the conflict continues, the greater this danger will become, a point that should not be lost on policy makers in Russia and elsewhere. More innocent lives will be lost, extremists will be emboldened, sectarianism will increase and the risk of the use of Chemical or Biological Weapons will grow.

A negotiated agreement leading to a new government formed of the opposition and elements of the regime, on the basis of mutual consent, is the best way to chart a way out of Syria's divisions. We want Russia and China to join us in achieving this transition, backed by the United Nations Security Council.

But there is a serious risk that the violence will worsen and we must keep open options to help save lives in Syria and to assist opposition groups that are opposed to extremism. So we are working with other European countries now to amend EU sanctions so that the possibility of additional assistance is not closed off.

We also believe the EU must also take robust action in response to the terrorist attack on a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Bulgaria last year. The Bulgarian investigation has indicated that Hizballah's military wing was responsible. The European Union must demonstrate that no organisation can carry out terrorism on European soil without consequences.

And as we work to eliminate safe havens for terrorists further afield, we must be clear that no state should allow terrorist groups to operate from its territory and that terrorism as a tool of foreign policy is always unacceptable.

If we know that the threat we face from terrorism is likely to come from a wider range of fragile countries; that plots against the United Kingdom are frequently prepared overseas; and that we cannot disrupt such plots without working with nations where the risk originates, then a long term, coordinated international approach is the only way we can defeat terrorism.

The Government's counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, combines a full range of international and domestic responses, ranging from the overt to the covert, from security to development, through to working with our communities at home.

We have maintained and where necessary increased police, intelligence and other counter terrorist capabilities.

We are ensuring that we have the powers in place to detect, investigate disrupt and prosecute terrorist activity through legislative changes, and we have made significant improvements at our borders to reduce threats to their security and to civilian aircraft.

We are also making continuous improvements to improve the complex, coordinated response needed from our police, agencies and emergency services if acts of terror do take place,

learning lessons from attacks such those in Mumbai in 2008, in Norway in 2011 and in Toulouse in 2012.

In the 12 months leading up to July last year, more than 220 people were arrested in the UK for terrorism-related offences, so the threat from home grown terrorism remains challenging. So we also work to prevent people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. This includes resisting the efforts of those who actively seek to stoke tensions with Muslims in Britain. The Government and all communities need to continue to work together so that we can reject messages of division, hate and extremism, wherever they originate.

But a large part of our effort to counter terrorism is now overseas where terrorists train and plan for attacks against the UK or our interests abroad. We cannot do this without working with other countries.

First of all, we must address the conditions in which terrorism thrives, whether it is restarting the Middle East Peace Process or intensifying our conflict prevention work to help fragile countries become more stable and secure.

Helping Somalia is a major priority for our government. Two years ago Al Shabaab controlled large parts of the country, piracy was booming and the threat from terrorism was growing. Today, a coordinated effort by the international community has seen African and Somali troops drive Al Shabaab out of its strongholds; the creation of a new and legitimate government; and the reduction of piracy to its lowest levels since 2008. In May, there will be a second conference here in London to plan support to rebuild Somalia’s armed forces, police, coastguard, justice system and public finances.

We must never assume that what works in one country will work exactly in another. But the key features of what is working in Somalia are helping a new legitimate government, African troops bringing peace and security, with the international community giving constant diplomatic, financial and humanitarian support.

This should be the model that we follow elsewhere in Africa wherever we can, including in Mali, where a full and inclusive democratic process, including talks with non-violent groups in the north and support for Malians to rebuild their livelihoods, is urgently needed. As a country we give generous humanitarian assistance to countries affected by conflict, including £13 million in Mali, £55 million in Yemen and £80 million in Somalia, in the current financial year.

We must also strengthen the ability of states to counter terrorism, while protecting human rights, as called for by the UN.

This is extremely difficult and challenging work, since the threat from terrorism is greatest in the countries where the rule of law and human rights are weakest.

And that is why today I wish to set out a clear direction the Government will follow over the coming years.

When we detect a terrorist plot originating in a third country, we want to be in a position to share information to stop that planning, and do it in a way that leads to the arrest, investigation and prosecution of the individuals concerned in accordance with our own legal obligations, and with their human rights respected at every stage.

This gives rise to extremely difficult ethical and political decisions, such as whether to pass on information which might save lives and disrupt an imminent attack, but which could also create a risk of someone being mistreated if detained.

Our Secret Intelligence Service has the lead responsibility for sharing intelligence with foreign partners on terrorist threats. Requests to share intelligence in these difficult and finely-balanced circumstances come to me.

Where there are serious risks, it is right that it is the Foreign Secretary who takes the ultimate responsibility for these decisions, just as it is right that our Parliament and ultimately the Courts hold government to account.

In many cases, we are able to obtain credible assurances from our foreign partners on issues such as detainee treatment and legal processes that give us the safeguards we need, and the confidence that we can share information in this way. Where this is not the case, we face a stark choice. We could disengage, or we can choose to cooperate with them in a carefully controlled way while developing a more comprehensive approach to human rights adherence. This approach brings risk, but I am clear that the risks of the first option, of stepping back are greater still, placing our citizens at greater risk of terrorist attack.

The need to cooperate with other countries is growing for all the reasons I have described. So I am convinced that we need to have a coherent approach that is sustainable for the long term, that upholds our laws and has safeguards, and that works to strengthen the ability of other countries to observe human rights and meet their own obligations. How we go about this will have to vary from country to country depending on the scale and nature of the challenge. But we will seek justice and human rights partnerships with countries where there is both a threat to the United Kingdom’s security, and weaknesses in the law enforcement, human rights and criminal justice architecture of these countries.

These are not one-off initiatives or stand-alone agreements, but rather – as the name suggests – a systematic process of working with the authorities in question to identify shortcomings in capability, and to address these through the provision of British assistance and expertise, over many months or years.

The sorts of measures we will take include:

-Building up the counter-terrorism capacity of overseas security services to improve compliance with the law and human rights and to make them more effective;

-Working with local investigators to improve the ability to build cases based on evidence rather than on confessions;

-Supporting prosecutors and judges to ensure that they are capable of processing terrorism cases through the court systems, effectively, fairly and in line with the rule of law;

-And working to improve and where appropriate monitor conditions in detention facilities so that convicted terrorists can be held securely and their treatment meets with international standards.

We are already doing many of these things. In Somalia for example, we are already working with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to construct prisons to hold convicted pirates in facilities that meet international standards.

What I am making clear today is that given the changing nature of the threat I have described, and given our determination to uphold human rights and the law, we will be doing more of this and developing more of these partnerships.

But crucially we are creating a strong and systematic framework for this work, with strong safeguards, with five safeguards:

First, we will only engage in such efforts where there is serious and potentially long-running threat to the UK or our interests abroad, such as that flowing from terrorist networks in South Asia, Yemen, and parts of North and West Africa.

Second, all our counter-terrorism capacity building work will be carefully considered in line with our Overseas Security and Justice Assistance Guidance in order to assess and to mitigate human rights risks, and specifically designed to improve human rights standards and strengthen the rule of law in that country.

Third, it will not be carried out in isolation, but will be part of UK and international diplomatic and development efforts in that country.

Fourth, the intelligence dimension will be subject to the same robust scrutiny and oversight that exists in other areas of Intelligence activity and always be in accordance with the law.

Fifth, every aspect of this work requires Ministerial oversight and approval. If I or another responsible Minister see any credible evidence that our support is being misused we will take immediate action. Any work that would involve breaking our legal obligations simply would not go ahead.

So this is a framework of accountability and human rights to ensure that our counter-terrorism work supports justice and the rule of law as well as our security, with the goal of creating the long term conditions for better observance of human rights in countries that have a poor record and where the threat from terrorism is strong.

We believe that the British people can have confidence in this framework; that it puts UK capacity building overseas onto a surer footing; and that it will give greater confidence that UK and international law and our democratic values are upheld.

Even with these safeguards in place, there may be some people who say that this approach is wrong.

But we cannot keep our country safe if we are not cooperating at all with countries that don't fully live up to our standards. Only a minority of countries in the world do that. We have to work with other countries. Justice and human rights partnerships will be a powerful framework for doing so.

Without such partnerships our ability to tackle threats before they reach the United Kingdom would be severely limited. And there are good arguments that by introducing important legal and human rights concepts and professional ways of tackling terrorism, and by insisting on the highest standards ourselves, we can encourage better human rights observance in those countries.

Achieving security, justice and advances in human rights together will not always be straightforward and despite our best efforts we may not always succeed. But it will always be our aim.

This is consistent with one of our first acts as a Government on this issue, which was to issue Consolidated Guidance to Intelligence Officers and Service Personnel on the Detention and Interviewing of Detainees Overseas, to ensure their actions uphold our domestic law and our international obligations. Additionally the Prime Minister also asked the Intelligence Services Commissioner to oversee compliance with the Guidance.

We are also taking steps to strengthen Parliamentary scrutiny and oversight of the agencies through the Justice and Security Bill currently being considered by Parliament. This also aims to ensure, where strictly necessary, that judges in civil cases relating to matters of national security will be able to consider all relevant material, including sensitive material, to ensure that justice is done while upholding national security. The objective is not to hide away the actions of the most secret parts of the State, but precisely the opposite: to strengthen their accountability and public confidence in them as they go about their difficult, dangerous and necessarily secret work.

Few if any countries have a stronger system of clear guidance, Ministerial decision-making, and strength of legal considerations in the area of counter-terrorism than we do. We are a world leader in upholding the highest possible standards.

But we are also a country that needs to be able to keep people safe and that is threatened by many who would do great harm to our citizens. Therefore we also intend to be foremost in the world in how we develop partnerships that are effective in protecting our security while upholding human rights. Far from being contradictory, these two concepts go together.

In tackling terrorism overseas we must approach the world as it is, rather than as we would like it to be. But that does not mean that we should not try to shape it and improve it and, when necessary, find means of working with others in ways that are consistent with our values: the very values which terrorism is intent on destroying.

So this is our government's approach to tackling terrorism overseas:

Governments, agencies, police and prosecutors working together in a coherent, long term manner to address immediate threats from terrorism and the causes of terrorism;

Combating terrorism while upholding our values, within a framework of strong democratic accountability, seeking greater respect for human rights in other countries;

And using foreign and development policy to build stability in fragile countries.

This is how we enable the greater global cooperation that is essential to eliminating the risk from international terrorism over time, and support a safe, secure and prosperous future for our country."

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/countering-terrorism-overseas