



Ken McCallum's Communication to a select group about Terrorism

" Since March 2017, MI5 and the police have together disrupted 43 late-stage attack plots. Some of those plotters were trying to get hold of firearms and explosives, in the final days of planning mass murder. Our vital work together has saved numerous lives.

The headline split of our counter terrorist work remains roughly 75% Islamist extremist, 25% extreme right-wing terrorism. But under that headline, much has shifted. Straightforward labels like "Islamist terrorism" or "extreme right wing" don't fully reflect the dizzying range of beliefs and ideologies we see.

We're encountering more volatile would-be terrorists with only a tenuous grasp of the ideologies they profess to follow. People viewing both extreme right wing and Islamist extremist instructional material, along with other bits of online hatred, conspiracy theories and disinformation.

Compared to my years combating Al-Qaeda, it's harder these days for my investigators and their police counterparts to quickly and definitively determine whether an act of violence is ideologically motivated or driven by another factor like mental health.

Today, an attacker may have no connections to other terrorists.

They might not be on our records.

And there's often no claim of responsibility.

MI5 and the police follow the intelligence and evidence to whatever conclusion – or lack of conclusion – they support. To be explicit, politics plays no role in these decisions. We will continue to do the best professional job we can of analysing a picture which is inherently messy.

We're also seeing far too many cases where very young people are being drawn into poisonous online extremism.



Sadly, 13% of all those being investigated by MI5 for involvement in UK terrorism are under 18. That's a threefold increase in the last three years. Extreme right wing terrorism in particular skews heavily towards young people, driven by propaganda that shows a canny understanding of online culture.

Managing complex risks intelligently requires varied professional expertise. For those planning attacks, a criminal justice outcome is generally needed. But for some vulnerable individuals, alternative interventions delivered by a wider range of partners may be more effective.

Which brings me to my next point, a predictable one but no less crucial for that: it's hard to overstate the centrality of the online world in enabling today's threats.

In both Islamist extremist and extreme right-wing terrorism, lone individuals, indoctrinated online, continue to make up most of the threats. In dark corners of the internet, talk is cheap; sorting the real plotters from armchair extremists is an exacting task.

Anonymous online connections are often inconsequential – but a minority lead to deadly real-world actions. We see this in recent convictions of British teenagers.

One planned to attack a British synagogue. Another posted material that inspired deadly mass shootings in the US. A third drew up plans to stab people at a music festival and shared terrorist propaganda online.

When so much plotting takes place on the internet, our ability to track the online activity of those who mean us harm is utterly crucial.

Maintaining proportionate, lawful access to such communications in the face of ever-more-prevalent encryption is sometimes our only means of detecting and understanding these threats. Privacy and exceptional lawful access can coexist if absolutist positions are avoided. World class encryption experts are confident of this. The alternative is allowing child abusers and terrorists to operate at scale, without fear of consequences.



MI5's operational focus sits within a much wider online context: the insidious effect of internet hatred and disinformation has played into threats to election candidates, intimidation of communities, and the public disorder that followed the sickening attack in Southport.

Yesterday marked a year to the day since the horrific Hamas attacks on Israel. We've seen appalling loss of life in Gaza and now Lebanon, and conflicts spiralling in the wider region with all the implications that brings for Middle Eastern – and UK – security.

Today, we are powerfully alive to the risk that events in the Middle East directly trigger terrorist action in the UK, as we saw with last October's knife attack in Hartlepool. The ripples from conflict in that region will not necessarily arrive at our shores in a straightforward fashion; they will be filtered through the lens of online media and mixed with existing views and grievances in unpredictable ways.

Thus far, while our police colleagues have responded to rising public order, hate crime and community safety challenges, we haven't – yet – seen this translate at scale into terrorist violence. The overarching UK terrorist threat level remains at SUBSTANTIAL – an attack is likely – and is kept under constant review.

Alongside the risk of short-run mobilisation to attacks sits slower-burn radicalisation. This tide is hard to quantify or to forecast. It requires a cross-government, and community-based, response. MI5 will contribute its expertise and vigilance.

I'll finish here with the terrorist trend that concerns me most: the worsening threat from Al-Qaeda and in particular from Islamic State.

Today's Islamic State is not the force it was a decade ago. But after a few years of being pinned well back, they've resumed efforts to export terrorism. The ISKP attack in Moscow was a brutal demonstration of its capabilities. We and many European partners are detecting IS-connected activity in our homelands, which we are moving early to disrupt.

And Al-Qaeda has sought to capitalise on conflict in the Middle East, calling for violent action.



To illustrate, over the last month more than a third of our top priority investigations have had some form of connection, of varying strengths, to organised overseas terrorist groups.

Late last year, a man in Coventry was jailed for life for designing a 3D-printed armed drone for IS in west Africa. Just a few weeks earlier, two brothers from Birmingham were jailed for an attempt to join ISKP in Afghanistan.

These cases are not wild outliers. More will be coming through the courts. Organised groups have the numbers and the know-how to carry out, or inspire, horrendous mass casualty attacks.

I must touch on Northern Ireland. Earlier this year, the threat level was reduced to SUBSTANTIAL.

But sadly, we continue to see aspirations to mount attacks. With our police partners we stamp out most, but very occasionally the small rejectionist groups manage to cause appalling harm, such as in the attack on DCI John Caldwell in February last year."