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Counter-terrorism

Latest CONTEST strategy affirms hawkish direction of security policy taken since 2020

- The [latest edition of the CONTEST Counter-Terrorism Strategy](#) was published, with this update having been announced in October 2022.
- The last edition was published in 2018, under the leadership of PM Theresa May and Home Secretary Sajid Javid. This update largely affirms and consolidates the significant shifts that have taken place in counter-terror and national security policy since then, particularly the change of direction under Boris Johnson and Priti Patel.
- That is to say that the 2023 CONTEST reiterates the more aggressively punitive approach to those convicted of terrorist offences that Priti Patel oversaw, including through the expansion of prison segregation wings for 'extremist' prisoners, harsh restrictions on prisoners, and extended prison terms and post-release licence conditions.

It also affirms the Shawcross review of Prevent and the sharp return to targeting Muslims under Prevent, and describes the role of the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE), now under the leadership of Henry Jackson Society alumnus Robin Simcox, as the government's 'independent 'centre of excellence' on counter-extremism, [whose] work will continue to inform policymaking".

- But while describing and reiterating the shifts of the last few years, the latest CONTEST does little to indicate future developments in the field - other than an emphasis on the role of Artificial Intelligence in national security, re-emphasising attempts to undermine end-to-end encryption and pointing to efforts to deepen international CT collaborations.

- Interestingly, in her [speech announcing the launch of the strategy](#) Home Secretary Suella Braverman went out of her way to speak on the issue of so-called 'Anti blasphemy protests' by Muslim communities in Northern towns.

In the speech she stated that such protests 'whether...outside schools or cinemas, are in my view a threat to national security' and that she had 'tasked officials to develop policy options across government so that we get this sensitive issue absolutely right'.

This is despite such protests getting no mention at all in the CONTEST strategy itself - while [falling firmly on the radar](#) of CCE head Simcox, who described them as one example of the ways that 'extremism can flourish across communities when pernicious ideologies are not openly confronted.'

This indicates the way that issues such as the protests are being prioritised based on advice and/or lobbying from bodies like the CCE, and/or to fulfil a partisan political agenda, rather than being based on Home Office-determined priorities.

New Home Office-funded research facility blends law enforcement, policing and counter-terrorism with military research

- At the beginning of June it was announced that a [new research facility had been opened](#) at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl), part of the Ministry of Defence.

The facility will draw together insights and interests from the fields of counter-terrorism, law enforcement and policing with military research, so that 'ideas can be exchanged and innovation funded in one area can be applied to multiple problems'.

The work of the facility is intended to support the likes of UK Policing and the Border Force.

National Security

National Security Act passes into law, in major escalation of anti-state threat legal architecture

- The National Security Bill [has passed into law](#).

The Act, having been introduced to Parliament in May 2022, is a watershed piece of legislation in the development of a new, post-War on Terror 'national security' architecture directed at 'state threats'.

Of particular concern for the government are supposed threats to Britain from China, Russia and Iran, though this list is elastic.

- The Act draws on the most repressive and broad-ranging laws and offences of counter-terror legislation and mirrors them for the purposes of cracking down on activity allegedly carried out at the behest or interest of foreign rival states.

These powers include the new State Threats Prevention and Investigation Measures (STPIMs) power, modelled off the TPIMs and Control Orders under counter-terror law - pre-crime sanctions which severely limit the lives and mobility of people without any criminal procedure or prosecution.

- Clauses in the [Act also introduce](#) a mandatory Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS), similar to the 'foreign agent' register in the US, the ability to restrict or withhold legal aid for those convicted of terror offences, criminalises activity that is 'likely to materially assist a

foreign intelligence service in carrying out UK-related activities', and introduces new/updated anti-espionage powers.

First report from 'Spycops' inquiry rules that undercover policing unit tactics were not justified

- The first, interim report from the Undercover Policing Inquiry has been published.

The inquiry, also known as the 'Spycops inquiry' is looking into activity of the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), a unit of the Metropolitan Police force's Special Branch that spied on and infiltrated a wide number of activist groups and justice campaigns between 1968 and 2008.

A number of SDS officers also initiated long-term intimate relationships with women activists during their deployments.

- The inquiry was commissioned by then-Home Secretary Theresa May in 2015 after stories came to light about the activity of the then-defunct unit in the years prior, and after campaigning by activists targeted by the unit. It is expected to run until 2026.
- In the report the presiding ex-judge John Mitting determined that *'The use of undercover policing tactics from the 1960s onwards were not justified and [SDS] should have been disbanded early on'*.

National Security/Other

- While welcoming the judgement, campaigners [expressed their hopes that future reports](#) from the inquiry would deal with issues absent from this one, including 'the central role of MI5, government involvement, targeting of family justice campaigns, blacklisting of trades unionists, and reporting on children'.

Defence Minister Ben Wallace resigns and announces intentions to retire from Parliament next year, shortly after being blocked from NATO chief role

- Defence Minister Ben Wallace's career took an unexpected turn after he [announced his resignation from the government](#) Cabinet and intentions to stand down at the next General Election, citing personal reasons.
- Wallace's resignation was preceded by an [abortive attempt to run](#) for the position of NATO General Secretary.

While backed by Rishi Sunak for the job, his efforts were dashed by [resistance from the US](#) - de facto leader of the military grouping - which was apparently displeased with the overzealousness of the UK and Wallace's support for Ukraine, and their attempts to 'force the path' on the war.

- Also significant was [opposition from France's President Macron](#), who was adamant that the next NATO leader should be from the EU so as to try and salvage some degree of European autonomy from the US - an ambition that has largely fallen by the wayside following the outbreak of the Russo-Ukraine war.
- At the NATO summit in July, Wallace also [drew attention for his criticism of Ukrainian president Zelensky](#) for lacking gratitude and treating NATO allies like 'Amazon' in their endless demands for military equipment - a statement Sunak distanced himself from.
- The hawkish former Army officer, who has consistently been part of the Cabinet since 2015 and is well-liked by the Conservative Party grassroots, joins a number of prominent Conservative MPs announcing their withdrawal from Parliamentary life before next year's election.

His replacement in the Cabinet will be announced as part of a Cabinet reshuffle expected after Parliament's summer break.