

Blair government's strategy to police Britain's Muslims leaked

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3 June 2004

The May 30 *Sunday Times* newspaper has leaked confidential papers discussing a government project code-named "Contest," which is meant to tackle mass social and political disaffection amongst the UK's 1.6 million Muslims. Its aim is more narrowly conceived, however, with its primary purpose seen as curbing the influence of Islamic fundamentalism.

The papers paint a damning picture of the alarming levels of social and political alienation amongst British Muslims. But this is only addressed from the standpoint of how this has fuelled an increased interest—particularly by Muslim youth—in extremist Islamist organisations.

The strategy paper is based on the understanding that repression alone is not enough to fulfill the government's aim of clamping down on oppositional sentiment amongst Muslims. With the stick must also come the carrot. The aim of the government is to isolate Islamic fundamentalists, while co-opting what are defined as more moderate elements from within the clergy and the Muslim political elite, in a classic strategy of divide-and-rule.

Prime Minister Tony Blair has brought together senior ministers and top civil servants from nine of the biggest Whitehall departments to draw up the present strategy. Sir Andrew Turnbull, the cabinet secretary, chaired a meeting of permanent secretaries convened to discuss "Contest" in April. Its agenda, set out in more than 100 pages of confidential documents, was leaked to the *Sunday Times*.

The government intends to cultivate a layer of pro-Western, media-savvy Muslim academic careerists and government-friendly imams. The documents state, "We need to find ways of strengthening the hand of moderate Muslim leaders, including the young Muslims with future leadership potential, through the status which contact with the government can confer, and through practical capacity-building measures."

The leaked papers name four individuals whom the government may actively promote. Among them is Amr Khaled, 36, an accountant-turned-lay-preacher who came to prominence in Egypt in the late 1990s and now lives in Britain.

Called the "sheikh in a suit," he is said to be popular with Cairo's upper middle class because he has eschewed the traditional full beard and flowing robes of the orthodox Islamic cleric and appears on television wearing a business suit. Just as important is his message in defence of accumulating personal wealth. "Being a good Muslim doesn't mean you have to abandon your regular life, as long as your instincts are pure," he declares.

The government also intends to "promote awareness" of foreign-based imams, including Hamza Yusuf, Suhaib Webb and Tariq Ramadan. Yusuf, 45 (born Mark Hanson), is an adviser to US President George W. Bush and has been described in the media as the "rock star of the new Muslim generation." He recently completed a lecture tour of the UK, which included an appearance on BBC television's "Question Time" programme.

Webb, another American Muslim, who converted to Islam in 1992 after three years of "soul searching and study," received praise for helping to

raise \$20,000 for the widows of New York firefighters killed in the September 11 attacks.

Tariq Ramadan, a 41-year-old Swiss-based professor, was in *Time* magazine's list of the world's most influential people. He has been lecturing Muslims on how to integrate into European societies "without betraying Islam." He has also advised the British police force.

In a drive to create a new generation of homegrown "moderate" clerics, the Home Office is setting up a series of government-backed training courses for budding British imams.

In tandem with these moves, the government is to target fundamentalist clerics such as Abu Hamza, who is presently contesting attempts to extradite him to the United States on 11 terrorism charges including hostage-taking and trying to set up a terrorist training camp in the US. Yemeni authorities accuse him of being involved in attacks there in 1998. Hamza is the most high-profile example of the government's efforts to clamp down on oppositional clerics. It has accused him of providing support and advice to terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, and in February 2003, he was banned from preaching at the Finsbury Park mosque by the Charity Commission, which accused him of abusing his position for "personal and political, rather than charitable purposes." The Home Office also wants to remove his British citizenship, gained through marriage in 1981.

Hamza is being used as a test case for further draconian measures. Home Secretary David Blunkett has said that he wants the law changed so that intercepted phone calls—supposedly part of the basis of the US extradition request—can be used as evidence in UK courts. He complained that Hamza could not be prosecuted in Britain because of legal restrictions and lack of evidence.

Blunkett said, "We do not use intercept[ed phone calls] in open court. We have a review of that going on at this very moment and I hope to be able to report by the autumn. I have indicated I am being moved on this issue—my views have changed and I think there is room for limited use of such evidence; [whether it is] picked up in the US or by GCHQ is, of course, another matter."

The "Contest" papers insist that in future, all fundamentalist clerics should be barred from entering the country.

This is in itself an attack on free speech, but the government intends to go much further in intimidating any Muslim speaking out against the government's policies. The documents reveal government ministers and civil servants are preparing a major offensive to place pressure on Muslim community leaders to adopt a more pro-government line. One briefing says, "Muslim representatives should be challenged to work harder at improving their relations and image with other communities and to be more unequivocal in their condemnation of terrorism and espousal of democratic values."

One document attacks the "crude teachings" of some foreign Islamic clerics, who are described as having "little understanding of the UK." The documents warn there is a pool of disaffected young Muslims whom

radical clerics are exploiting. “Al-Qaeda and its offshoots provide a dramatic pole of attraction for the most disaffected,” wrote Turnbull in a letter to fellow officials.

In a letter to departments on April 6, Turnbull wrote, “The aim is to prevent terrorism by tackling its causes...to diminish support for terrorists by influencing social and economic issues.”

But despite the high-sounding rhetoric, the government strategy doesn’t even pretend to concern itself with the social and economic issues that give rise to the type of political alienation being exploited by the fundamentalist groups. In this lies the government’s inevitable failure. As in all things, its policies on terror are determined by a super-rich elite, which will not tolerate any measures of social reform that may impinge on its personal wealth and can offer only repression and intimidation on which it is impossible to secure any long-term social consensus.

The findings in a document entitled “Briefing on British Muslims: Socio-Economic Data and Attitudes,” are based on the 2001 census. It is marked “Restricted—contains unpublished data,” as it contains sensitive audit data about unemployment and inactivity rates among Britain’s Muslims. Its sensitivity lies in the fact that for the first time it classifies unemployment and economic inactivity rates by religion, rather than by the usual categories of age, sex or geographical area.

Among its key findings:

- * The unemployment rate of Muslims is more than three times that of the general population and is the highest of all faith groups. One in 7 (14.6 percent) of economically active Muslims was unemployed, compared with 1 in 20 (5 percent) for the wider population.

- * More than half of all Muslims are economically inactive (52 percent). This is higher than for any other group and is 1.5 times that of the wider population (33.5 percent). Half of all Muslim women have never worked.

- * Sixteen percent of Muslims have never worked or are classed as long-term unemployed—more than five times the rate for the rest of the population.

- * Forty-three percent of Muslims do not have a (recognised) educational qualification. This is the highest rate of all faith groups and compares with 36 percent for the population as a whole.

- * Higher concentrations of Muslims live in deprived areas (15 percent live in the 10 most deprived districts, against 4.4 percent of the population as a whole).

- * Participation of Muslims in parliamentary politics is about three quarters of the rate of all faith communities as a whole. Young Muslims are the least likely to participate.

The briefing paper concludes: “Data from opinion polls among Muslims contains mixed messages: strong opposition to terrorism and loyalty to Britain, but strong disapproval of foreign policy and significant concern about discrimination.”

A paper jointly written by Home Office and Foreign Office civil servants, entitled “Young Muslims and Extremism,” reveals that surveillance of the Muslim “community” by MI5 found that there are “extremist” groups operating within universities to recruit middle-class students.

The paper states that “there is evidence of the presence of extremist organisations on campuses and colleges,” and that even when a radical campus organisation is banned, its members often set up under a different guise. It goes on to name university-based groups including the 1924 Society and Muslim Cultural Society as having “extremist tendencies.” There is no suggestion that they are linked to terrorism.

Home Office analysts suggested there may be between 10,000 and 15,000 British Muslims who “actively support” Al-Qaeda or related terrorist groups. These numbers appear to draw on intelligence, opinion polls and a report that around 10,000 Muslims attended a conference held last year by Hizb ut-Tahir, described by the Home Office as a “structured extremist organisation.”

Although this estimate represents less than 1 percent of the Muslim population, the paper insisted that the sheer size of the actual “pool” of potential Al-Qaeda recruits—those who go to meetings to express their support—represents a stark warning about the “extent of the threat.”

This represents a clear attempt to tar all those opposed to Britain’s imperialist warmongering with the stain of terrorism and legitimise spying and other repressive measures. At the meeting to discuss “Contest,” Turnbull told colleagues that because of the terrorist threat, Eliza Manningham-Buller, MI5’s director general, had been asked to contribute to the debate.

According to the leaked documents, intelligence officers are already drawing up profiles of the typical Muslim recruited by al-Qaeda, aiming to identify the “specific actions taken by individuals on the path from law-abiding citizen to terrorist.”

John Gieve, the permanent secretary at the Home Office, summarised this MI5 evidence in his note to Turnbull, writing:

“Muslims who are most at risk of being drawn into extremism and terrorism fall into two groups:

- “a) well-educated with degrees or technical/professional qualifications, typically targeted by extremist recruiters and organisations circulating on campuses; b) underachievers with few or no qualifications, and often a non-terrorist criminal background—sometimes drawn to mosques where they may be targeted by extremist preachers and in other cases radicalised or converted whilst in prison.”

The leaked papers show that MI5 is now drawing up a detailed description of the so-called “terrorist career path.” On the basis of this, the blueprint says that ministers need a plan to “intervene at key trigger points to prevent young Muslims from becoming drawn into extremist and terrorist activity and action. We need to understand the evolution of the terrorist career path...to enable us to turn people from the path....We need to focus specifically on influencing opinion around young Muslims.”

As the leaked Turnbull letter reveals, “Contest” is just one plank in the government’s counterterrorism strategy—prevention—that must be allied to suppression. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the priority then was to introduce new laws to allow police to detain foreign terrorists in Britain without trial, etc. “The idea now is to take a more co-ordinated approach to the problem,” said one insider. “We did the same in Northern Ireland in the 1980s when as well as deploying police and troops on the streets we had a massive programme of investment in the local community, raising living standards. We also set about bridge-building with the Catholic community.”

The analogy with Northern Ireland is revealing. Here again, the British state sought to buy off a layer of the Sinn Féin/Republican elite, while offering a few sops to the population of the province. But the fundamental status quo was to remain unchanged.

The sops being muted in this case are hardly worth mentioning. They involve the creation of young Muslim “ambassadors”—government-funded flunkies—to act as “role models” to represent Britain abroad, “signalling the UK’s pride in its Muslim youth”; developing “communications plans aimed at combating distorted public and media perceptions of Islam and Muslims”; encouraging young Muslims to enter local and national youth parliaments; funding moderate Islamic television and radio stations and newspapers; setting up right-to-buy Islamic mortgages; and creating “Muslim-friendly workplaces.”

Meanwhile, the stick continues to be applied with vigour.

Detainees held in Britain in the aftermath of the September 11 bombings are still being kept in “barbaric” conditions, according to medical experts. The seven suspects at Belmarsh high-security prison in southeast London, all male Arab Muslims, are kept locked up for 22 hours a day and prevented from seeing daylight. They are not allowed access to their lawyers or to their families, and are still unable to speak to their families in Arabic without the presence of an official translator, who only visits

once a week. The men were given just five days to appeal against their internment.

Gareth Pierce, the legal representative for several of the prisoners, told the *Observer* newspaper of January 20, “These men have been buried alive in concrete coffins and have been told the legislation provides for their detention for life without trial.”

One of the internees said, “The guards shouted at us, called us ‘Bin Ladens’ and threatened us if we didn’t strip naked.” He was refused medication while in detention.

Since September 11, there have been dozens of arrests throughout Britain. Several have been carried out under the government’s recently enacted internment legislation, which was rushed through parliament with minimum debate. Most of the remaining arrests were for alleged immigration offences.

On January 2002, 17 arrests were made in London and Leicester. In Leicester, police officers conducted dawn raids on several houses that had been under surveillance. Nine people were arrested under anti-terror laws and the rest under immigration laws. Six men and two women were later transferred to the custody of the Immigration Service. Two Algerian men are accused of being members of Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda network and have been remanded in custody.

Police raids have since been carried out in Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham and other towns and cities across the country. Police chiefs at Scotland Yard claim there may be “hundreds” more al-Qaeda supporters and other terrorists active in the UK.

Pierce said, “Aid workers, dissidents and those struggling against oppressive regimes all now qualify as terrorists. They are being rounded up by the police and intelligence services, who have no comprehension of the culture, religion and way of life of these refugee communities.” (See: “Terror suspects held in brutal conditions in British jail”)

The Terrorism Act 2001, introduced in February, was supposedly specifically directed against combating the threat of terrorism, and included actions taken or “incited” outside the UK. Its measures had far-reaching implications. For the first time, the definition of terrorism was extended to cover threats against property, which in the past were treated as “criminal damage.” Clause 1 of the Act defines terrorism as “the use or threat for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause, of action which: Involves serious violence against person or property; Endangers the life of any person or; Creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public.”

Opponents of the Terrorism Act said at the time that such a remit was alarming. It could mean that anyone advocating direct action—anti-globalisation protesters, for example—could face charges of terrorism. Those parts of the Act that prohibit any action that interferes with essential services also threaten workers’ right to strike.

The government defended its legislation on the grounds that, once in place, it would protect the lives and security of the British people. Immediately after the September 11 terror attacks, however, Labour claimed that these measures were still not enough and announced plans to rush through new emergency legislation. Under the provisions of an Emergency Anti-Terrorist Bill and Extradition Bill, applications for asylum for those suspected of being members of a terrorist organisation can be rejected without any recourse to appeal or judicial review.

Such were the implications of these measures for civil liberties that the government argued for the “derogation” of Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights, outlawing arbitrary detention and imprisonment, which was only incorporated into British law in 2000.

The British state now has the legally authorised power to arbitrarily arrest and hold any individuals on suspicion of terrorist activity (irrespective of whether it has been carried out), and to deport them from the country, as well as powers to access and seize personal materials that they believe may be related to terrorism.

The latest policy proposals form part of this battery of antidemocratic legislation and not an alternative to it.



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