Future Tasks for Security Agencies in the Fight Against Terrorism

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I believe that we are at war – a war against terror. It is a different sort of war from the wars we have previously fought, against an enemy who is different in some ways – but not every way – from the sorts of enemies that the liberal democracies faced in the twentieth century.

I very much hope that one day the key problems posed by this war will be solved. I am not sure they will be solved, but in the short term we have to take short-term measures to deal with what I believe is a new war. This paper argues that there are four big tasks for the security agencies in the fight against terrorism in the future.

The first of these tasks is to think of ways to help the security and intelligence agencies, and also the British public, to understand the nature of the threat we face. I will argue that the UK agencies did not always properly understand that threat prior to 9/11. In order that they may do so properly today, I believe that that the government should establish what I would call, for want of a better term, a ‘national institute of intelligence excellence’. My argument is that the importance of having excellent intelligence on which the UK security and intelligence community can act is so great that it cannot simply be left to the people who are charged with collecting and analysing intelligence to decide what they should be doing and how they should be doing it. I believe that a national institute of intelligence excellence should exist to add a new dimension to the UK security and intelligence community and introduce fresh thinking into how it goes about its duties.

The second task for the future is to carry out a proper, dispassionate and objective public audit of Britain’s intelligence and security successes and

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failures. I believe that the relevant statutory body – the Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians – is not sufficiently skilled for what has become a vitally important job.

The third task for the future is for the experts in the field to continually remind the public of the nature of the security threat. It is in the nature of human beings that they do not wish to dwell on the unpleasant things in their life. However, people need to be reminded, since public opinion is rightly deemed to be very important in our democracy. I have been very shocked by some of the things that were said in the UK parliament during the debate on anti-terrorism and by parliamentarians on radio and television and in newspapers. Memories can be very short where difficult and unpleasant matters are involved.

The fourth future task for the agencies is to begin work now on a series of much smaller tasks. I have listed several of tasks below.

That is the scope of the argument presented in this paper. These are all specifically targeted tasks that address the future issues facing us in our search for security, bearing in mind that some long-term political solution may or may not be found that would allow us to take a step back. It would be wonderful if this were the case, but I do not believe it will be.

Academics have historically played a remarkable role in the development of British intelligence and security agencies, particularly during their ‘finest hour’ in the Second World War. The great intelligence successes of the United Kingdom at that time may in large part be attributed to the fact that the agencies pulled into the community first-rate minds from academia. Bletchley Park is the obvious example, but it is by no means the only example of the ways in which academics have contributed to national security. They can and should do so today.

Academic skills and talents are also ways of adding value to the analysis of intelligence. It appears that the UK security services, including MI5, for example, are going to have to double the number of officers that they are recruiting. Academics may need to be brought in to make sure these people are properly trained. Indeed, academics may also be needed to advise on recruitment issues that exist when any institution is to be doubled in size. At the moment, the UK intelligence services tend to recruit people a bit like a modelling agency tends to recruit models. It goes for people with self-evident talents, who present straightaway the qualities of potential self-starting intelligence officers, with the necessary personal and analytical skills – just as a particularly pretty face and body are the prime requirements for a model. Perhaps, however, this is not the best way to recruit intelligence officers.