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POLITICAL DISCOURSES ON TERRORISM AND THE ENEMY WITHIN THESIS¹

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Abstract: Resting upon a content analysis of the reported in the press British political discourses on the terrorist threat (Sept. 2001-March 2005), the paper addresses the issue of the framing of the enemy within thesis. The analysis uncovers that, in spite of the growing surveillance of some social groups, government and security officials deny the enemy within thesis. This position has significantly changed since the 2005 terrorist attacks.

One of the major challenges posed to Western democracies by the current terrorist threat is its political definition and further communication on it. The ongoing framing of the threat assessment in the public debate is of an utmost importance in that it forms the justificatory ground of all liable to counter the threat policies, even or rather

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especially when these ones rely on emergency measures. What is at stake then in this process is not merely the temporary maintaining into power of a given government, thanks to in such a way legitimised policy, but the more permanent restrictive reframing of freedom and human rights in the name of the protection of public safety and national security. How is the terrorist threat in EU countries presently defined? What are its core elements and the key themes it is associated with? What is the alleged origin of the threat?

This paper aims to address the latter issue by analysing the reported in the press statements of domestic politicians, opinion leaders and security experts in one of the leading countries in the fight against terrorism in Europe, i.e. the UK, from 11 September 2001 until 12 March 2005, i.e. when the Prevention of Terrorism Bill passed by the House of Commons. The data come from all relevant articles published in the following nationally distributed upmarket daily newspapers: *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. The quantitative and qualitative content analysis revealed that, in the post-September 11th era, the framing of the terrorist threat has relied on a series of themes that, despite their initial irrelevance to terrorism, have ended by being associated with it. These themes serve as reference frames that complete or specify the definition of the threat. One of them has been the Islam/enemy within theme.

The establishment of the Islam-terrorism nexus

The establishment of a close association between terrorism and Islam emerges in 2001 and is identified in only 3 statements. None of them is made by politicians involved in the present political life of the country. The first one is made in 2001 by a former Prime Minister, the second one is made in 2002 by a scholar and the third one in 2004 by a senior police officer. None of them is made in the aftermath of a major terrorist attack.

However, the weakness of the statements that seek to link terrorism with Islam does not imply the absence of this theme from the public debate. The theme is present all over the period covered by this study but as the object of a counter-discourse. The denial of the terrorism-Islam nexus is identified in 14 statements that are made in 2001 (21.4%), 2002 (7.1%), 2003 (7.1%), 2004 (57.1%) and 2005 (7.1%). Most of them are made by the Prime Minister (35.7%), senior police officers (28.5%) and the Home Office (21.4.%). The other ones are made by one member of the opposition (7.1%) and one security expert (7.1%). The Prime Minister accounts for 75% of the 2001 and 2002 statements, and for 25% of the 2004 ones. The police officials are absent from the public debate in 2001, 2002 and 2003 but account for 50% of the 2004 statements.

Initially, the terrorism-Islam nexus refers to Muslim people in general. Muslims are

believed to be linked with terrorism either because they are actively involved in it or because they passively approve it. In the former case, the threat is directly associated with the Islam, which has allegedly been engaged in an anti-Western crusade. What is perceived as a clear example of the 'clash of civilizations' thesis implies that the threat will increasingly grow insofar as "the wider Muslim milieu will continue to produce other terrorist groups", with al-Qaida being "only the vanguard of a global Islamist threat posing the likelihood of a long-term, more or less continuous conflict with the West". When Muslims are not seen as dangerous due to their will to "compete with and challenge the Western influence in the Muslim world", they are denounced for their moral support to terrorist attacks. It is thus stated that there has not been "enough condemnation from Muslim priests [after the 11 September 2001 attacks]. The people who brought down those towers were Muslims, and Muslims must stand up and say that is not the way of Islam".

In the following years, the development of the enemy within thesis shifted the threat from Muslims in general to the specific Muslim communities in the UK. This shift is clearly shown by the expression of the belief that "the major worry is the radicalism of Muslims brought up in this country".

The denial of the Islam-terrorism nexus

However, as it has been mentioned above, these statements remain marginal. On the contrary, the main discourse seeks to deny any association between terrorism and Islam. Many voices, therefore, seek to establish a clear distinction between terrorists and Muslims. This distinction, which aims to decrease the hostility by Muslim people and nations towards the UK, is made, on one hand, with regard to the objective of the current counterterrorism policy and, on the other, with regard to the Muslim community itself.

In the former case, the dissociation relies mainly on the regular recalling of the fact that "we are not waging a war against the people of any country or any faith". Hence, people are not detained at Belmarsh and Woodhill prisons "because they are Islamic [but] because they pose a major threat here and across the world. In tackling terrorism, we do not tackle Islam". The diffusion of the message that "no one is being targeted by police because of their culture or faith" is intensified in 2004, following the conclusions of several opinion polls that many Muslims see the 'war on terror' as a war against Islam, believe that British anti-terrorist laws are being used unfairly against the Muslim community, and feel that Muslims are 'demonized'. This well-grounded opinion in the Muslim community appears to be confirmed a few months later when it is statistically shown that stop and searches under terrorism legislation from 2001-02 to 2002-03 rose

302% for Asians, 230% for black people and 118% for white people. The worries expressed by the Muslim community about the criminalization of young Muslim men are then eased by the recall that Muslims “are arrested because they are terror suspects, not because they are Muslims. We are going after terrorists, not particular races or religions”. The same reaction is produced after the publishing of the Report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. Its conclusion that “there is mounting evidence the powers under the Terrorism Act 2000 are being used disproportionately against members of the Muslim community” is called into question and, once again, it is reminded that the arrests “are not aimed at a particular race, religion, or group”.

The constant recall that counterterrorism measures are implemented following strict security criteria is grounded on the assumption that terrorism “has nothing to do with the true message of Islam”. It is noteworthy that Islam is never seen as a major common feature of an important part of the international political scene. Totally depoliticized, it is solely defined in cultural terms to be presented as a peaceful and tolerant religion, distorted by people pursuing other, non-specified objectives. Hence, the fight against terrorism does not target Muslims but, on the contrary, the illegitimate appropriators of Islam, “those who distort and destroy the name of Islam by using terrorism in a way that was never authorized by the Koran”.

Furthermore, as A. Lazar and M. Lazar have pointed out, the *enemy’s appropriation of religion is thwarted in the discourse by purportedly speaking from the point of view, and on behalf, of the Muslim community at large. This is out-casting done not merely from the position of an “outsider”, but also from an “insider’s”*. In this way, the enemy is alienated from the in-group of Muslim “brotherhood”, disowned and cast as evil from within the faith. By the same token, this form of discourse homogenizes the Muslim community, eroding the diversity of its religious traditions and political orientations. Therefore, far from being generally perceived as potential terrorists, Muslims are constantly presented as members of a community “the overwhelming majority of [which] are law-abiding and completely reject all forms of violence” for they “fully sign up to the values of mainstream society”. A clear line is thus drawn between them and the few extremists, who are unable or unwilling to share the dominant values of both the British society and their own community. The fully integrated Muslims should not be distinguished anymore from ordinary Britons insofar as not only do they not approve terrorism but also they are willing to collaborate with the law enforcement agencies to counter the terrorist threat. Already noted in the immediate aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, when the Prime Minister stated that Muslim leaders had “stood side by side with [him] in Downing Street to deliver not just their condemnation of what

happened on 11 September but also their strong support for bringing those responsible to account and ending terrorism”, the law-abiding attitude of British Muslims has been regularly confirmed ever since. Their collaboration is thus taken for granted, either as a permanent probability (“the majority of the UK’s Islamic community condemn terrorism and would alert the authorities to suspicious groups or individuals”) or as an established reality (“we have a very good relationship with the Muslim community in London”).

The adoption of this position aimed, without doubt, to the maintaining of the social cohesion of the country, in compliance with the dominant multicultural pattern. At the same time, it avoided any further deterioration of the relations with the Arab countries, mainly after the involvement of the UK in the Iraq war. Nevertheless, the denial of the Islam-terrorism nexus in the public debate has not had any significant effect on the effective implementation of anti-terrorism stop and searches that keep on targeting disproportionately young Muslims all over the period covered here.

The aftermath of the 2005 attacks

In the aftermath of the 2005 attacks, this position changes significantly. While government and security officials always seek to defend the dominant post-war multicultural pattern, the enemy within thesis gains momentum in the public debate. Questions are raised as to whether and why the multicultural pattern has failed, and as to what is to be done in order to protect people from those new internal enemies. This position is further developed in 2006, mainly after the foiled attack of last August. One month ago, the director-general of MI5 said the service knew of some 30 plots and had identified 1600 people actively engaged in planning or facilitating terrorist acts in Britain – “some of these plots having links back to al-Qaeda in Pakistan; through these links al-Qaeda gives guidance and training to its largely British foot soldiers here”.

What was then a merely marginal hypothesis became, after the 2005 attacks, a taken-for-granted fact, jeopardising thus social cohesion, by casting doubt on the members of some social groups and stirring up racial and religious hate. That is not meant to deny the genuine threat posed by terrorism on British society. What is called in question is the political use of fear. Such a politically defined and diffused fear has had many functions. First, fear has become the ultimate legitimising basis of domestic policies, the emotional ground allowing the strengthening of the executive at the expense of freedom and human rights. Based on the promise of security, certainty and safety – all of them remedies against the increasing fear – the British government has established a situation of permanent emergency that *brings us back to disciplinary entrenchment as*

protection against terror.

But fear has also been a commanding tool in the power games of political and security agents in their respective fields. While, in a top-bottom direction, it allowed them to strengthen their position towards the people in that it convinced people that it was in their interest to put aside any disobedience, in a service-to-service direction it allowed the reconfiguration of the political and security fields – becoming thus a key factor of the present evolution of these fields.

Fear has also been a social unifying force in that the definition by political leaders of public objects of apprehension presumes that the leaders and people to which they are appealing share a common identity or, at least, should act as if they shared it. The appearance of a common enemy leads to the strengthening of the feeling of belonging and, consequently, to the reinforcement of social cohesion – a value that, precisely, is presently jeopardised both by the British involvement in the Iraq war and the domestic counterterrorism policy.

This is not to deny the existence of a genuine threat. But fear-fuelling statements are of little help against such attacks. Besides, in the aftermath of the 2005 attacks, the government communication was mainly based on fear-calming and reassuring statements. This is not to deny either the right of the people to be informed on an upcoming danger. But this right is meaningless unless the information on the danger helps the people to be protected from it. Information on danger is socially useful when it entails a dynamic and rational relation with people in that it can enhance their chances to find the way to a safer future. Yet, all the fear-fuelling statements made during the period studied here were static in that they merely stressed the potentially multiform presence of danger without somehow linking the dangerous present to a safer future. In other words, they solely sought to achieve their goal by appealing to the emotional rather than rational part of the targeted population. For what good is to be reminded, day after day, that terrorists may attack anytime, anywhere and under any form if that knowledge, at worst, indicates the limits of any possible protection or, at best, leads to no other protection than the one proposed by the government, which, precisely, cannot be implemented unless people accept the restriction of their civil liberties?