This essay is concerned with the moral oxygen for Islamist-inspired terrorism in Western countries, i.e. those supplying, often without knowing, the tacit support for both violence and the legitimacy of direct action in support of shared goals. The kinds of intervention needed to tackle terror plots directly will be distinctive and differ from those needed to address the problem of those who 'look the other way'. But the effects of one kind of policy will often be felt, in some degree, by all Muslims. Some of the most sophisticated approaches to counter-terrorism are supposed to act with the precision of a slingshot, singling out the various targets in an accurate and predictable fashion. However, there has, in practice, been something of a boomerang effect, whereby counter-terrorism measures have spawned unintended side-effects which have swung back to damage the reputation of government and the security and intelligence communities. This article discusses these tensions and suggests new and innovative ways to maximise slingshot impacts while minimising, if not avoiding altogether, the public detriment created by boomerang effects.

Keywords: Muslims; Islamism; Counter-Terrorism; Public Policy

The terrorist attacks on London's public transportation system in July 2005 are said to have 'changed things forever’. In one word, 'forever', it is, of course, possible to see both everything and nothing. The London bombings were a pivotal moment without doubt, causing many to alter their thinking and sometimes even their position and behaviour. The then-Prime Minister spoke directly of the impact on policy-makers, claiming that 'the rules of the game have changed'. And coming within a few years of the New York City attacks, the London bombings were almost immediately dubbed
as Britain’s 9/11; confirmation, if it were needed, that Western nations were collectively subject to a global, jihadist-inspired threat.

The immediate response after 9/11 was rapid escalation of a security-based policy to meet a narrowly defined security challenge. However, arguably the most important chain reaction stemming from 7/7 has been the realisation that such acts of home-grown terror necessarily require a circle of tacit support in order to succeed. It is now widely understood that tacit supporters are critical to Al Qaeda-inspired, or indeed any other kind of, terrorism. They are needed to provide logistical backing in the form of funding, transportation, safe housing, explosives expertise and so on. Others are needed to offer an intelligence radar to the conspirators in order to avoid detection. And yet others are indirectly drawn into plots by either looking the other way or placing pressure on others to do so. But all are involved in one very particular way, namely in supplying the moral oxygen through which acts of terror are condoned or at least not condemned.

If draining the swamp characterised the initial phase of policy to tackle terrorism threats, the emphasis since the 2005 London attacks has shifted markedly. Disrupting the well of sympathy for the objectives and motives of such terrorism has emerged as the biggest strategic challenge in counter-terrorism policy. Identifying interventions that serve that end is therefore a key implicit aim of this essay.

With this shift in mind, this study focuses on those who provide the moral oxygen for Islamist terrorism in Western countries. This sub-set of Muslims supply a kind of tacit support for both violence and the legitimacy of direct action in support of shared goals. Provocatively, they have been dubbed as fence-sitters on terror, although it is clear that sometimes their role is unknowingly to give implicit backing to men of violence. This essay looks at the by-product of three inter-related and partly-overlapping groups: those who are peaceful and non-violent, those who equivocate on political violence, and those who are closely involved in violence and violent conspiracies. This interplay between them sets the context of policies and initiatives to combat Islamist terrorism aimed at Western liberal democracies. The kinds of intervention needed to tackle terror plots will be distinctive and differ from those needed to address fence-sitters, if they can be dubbed as such. Both targets, in turn, need to be distanced from measures aimed at the peaceful majority.

But herein lies the rub, since not all interventions can be relied on to differentiate with such precision. Moreover, all Muslims will, to some extent, feel the effects of one kind of policy. The result can, and often has been to, aggregate together targets and remedies, when the strategy has called for disaggregation and precision. Acting, as they should, with slingshot precision, some of the most sophisticated approaches to counter-terrorism (hereafter CT) accurately identify the various targets, whilst appealing to very distinctive concerns and interests that lie near, or beyond, the actual problem. In practice, however, this has resulted in something of a boomerang effect, with CT measures causing unintended side-effects which in turn have swung back to damage government and the security and intelligence communities.
The study comprises four main parts. In the first two sections, various changes in CT experience and thinking are outlined, paying particular attention to the importance of influencing tacit supporters of extremism and terrorism. The third section looks at the central narrative of grievance and humiliation that has underpinned both those who have been inspired by radical Islamist politics and those who have been prepared to identify with those radical aims. In the fourth section, the discussion shifts to examine the lessons for CT strategy and for preventing radicalisation and extremism. This discussion is set in the context of how prevention can be induced by influencing thinking and behaviour among tacit supporters, and deals more explicitly with the key policy lessons of this study so as to minimise boomerang and maximise slingshot effects in the future.

**Madrid, London and Beyond**

The reactions to the attacks against Western states (in London and Madrid in particular) have themselves shaped public policy thinking. As mentioned previously, a key aspect of these reactions has been a growing recognition that there existed significant levels of previously unregistered sympathy for the underlying aims of Islamist terrorism. The circle of tacit support, as this phenomenon became known, was initially highlighted within government in 2003, and drew, in part, on the insights gained from studies of political violence and terrorism in Northern Irish, Basque and Quebecois conflicts. It later gained some wider currency among senior commentators, analysts and policy-makers.

At one end of the spectrum, highly vocal, community-based organisations sought to use 7/7 as evidence that the vast majority of British Muslims were, and remained, peaceful and moderate citizens under pressure. The attacks, so the argument ran, were the work of extremists without wider backing in their communities. This emphasis on a few isolated extremists was nested within a wider strategy that has sought to incorporate majority opinion among Muslims into mainstream, democratic society. In the words of Britain’s then-Communities Minister, Ruth Kelly, the overarching aim is to ‘send a message about being proud to be British, proud to be Muslim’ (Salzburg Seminar 2007).

At the other end of the spectrum, sterner critics of government strategy have argued, with effect, two things. First, that the bombings shattered not just lives but also Britain’s delusional belief that jihadists could be tolerated on British soil without the risk of spillage. This argument has been especially critical of the security and intelligence agencies for their complacency in failing to respond to mounting evidence of violent conspiracies. Second, that numerous public agencies and officials—ranging from policing to border control and higher education—had come to believe and behave as if the overall threat had been greatly exaggerated. The activities of jihadist-type movements on some British university campuses have been cited as one example of the willingness of public authorities to turn a blind eye to the seriousness of the problem.
Shortly after the Madrid bombings in early March 2004, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) came under pressure to take pre-emptive action in the face of suggestions that similar events might occur in the UK. Prior to the 3/11 bombings of the Madrid commuter trains, the broad consensus had been against the idea of a generalised, anti-Western terror campaign. And yet intelligence reports had pointed to real and present threats in Spain, France, Britain, Germany and the Netherlands prior to the Madrid attacks. Despite growing evidence of this sort, very little political capital existed in Britain, nor indeed in other West European counties, to avert or prepare for a specific incident on such a scale. In short, it was widely thought that this was a possibility remote enough to warrant more inaction—where others sought more action. The events in Madrid brought much of this mindset into question.

The MCB initiative was launched in late March 2004 and involved a *de facto* edict to be read out during Friday prayers in all of the mosques affiliated to the Council. Inevitably, the launch was not accompanied by any specific information or guidance concerning implementation of what, in effect, was a request for member mosques to follow (and be seen to follow) a policy line. As a voluntary umbrella organisation, the Council necessarily lacked the infrastructure and capacity to ensure that its policy position was dutifully followed or even backed by a supportive network at grassroots level. One anecdotal report suggested that the MCB edict was meaningfully deployed at the grassroots level in perhaps 10–15 per cent of member mosques. In the vast bulk, therefore, it was consigned, in effect, to the wastepaper basket. To be sure, one of the acid criticisms of MCB prior to, and even following, March 2004, has been its apparent willingness to go along with the strident, and sometimes notorious, viewpoints of its membership. This episode exemplified for many the underlying fault line in the MCB’s position and, by extension, in government strategy that had become allied with the MCB.

The edict followed months, if not years, of mainly private discussions within the Council’s ranks. A well-organised fringe within its membership had pursued an argument that was doubtful of the value of close association and cooperation with the government’s CT policy. Indeed, this sentiment has been regularly expressed beyond the politics of MCB. It has emphasised the perceived lack of credibility of such a position in the eyes of more alienated, younger Muslims. And MCB’s broadly moderate leadership has also come under attack, sometimes in public, from more radical groups and individuals. For example, in the May 2005 general election campaign, MCB’s general-secretary, Iqbal Sacranie, held a campaign event for the major political parties that was deliberately and very publicly undermined by a threatening, radical contingent.

It took events to break the deadlock. The counter-view, favouring cooperation, was eventually pushed through by the turbulence created immediately after Madrid. This held that responsible, moderate leadership within British Muslim communities could not afford to sideline the threat posed by a radical fringe. Whatever else this position took, it could not afford to be seen to be impotent in the face of direct threats of terror. In an almost cynical twist of logic, the idea gained currency that MCB, at least,
had to ‘get its excuses in first’. If it did not, then public anger against even moderate Muslims following an attack on UK soil, would, it concluded, be vented against MCB and its allies in government.

It also exposed a broader point. However much this particular behaviour might be criticised or defended, its significance stems from the broader dilemma it raises for Western Muslims. Tending towards cooperation with, and involvement in, CT security policies is obviously an important dimension. But it remains just a single, albeit prominent, dimension of a wider debate regarding participation by Muslims in mainstream society and its values and institutions (Arthur 2005). The relationship between Muslims and CT policy can therefore be viewed as symptomatic of wider engagement, or its absence.

The wider debate has emerged as one of the most challenging and vexed concerns facing Western democracies. It is not strictly the remit of this study, but it nevertheless underscores the politics of what can, and cannot, be realistically attained through effective CT policies.3

Two leading French commentators, Gilles Kepel and Oliver Roy, have put forward the argument that most Western liberals have massively under-estimated the nature and purpose of political Islam in the West. The former has highlighted the flaws of an accommodationist posture between moderates and government, suggesting that radical forces can neither be tamed by this approach, nor be encouraged to accept deeply threatening pluralist ideas and values for their own sake (Kepel 2004). The latter has gone further in claiming that Western Islam amounts to the most vocal and active branch of a globalised Islam that is well-advanced in threatening the purpose of Western secular society (Roy 2004). Both these viewpoints combine with others to conclude that participatory policies to promote integration are little more than wrong-headed (at best) and even disingenuous and dangerous (at worst).4

Meanwhile, within Western Muslim communities, the broad non-accommodationist line of thinking has certainly chimed to some degree. It highlights the limitations of balancing faith-based identity with secular politics and political culture. It also serves to promote, however unintentionally, a victim-oriented style of political mobilisation. And, lastly, it greatly increases the odds that CT security measures will be viewed with suspicion and a lack of legitimacy. The MCB edict, therefore, amounted to an exception to prove a general rule of social isolation and mutual mistrust.

Conspirators and Sympathisers

If the Kepelian stance is seen by some as too one-sided and pessimistic, it is balanced by other accounts that stress the dynamic nature of changing Western Muslim identity and politics. Jytte Klausen’s detailed study of Muslim leadership points in this direction and concludes that various forms of day-to-day accommodation already populate the landscape of Muslim communities (Klausen 2005). The inference that might reasonably be taken from this argument is that legitimacy is generally attached
to participation in mainstream society, and that mainly practical, rather than principled, barriers stand in the way of integration policies.

It is this interpretation that is further probed in this essay, not least in terms of its implications for combating Islamic terrorism. The central test, for policy-makers searching for a credible CT policy, remains the degree and intensity of ambivalence or indifference towards political violence in the name of Islam.

Looking the Other Way . . .

The current evidence outlining attitudes among Western Muslim communities contains a number of concerns. But this body of data can also include some inconclusive elements. For instance, a recent Gallup World Poll project found that between 5 and 10 per cent of Muslims surveyed in Britain, France and Germany accepted that the use of violence was justified in aid of a noble cause, however subjectively defined (Gallup 2007). Interestingly, and rather confusingly, this 1-in-10 group roughly matched the proportions in the general public of each country who endorsed this stance. In both cases, very strong and similar majorities condemned the use of violence in all circumstances. This is the case even though it might have been expected that Muslim respondents would embody a greater implicit identification with political grievances in the Middle East that are already deeply embroiled in violence.

Other surveys paint a less hopeful picture. In 2006, in the aftermath of the Danish cartoons controversy, various surveys polled British Muslims on their attitudes towards extremism and violence. An ICM poll for The Daily Telegraph reported that an astonishing 20 per cent of British Muslims agreed that they held ‘some sympathy with the feelings and motives of those who carried out the London attacks’. This equates to just shy of a third of a million individuals. And some 7 per cent felt that ‘There are circumstances in which I would condone suicide bombings on UK soil’, according to a Populus survey commissioned by The Times. This proportion equals more than 100,000 British Muslims. Some 10 per cent could not, or would not, say whether the London bombings were right or wrong. A more focused FOSIS survey looking at Muslim students in higher and further education noted that 4 per cent of respondents were unable or unwilling to condemn the perpetrators of the London bombings (FOSIS 2005). A number of Channel Four commissioned surveys have indicated widespread mistrust among British Muslims about the factual portrayal of the London attacks. One even reported that around a fifth held enough doubts about the signatories of the attacks to include a role for the British intelligence services. In two other surveys by Sky Communicate Research and YouGov, the great majority of British Muslims refused to justify the suicide attacks (91 per cent in the former poll). However, some 2 to 6 per cent agreed that they were justified—or, to extrapolate crudely, a pool of between 22,000 and 66,000 individuals. Finally, a more recent MORI survey showed that between 10 and 20 per cent of British Muslims thought that they had been manipulated in some way about the role of Muslims in suicide
terror missions. A similar proportion went on to admit a meaningful sympathy for the core goals of terrorists that extended to an understanding of their instruments of action.

Each of these snapshots has reinforced the view that tacit supporters of terrorism are possibly as large a challenge to policy-makers as the agents of acts of terror themselves. One obvious lesson, post 7/7, has been that the CT policy community has focused too heavily on angry conspiracies of violence, thus taking its collective eyes off those who surround, and tacitly support and condone, violence.

Elsewhere the author has been reported as arguing that the wrong model of CT is as dangerous as terrorism itself (Blick et al. 2007: 16–17). This is because there is a significant ‘big known’ in understanding that has been poorly acknowledged in policy and politics. According to a recent Rowntree report on the subject:

Religious and political extremism, and a mixture of understanding and sympathy for those who turn to violence, exists on a large scale among Britain’s Muslim communities. Most commentary on the attitudes towards terrorism among the Muslim communities in the UK rightly asserts the law-abiding and moderate nature of Britain’s Muslims (Blick et al. 2007: 16).

But the attention of policy-makers has now fallen on the ‘fence-sitters’ who may provide a ring of practical and moral backing for terrorists, ranging from sympathy to logistical support—and silence. This necessitates a shift of conceptual lens so as to understand, persuade and if necessary challenge the ‘fence-sitters’. And this, to be sure, is at least as big a job as bearing down on actual terrorists themselves.

Dilemmas and Dogmas

It is a moot point whether the job of penetrating the circle of tacit support is aided or deflected by further—and finer—interpretations placed on such findings. It may be that such results show that Western Muslims are aware that they are caught on the horns of a dilemma; or that they are reflections on the perpetual human condition that is drawn to sympathy for kith and kin, however misguided others may see this. Or again that:

They suggest no more than that Muslims are willing to try and understand and empathise with the feelings they think the young bombers were experiencing. The confused and equivocal response of young Muslims . . . gives some context to these findings. There is an element of ‘fence-sitting’ here, but it is not the whole story (Blick et al. 2007: 15).

There are three main implications of these findings. First, the silence and support of the tacit circle is critical because it is only when that circle is penetrated that terrorism loses its moral backing. Secondly, in pursuing success within and around the circle, policy-makers have to judge whether their actions and words are delivering, unintentionally, greater harm than good. Finally, there are many things and levels
of debate that can drive an unnecessary and unhelpful wedge between faith identity
groups, making overall success even more elusive.

**Humiliation and Grievance Politics**

The discussion so far has dwelt on the need to understand and address the wider
causes and symptoms of security threats. In particular, this means looking at
sympathy for the political agenda of Islamist terrorism. This adds a new, and largely
helpful, lens to the picture facing the policy community. But the logic of taking a
more fine-grained approach can be extended further—it becomes quickly apparent
that the granular character of the aims of political violence is important and worth
closer inspection.

There are a number of things on the list for closer scrutiny. High in the running
order is the widely held perception that Islamist terrorism has, in part, been
fermented by the actions and inactions of Western liberal democracies. In some
quarters this argument is seen as a so-called political unmentionable, inferring that
there is a sensitivity and selectivity in policy-makers’ approach to examining the
underlying causes of terror. It is not so vital that this argument is tested rigorously
here, since its significance is based on the general perception of selectivity. In other
words, if enough critics and doubters of CT strategy and policy are concerned
about the basic reputation of Western governments, then it is prudent to
take seriously their worry. To fail to do so, is, in essence, another case of a
proverbial 800lb gorilla that conspicuously sits, unmentioned, in the corner of the
room.

So what does it mean to suggest that the reputation of Western secular societies is
in fact linked to the causes of terrorism? This viewpoint can lead to a number of
largely unconnected observations and issues. For example, *in extremis*, it can serve to
suggest that ‘The West’ has, and remains, determined to subjugate rival ideological
traditions, thus spawning an appetite for resistance and political violence. This is,
without doubt, a massively overplayed form of convenient exaggeration, spiked with
a generous dose of reductionist thinking. It is not, therefore, worthy of serious
discussion here.

**The Un-Said and Un-Heard**

Nevertheless, it does prompt a more credible answer to the question as to what
remains un-said. The most profitable way of answering this is by probing the
historical-ideological narrative within which the politics of grievance is couched. In
the case of Islamist political grievance, it is not a narrative that is especially hard to
decipher. Much of this narrative centres on particular critical nodes which can be
identified. These include, but are not limited to, the following few key issues
highlighted in the 2007 report of the Commonwealth Secretariat:
the sense of double standards permeating the relationships between powerful Western nations and less powerful Muslim nations;

• the frustration and alienation that have arisen as a result of perceived one-sided interventions and policies in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict specifically and across the Middle East generally;

• the tendency towards autocratic, unaccountable governance in many Muslim societies; and

• the reputation of Western secular traditions as oppressive in their treatment of Muslims living in Western countries.

Of course this is a lengthy and very broad-ranging list of grievances, which may only skim over several other important points of friction. Moreover, these critical nodes of narrative themselves contain very large sub-set stories and controversies, some of which have almost no credible link with the political grievances that dominate the political landscape. But this narrative nevertheless subsumes the main structural aspects of modern religio-political ideologies that see global Islam as in conflict with Western liberal democracies. The narrative is, therefore, one that spans as much of the territory of collective grievance as possible whilst retaining an overall, simplified coherence. Put another way, it would be odd to discover that some aspect of these four nodes did not resonate in some significant way with the attitudes and perceptions of the vast majority of Muslims, and particularly those living in Western societies.

Some parts of the broad narrative of grievance will undoubtedly chime more among certain Western Muslim communities than others. Indeed, the evidence supports this kind of disaggregation of generalised grievance. For example, British Pakistani-origin Muslims, particularly those drawn from Kashmiri roots, have historically been closely linked with the claim that Western one-sidedness has, so the argument goes, turned a blind eye to resolving fairly the dispute with India over Kashmir. Other Muslim communities, especially Western Palestinian exiles, have gravitated around the dispute over the West Bank and Gaza. But almost all Western Muslims have found that the controversies over the creed of Western secularism have touched them. For instance, the very public rows in several countries over publication of the Danish cartoons in 2005–06 had very broad resonance across Western Muslim communities. And the earlier fall-out from the murder of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands has been felt across both Europe and North America.

Returning to the question of the character of grievance, these assorted disputes and controversies can often remain disjointed. But the logic of political Islam has been to weave these issues together and to do so in a way that is presented as part of a coherent, overarching world view. Practitioners (very few) and proponents (rather more) of political violence both require, and function on the basis of, such an ideological world view. They may require it for somewhat different reasons and might deploy its force to arrive at different conclusions, but both depend in some way on
a rationale for embracing, or remaining indifferent towards, political violence. Such a rationale, if it could be described, is hallmarked by the sentiment and emotions of group humiliation. Accordingly, one-sidedness, instrumentalism and strident secularism are all obvious and predictable components of a behaviour that sets out to humiliate Muslims at large. And, even if it lacks this core motive, the rationale goes on to stress that Western secularism has been indifferent to Muslim feelings of hurt, humiliation and dishonour.

This is a powerful recipe for the idea of political victimhood that sees Western Muslims in particular as forever outsiders whose presence and very identity are regularly and openly questioned. Indeed, the issue of the political and national loyalties of Muslims is a regular feature of public debates about the integrative appetite of Muslims and the absorptive capacities of Western societies.

Objective-Real Versus Subjective-Imagined

The discussion began by noting that the appeal of Islamist terrorism lay in the murky waters of hidden sympathies for the goals of men of violence. Such men may be widely seen as misguided in their tools but their sense of duty to a cause was, if anything, quietly admired in many circles. The logic of this observation was that policy-makers should invest more effort into gaining an understanding of the complex politics of grievance and humiliation. That is not to suggest that political violence can be better tackled by directly addressing such grievances. But it is to argue something rather more nuanced, namely that policies that bring about changes in the objective world (even if these are rapid and favour those with grievances) may deliver proportionately rather few advances in combating terror.

This is because the nature of political humiliation is less firmly rooted in the objective, real world that operates along the measurable dimensions of conventional public policy. In fact, the argument pursued here suggests that grievance and humiliation are mainly nested in the subjective imagined world, the dimensions of which are usually historically narrow, self-reinforcing and with strong disincentives to change.

To be sure, many observers of the dynamics of contemporary global Islam report that the profound sense of the honour or dignity of Muslims is under attack. A perception of humiliation, at the hands of Western secularly minded governments and publics, is a core element of the narrative:

Muslims are acutely aware that they belong to a world civilisation with great influence in the past and are today again a large presence in the world. Their anger and frustration stems from the fact that in spite of the splendour of the past and the widespread influence of the present they seem powerless in the face of attacks on their honour and dignity (Ahmed 2006).
'Righting the Wrong'

At the individual level, it is also worth looking at the particular reasons that serve to drive rage and extremism. In addition, the circumstantial factors surrounding individuals who have engaged in terrorism can be revealing, not least because certain patterns are evident but also because many presumed traits are in fact not confirmed by the evidence. Most obviously, the vast bulk of Muslim violent conspirators and terrorists have, to date, had very little connection to, or knowledge of, social and economic disadvantage. And very few have sought to reference their ideas and motives in terms of exclusion, opting instead to lay stress on the much larger and settled narrative of grievance and humiliation.

Put together, a picture emerges in which the experience of profound shaming and humiliation provides a context within which an unquenchable desire for vengeance develops. Terrorists and terrorism, therefore, are nested in the idea of 'righting the wrong'. Direct action, sometimes coordinated and collective, sometimes more opportunistic, is the outcome.

The immediate trigger can be almost impossible to identify in this context. In some cases it will stem from close personal association with the perceived 'wrong', typically involving a family member or personal friend. But in many, many cases there is no direct proximity. The 'wrong to be righted' may be largely the product of generalised sentiment, perhaps responding to stimuli that have been generated by website chatrooms or equivalent. The fuel created by this combination of narrative and behaviour feeding off each other can be and has been considerable, although it has been under-researched to date and is worth much greater attention in the future, not least because of the underlying patchiness in the literature on the causes of radicalisation among Western Muslim communities.

Taking the above analytical logic a step further involves filling a gap in research knowledge as a matter of urgency. Examining the various causes behind, and causal interplay between, radicalisation as a phenomenon involves probing two largely missing elements. The first is a broader disciplinary input that exploits the insights of social psychology as well as social psychiatry in teasing out the ways in which anger and vengeance are shaped and triggered through sentiment around group humiliation. Other and/or earlier chapters of terrorism, spanning those centred on nationalistic and political ideologies, are likely to be worth closer examination. A significant extant literature can be mined to begin with, as an initial part of a better understanding of group-based solidarity that underpins the general appeal of political violence for those who engage in it as well as those who indirectly or directly identify with its motives.

The second missing element goes beyond harnessing a wider disciplinary perspective. It focuses on identifying the patterns, such that exist, in causal relationships that allow humiliation to connect with violence. This is a potentially murky task and not one to be undertaken casually without firm boundaries. The core proposition is that a sentiment around humiliation, once shared across a like-minded
identity group, can link to an increased likelihood that violent political behaviour will result. This is a fairly bald summary and it is not in itself designed to have any special predicative quality. But it is a starting point that can be amended or revisited in order better to understand a range of closely related hypotheses.

This essay is not the right place to undertake a comprehensive hypothesis tree-building exercise. However, there is a strong case to map causal links in this way and to highlight where cumulative effects that raise the odds of violent expression are most likely to be felt. For instance, the humiliation–violence nexus obviously requires an appreciation of context. This contextual backdrop can take various distinct forms. Is it, for instance, useful to take account of a specific narrative of historic injustice, whether perceived or actual? This approach might lead to a theory of historic compensatory rights, much like the intellectual foundations that underscored the United States’ facing up to slavery and racism in the form of civil rights and affirmative action policies. Such a chapter, of course, was not entirely peaceful and on many occasions was marked by an appeal to, and appetite for, political violence. Such violence was not entirely random in its narrative: one aspect of it related to an appetite for vengeance for injustices; another, meanwhile, related to bleak assessments about the willingness of the political process to bend and adapt to the task of the full political emancipation of black US citizens.

This example can also be instructive in showing how humiliation alone is unlikely to drive the appeal of political violence. That is to say, in the case of black political and social emancipation in the US, there is good reason to take account of group feelings around hopelessness and despair. These are closely related sentiments and can often be held individually (in which case they become harder to penetrate and understand), or be nurtured generally among groups (making it rather easier to measure and appreciate).

**Hopelessness and Despair**

Closer examination may reveal that the sense of hopelessness is likely to come to the fore, because of the circumstances in which there is a known absence of legitimate means to marshal and express widely held grievances. In pre-democratic South Africa, for instance, the system and ideology of Apartheid meant that such means were either very scarce or often tainted. In the case of Palestinian grievances going back to 1967 or even 1948, hopelessness has plainly emerged in many quarters as a result of the short supply of co-existence frameworks that have been implemented. The 2006 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza constituted a rare exception to a general rule; likewise in relation to the surrender of the Sinai a generation ago. The grievance that has resulted is far from unusual or unexpected, given the glacial pace of change since 1967. What is significant, arguably, is the fairly direct link between the Palestinian predicament on the one hand and, on the other, the widespread identification with their hopelessness among Muslims globally.
As regards despair, this is again a closely related sentiment but with a somewhat dissimilar attached narrative. It refers mainly to a loss of patience with available routes through which to express grievance rather than their complete absence. It is, therefore, about a group’s sense of giving up, having tried, perhaps, over several attempts. In the case of some British Muslims it is this kind of despair that lies beneath protests over the scope and efficacy of CT policies. Many of these policies are only effective to the extent that they are partnered with transparent measures to build communication between policing and security agencies and local communities. That is to say, community-based CT by its nature builds in a participatory channel for Muslim communities and minority groups in general. The intelligence upon which effective CT measures are based will come from a variety of sources, including the communities in which conspiracies of terrorism take place.

However, there is a rub. This is that community cooperation with policing and security services is not just a one-way street. It is an exchange, a trade between both sides. On one side, CT agencies require tangible information and leads to allow them to organise and deploy their resources effectively and preventatively. And communities require two things in exchange: firstly, confidence that CT responses are highly focused on tackling those at the core of violent conspiracies, rather than measures that appear to be closer to proverbial fishing expeditions which serve only to implicate by-standers. Most notoriously, the flawed anti-terrorism raid in May 2006 in Forest Gate, an inner-East-London neighbourhood, stands out as a major failure in this regard. Follow-up inquiries have revealed that it was always likely to miss its poorly evidenced target, and that it was marred by a series of circumstantial leaps.

Secondly, they require a firm basis for collectively believing that Muslims at large are not being victimised or pressurised as part of a CT strategy. Of course, it almost goes without saying that the latter is something that is unlikely or exaggerated, when there are daily reminders of this anxiety on all sides. Not only have arrests become commonplace in Britain in the past few years but many Muslim community organisations have responded to these arrests with an air of disbelief. It is striking how much such protests have been couched in a language that suggests a wider sense whereby Muslims have been singled out for scrutiny which borders on group harassment. Some of this is not misplaced. A private poll carried out in 2005, shortly before the 7/7 attacks, showed that four-fifths of the British public thought that ‘most Muslims are not terrorists’; more depressingly, however, a similar four-fifths agreed that ‘most terrorists are Muslims’. The idea that public concerns about terrorism as embedded in the public reputation of British Muslims appears inescapable.

Taking Broad Preventative Action

All this implies that the causal relationships behind radicalisation and terrorism are not entirely random. That is, these may be worth breaking down to obtain a better grasp of particular aspects of the narrative around grievance and humiliation. What is clear is that, within the array of conspiracies and plots that have been uncovered and
even brought to prosecution, there are a number of recurring themes that speak 
loudly about the manner in which loosely framed disaffection crystallises into 
something tangible. This crystallisation appears not to take shape at the individual 
level but rather at the level of group consciousness. For this reason alone, a wider 
interdisciplinary study of radicalisation and extremism is sorely needed. What is 
required is a robust way of understanding what allows general causes to turn into 
specific drivers. Rigorous modelling of this relationship may prove elusive but teasing 
out stronger versus weaker aspects of the relationship is certainly attainable. 

This matters not least in order to challenge the conventional wisdom about 
preventative strategy, itself sometimes presented in isolated terms from new thinking 
on preventative strategy (Swain 2007). This suggests that taking any kind of 
preventative action can be meaningless, since trigger episodes are as much random 
as recurring. The evidence in fact points to something between these points, namely 
that flashpoints of tension, further grievance and even potential terrorism targets can 
be effectively identified. A handful of generalisations can be sketched on the existing 
evidence base:

- **Eye-catching targets.** The targets of terrorism tend to vary a lot in nature, location 
  and circumstance. And yet, in the case of Al Qaeda-inspired terrorism, it is 
  apparent that the perpetrators have shared motivations. That is to say, they are 
motivated by a desire to show that their actions will lead to a sense of 
  powerlessness among Western governments. The 9/11 attacks were, *per force*, a 
tangible illustration of such overwhelming (though temporary) weakness of a 
  super-power. At the most basic level, then, the flashpoint arose from the driving 
  force of those inspired by humiliation.

- **Second-order terrorism targets.** The difficulties encountered by active conspirators 
in executing attacks against prime, World Trade Center-type targets, has had a 
knock-on impact. A number of less spectacular, but equally valuable, targets have 
come into view. In numerous cases these have retained a fixation with civil 
aviation, a powerful consumer industry that many ordinary citizens of Western 
societies easily relate to. This is not a random choice of targets since it allows 
terrorists to demonstrate an ability to overcome the complexity of a sophisticated 
industrial sector. Potential attacks on water supplies, civil nuclear power and other 
forms of mass transit all share the same hallmark. The driving force appears to 
dwell on a ‘David-versus-Goliath’ logic that is itself a metaphor for the asymmetry 
of power relationships between ‘The West’ and others.

- **The cultural Grand Canyon.** Some media portrayals can serve to exacerbate the 
narrative of oppositional forces and irreconcilable, value-based differences. This is 
reflected in media coverage of rows over headscarves, television comedy, school 
religious curricula, and even in the turbulence of Salman Rushdie’s knighthood. 
Cumulatively these and many other examples can easily become underscored by an 
imPLICIT assumption that Western and Islamic identities and values are culturally at 
 odds with each other. Bi-polarism, in other words, can become the core prism
through which more complex differences are seen and understood. Therefore, responses need to go beyond softening such portrayals and instead question fundamentally the idea that the Western and Islamic worlds are polar opposites. One response is to invest in cultural cosmopolitanism as a way of handling and managing ethno-religious pluralism. Investment in this sphere can be extended so as to minimise the frequency and spillover of shrill, violent encounters. The underlying driving force, otherwise, is a tendency towards high-profile, undignified spats between leaders who adopt a winner-takes-all approach to political and religious representation.

- **Nurturing internationalism.** The bigger task, faced by media professionals and thought leaders at large, is to develop a more critical and dynamic understanding of international issues. Such an understanding may be required as much in Islamic societies as it is in Western ones (Atran 2006). And its reach can be potentially large, given the Huntingtonian mindset that characterises and over-simplifies day-to-day debates, especially those concerning Muslims in Western countries. The UN Alliance of Civilisations report, published in spring 2006, made play of this as a priority. It argued that corrective measures would greatly help to inform publics in a range of countries to take a balanced view about these issues. In the absence of such interventions, the driving force towards extremism is based on poorly informed publics who are not fully equipped to hold to account political leaders who champion a one-dimensional view of Muslim versus Western identity.

- **Religious and ethnic sensitisation of public policy.** Sensitisation to ethnic and religious diversity in public policy, especially when delivering public services, is another important area in which to develop common understanding in order to reduce friction and misunderstanding. This is an area where an early investment in delivering greater awareness has been controversial in Britain and elsewhere. The main drawback has been the danger of a public backlash that perceives such sensitisation efforts as overplayed and counter-productive. On the positive side of the ledger, meanwhile, there are other things to consider. Although the links to political violence are non-existent, it remains the case that many Western Muslim leaders regularly complain about the oppressive qualities of ‘secular fundamentalism’. Public policies that are appropriately and proportionately designed to take into account the legitimate sensitivities of different faith groups are, therefore, a powerful counter-balance to such complaints.

- **Avoiding over-reach.** These religious sensitisation policy adjustments may be successfully identified in principle but they can prove hard to deliver in practical terms. For example, rebalancing the dietary policies of schools and hospitals can be done often with minimal controversy but the content of the religious education curriculum or dress codes in state schools often results in heated local disputes. By extension, policies to expand faith schools that are funded through public resources have, in Britain, attracted enormous dispute. With these practical reservations in mind, it is only fair to say that some such policies, or an excess of zeal in implementing or defending their indirect consequences, can serve to create
new political problems. For instance, religious sensitisation policy agendas might seek to deliver outcomes that protect certain faith groups from offence of one kind or another. This is terribly difficult to do in a mature liberal democracy and is likely to be wrong-headed in the sense that liberal democracies can seek to curb offence that is designed to incite hatred or violence, where this link is reasonably direct, but these political systems cannot automatically offer shields from criticism of one group by another. The goal of religious sensitisation is therefore one that should be seen in its context, namely to rebalance and adjust policies and programmes that unintentionally exclude religious minorities, particularly unpopular ones. This goal can be chimerical if it is used to shield faith communities entirely from critical comment, and can contribute to the underlying problem. Meanwhile, those attracted to, or prepared to excuse, political violence are keen to emphasise anti-Muslim oppression, real or imagined. Suitably sensitised public policies in schools, employment, housing and so on, can, if well managed, provide a rival narrative of inclusion and mutual respect. The value of this narrative is that it can, at least partially, offset a narrative of deterministic religious conflict in reminding warring parties that Muslims and non-Muslims share many other identities beyond faith.

- Respecting the right of belief. Arguably the bigger, regular disruptor of Muslim/non-Muslim understanding and relations have been public disputes over religious belief and the public domain. These have generated a considerable number of flashpoints in a wide range of fields, including artistic and theatrical expression, journalistic comment, party political mobilisation and popular entertainment. The heated controversy surrounding Robert Kilroy-Silk's unalloyed views of Arab societies and values, published by a British national newspaper in 2002, was a typical case in point. It is, of course, too simplistic to argue that greater effort can and should be made to promote recognition of the right of groups to hold distinctive beliefs and belief ideologies. The inability of some groups to enjoy this right has often been responsible for their grievances. But airing grievances alone will not obviously lead to less tension: the opposite can result if this is dominated by grievance politics attached to perpetrators or guilty parties. The driver towards radicalisation stems from extremists' preference to blur the right of belief with the airing of grievance. In fact the two can often be effectively interwoven into a single, all-encompassing narrative of a global, generalised attack on Islam.

Obtaining Better CT Results

Thinking over the longer term, the argument pursued here might be extended to ask what British CT policy has done, concretely, to address or to affect the tacit circle of support for terrorism. It has been widely conceded that the effects have been two-way. For instance, the overriding risk with legislative measures to criminalise the glorification of terror is that this can be both hard to endorse and smothered by
subjective, intense feeling. If applied to individual Muslims, without regard to their role in leadership, it is likely to breed further resentment.

A related test for the future is to assess what has been done that is right, smart and effective (i.e. which measures have been best at minimising or avoiding the boomerang effects). This is not the easiest question to judge in evidential terms, chiefly because the effects are likely to be slow-burning and gradual and also concentrated in providing greater soft support for intelligence-led CT efforts (Schmid 1993). For instance, anti-terrorism policing tactics have long speculated about the relative advantages of working closely with women as against men for the purposes of gaining credible intelligence leads. These motives, it is held, are rather better understood and respected among women, possibly because of their near absence in positions of leadership. The negative risks of intelligence-led measures—including colossal failure, as with the Forest Gate case—can be minimised when CT operates against the backdrop of continuing support. An even better approach is to build links at community level that anticipate the consequences of failure. This is especially pertinent when CT measures are reliant upon intelligence that does not lend itself to second- or third-level verification. Strikingly, the Forest Gate episode highlighted the virtual absence of a community engagement strategy in one of London’s largest Muslim communities. The local authority was forced to concede this gap in its knowledge and contacts even at the height of the controversy. This admission meant that rapidly convened arrangements were put in place to allow a simple communications strategy to take shape. The lesson appears to be that Waltham Forest borough would have been wiser to have taken measures to build dialogue and engagement prior to and irrespective of any local failure. The lessons for CT policy generally must be similar and with priorities for local government and for decentralised police commands.

Taking stock of CT strategic policy in the past half decade is a much larger yet urgent task. This is particularly important in terms of isolating what has been done that is unwise, ineffective and has negative unintended consequences, i.e. to pinpoint the main boomerang effects so as to avoid repetition. This is about how to make CT policy more effective in dealing with the tacit circle—and, by extension, in shaping the relationships with, and accountabilities to, the other two groups. The key objectives here are two-fold: firstly, to allow effective pressures to be placed on fence-sitters to take positive action to deprive jihadists of their moral oxygen; and to reduce the flow of tacit supporters into the ranks of those pursuing violent conspiracies.

Three suggestions stand out. First, CT strategy requires a greater investment in social resilience. This is the kind of resilience that allows public attitudes to dismiss Islamist-inspired terrorism as the rare exception to the rule about British Muslim communities. At present those attitudes edge into the opposite characterisation that views all or most Muslims in suspicious terms. Another kind of resilience is also needed, namely within Muslim communities themselves (Harb and Leenders 2005). However, the driver here is to provide relatively safe channels through which intelligence can be procured and supplied about violent conspiracy. Where
confidential hotlines have been deployed with some success in relation to black-on-black gun-related crime, similar techniques might be used in CT policy. These measures are essentially about reducing the direct, individualised costs of cooperation with intelligence and security efforts. Artificially removing those costs, at least in the short term, is an attractive option but carries other risks of accountability that obviously require safeguards.

Secondly, the future ability of CT policy to avoid boomerang effects is probably best ensured by a greater ownership of the problems of extremism and violence by Muslim communities themselves. This is a long-haul objective by any measure. However, some of the interventions required to incentivise tacit supporters will need to come from within Muslim communities. They are specifically likely to stem from the peaceful, moderate majority who are concerned about the unaccountability of those who turn a blind eye to criminal or near-criminal behaviour. It is likely that these interventions will not mimic those that are established by government for the same purpose. For example, and pressingly, the growth of representative and accountable political leaders will help greatly in airing these concerns and setting out acceptable limits of behaviour. Additionally, the parts played by younger Muslims and by women are also likely to be important, mainly in diluting the current dominance of self-appointed and self-perpetuating older, male leaders. Successful CT policy can and should be designed to work with communities but this is somewhat more plausible in circumstances that permit ownership from within communities. It is helpful, therefore, to back measures that facilitate that end and, in so doing, accept that the results will have to be very gradual rather than sudden. The actual interventions that are likely to follow are ones that will come from individuals and communities and, while these may have shortcomings, they will carry the benefit of not being artificially imposed from outside.

Finally, and related to the above, the long-term odds of success in CT will depend on internalising the costs of Islamist terrorism, in contrast to the externalising tendencies that exist today. This means that fence-sitters are able to pass by on the other side with little or no regard to their preventative responsibilities. But more important even than that are the effects of fence-sitting that diminish even further the reputation of Muslims in Western democracies. A fundamental shift in this externalising pattern would imply that ordinary British Muslims would note and accept the real costs of tacit support. For those who provide tacit support for violence this would expose the costs incurred by Muslim communities at large, many of whom would be unwilling to meet these costs. For those who are already peaceful and moderate in outlook, this would be an obvious way of highlighting the responsibilities of others. In either case, success depends on transparency and accountability. Future CT strategic thinking will need to play on those relationships more effectively by creating incentives for tacit supporters to be accountable to others who are unwilling to pay a reputational price that is not of their making. In Northern Ireland it was the underlying, weary appetite for peace that incentivised cooperation and more among fence-sitters. In the case of British Muslim communities it is not clear
at present where the incentives might lie. A promising intervention by government
might then be to foster an engagement and communications campaign that served to
highlight the reputational costs involved. This would be largely the inverse of past
efforts, many of which have tended to brush these costs under a proverbial carpet.
The effects, if carefully handled, might be to facilitate a more balanced environment
in which the politics of Muslim grievance are discussed. It is the balancing element
that is the most likely to deliver benefits for CT strategy so it is not necessarily the case
that government should lead this effort. In any case it might not be able to do so, but
the larger point is basically a political one, namely that government itself must be
willing—and be seen to be willing—to encourage the internalising of reputational
costs. Further externalisation will make matters rather worse and will certainly mean
that CT policy is operating with one hand tied behind its back.

Closing Remarks

The argument pursued here has been two-fold. The first part has centred on the
policy implications of an acceptance that hidden or misguided sympathy for
extremism and terrorism is as important as the agents of terrorism. It is a simple
distinction that has received extensive coverage in other ethno-religious political
conflicts. But it is also, crucially, a distinction that has been accepted in the British
policy community in the post-7/7 period. It has therefore resulted in a shift in
understanding as well as instinct, leading to a number of important policy and
operational changes.

If this is one half of the argument, what of the other half? The remaining element
has been to pick up on the nature and logic of tacit support, and to relate this to the
surrounding context. In brief, it argues that such context matters and, contrary to
conventional steers, there is in fact scope to map the critical aspects of why and how
contextual factors twist one way rather than another. Patterns and themes can be
identified, and the most pressing are those around issues of perceived group
humiliation, hopelessness and despair. This is not to argue that pressures towards
political or religious victimhood are drivers of modern Islamist terrorism in Britain
or in Western countries generally. Such a characterisation informs a reductionist
simplicity that does not generally stand up to close scrutiny, not least in terms of
persuasive evidence.

Rather, the argument does conclude that the particular drivers of political
grievance are important enough to merit an examination of what they suggest about
generalisations concerning political violence. This can be broken down into several
tasks, the most immediate of which is to understand political narratives of
humiliation. These can, in the case of Western Muslim communities, be sufficiently
compelling to prop up considerable levels of fence-sitting about terrorism. The main
point, surely, is that such narratives have been widespread, mutually interlocking and,
in the end, rather effective in generating a moral oxygen for violence.
Counter-narratives have, by contrast, been less visible and less effective. And, to be particularly pertinent, many CT policies and measures have been associated with a longish tail of unintended consequences. These have regularly sparked unexpected reactions that are effectively labelled as symptomatic of the local, British oppression of Muslims. These kinds of outcome have, by any measure, been damaging to both the effectiveness of CT policy and the reputation of the government’s broader community cohesion and integration strategy.

Important shifts in CT thinking have come about as a result of the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London attacks. These attacks highlighted the centrality of tacit supporters, the difficulties of affecting their behaviour, the absence of reliable infrastructure to support CT intelligence on a sufficient scale and, most depressingly, the absence of accountability mechanisms within and among Muslim communities themselves. The lessons for CT policy are all nested in these observations and the changes in thinking that have come about since. Capitalising on these changes has been harder in practical terms to be sure. But the key point remains that CT policy measures are required to meet each of these insights. Some have been tried and experimented, and others have misfired in some sense. However, there is an appetite to generate fresh interventions in these areas and to learn from their experiences, including failures, whether boomerang in nature or not. This resembles the beginnings of a more nuanced and granular approach to CT, itself a hopeful sign.

The boomerang metaphor is, therefore, an apt one when analysing why and how the political capital deployed to tackle extremism and terrorism has produced so few results to date. That is not to say that the delivery of more positive outcomes is a pipeline effect if current measures are given a chance to bite. The job of articulating a credible counter-narrative is, by its nature, a medium- to long-term exercise. But the initial assessment is not encouraging, as witnessed by the regular indicators of flows into radicalism, never mind the state of play on stocks. Enough young, Western Muslims are indifferent about, or attracted to, serious conspiracies of violence to suggest that current policy thinking is in need of more than cosmetic updating. Large-scale recalibration, in some areas, may be appropriate. The appetite to do so will be limited, inevitably, not least because so many political judgements in this field are shaped almost solely by examples of naked policy failure. A number of well-informed commentators and practitioners have spoken about the need to prepare for the next act, or acts, of terrorism. It would be unfortunate if learning and change were always restricted to the aftermath of terrorist attacks.

The notion of a policy slingshot, meanwhile, encourages those involved to think more rigorously about how policy can be designed to deliver specific, limited and proportionate results. Its success is shaped, in other words, by the avoidance of unwelcome, secondary effects. In combating terrorism, such secondary effects are numerous and everywhere. Put most basically, there is a need to design and deploy, with surgical accuracy, sophisticated policy measures that remove direct threats to security—and without being obstructed by tacit backing for those threats to begin...
with. In brief, this equates to being left with a security policy to respond to a security problem.

There are, in truth, very few areas of public policy where problems are either easily defined or straightforwardly addressed. Indeed, almost all of what government does is to tackle general, complex problems in ways that are the most likely to treat both some large underlying causes as well as immediate symptoms. One measure of success in other policy fields would be to do just this, whilst avoiding, or keeping to a manageable minimum, the chances of setting off new problems or grievances. Combating terrorism is, therefore, a case in point on a larger canvass already pockmarked with inherent complexities about causes, effects and definitions. A shared understanding of problems and successes is a not always a key feature of this canvass.

Doing good by doing little might be one, somewhat downbeat, conclusion from this study. It should not be. The key, generalisable conclusion that emerges is closer to one that is more robust about challenging policy-makers to assess the proportionality and effectiveness of existing and proposed policies. It is both a strategic and an operational policy challenge. To avoid making things worse is one simple test of this challenge. Nesting policy solutions in a wider understanding of where government and regulators have made a positive, lasting difference is another. And, in case it needs saying, playing a long game that anticipates setbacks and builds physical and social resilience along the way is yet another.

Notes

[1] This term was first used by the author in 2003 in a strand of policy work on extremism and radicalisation (The Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, Strategic Audit, 2003). The summary public report can be found on the PMSU website alongside summaries of the 2005 audit exercise and related assessment papers: www.strategy.gov.uk.
[2] For example, the conceptual idea (and actual term) was extensively incorporated into a pair of unpublished reports by Oxford Analytica in 2004 and 2005 dealing with ‘The likely evolution of radical Islam in Western Europe’. This material has been more generally used in the published output of the National Intelligence Council, May 2005.
[4] See also Joppke’s contribution to this volume.

References


