

**Chris Hobbs demonstrates how the UK's inadequate border controls allow British-based jihadists to threaten UK security, and warns that armed police units doubt they can meet the threat**

# BORDER FA

**S**o now we have it: British Prime Minister David Cameron has publicly indicated that the nation is at risk from terrorist attack that could dwarf anything we have previously seen in the UK. These attacks could well take the form of massacres of civilians similar to those we saw in Mumbai and Nairobi. Sadly, the horrific murder by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebawale of Lee Rigby could be just a small foretaste of what is to come.

His comments have been followed by the Metropolitan Police's senior counter terrorist officer, Cressida Dick warning that we would be suffering the consequences of the Syrian conflict, "for many, many years", yet UK-based jihadists have been travelling back and forth largely uninterrupted since 1995. Cressida Dick, who is shortly to be controversially moved from her current role by Commissioner Bernard Hogan-Howe is, however, rightly raising red warning signals that should both alert and alarm the British public.

The question that surely must be asked is how we, as an island state, have managed to get ourselves into a situation where there are thousands of trained potential terrorists resident in the UK and many hundreds of others fighting abroad. David Cameron's alarm at the prospect of being "attacked at home" is belated and, of course, comes in the wake of cutbacks to the police and security services which are compounded by border controls that are as effective as the proverbial chocolate teapot.

Former MI6 Director Richard Barrett is unquestionably correct when he says it is impossible to monitor all jihadists when they return home, but as we will see much, much more could and can still be done to place individuals "on the radar" and to disrupt them. In 1995, in what should have been a major wake up call, a Metropolitan police Special Branch colleague and I stopped two young British males arriving at Heathrow from Pakistan. We acted on our instincts, as the two quite simply "didn't look right" as they passed through the controls, but within 20 minutes there was no doubt that these two had been comprehensively "terrorist trained".

They were in possession of exercise books crammed with notes on bomb making, how to set IEDs, techniques of killing using bare hands and knives, sniping techniques together with numerous other methods of killing people that made chilling reading.

At that time they hadn't committed any offence under UK law and, after detaining and questioning them for some hours, we had to release them – but this was the first occasion where there was concrete evidence that individuals had been travelling to terrorist training camps abroad.

In the following months and years, intelligence poured into Special Branch and local police intelligence units



©Getty Images

“**Passport control in reality means 'welcome home' to the vast majority of those individuals poisoned by jihadist ideology**”

# ILLUSTRATIONS



about individuals travelling initially to Bosnia and then to Pakistan for terrorist training. Yet, with the IRA still an active major threat, the general response from those on high was that these individuals wouldn't "mess" on their own doorsteps.

During this period, Special Branch officers at Scotland Yard began closely monitoring the activities of extreme Islamist groups such as Hizb ut Tahrir and Al Muhajiroun who encouraged individuals to travel abroad and engage in jihad. Amazingly, in 1998, the Labour government's reaction to revelations concerning terrorist training abroad was to abolish embarkation (departure) controls to save just £3m pounds a year. These controls were staffed by immigration officers who would examine passports and scrutinise passengers as they passed

through to their flights. Any contentious matters were frequently referred to Special Branch. This decision provoked fury among police and immigration officers, yet protests were ignored by Jack Straw and suggestions to successive home secretaries, including Theresa May, have fallen upon deaf ears.

Passengers, when going through the trauma of airport security today, probably won't even notice that 99 times out of a hundred they will not be passing 'under the eyes' of any UK law enforcement officer. The body and hand baggage searches will be carried out by private security guards employed by the airport authority and their passports may be examined by poorly-paid private security personnel at the gate.

It is true that hard-pressed counter terrorist detectives at airports, whose numbers are being reduced due to government cuts, attempt to cover a handful of outbound flights in an effort to plug gaps left by the absence of embarkation controls, but these sporadic checks have to be carried at the airport gates in conditions that are far from satisfactory.

So what does this mean for the extreme Islamist fanatic who is leaving the country to either receive training or to engage in jihad abroad? Armed with a British passport – or indeed a foreign passport with an "indefinite leave to remain in the UK" stamp – it means that he or she has no hurdles to jump when departing from the UK. Of course we could substitute child abductor, a future victim of a forced marriage, a drug trafficker, paedophile, people trafficker or an individual involved in serious organised criminality for terrorist.

For the thousands of UK nationals who have received training abroad, there should be the hurdle, when returning to the UK, of passport control. Yet the term passport control in reality means welcome home to the vast majority of those individuals whose minds have been poisoned by jihadist ideology as espoused by the likes of ISIS, Al-Shabaab or al-Qaeda.

Huge queues and EU regulations mean that UK Border Force officers are forbidden to question passengers passing through the UK/EU controls unless they believe them to be impersonating UK nationals.

Two years after the pre-Olympic debacle, frustrated Border Force officers are still being instructed by managers to land non-European passengers they are unhappy with purely in order to avoid queues. Thus it is left to counter terrorist officers to speak to – and possibly examine under the Terrorism Act – anyone they are concerned about. But at best there may be only one or two officers attempting to monitor arriving passengers, and very often there will be no officers at all.

Furthermore, the incident with David Miranda, the partner of Guardian newspaper journalist Glenn Greenwald, who was detained for nine hours at Heathrow Airport over the Edward Snowden affair, means that even today, the powers of police to examine passengers under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act could be watered down or even removed. Proposals being actively considered by the Home Office could well mean that any stops or detentions under the

# BORDER FAILURES



©Getty Images

terrorism legislation at air or sea ports would have to be “intelligence-led”. In other words, those stopped would already have to be “on the radar” of the security services or police. As most of the thousands of UK residents trained abroad are not “on the radar” – as indeed will be the case with those currently engaged in Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, Syria or Iraq – the folly of this proposal is self evident.

Interestingly, under these new proposals, we would not have been able to stop and search the two terrorist trained males we encountered at Heathrow's Terminal 3 back in 1995.

The security services and police have, to their credit, managed to frustrate a number of terrorist attacks since 7/7 and some individuals have been arrested when leaving and arriving back in the UK. Despite those successes, however, it has generally been a walk in the park for those jihadist UK citizens and residents entering and leaving the UK who are now capable of inflicting damage on a scale way beyond that which we have witnessed in Mumbai, Nairobi and Woolwich.

Of course, should the worst happen and jihadist gunmen armed with automatic weapons begin a rampage through Brent Cross, Westfield or Lakeside, it will be police officers who will be expected to risk their lives and attempt to deal with the situation. This of course will be the self same police service which is suffering massive cutbacks and whose morale has been (excuse the appropriate pun) shot to pieces in what appears to be an orchestrated political campaigns from

the both the right and left.

While elite firearms units such as the Met's CO19 have been training to deal with most scenarios, they themselves are concerned as to how effective their response would be, especially in the event of a simultaneous multi-venue attack. Perhaps of equal concern to the government should be the very real possibility of the Met's CO19 officers handing back their firearms authorisations in the event of post-incident procedures changing or the prosecution of officers involved in the deaths of Azelle Rodney or Mark Duggan.

It should of course, be reassuring to know that senior Met officers would have discussed and planned for any eventuality in relation to terrorist incidents, but after the debacle in the wake of the Mark Duggan shooting that led to the Met losing control of the capital's streets, how confident can the public be that a co-ordinated terrorist attack won't also lead to a similar shambolic response?

It is hardly surprising that the Met's CO19 officers are concerned over whether the Met's senior managers are competent enough to prepare for and manage a terrorist scenario as described above. The view of front line officers is that the number of available armed police resources need to be significantly increased in the light of the threat posed by those terrorists who have been trained to kill and maim. Using the term “unprecedented” as a get out of jail card, as senior police officers did so frequently after the riots, quite simply won't suffice this time. In the meantime, entering and leaving the country for most British jihadists will continue to be a walk in the park.

**Poor border controls could allow trained fighters back into the UK**

**Chris Hobbs is a former Metropolitan Police Officer who retired from the London force just days before the 2011 riots after 32 years service. About one third of that service was spent at UK and Jamaican airports working initially as a Special Branch officer before transferring to Operation Trident in 2006. This article was first published in Vigilance Security Magazine.**