

Conduct a literature review on how UK police forces support the Prevent strand of the CONTEST counterterrorism strategy, and what challenges do they face in implementing it effectively in today's society?

Introduction:

The legal definition of terrorism in the UK is defined as ‘both in and outside the UK, as the use or threat of one or more actions listed below, and where they are designed to influence the government, or an international governmental organisation or to intimidate the public. The use or threat must also be for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause.’ (Crown Prosecution Service, 2025).

Some groups are labelled under terrorist groups in the UK due to this definition. Some of the most known would be Al-Qaeda, ISIS and the IRA, but another group has recently been labelled as a terrorist group that others may actually disagree with. This group is the Palestine Action group and was proscribed a terrorist group in July 2025. The reasoning for the group being deemed a terrorist group is because, ‘In several attacks Palestine Action has committed acts of serious damage to property with the aim of progressing its political cause and influencing the government.’ (Home Office, 2025)

Main body:

The UK has experienced ‘5,227 terror attacks between 1970 and 2016’ (WorldAtlas, 2017). Of course, the UK would like to try it’s best to try and prevent any more terrorist attacks in the future or at least the impact that they would have. This has led the Government to create legislations and acts to help aid in the UK’s response to these attacks. Legislations like the Terrorism Act 2000 and Terrorism (Protection of premises) Act 2025. The Terrorism Act 2000 first got introduced because it widened the definition of

terrorism allowing less loopholes and also 'gives the government the power to proscribe particular organisations' (SACC, 2010). This act has allowed the government to proscribe over 80 groups so far as of 2025 as stated by the Home Office including the Palestine Action group and the more well-known groups like Al-Qaeda.

There have been several terrorist attacks in the UK following the introduction of this Act, however that pushed the government to pass new legislations or to adjust them due to the criticisms of the public on how these attacks got responded to, for example, the 7/7 bombings. The 7/7 bombings was an attack that happened in London in July of 2005 and was a coordinated suicide bomb attack on London's transit systems. The first attack happened on a train in the underground, and the second attack an hour later on the top deck of a double decker bus. The emergency service response to this attack when it came to priorities was very clear and was praised for, "clear set of priorities expressed in major incident planning that worked and were validated" (RUSI, 2007), but some concerns were also raised. The main concern that was had was the emergency services communication systems and how information was provided. At least one hospital lost outside communication when those who were injured arrived resulting in a lack of vital information due to the communication systems available between the emergency services. Due to this the government did implement new strategies to try and prevent a serious attack like the 7/7 bombings again, including better intelligence sharing through 'better sharing surveillance photos among police and MI5' (BBC, 2015).

One of the most recent attacks was the Manchester Arena bombing that happened in the May of 2017. It was planned by two brothers, one being the suicide bomber that detonated the device after an Ariana Grande concert at 22:30. Unfortunately this tragedy exposed how underprepared all emergency services were as there were many failings on their part that was criticised by both the public and the media. The first thing that went wrong was that the inspector on scene, Inspector Dale Sexton, 'failed to tell the other emergency services that he had declared it a major incident until 2 hours later' (BBC, 2022), possibly hindering the response times of other emergency services. Another big problem was that for the first forty

minutes after the explosion there was only one paramedic attending to the numerous casualties, even after that there were only three other paramedics attending the City Room which greatly impacted the speed of care for others. There were many other failings in this tragedy, but the biggest one was that more people would have survived if communication was better.

The response to the Manchester bombings kickstarted The Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025, otherwise known as Martyn's law. It exposed the greater need for better and increased security measures in the UK to better prepare for future terrorist attacks, this also forms part of a counter-terrorism strategy called CONTEST.

CONTEST is based on four main elements, those being. prevent, pursue, protect and prepare. CONTEST has been seen as 'largely successful in reducing risk by suppressing the most serious terrorist threats' (Home Office, 2023).

It leaves the question as to what terrorist attack in the UK had the best response from the emergency services? It has largely been agreed that the London Bridge attack of June 2017 was seen as one of the better responses by emergency services due to the speed and effectiveness of the police. In just eight minutes from the start of the attack, the three terrorists were successfully intercepted lawfully by armed officers, with those saying that the police were 'rightly being herald for the speed, courage and effectiveness in ending the terrorist atrocity' (The Conversation, 2017). It was generally seen that the emergency services were more prepared and had learned from previous terrorist attacks. The response to the London bridge attack would help in easing public view in how effective the emergency services, especially police are in dire situations like these.

Another method that the government implements is Prevent. Prevent is a framework designed for members of the public to report concerns they have of someone. Prevent's goals, as the name suggests, is to prevent an individual from 'becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' (Department of Education, 2023). Prevent is mostly taught to educators as they are the ones who mostly come into contact with children as they are seen as the

most impressionable and can be easily influenced. Anyone can refer someone to Prevent, and they do not have to be a child. In 2024 there were almost 7,000 referrals to Prevent but out of those almost 7,000 individuals only '512 went to receive channel support' (Home Office, 2024). One prolific case of an individual who got referred to Prevent is Axel Rudakubana. Axel was just a teenager, 17, when he committed the horrible Southport stabbing where he unfortunately took the lives of three children. Before all of this, Axel was referred to Prevent three times by teachers between the years of 2019 and 2021, but nothing came of it. Due to this 'there has been much discussion about Prevent's role in relation to the atrocity' (The People's Review of Prevent, 2025).

Prevent can also cause a harmful view on certain religions such as Islamic religions, where it is more traditional to wear certain religious pieces and clothing.

Prevent teaches that if someone suddenly seems to change or increase their religious beliefs, which could include wearing religious pieces and clothing then it may be best to report them to try and assess whether the person is at risk of radicalisation. 'Switch from one ideology to another over time' (Department of Education, 2023). This could easily risk labelling innocent people as possible threats when they are simply practicing their religion. An example of this is shown on a Prevent Watch video where a woman explains how her colleagues referred her to Prevent simply because she became Muslim, and the fact that she was the only Muslim in her family this further demonstrates how some of the elements Prevent teaches can actually cause harm to certain groups of people.

Prevent has not failed every person that gets brought to them though, there are also plenty of cases where they have successfully deradicalised a person and have steered them on the correct path. One case is the case of 12-year-old Abdu who had adopted Islamist ideology and had a very strong dislike to Christians. Abdu was bullied in school and with the recent passing of his grandmother had turned to the internet where he had plenty of opportunities to talk with others online. It was said that Abdu "made comments in school which supported Daesh" (Department of Education, 2023) and agreed with the views and use of violence by Daesh. Abdu got

referred to Prevent who carried out an interview with him to where Abdu stated, 'they were just in time'. After multiple interviews, Abdu was found to have made a positive change.

Another case is the one of Charlie who was 17 years old and had extreme right-wing ideology, especially towards those who were Muslim. He went through the channel panel, and it was concluded that he needed a meeting with his parent. Support was offered to them as Charlie and his parents had previously not had the best relationship with services. "After 11 months of support, Charlie stopped engaging with extreme right-wing groups and the relationship within the family circle and services improved." (Department of Education, 2023).

Conclusion:

To conclude, it can be seen that the UK's emergency services have had many flaws when it comes to the response of certain terrorist incidents. Possibly one of the worst responses being the Manchester arena bombing due to being underprepared and communication being very weak between the emergency services. However, the emergency services have also had their moments when they have performed very well like the London Bridge attack, where they put a stop to the nightmare incident within 8 minutes. The new legislations can help with the preparedness of the emergency services for terrorist incidents in the future, especially the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 as it lays out how to better prepare and act for when a terrorist attack happens and also along with other Legislations and Acts forms a part of CONTEST.

Prevent was also looked into and whilst it has helped reform and lowered people's risks of radicalisation, it has its many flaws by letting some slip through the net such as Axel Rudakubana but also labelling people as a threat risk when they are completely innocent. This showcases that there are adjustments that could be taken to help minimise circumstances like these in the future, as ultimately it can be Prevent's downfall.

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