

Government opens new front on terror **22 January 2008**

By Ash Smyth

At the launch of a body which aims to stem the radicalisation of young people who might later turn to terrorism, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith said in London last week that "stopping people becoming, or supporting, terrorists... is the major long-term challenge of the State".

And if you peeled away the shrouds of management jargon - 'dialogue', 'shared values', 'community cohesion' - and saw past her careful avoidance of any overt references to Islam, it was eventually possible to discern that the Home Secretary was saying it was time to tackle the increasing use of the internet in the radicalisation of young Muslims.

She gave her speech, which came in the same week as headlines concerning Younis Tsouli, the Shepherd's Bush 'cyber-jihadist' who disseminated Islamist materials under the pseudonym of Terrorist 007, to delegates

and journalists attending the inaugural conference of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR).

An immediate retort came from the BBC's Frank Gardner: surely a policy decision now to tackle terrorist recruitment was 15 years too late. True; but better late than never, given the stakes.

The Home Secretary is not wrong about the overwhelming importance of the internet. An estimated 5,000 terrorist websites currently help to spread propaganda, radicalise, recruit, fund-raise, train and give operational orders.

Islamist recruitment appears to be on the rise, and the web is vital to this: al-Qaeda has "regrouped" largely through internet use, Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of MI6, told the ICSR conference.

So the government wants to prevent young Muslims from becoming radicalised in the first place. But how to achieve it?

Anti-radicalisation efforts must involve - publicly and intellectually - countering the extreme interpretations of Islam that legitimise mass murder. But they must also be about keeping disenchanted and impressionable 19-year-olds away from pathologically-enticing martyrdom videos.

So, while the Home Office works with the internet industry, experimenting with anti-paedophilia strategies to identify terrorist recruiters, it also plans to start pulling down extremist material from the web. "The internet is not a no-go area for government," Smith warned.

There's no doubt the Home Secretary understands the scale of the problem. The question is whether she has any idea how to fix it.

Enter ICSR, a body designed emphatically, says its director, Dr Peter Neumann, to knit together "academic insight and political foresight", by tapping the brains of a dream-team of policy nerds, parliamentarians, theologians and academics from all over the world - including, importantly, collaborating Israeli and Arab academics.

'Counterterrorism and the Internet' is one of ICSR's three fully-funded projects for 2008. Pulling together government, academia and industry expertise, the ICSR plans to "work out innovative strategies through which to counter the phenomenon" culminating in a "global plan of action", to be presented to governments and international bodies.

They will have to strike a balance between controversial hard approaches, such as censorship, blocking, filtering, state hacking, and softer ones, such as a vague cocktail of 'engagement', 'user-driven strategies' and increased state backing for moderate Islamic sites.

This won't be easy. The real test of ICSR's usefulness will be a year from now, when their report on tackling web radicalisation is published. ICSR's own brief has realistically modest targets; but in Neumann's own words, "no amount of academic writing will make a difference if governments don't listen". For the moment, at least, it seems Smith is listening.