

Fortress Britain vs. Liberal Britain: Responding Effectively to Terrorism

With troops on the streets after the Manchester attack, liberal Britain is threatened by harsh (and ineffective) responses to terror

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The attack on concert-goers and their families in Manchester has provoked heartfelt outpourings of grief and sympathy as well as widespread and vehement condemnation. Politicians and citizens alike have pledged not to let this affect the cohesion of the diverse Mancunian community or to let it change liberal ways of British life.

Inevitably, however, the attack has also prompted demands for heightened security measures including more security checks and improved detection equipment. There has been discussion of increasing police funding and granting the police and security services extra powers as well as calls to bolster anti-radicalisation and surveillance programmes targeted at what are euphemistically referred to as '[particular communities](#)' (read: Muslims). The government responded by raising the alert level to 'critical' (the highest) and deploying nearly 1000 troops under police command. The [right-wing press](#) hailed the coming of '[Fortress Britain](#)' but this threatens the country's security as well as its liberal society.

Analysis: Expediency vs. Effectiveness

Calling for **increased security checks and improved detection equipment** has become a default response to an attack as it is ostensibly the least contentious. Financial – and political economic – implications aside, however, it can only ever be a partial solution and it is not without other costs. Recent attacks in nondescript public spaces (Dortmund), places where people gather outside (Berlin) and even pubs and cafes (Paris) show that infinitely extending what are, at heart, access control measures is neither feasible nor desirable. There is also a risk of complacency as such backward-looking measures (focused on the last attack) become not only the parameters of detection – but also of evasion.

Police checks on people on the move through cities, in the manner of stop-and-search raise other issues. They can undermine peoples' sense of belonging, which impacts on a city's general atmosphere but hits 'particular communities' particularly hard. Such measures can worsen the very problem they purport to address by [increasing feelings of alienation and even oppression](#), which hinder **intelligence gathering** as well as community protection. **Extension of powers** of surveillance, investigation and detention, without commensurable extensions of oversight and accountability, would cause similar problems and have been [rejected by police and government](#) for now.

The efficacy of **increased police funding** depends on what it is used for. [Proposed extensions](#) of the 'PREVENT' anti radicalisation programme may also be [self-defeating](#) if they discriminatorily [infringe civil liberties](#) and create further '[preconditions](#)' for potential violence. They may also [undermine](#) the laborious, long-term work of **community policing**, integrated with other social services, that proved effective in [Northern Ireland](#), the Balkans and elsewhere.

Camouflage uniforms and long-barrelled weapons are anathema to community policing and the **Military Assistance to the Civil Power (MACP)** that has put troops on the street under 'Operation Temperer' could be seen as militarisation of the state's approach to Muslims and other minority communities. Along with more armed police, it also increases the potential for fatal [incidents](#), which could [precipitate](#) 'retaliatory' attacks. Conversely, however, the use of troops to 'backfill' guarding duties and free police for more specialised duties, including community policing, could actually help matters.

Increasing police presence and augmenting it with troops is unlikely to prevent or deter attacks like the one in Manchester – it did not prevent those in [Brussels](#) or [Nice](#) – and is largely a cosmetic security measure designed to reassure (some of) the public. However it could have the opposite [effect](#) and has raised further concerns about the [politicisation of the attacks](#) and the use of the [politics of fear](#) in the middle of a general election campaign.

Outlook: Short Term vs. Long Term

Terrorists seek to provoke strong emotional reactions and cloud judgement over the most-effective long-term responses, hoping to provoke harsh measures that would legitimise their struggle in the eyes of others, and gain new sympathisers and recruits. Avoiding knee-jerk or [heavy-handed responses](#) is crucial to prevention. So too is focusing on the long-term political causes of violence (where they exist) rather than merely trying to treat the symptoms.

Despite the predictable jingoism of the 'Fortress Britain' crowd, parts of the right and centre-right-wing media have cautioned against the extension of [surveillance](#) and the [troop deployment](#). Academic security expert Andrew Neal has argued that it would be alarming if the deployment of troops were to become a full-scale military operation but that there is no current indication of that happening. The deployment is likely to be short term and [will not include Manchester](#).

There are, however, a real dangers: increased [surveillance](#) will be sanctioned without [necessary democratic oversight or accountability](#); that cosmetic yet oppressive security measures, increased access control and fortification of city spaces will be preferred to the long-term work of community policing, thus depriving police of vital intelligence as well as depriving minority communities of their secure sense of belonging in the country. The illiberal French and Belgian responses to recent attacks are negatively instructive in this regard and such courses of action should be avoided.

Recommendations: To the UK Authorities – Keep Calm and (Liberally) Carry On

- ◆ In the scope of **Operation Temperer** keep troops on the streets for as short a time as possible and restrict them to less visible, 'backfilling' roles, that free police officers to focus on specialised policing tasks.
- ◆ Ensure that any **increased policing activity** and **security checks** do not discriminate against minorities and limit such measures as far as possible in order to maintain liberal ways of life and mobility, especially in cities.
- ◆ Resist rushing through **new legislation or security or police powers** or returning to '[control orders](#)' but ensure that current powers are used – and overseen – in accordance with the **full force of the law**. Any new powers, including in the Prevent or [TPIMs](#) programmes, should be accompanied by explicit commitments to **enhanced oversight and accountability** mechanisms and ways to ensure that minority communities feel represented in them.
- ◆ Invest in **community policing** and **broad ranging social inclusion programmes** rather than relying on **technological or infrastructural solutions** to deal with the socio-political problem or terrorism. There should be a – related – **focus on the political causes** of violence rather than merely on its symptoms, like the Manchester attack.

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