

By Bill Rammel MP, Minister for the Armed Forces

The first duty of government is to keep its people safe. Our National Security Strategy, updated earlier this year, sets out the threats we face. It shows how far the threats have evolved, and why an agile, cross-government response is required.

9/11 was a catalyst for change. Those images of planes flying into the twin towers are seared on our consciousness. On 7th July 2005, 52 innocent people were killed and 700 injured on the London underground and bus network by suicide bombers. This time the terrorists were British citizens working with Al Qaeda.

Over the last couple of years, thousands of dedicated police officers working with the security and intelligence agencies have thwarted a number of major plots which would, as on 7/7, have led to mass murder.

So it is clear that terrorism has evolved. But this new reality is still not always widely understood. One of my predecessors, Adam Ingram made recommendations last year about the Defence contribution to counter terrorism.

Adam's report importantly reaffirmed two key principles that underpin the MoD's approach. First, that contributing to national and international efforts to counter terrorism is one of the MoD's highest priorities. And second that the defence contribution in countering terrorism should continue to be focussed primarily on overseas operations to counter the international terrorist threat before it reaches this country.

Our Armed Forces are engaged in a tough fight in Afghanistan....Lives are being lost; injuries sustained. Our forces and their families are facing this with bravery, fortitude and resolve.

Our Armed Forces are in Afghanistan defending our national security. We are enormously in their debt. They are fighting against an insurgency which, if successful, would provide free reign to the terrorist capacity that inspired, planned and provided support for attacks like those of 9/11 – of 7/7, and many more besides.

So today I want to talk about how the work undertaken by our Armed Forces in Afghanistan - in support of the Afghan Government and in-conjunction with our civilian and military partners in the international community - is vital and fundamental to our counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST. And how Defence contributes to CONTEST more generally and how we approach the future.

The evolution of present day terrorism

In the last century, the threat to the UK was overwhelmingly from the Armed Forces of other nations. Yet now no state threatens directly the national territory of the UK. Certainly vigilance remains necessary. Deterrence, in all its forms, remains a valid strategy.

But threats have now diversified. Among them are the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the consequences of weak states and ungoverned space, and of course terrorism in all its forms.

The use of terror as a strategy is as old as warfare itself. But those who have used it, what they hope to achieve, and the way they apply it is continually evolving.

As civilisation is adjusting to the new realities of globalisation - with the increased worldwide use of the internet, the growing ease of global travel, and the interconnection of national economies - so civilisations old enemy – terrorism – has shown a new and ugly face. On 9/11, we saw the graphic results of this. There was no prior warning, mass casualties, symbolic targets, synchronised attacks, and orchestrated across continents.

Terrorists groups like Al Qaeda use the features of our new world – global communications, international travel, devolved networks, outsourced operations, franchising, diverse finances. This is sophisticated and ingenious use of new technology, finance and communication for fundamentally evil ends.

Their aims are not the narrow nationalist aims of 20th century terrorist groups like ETA or the IRA. They are undertaking a global campaign exploiting a range of grievances to carry out acts of terror. They wish to impose a narrow, extreme interpretation of society on all who would fall under its sway. They wish to define people, not by their humanity, but by the religion that they choose. In their view, those that don't agree deserve death.

Al Qaeda seeks to use Islam as a smokescreen to hide behind as it attacks our evolving global, connected and free civilisation. They abuse, misrepresent and distort religion to motivate, recruit, justify. But the vast, vast majority of Muslims stand against this violent extremism.

Many of the victims to date of the terror and injustice it wreaks have been Muslims. Muslims are most at risk from Al Qaeda's brand of intolerance. It doesn't just target western countries but Muslim majority countries like Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and, of course, Afghanistan.

A few would have us believe that we brought this on ourselves. That if we hadn't gone into Afghanistan and Iraq all would have been well. However in my view this strand of thinking ignores the reality that the planning for 9/11 took place while Bill Clinton was still in the White House and the prospects for peace in the Middle East were closer than they had been for a generation.

This type of thinking exists in parts of the liberal left. I am part of the liberal left but this view point refuses to recognise the palpable truth that what Al Qaeda most loathes about the west – sexual equality, freedom to protest, art and recreation as a means to self fulfilment – these are

the values of the liberal left.

I recognise that extreme injustice can create extreme grievance which terrorists can exploit. We must do what we can to right these injustices. But there can be no justification for terrorist violence that indiscriminately kills innocent people.

This is not democracy vs. Islam. Democracy and Islam are not mutually exclusive. Both democracy and Islam come in many different forms – and so does Christianity for that matter. The roots of democracy are simple - rule by the consent of the people – by the ballot box and by law. This is being put into practice by nations all around the world, of different ethnic, cultural and religious make up – including Muslim majority countries. Each form is different – and none, bluntly, is perfect.

But Al Qaeda does not accept this diversity. They want to impose by force their concept of a caliphate across Muslim majority countries and even across the world. They wish to impose across continents a system sharing many of the ways used by the hard-core ideological Taliban in Afghanistan when they were in charge of that country.

Brutality, oppression, intolerance and violence -this is a new form of fascism - the use of terror to impose terror. This is not a clash of civilisations. This is a clash for civilisation, a struggle for the soul of the twenty first century. Will our world be open, tolerant, and connected? Or will it be closed off, oppressive, and divided?

Our whole society

This new, evolved, globalised form of terrorism must be confronted. And we must continue to grow and adapt our counter-terrorism strategy to address its new face. The National Security Strategy sets out the context for that work. There are no 'home' and 'away' threats anymore.

Our refreshed counter-terrorism strategy - CONTEST – is a comprehensive strategy for tackling terrorism. But there can be no purely military solution to terrorism. Countering terrorism requires countering its financing, recruiting, communications and ideology – none of which can be done at the point of a gun.

In the UK this effort involves every government department : Diplomacy and international development; the military and intelligence services; Police and emergency services; Regional and local government; education; businesses and voluntary organisations; and crucially the general public. And, of course, working across the piece with our international partners.

To every person of Muslim faith in Britain : We are working to keep safe all citizens of the UK, regardless of faith, race, or background. Muslims are as much at risk from the terrible effects of violent extremism as any other member of our society. And I believe violent extremist views are shocking to the overwhelming majority of Muslims, in the same way that Christians are shocked by the views of the Ku Klux Klan.

Take the case last month of Andrew Ibrahim. Ibrahim was jailed for plotting carnage at a

crowded shopping centre. It was the local Muslim community, alarmed by Ibrahim's erratic behaviour, who alerted the authorities, allowing them to arrest Ibrahim before he could carry out his bomb attack. Who would have died if that attack had gone ahead? Muslim and Christian would have died side by side - with people of other religions or of none – just as they did in the Twin Towers on 9/11 and on the London transport network on 7/7.

We need to address terrorism as a whole society because it is our whole society which this new terrorism threatens. That means reaching out to those in our society who are being specifically targeted by Al Qaeda and others who would give support to extremist violence.

That means reaching out across government to be more effective, reaching out to all countries, not just our close allies. It means using all tools at our disposal to pursue, prevent, protect and prepare.

Our national security in Afghanistan

Britain's involvement overseas can be controversial. It can create strong grievances which resonate across different communities. Our defence and foreign policy operations are often misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented.

In April, the Prime Minister set out in detail how our strategic engagement in Afghanistan is part of our strategic engagement in the region as a whole.

The greatest international priority in tackling terrorism around the globe is the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. 191 Armed Forces personnel have died in Afghanistan since 2001. With the hard fighting over the last few weeks, and the casualties that has brought, it is all the more important to reinforce why we are there and what we are achieving.

Our troops are in Afghanistan to keep our country safe from the threat of terrorism. To prevent Al Qaeda having a secure base from which to threaten us directly. But this is not just about the UK's national security. 42 nations are taking part - one of the widest ever international coalitions. It is about their national security too. (Editor's note : 1286 troops from 23 countries have died in Afghanistan since 2001)

Let us not forget the threat posed by Taliban rule in Afghanistan before 2001. It was there that the horrors of 9/11 were planned and that recruits were trained in the methods of terrorism. It was there that Al Qaeda leaders were planning and directing further major terrorist operations which would, no doubt, have been aimed at the UK and others.

Lest we think that this is a thing of the past, as the Director General of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism at the Home Office has made clear recently, of the people arrested in connection with terrorist offences in Europe over the past few years, a significant proportion have been trying to engage in insurgencies in places like Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Entire facilitation networks have emerged around Europe to enable them to do so. Some of these people then intend to come back to Europe and re-engage with the terrorist networks

whose focus is on operations here.

So our ultimate objective in 2001 holds true for 2009: to protect our citizens from terrorist attacks by preventing Al Qaeda having a safe haven in the tribal belt whether it be in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

We are fighting the insurgents now in Afghanistan because the return of the hard-core irreconcilable Taliban would give Al Qaeda greater freedom to operate, plan, direct or provide support for more terrorist attacks. With the return of the hard-core Taliban, hundreds of thousands would flee, unrest in the region would escalate.

Al Qaeda is now located in the borderlands of Pakistan where they pose a direct threat to Pakistan and to wider international security. That is why our strategy doesn't focus on Afghanistan alone. But Al Qaeda is not in Afghanistan, because we and our Allies are providing support to the Afghan Government.

The vast majority of Afghans think that NATO and US forces are doing a good job. A paltry 4% would rather the Taliban were back in charge. In the long-term, the key in Afghanistan will be Afghan-led governance and political reconciliation.

Our strategy in Afghanistan is not about territory, it is about people. Securing the main population centres against the insurgents. Providing the space for governance and public services to take root. Splitting the insurgency. Allowing governance to be taken forward from a position of strength.

That is what Operation Panther's Claw has been about. The five week campaign this summer has seen a region home to 80,000 Afghans cleared of the Taliban and secured ahead of the Presidential elections. British, US, Danish, Estonian and Afghan forces have been taking part. This has cost British lives – 10 in the military operation itself.

But we have inflicted heavy losses on the insurgency, decimating their command and control structures, weakening their resolve and splitting them up. Objectives have been successfully achieved. And we should be proud of the way our troops have taken on this task.

In counter-insurgency operations body count is not the measure of success – the measure of success is how safe people feel and whether they have faith in a new future. So Panther's Claw was not just a military operation but a joint civil-military plan to bring security and the possibility of stable governance to the area. 3 new health clinics are being prepared, a clutch of community schools – and across Helmand province roads, water projects, electricity, agriculture. This is the new push in the cleared area – this is hold and build.

Let me be clear, we are not in Afghanistan because girls were not allowed to go to school, but helping them do so is an important down-payment to Afghans desperate for a better future for their children. It brings faith in the Afghan government and provides the opportunity for insurgents to lay down their arms and take up peaceful life.

A critical point often misunderstood is that we are not trying to impose an idealised western democratic model or run Afghanistan ourselves. Ultimately it will be the politics of development, reconstruction and reintegration that will bring lasting stability to the region – no place for the terrorists to hide – and no reason for people to hide them.

Pakistan faces a fierce insurgency of its own. The Government of Pakistan has recognised that violent extremism poses the most serious threat to the Pakistani state. Over two thousand innocent Pakistanis lost their lives last year in terrorist attacks. For Britain to be secure, Afghanistan needs to be secure, Pakistan needs to be secure.

The Pakistan military recently launched successful operations to drive out militant extremists from the Swat and Buner. They are now looking to take on the Pakistani Taliban leadership in South Waziristan.

We recognise the heavy sacrifices that the Pakistani security forces have made, and the humanitarian cost the people of Pakistan are bearing. The overwhelming majority of the Pakistani people fully support their government's actions. They see that the failure to bring these regions under the control of the Pakistani Government would pose a fundamental threat to the future of their country.

CONTEST present and future

In Afghanistan and Pakistan I believe our purpose is clear: to prevent terrorism coming to the streets of Britain. The operations in Afghanistan and engagement with Pakistan are therefore a significant contribution to CONTEST.

CONTEST has four strands:

Pursue to stop terrorist attacks.

Prevent people from becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism.

Protect the UK by strengthening our defences against terrorism;

Prepare to mitigate the impact of any attack

Defence has an obvious contribution by helping other countries to tackle the growth of terrorism within their region. The MoD is helping to build capacity in 14 countries including Pakistan. In many cases, our support is not just about military effectiveness. It is also about demonstrating how military forces should operate under the control of democratically accountable governments with an understanding of, and compliance with, international law and humanitarian norms.

In the UK, we work with the police, local government and emergency services on crisis management planning and dealing with the consequences of an attack. We need to keep on our toes, to keep learning from experience and to keep looking forwards.

The Armed Forces hold specialist capabilities at very high readiness to move in response to such potential threats and incidents. They exercise regularly to ensure their response is tried and tested, including Special Forces. Ministry of Defence Police protect the strategic nuclear deterrent and some of the Critical National Infrastructure. The Army's Royal Engineers are on hand to analyse suspicious substances, in particular home-made explosives. Typhoon and Tornado aircraft are ready to launch at minutes' notice, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year to react to potential renegade aircraft. This is real operational business for the men and women of our Armed Forces guarding the UK.

We work across government on the collection and analysis of intelligence: On countering the threat posed by the terrorist use of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons; On internet and communications security; And of course we provide land, sea and air defence against attack.

Even though we have changed to face the new threats, we need to remain ahead of the game. How do we align our Armed Forces to conduct complex counter terrorism operations in the future? How can we, across government and around the world, become better at preventing problems from emerging in the first place? How can we embed every aspect of the Comprehensive Approach to countering terrorism?

The work being undertaken to prepare for next year's Defence Review will be essential. We have to be prepared to consider deep and wide-ranging changes to our Armed Forces. We will need to re-balance our investment in technology, equipment, and people to meet the challenge of irregular warfare over the next decade while still retaining our ability to respond to emerging state-led threats and other military challenges.

Conclusion

While terrorism is not new, in the 21st century the threat is unlike anything we have faced before. To counter it we need to use all the tools that are at our disposal. And we will have to continually evolve to address threats as they change.

We are I believe being successful: It is the totality of our efforts, at home and abroad, which has resulted in the terrorist threat level being reduced to the lowest level since 7/7.

Our Armed Forces make a magnificent contribution to the counter terrorism effort, throughout the UK and indeed overseas. There is no clearer example of this than in Afghanistan. Our national security will be compromised if we allow Afghanistan to fall back into the hands of those who would give support to terrorism.

This is a tough fight – and it is a long way from over. Our Armed Forces I believe are doing their job – courageously and with great skill. We should be immensely proud of them.

They deserve our support to see it through.

This is a slightly edited version of a speech which was delivered at RUSI, London, on 3rd August 2009