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R E P O R T

# Exploring Patterns of Behaviour in Violent Jihadist Terrorists

An analysis of six significant  
terrorist conspiracies in the UK

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Prepared for the Airey Neave Trust

The research described in this report was prepared for the Airey Neave Trust.

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## Summary

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The aim of this research was to see if individuals who had taken part in the six most serious terrorist conspiracies and attacks in the UK exhibited any specific types of behaviour before or during the conspiratorial, planning or preparatory phases of their attacks and, if this proved to be the case, whether those behaviours could have indicated their ultimate intentions. All of the attacks and conspiracies took place between 2004 and 2007 and all were driven by the ideology of violent Jihadism.

The empirical research is based around the premise that no matter what their background or cultural origin, terrorists will exhibit certain types of behaviours, both as groups and as individuals, during the planning and preparation phases of an act of terrorism. Previously much research in this field has focused on constructing profiles based on the characteristics of particular individuals involved in terrorism, or who potentially may become involved in it. This approach has at best proved inconclusive and at worst has been time consuming and counter-productive. Horgan argues that “profiling the individual and his/her presumed associated qualities has no future in serious analyses of either the terrorist or the pathways to radicalization.”<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, the research here provides a detailed examination of aspects of the behaviours exhibited by violent Jihadist groups/cells and the individuals within them prior to and during the time they conspired, planned and prepared to commit an act of terrorism. To ensure its validity and relevance, data have been drawn from the six most significant conspiracies involving violent Jihadist groups/cells, which occurred in the United Kingdom between 2004 and 2007. In each case the terrorists successfully launched or unsuccessfully attempted an attack, or were arrested and convicted of conspiring to carry out a terrorist attack.

Having introduced the research in greater detail, the report goes on to outline the history and backgrounds of the six main conspiracies, before examining the organisational and general characteristics of the groups/cells involved. It then examines in detail both the group and individual behaviours of those violent Jihadists involved, before looking at the behaviours associated with attack planning and preparations. Finally, the report raises the question of whether such past behaviour can indicate potential future intentions and, if so,

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<sup>5</sup> Horgan (2008), p.92.

whether such behavioural indicators might be used to signal the possibility of individual or group involvement in the planning and preparation phases of a terrorist attack.

As a prerequisite to answering this question, the report identifies the generic behaviours the six terrorist groups/cells share with others also attempting or carrying out mass casualty attacks using explosives. It also identifies many behaviours specific to violent Jihadism and terrorism. The six UK case studies show there are three categories of such behaviours developing from “radicalisation”, to “transition to violent Jihad” and then to “terrorist attack planning and preparation”. While these categories of behaviour overlap and can be seen in certain individuals as stages over time leading towards their decision to conspire and implement a terrorist attack, they are not deterministic. Individuals may exhibit behaviours associated with the “upper level” of one category without ever proceeding on to the next.

Using the categorised data from the six case studies, the report demonstrates that there are certain distinctive behavioural characteristics displayed as a result of planning, preparing and implementing an act of terrorism. While accepting that additional refinement and testing will be necessary to identify “signal indicators” of use to police and security forces, these findings open up the possibility of identifying through their behaviour individuals and groups engaged in the planning and preparation of a terrorist attack, thus allowing such attacks to be prevented or disrupted before they can be implemented.