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Q&A The Future of Terrorism: Complexity, Opacity, and Uncertainty

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Dear readers,

This year, Liverpool John Moores University in partnership with Informa Connect Academy hosted a webinar on “The Future of Terrorism: Complexity, Opacity, and Uncertainty” in line with the portfolio of counter-terrorism security courses taught by LCAPS (Liverpool Centre for Advanced policing Studies).

The webinar, included a of counter-terrorism experts including Naomi Davis-Crane, Max Sahota, Colin Davies, Kev McLean. This webinar shared practical tips and real-world examples to help you better understand some of the modern challenges of counter-terrorism.

We documented the most trending counter-terrorism related questions from the webinar to put together this expert Q&A piece as well as the responses, based on observations and experiences from various international security and ex-police professionals. Please enjoy the answers to these highly demanded questions in this exclusive Q&A session transcript.



Q&A The Future of Terrorism: Complexity, Opacity, and Uncertainty



Naomi Davis-Crane:

Naomi Davis-Crane brings extensive expertise in tactical and strategic intelligence analysis, having served as Head of Intelligence Analysis in Counter Terrorism Policing. Her experience spans national security, major crime, prisons, and local policing, with a focus on intelligence processes, structured analytical techniques, ethics, data manipulation, and effective communication. She has worked on multi-agency and international intelligence operations with partners across the UK, Five Eyes, Europe, and Africa.



Max Sahota:

Dr Max Sahota is a former Chief Superintendent with West Midlands Police and Assistant Chief Constable (Specialist Operations) with South Yorkshire Police, where he led efforts against organised crime, major investigations, covert operations, and counter terrorism in collaboration with MI5 and Counter Terrorism Policing Headquarters. He later served as Head of International Policing with the UK College of Police and as a senior security consultant for Qatar, training police and military commanders for the FIFA World Cup 2022. Holding a professional doctorate in policing, security, and criminal justice from Liverpool John Moores University, Max specialises in international security and cross-cultural leadership. He is also a qualified executive leadership coach and currently lectures on leadership and counter terrorism at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.



Kev McLean:

Kev McLean is a Lecturer in Policing at Liverpool John Moores University, following a distinguished 30-year policing career, retiring as Detective Chief Superintendent. He most recently served as Head of Borders and International Strategy for Counter Terrorism Policing, overseeing national security at UK ports, airports, and international counter-terrorism operations. Kev held senior leadership roles within Lancashire Constabulary, including Head of Serious and Organised Crime and Director of Intelligence, and is an experienced investigator accredited as a PIP Level 4 and Level 3 Senior Investigating Officer. He specialises in major crime, serious and organised crime, and covert policing, and holds a Master's degree in Criminal Justice Studies with a research focus on police culture.



Colin Davies:

Colin is a highly experienced legal professional and educator, having served as a Solicitor of the Supreme Court of England and Wales and held numerous senior roles within the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), including Head of the Complex Casework Unit for Mersey/Cheshire. With expertise in prosecuting organised crime, cross-border cases, high-profile homicides, complex frauds, and covert investigations, he has worked closely with Eurojust and Europol. Colin has also been a Disclosure and Proceeds of Crime Champion, contributing to the development of the Disclosure Manual and training courses on homicide, confiscation, and restraint orders. A seasoned trainer, he has delivered extensive legal training to CPS lawyers, police forces, and as a sessional lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU).

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Q: If there are varied terror groups operating in and around UK, how effectively is the MI-5 and CTC SO15 able to cope up with these threats?

Max Sahota:

The MI5 and CTC SO15 work extensively with global partners e.g., foreign intelligence and security agencies, international law enforcement organizations such as Interpol and Europol. They also share intelligence with some agencies, such as CIA and FBI. This intelligence sharing allows for the co-ordination of investigations.

Naomi Davis-Crane:

The UK operates a national counterterrorism network of regional collaborations between policing and the security services to ensure local understanding of threat, vulnerability and risk is not overlooked. This network was established following the 7/7 bombings and continues to develop in capability today.

Kev McLean:

MI5 Director General Ken McCallum annual threat update 16/10/25 – “Since 2020 MI5 and the Police have disrupted 19 late stage attack plots”

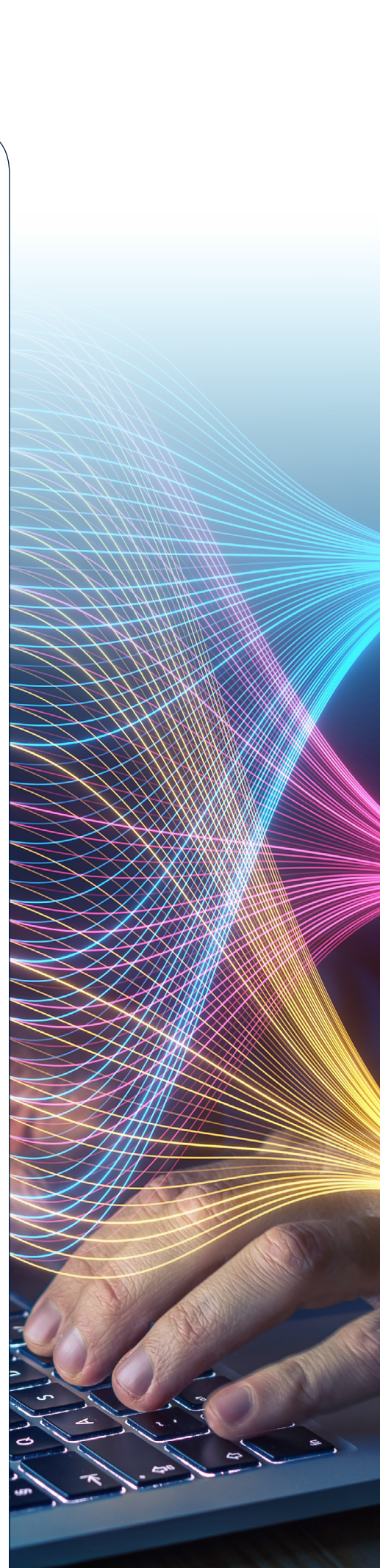
Q: Differentiate between Terrorism and espionage in the opacity section in regards to the Russian vessel and the Iranian groups especially in regards the ongoing wars in the Gulf and eastern Europe.

Naomi Davis-Crane:

In this context the line differentiating the concepts is not definitive.

Kev McLean:

Need to be a bit careful with this as Counter State Threat is in its infancy regarding stepping out of the shadows. Again, potentially look towards Ken Mc's annual threat update mentioned above ([Director General Sir Ken McCallum gives threat update | MI5 - The Security Service](#)). He clearly describes the difference between current UK terrorist and counter state (espionage) threats.



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Q: Do you think jihadists in Sahel/West Africa could become as significant as their presence in Afghanistan prior to 9/11 and how significant is their southwards spread into the Guinea coast states eg Senegal, Ghana.

Max Sahota:

The Sahel has become a major centre of jihadist activity, though it has not yet reached the global significance of Afghanistan before 9/11. The southward spread is concerning. However, Senegal remains comparatively resilient, but continued instability increases the risk of wider regional and transnational threats.

Q: On the sponsorship of the Terrorist groups like al qaida and Boko Haram or even ISIS, are the developed western countries playing a role in supporting them?

Max Sahota:

There is no credible evidence that Western governments intentionally support al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, or ISIS.

Naomi Davis-Crane:

Insufficient quality intelligence and information available at an open classification to respond to this.

Q: Are current counter-terrorism frameworks keeping pace with AI-generated content, deepfakes, and synthetic media?

Colin Davies:

It is always a challenge for legislation and the legal framework in any country to keep pace with developments with AI and there may also be the need for multi-lateral international agreements to deal with those changes.



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Q: Is there a requirement for update on the Terrorism Act to update to include the latest version of attacks and definitions ?

Colin Davies:

In the UK there is an Independent Advisor to the government on terrorism who advises on possible changes / amendments to the legislation. There may also be changes following high profile events / Public Inquiries on major incidents.

Kev McLean:

A potential legislative update could be to address the Violent Fixedated Individuals who display obsessions regarding violence, mass killings, weapons, and online content, but no ideology to warrant the use of terrorism legislation.

Q: What is the level of risk imposed by Afghanistan defacto regime?

Max Sahota:

The Taliban regime poses a moderate to high security risk by providing an environment where terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and ISIS-K, can operate or seek refuge. While the Taliban has focused primarily on domestic control, concerns remain about Afghanistan's potential to again serve as a base for transnational extremist activity.

Q: Anti-terrorism laws are being used by governments to suppress activists and the general citizenry. How can we as professionals navigate these?

Colin Davies:

It is important for practitioners to understand the relevant legislation / legal parameters in each country to ensure compliance with the legal requirements.



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Q: Is terrorism a law enforcement problem? The magnitude suggests that it can be countered by the use of military force alone.

Colin Davies:

This is an important question which raises several ethical and legal issues and may be dependent upon which country is being considered. For example, in the UK and EU countries nations are bound by the European Convention on Human Rights and have democratic structures where police forces normally take the lead in law-enforcement and where the military if utilised are there to support the civil authorities. It would also raise issues of training and the legal framework that exists.

Naomi Davis-Crane:

Countering terrorism for the long term requires a holistic approach which incorporates elements of investigation, prevention and rehabilitation.

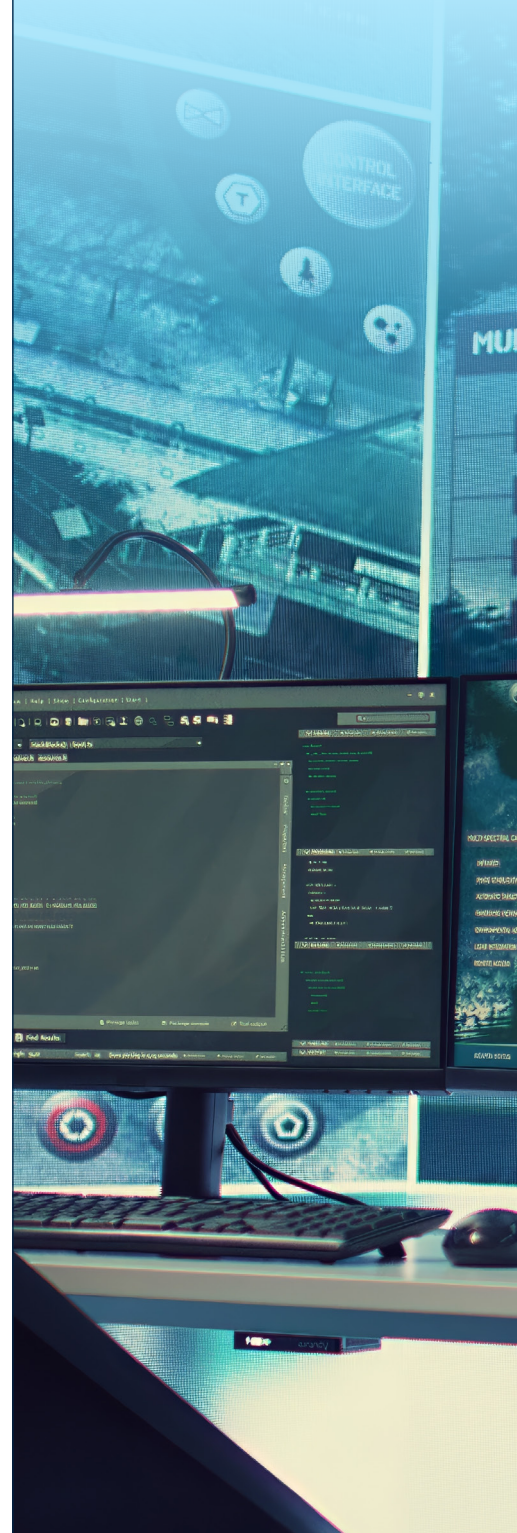
Kev McLean:

This approach will differ in various parts of the globe due to the policy, procedures, and priorities of a country's law enforcement agencies. The UK polices by consent based upon Peelian principles with limited interaction with the military. The counter terrorism framework by which the UK tackles threat is multi agency (Police, CTP, UKIC and various defence, home office and foreign office governmental depts) but does not have a military lead approach.

Q: What do you think the most concerning aspect of AI in terms of terrorism and how national security in the UK can combat this?

Colin Davies:

There are potential challenges with the development of AI and its use. There is a need for multi-lateral cooperation on the use of AI and the engagement of SM companies in managing content, but there are civil liberty issues which will also have to be considered.



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Q: Has immigrants generally been seen sleepers? If so, how far?

 **Max Sahota:**

No, security services generally do not regard immigrants as sleeper agents simply because of their immigrant status. They recognise that a very small number of individuals may exploit migration routes or immigration systems, but investigations are much more targeted based on evidence rather than assuming immigrants as a whole pose such a threat. This measured approach improves security of nations and, at the same time, does not discriminate.

Q: Thinking about trends in Western terrorist operations, do we see more bottom-up dissemination of ideas in organisations, or does it tend to be more sudden and top-down (e.g. a Bin Laden/Baghdadi type says something notable - groups change operations accordingly)?

 **Naomi Davis-Crane:**

The evolution of technology and increased ability of individuals to create and disseminate content I would suggest has led to a move from top-down propaganda to a more diffuse and critical mass model. AI may further escalate this movement.

Q: What do you think about paying a ransom to kidnappers? Is it considered an international crime, or what?

 **Colin Davies:**

In the UK the policy is that ransoms should not be paid.

 **Naomi Davis-Crane:**

A really tough question. Some states pay, others do not or at least do so via third parties. History has shown both the risk to the current hostage of not paying, but also the risk of encouraging future kidnap for ransom if payment is made. I think it would be very difficult to reach a single global position on payment or otherwise as the circumstances in which KFR take place are so diverse and nuanced.

