The Construction of "Suspect" Communities in Britain 1974-2007: comparing the impact on Irish and Muslim communities
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Interim Report — Preliminary Findings
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Since the events of 11 September 2001 in the USA and the bombings in London in July 2005, the situation of Muslim people in contemporary Britain has sometimes been compared to that of Irish communities during the 1970s and the 1980s. Prior to our study, no systematic research had been carried out to draw out parallels and differences between the experiences of these communities. Our collaborative research project addresses this through a comparison of the social construction of "suspect communities" in a historical period (1974-2007) that has been marked by comparable acts of terrorism, policing practices, counter-terrorism and other policy responses, and extensive media coverage. These events and responses have occurred in a fast-changing globalized context where immigration and information flows, and increasing religio-ethnic diversity are perceived as challenging traditional notions of stability, security, and national identity.

Our use of the term "suspect communities" derives from Paddy Hillyard's 1993 study on the impact of the Prevention of Terrorism legislation over the years on Irish communities in Britain. He argued that the implementation of this legislation rendered all Irish persons living in Britain "suspect", which contributed to fostering a climate of (mutual) fear. We test the validity of the notion of "suspect community" in the current era, which is defined by a perceived *Muslim threat*. We examine the extent to which this concept can contribute a better understanding of the comparison between two eras, two perceived terror threats and two sets of communities that share a number of similarities.

This research project provides a new analysis of Irish experiences, which it compares with current Muslim experiences. This comparison, when complete, will enable us to offer useful insights to policy makers and activists seeking ways to implement counter-terrorism without alienating communities. The research will contribute new understandings of the changing articulations of religion, ethnicity and race in the construction of communities as "suspect", and of the tensions between this construction and the political project of creating a socially cohesive multi-ethnic, multi-faith society in Britain.

About this Research

This project investigates transformations over time in the social construction as "suspect" of religio-ethnic communities. The research examines similarities and differences in the perceived impact of such constructions and of counter-terrorism on Irish and Muslim communities in Britain. We investigate the *process* through which the notion of "suspect communities" has emerged and how this construction has impacted on the communities concerned. We also examine the possibility of *de-suspectification* of specific ethno-religious groups in a context of shifting real and perceived threats to the British state/society.

Our goal is to dissect the complex interconnections between the impact of acts of terrorism, counter-terrorism policies, and media coverage of these events and issues upon Irish and Muslim minorities, and on broader society in general. We aim to understand how discourses and practices relating to such events and issues are interwoven with notions of religion, diversity, Britishness, and concrete structural factors affecting the underlying socio-economic context. In order to examine such complex relations, our project is composed of various strands of research, which are all centred on 19 events.

Research Objectives

A set of five research objectives over-arched our collection and analysis of the three sets of data:

To investigate how counter-terrorism measures and media representations contribute to the construction of communities as "suspect".

To compare similarities and differences in these constructions and their relationship to the ideological project of Britishness.

To carry out an exploratory study of the impact of these constructions on Irish and Muslim communities, and of the value of comparing these experiences.

To draw conclusions of academic, policy and community relevance from the comparison of the Muslim and Irish cases and experiences.

To disseminate these findings to a range of audiences (including research participants), policymakers, academics, community groups, activists, NGOs, media practitioners, and the police and security forces.

Data Collection

In order to test this, the research collected three types of data:

MEDIA MATERIAL: national and diaspora press coverage of Irish- and Muslim-related events in the period 1974-2007;

POLICY MATERIAL: legislation, parliamentary debates, speeches, and statements by political actors and the security forces in the same period;

SELF-PERCEPTIONS: key informant interviews and discussion groups that combined Irish and Muslim participants in Birmingham and London.

19 Events

The 19 events we analyzed fall into six thematic categories:

BOMBINGS: 1974 Birmingham pub bombings; 1983 Harrods bombing; 2005 London Bombings;

ANTI-TERRORIST LEGISLATION: 1974, 2000; 2006.

RELEASES: Birmingham Six; Guildford Four; Maguire Seven (incl. their arrest); Tipton Three; Forest Gate brothers; 2007 Birmingham raid.

ANTI-TERROR RAIDS: Diarmuid O'Neill; 2006 Forest Gate; 2007 Birmingham.

SHOOTINGS: Diarmuid O'Neill; Jean Charles De Menezes; Abdul Koyar.

MULTICULTURALISM & SOCIAL COHESION: Good Friday Agreement; Fatwa on Salman Rushdie; 2001 Riots; 2006 Jack Straw veil controversy.

We hypothesize that these events impacted on how the communities were perceived and treated in civil society, and that they were catalysts for the emergence, recycling and (re)framing of multiple, competing and sometimes contradictory discourses relating to, among others, the (potential) devastation caused; the perpetrators and their motives; victims and their plight; security forces and how they operate; the nature of and threats to Britishness; and the (self-)representation of Irish and Muslim communities.

Preliminary Findings: Media Study

The aim of the media study was to compare and contrast the construction of Irish and Muslim communities as "suspect" in the press. This analysis offers a base from which to compare media discourses with policy discourses and self-reported experiences of Irish and Muslim people in the period under investigation. The extent and the characteristics of press coverage were mapped by means of a descriptive statistical analysis of the complete sample of collected news items. The discourses relating to the construction of Irish and Muslim communities as "suspect" were identified and analyzed using critical discourse analysis for a purposive sample of news items, as described below.

The press sample was drawn from eight national newspapers (*Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Sun* and their Sunday equivalents) and three diaspora newspapers (*Asian Times*, *Irish Post*, *Muslim News*). The readerships of these newspapers cover a range of socio-economic classes, political convictions, and religio-ethnic backgrounds, thereby allowing us to chart the construction of communities as "suspect" in a cross-section of the British press. In total, we collected 2,789 news items, spanning the month following the occurrence of each key event (except

for the Good Friday Agreement and the 2000 and 2006 Terrorism Acts, where the time span of the policymaking process was taken into account). We retained the 367 news items within this sample that took a societal or analytical perspective on the events and issues they covered. From this, we narrowed the selection down further to a purposive sample of 37 news items providing a cross-section of press coverage of the 19 events. These were then assembled into packages corresponding to the thematic categories outlined.

Mapping Analysis

One of the most significant differences we note from our analysis is the tendency of the press to downplay the representation of the Irish as a whole as a threat, especially when compared with the tendency to magnify and extend the perceived threat posed by Muslims to entire communities. We found that Muslims were homogenized as a cultural and religious Other outside Britishness. Whereas, the Irish/IRA tend to be homogenized as a threat to British institutions and the British State.

The press participates in the construction of Irish and Muslim communities as "suspect" in public discourse to varying degrees and in divergent ways. This can vary according to the newspaper concerned, its political orientation, and the perceived social significance of the event being reported. The press also highlights human rights and civil liberties issues affecting members of both communities caused by the implementation of counter-terrorism, and, this, increasingly so in the contemporary period .

Critical Discourse Analysis

Here we report the critical discourse analysis of the package of news items relating to reactions to bombings, where we identified seven recurring discourses. While there is a degree of consensus within the national and diaspora press, the press does not offer a uniform representation of Irish and Muslim communities.

One of our major findings is that the reporting of Irish experiences has set a precedent for the reporting of Muslim experiences and can be used as a prism through which to observe and evaluate coverage of Muslims in the current period. The discourses we have identified are as follows:

HOMOGENIZATION: Irish and Muslim communities tend to be homogenized into monolithic wholes in the news.

INCLUSION/EXCLUSION: Members of Irish and Muslim communities are often represented as being at once inside and outside British civil society.

INNOCENT IRISH & MODERATE MUSLIMS VS. THREATENING & EXTREMIST IRISH AND MUSLIMS: The majority of Irish and Muslim people are constructed as being law-abiding, innocent and moderate, while a minority of individuals and groups are represented as a threat and as extremists. Alongside, and blurring this opposition, is

the notion of the *enemy within* communities, the "rotten apple on the tree".

IRISHOPHOBIA AND ISLAMOPHOBIA ARE SELF-INFLICTED: There is a consensus within the analyzed news items that anti-Irish and anti-Muslim backlashes mainly result from the actions carried out by bombers with an Irish or Muslim background.

CONSTRUCTING BRITISHNESS IN RELATION TO THE OTHER: The analyzed news items suggest that bombings lead to a reinforcement of British identity in the face of adversity.

SEIZING THE MORAL HIGH GROUND: The authors of the analyzed news items attempt to seize the moral high ground and to put as much distance between themselves and perceived extremists as they can, by deploying a vocabulary that strongly condemns the perpetrators of acts of physical or symbolic violence against British civil society.

THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING "SUSPECT": There is recognition in the national and diaspora press of the effects of being perceived as "suspect" on members of Irish and Muslim communities.

Preliminary Findings: Policy Study

This part of the study aims at examining whether and how national identity, national security, religion, race, and ethnicity have been articulated, defined, and re-defined by British policy actors in the process of coming to terms with the 19 events chosen for analysis. We collected and reviewed 745 policy documents relating to these events from a variety of sources, including: 65 laws, 395 documents written by relevant royal commissions, government ministries, the police, independent reviewers, parliamentary committees, and local authorities; 241 parliamentary debates and speeches; 23 speeches delivered on the occasion of the annual Police Foundation Lectures; and 21 Written Answers. The areas covered most intensively within these documents were Terrorism, Race and Policing, followed by Migration and Justice, with Race and Religion not figuring as stand alone issues.

To provide insight into the frequency and intensity with which certain issues emerged in parliamentary debates throughout the time-span under investigation, we also carried out a keyword search in *Hansard*. This search showed the dominance of the term "terrorism" in the period 1974-2005, which peaked in 2001, when it was mentioned 2,393 times. The second most frequently used term was "Irish". The keywords "Islam" and "Muslim" featured very little in parliamentary debates, although there were small peaks in 1980 (corresponding with the aftermath of the Iranian revolution) and in both 2001 and 2003, corresponding with the events of 9/11 and the war in Iraq.

Because the production of policies and legislation is often initiated as a response to an issue or event, we divided the collected documents into purposive samples of policy documents relating to each event. We thereby isolated policy packages consisting of a small number of documents

that will be analyzed in depth in conjunction with the media material and the data from the key informant interviews and discussion groups.

When identifying these packages, we focused primarily on the formulation, discussion, implementation and contestation of security and counter-terrorism measures. Whereas official documents relating to issues that have gradually become securitized in Britain (e.g. migration, race, ethnicity and religion) did not constitute, per se, the central objects of our examination, they were nevertheless included: these issues are not simply part of the backcloth, but provide crucial reading keys into the material under analysis. For instance, the 2000 and 2006 Terrorism Acts made temporary, emergency, anti-terrorist legislation introduced in 1974 permanent; and, the articulation of the 'good/moderate Muslim'-'bad/radical Muslim' discourse that circulated in policy circles after the July 2005 bombings cannot simply be put down to the effects of the 2001 attacks in the USA or the 2004 attack in Madrid.

In this context, it is interesting to note that whereas the need to respect 'diversity' is discussed frequently in relation to *religion* (esp. Islam) in the 2000s, awareness of diversity initially emerged in British society through the acknowledgement of minorities that were *racialized* as visibly different. This had the effect of excluding public recognition of minorities (e.g. Irish Catholics) that did not look visibly different from the majority population.

While political actors rarely if ever made speeches explicitly relating to Catholicism when addressing the IRA bombing campaign in Britain, since the 1990s there were frequent and open mentions of Islam and Muslims under New Labour. This shows both an attempt to extend the parameters of what was problematized within New Labour's "project" of social cohesion, and a shift in public perceptions of terrorism. The IRA had come to be understood and fought as a domestic problem, whereas so-called *Islamist terrorism* came to be framed ontologically as an attack on globally shared liberal values and on British society.

Key Informant Interviews & Discussion Groups

We conducted 41 key informant interviews, 22 in London and 19 in Birmingham with a range of policy actors, activists, stakeholders, community leaders, and media professionals who have first-hand knowledge of the two communities and key events between 1974 and 2007. Their expert knowledge provided insights on the generation and impacts of representations of communities as "suspect" and changes over time. Their participation enabled the researchers to obtain a fuller picture of local issues and community concerns prior to holding the discussion groups.
We conducted seven discussion groups, three in Birmingham and four in London. These small groups brought together between four and eight Muslim and Irish people to discuss their experiences. In total, 38 people of various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds participated in these groups (19 Irish—9 men and 10 women; 19 Muslims—10 men and 9 women). We were concerned to understand the impact on people of "being suspect" and also to explore if it is helpful to share experiences. The areas of discussion included: fears and feelings of being suspect; community and individual responses to counter-terrorism policies; the roles of the media, government and the police in counter-terrorism; and relations between different minority ethnic groups in Britain now and in the past.

Both the policy study and the direct experiences of our interviewees and discussion group participants indicate that the type of reactions to terrorist threats on the part of governments (e.g. the definition and implementation of anti-terror laws and policing methods), and the effects of counter-terrorism measures upon the two "suspect" communities were not substantially different in effect, as they were embedded in understandings of race, ethnicity and religion specific to the British historical and social context of the second half and the turn of the 20th century. Thus, our attempt to understand, over time, processes of *suspectification* and *de-suspectification* of communities in British society will enable us to reveal both the specificities and general outcomes of transformations and contradictions in the role, function, and self- and public perception of British state institutions.

The Research Team

Prof. Mary Hickman and two co-applicants, Dr Lyn Thomas and Dr Sara Silvestri were awarded an ESRC grant for this 18-month study. Mary has published widely on the Irish in Britain and immigration and social cohesion. Lyn is an expert on the media and audience studies. Sara specializes in Muslim political mobilization in Europe. Dr Henri Nickels is Research Fellow on the project and his main responsibility is the media study. Henri previously worked on a project comparing representations of Islam on British, French and Russian television.

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