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## *Terrorism and Responses to Terror*

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Thank very much – welcome everyone.

In 1995, a Muslim youth organisation called JIMAS held its annual conference here at Leicester University. Among the speakers were two of the leaders of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Army of the Righteous, a Kashmiri based jihadist group. The LeT would go on, in 2008 to carry out the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, which killed 174 people.

Here in Leicester, the group's leader, Hafeez Saeed, argued Muslims could find salvation fighting in Kashmir, and there was the opportunity to attend the LeT training camps beforehand. Jihad in Bosnia was described as obligatory for all able bodied Muslims.

My research focuses on three main areas.

I have a detailed interest in conspiracy theories, and the broader political fringe. Much of my interest is what I call British Jihadism – the involvement of a small but not insignificant number of GB Muslims in violence, a process that is now in its third decade.

When you look at these conflicts in historical terms, the international participation in the Syrian jihad is not so extraordinary, indeed in the case of British involvement, it is predictable. In my PhD, to become a book in the next year or so, I found British jihadis have fought in 14 different countries since 1992.

At least 16 different Sunni Muslim jihadist organisations have had British members, and that is without a detailed examination of the many small groups Britons were in which have tended to be absorbed into IS or al-Nusra in Syria and Iraq. I found 59 Britons had died fighting in these conflicts from 1992-2014, in 11 different countries. Far more than that since have died in Syria and Iraq.

This is not simply an external problem, of Club 18-30 holidays gone bad. British jihadis have killed 54 people in Britain since 2004. 5 suicide bombers have died here in that same period.

I have been able to name 79 jihadis from overseas organisations who settled in Britain in what became known as the Londonistan era.

As an academic, I think this detail matters. It can, and should, inform debate.

The importance of conspiracy theory – beliefs which see history as driven, not by material or overt political decisions but hidden powers who direct events.

According to 2011 research by the Pew Research Center, there is no Muslim majority country in the world, where a majority believe Al-Qaeda carried out 9/11. I will repeat that. There is no Muslim majority country in the world, where a majority believe Al-Qaeda carried out 9/11.

In a 2002 opinion poll here, only 21% of GB Muslims believed Al Qaeda carried out 9/11. A poll for Channel 4 News on the 7/7 bombings found a quarter of British Muslims did not believe the 4 suicide bombers did it.

There is much to be pessimistic about.

21 years on from the JIMAS conference, and Lashkar-e-Taiba here at Leicester University, what has changed?

On one level – not much. The conflict in Kashmir continues. For the Bosnian conflict, read, in much greater number, Iraq and Syria.

And within British Islam, debate flickers, but sometimes moves away. JIMAS for example was to split, in part because of opposition to those promoting a more extreme route for the group.

Universities now grapple with the issue of who should be allowed – and who not to allow – to organise, and to speak on campus. These debates – as we see with the controversy over Prevent, have become increasingly, I would argue deliberately, couched in racialized terms.

When my fellow academics, the trade union the UCU and the National Union of Students oppose Prevent, there is little or no reference to broader principles of free speech or problems that have existed on campus. The issue is simply couched as one of discrimination against Muslim students.

I tend towards a free speech approach, but this is a position where theory clashes up against reality. Universities, and especially Student Unions, have always banned, always censored, always restricted. The recent Free Speech Rankings illustrate that.

In 2014, I approached UK Universities, the umbrella body for UK Universities and the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) and asked how many students were believed to have left their courses to fight in Syria.

Neither would reply.

There is an element within the administration of our universities that hope if they put their hands over their eyes, these issues will go away. The current case at Queen Mary, for example, of a student who has left his course to try to travel to Syria, taking two younger guys with him, is barely known outside of that university. Others took umbrage on behalf of FOSIS – my question to them was in some way improper, or illegitimate. Perhaps I should have asked the Rugby Club or the Dungeons and Dragons Society about Syria, instead?

And yet in February 2014 a former spokesman of FOSIS, Amandla Thomas-Johnson, wearing the hat of the group Cage, had written in the *Evening Standard* that we had nothing to fear from young Britons going out to fight President Assad.

*“Listening to their views should be at the heart of forming policy”*

We can see their views, and their actions – there have been all over social media. From my reading they sound very similar to the views articulated by the Kashmiri jihadists here in 1995, and indeed those who fought in Bosnia. Themes of injustice, anger, and a desire to establish Islamic utopias predominate. I do not think those views sit well with liberal democracy, or with the liberal academy.

But these issues are not going to go away. They are here. How we respond to them is one of the issues of our age.

**Talk by Dr. Paul Stott at Leicester University – 5th February 2016.**



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