

On Friday 29th November 2019, the world witnessed an evil, callous and what seems to be, a premeditated [terrorist attack on London Bridge](#) against innocent civilians. I will not divulge in the exact details of the attack, in respect of the victims [Jack Merritt](#), 25, and [Saskia Jones](#), 23, their families and those that sought to prevent it. However, to put it in the softest of descriptions, they were murdered in cold blood with the use of a knife, in broad daylight, directly in the view of the public passing by, going about their day to day business.

This attack was carried out by [Usman Khan](#), a “rehabilitated” Jihadi, but what we have come to know now is false. However, there is probably some value, to know who he is and his life, at least in the criminal sense. Khan was born and bred in Stoke on Trent and was the son of Pakistani immigrants. He left school at 16 and there are no records to suggest he continued any educational endeavours after. At the age of 17 in 2008, Khan was arrested by [Counter Terrorism Police](#) but was not charged with any crime.

Two years later, Khan along with nine others, was arrested by [MI5](#) and pleaded guilty to [Al Qaeda](#) inspired terrorism offences. Some of what Khan was inspired to commit were; blowing up the [Houses of Parliament](#), the Mayor of London’s home who at the time was [Boris Johnson](#) as well as the [London Stock Exchange](#). It is reasonable to suggest that Khan had ambitious terrorist goals and had he not been intercepted so soon, these goals could surely have been realised.



Image: London Bridge/Yahoo

Furthermore, Khan sought to fundraise for terrorist activities abroad. He must have come to the conclusion that raising funds in the West would be strategically more beneficial than doing so in Pakistan. This view was likely guided by the fact that the value of the pound is more than that of the Pakistan rupee. Khan was surely astute enough to recognise that raising funds in the UK required little to no effort, and in this case not even being employed and so he exploited the benefits system and used public funds for his own nefarious purposes. Although the plan for the funds was to set up a terrorist training camp in Pakistan, this didn't materialise but it does raise questions about how the benefits system potentially needs revising in regards to convicted and would-be terrorists.

Following on from this, Khan was subsequently arrested and admitted to fundraising for terrorist offences. He was given an [indeterminate sentence](#) and a minimum term time of eight years. It is important to point out what the judge had observed of Khan, in regards to his demeanour and the evidence presented. The judge concluded that Khan was “[one of the] more serious jihadis” who operated “at a higher level of efficacy and commitment than

the rest". This of course, whilst true, is clearly worrying and something that should have been taken into serious consideration in moving forward with regards to what will happen to Khan during his prison sentence and release.

Khan was placed in prison for an indeterminate prison sentence until it was deemed that he was no longer a risk to the public. Whilst this seems to be a sensible sentence and plan for someone deemed to have high efficacy and commitment for terrorism, it was however overturned in an appeal to Lord Leveson. In his Judgment, Lord Leveson concluded that the original decision was flawed and that the characterisation given about Khan, along with two others; Nazam Hussain and Mohammed Shahjahan was more severe than what they actually were and in comparison to other defendants. Of course, no one can really know what someone is like, but on the balance of probabilities, the likelihood Khan et al were anything less severe than a danger to the public strikes me as extremely odd. As a result of the appeal, Khan was sentenced to sixteen years and released after eight years in December of 2018.

During Khan's time in prison, he was enrolled on to the [Healthy Identity Intervention Programme](#) (HIIP). It was the U.K. Government's pilot programme to prevent individuals from committing further terrorist offences. The HIIP seeks to do this by encouraging and empowering novice and experienced terrorists to disengage from their group, causes and or ideology. In addition to HIIP, Khan was also enrolled onto the [Desistance and Disengagement Programme](#). The purpose of this programme tailored interventions which support individuals to stop participating in a terrorism-related activity (desist) and to move away from terrorist ideology and ways of thinking (disengage). Naturally, these two well-intentioned programmes meant that Khan was given all the help and support required for him to be rehabilitated.



In regards to the effectiveness of the programmes and whether they were successful with Khan, we know for certain that that is not the case. It seems Khan gamed the system and presented himself as a rehabilitated ex-Jihadi on the path to redemption. The more worrying aspects of the programmes, or at least whether they have or will work on others is the lack of evidence to suggest as such. To date, whilst there has only been a [small qualitative evaluation for HIIP](#), there is presently [nothing for DADP](#). Although the Government have said that both programmes are under constant review, this seems too meagre when dealing with highly dangerous individuals. It is the Government's responsibility to keep the public safe, and therefore reviewing these programmes with strong and robust evidence must be their priority.

With all this in mind, I now turn to the issue of other convicted terrorists, be they Islamist inspired or White supremacists that are currently in the prison system. If the evidence that terrorists are somewhat immune to rehabilitation programmes, then there is a risk that they pose to other criminals vulnerable to being radicalised and subsequently recruited. We are

aware that prisons have played a role in the development and strengthening of terrorist organisations, such as the [Irish Republicans](#) and the [Egyptian Islamists](#). However, the threat serving terrorists pose, through their recruitment and radicalisation efforts could lead to new terrorist organisations. For example, [Primeiro Comando da Capital](#) in Sao Paulo came into existence from prison.

There are three policy approaches that could potentially deal with the threat of radicalisation within the prison system; [containment, dispersal and the mixed approach](#). The first policy approach that can be used is containment and as the name suggests, it is to isolate a prisoner seen as an influential radicaliser and recruiter. Whilst this approach is appealing, in that it literally keeps high profile terrorists away from many of the common criminals, it is far from completely ideal. The risk with this approach is that it provides the prisoner with an elevated status, thus helping other prisoners conjure up an image of someone infamous and to be looked up to. Furthermore, public opinion sympathetic to human rights could lead other inmates to feel like the treatment is unfair and thus, add to their potential radicalisation. In a sense, the high profile prisoner could potentially do nothing and still have the ability to influence and radicalise other prisoners without ever having to meet them.

The second policy is dispersal. Prisoners that have been convicted of terrorism offences are placed in the main vicinity of the prison with other less dangerous prisoners. In contrast to the containment policy, it potentially prevents these prisoners from gaining a high profile status by their equal treatment with other inmates. However, the main danger to this is that it exposes potentially vulnerable inmates from being recruited by highly influential terrorists. However this is not the only risk, there is also the potential of other organised criminal gangs potentially striking partnerships with these high profile terrorist prisoners, for both resources and communication abilities.

The final policy approach is a mixed approach. It is a combination of both the containment and dispersal policies. The aim of this approach is to have some flexibility in regards to who is put into containment and who is in dispersal. The obvious advantage of this approach is that it provides the prisons with some level of autonomy to react to the potential risk as it evolves over time. In addition, it also provides these terrorists, prisoners, with an incentive to behave and engage appropriately, with the punishment of being placed in containment should they fall short of the standards required. Of course, the danger to this approach is that it could be seen as ad hoc, with flimsy criteria and the potential of it being used not only inaccurately, but unfairly.

So where do we go from here with other potentially dangerous terrorist prisoners, such as

Usman Khan et al? The first point is that we have two programmes, that not only need funding but also need highly qualified people to deliver them. Without the right people with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to deal with highly intelligent, influential terrorists, we could potentially be wasting time and resources on someone that this programme will not work on. Furthermore, both programmes whilst under review, they must be evaluated properly and changes made as necessary. These programmes cannot and should not be static, but rather evolve as our understanding evolves of the people they seek to help and support. The second point is, that of sentencing. Whilst terrorists pose a significant risk, we must not fall into the trap of placing them in prison indefinitely unless it is deemed appropriate. Like containment in prison can elevate the status of terrorists, so to indefinite prison sentences as it could potentially feed into the grievance narrative that many would-be and novice terrorists are attracted to.

The third and final point and probably the most important, both in relation to prisoners and Usman Khan and that is gaming the system. Usman Khan successfully gamed the system, followed the advice given to him, engaged in the programs and was even being seen as the poster boy for successful de-radicalisation, but of course, he fooled everyone and had no intentions of changing his ways. Being able to know if someone has really been de-radicalised is probably the most important risk we have to deal with and one in which academics, practitioners and policymakers will need to consider in moving forward.

*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Kootneeti Team*

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