

Government appears helpless as hundreds of young Britons click through to jihad

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Kadiza Sultana, Amira Abase and Shamima Begum left the UK in mid-February. Met Police

We have been hearing for some time now that hundreds of mainly young people have left the UK and found their way to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State. Headlines about [young schoolgirls](#) with excellent exam results and bright prospects sneaking across the border from Turkey, or the [cold brutality of](#)

“Jihadi John” as a representative of Britain’s IS executioners have made for chilling reading.

While the media obsesses about the individual stories behind these defections, the UK government – like those in Australia, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, United States, Spain, as well as a number of northern African states – are desperately seeking a strategy to combat the lure of recruitment to jihad.

Overall, the police have noted that more than **700 potential terrorist suspects have travelled to Syria** over the past year.

Meanwhile Scotland Yard reported recently that a record **338 people were arrested for terror-related activities in the UK in the year to march 2015** – almost one per day. This represents a dramatic increase of 33% on the 254 who were arrested in 2013/14 – a shocking statistic. **Close analysis of those 338 arrests**, shows that more than half were arrested in relation to their activities in Syria. Almost eight in ten of these suspects arrested were British nationals.

Disaffected youth

This makes the situation even more dangerous in terms of security as there is no real “type” that we can determine as more likely than others to get involved with IS in Syria and Iraq. Statistics increasingly indicate that the majority of those involved are young – 56 were below the age of 20. Interestingly, **more than 11% of those in custody or who have been arrested are female**. This is one of the first times that we are witnessing such a swell of support from young women in a global context for a terrorism campaign.

This support from the youth appears to be an emerging threat which is increasing at a very rapid pace. And to add to that there is the disturbing report that suggests that half of those known to police are classified as being of significant concern. Many of those have now returned from Syria and Iraq to their homes, which may mean a possibility of IS cells emerging here in the UK.

Online outlaws

There are many questions as to why so many young men and women are becoming involved in the IS cause, whether they choose to travel to Iraq or Syria to join the jihadis or remain at home to engage in fund-raising activities online – or more disturbingly in hatching terror plots on the internet.



Home secretary, Theresa May, faces calls for urgent action over the number of young Britons being recruited for jihad. DFID - UK Department for International Development, [CC BY](#)

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The emergence of this online threat is a real focal point for the UK's security services, given the ease of access to sites such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp – all of which have been recruitment tools for the organisation, as well as methods of planning and co-ordinating attacks.

In this context, there have been calls for the authorities to become much stricter as to the access to information and technology not just to those who are known to be active in extremist or terrorist activities but to all citizens as a preventative and security measure.

Essentially, this could mean monitoring of all citizens online activities and would mean the introduction and implementation of a policy specifically allowing the authorities access to formerly encrypted sites and apps.

Now that the election is over and a new majority Conservative government established, it will be a waiting game as to when and how the issue is going to be addressed. The government's 2011 [Prevent strategy](#), which aims to prevent people being radicalised and getting directly involved in terrorism and terrorist activities, seems extremely vague in terms of context.

There is little in terms of detail to specify what measures can or will be taken against anybody who has been active or has claimed links to terrorist or extremist organisations in general. This could set a dangerous precedent in terms of arrests and detentions for those who are alleged to have been involved in any way with this type of activity.

That there needs to be security measures put in place by the government would seem obvious, but the scale and the level of invasiveness in people's lives needs to be carefully structured. The idea of having a [Patriot Act](#) in the UK would be quite unnerving for many people as it would be seen as a way for the government to have complete control over the everyday lives of the people.

The perceived threat to people's privacy and the overall perception of the government becoming a "Big Brother" would be seen as a challenge to the freedoms of the citizens and may be used as a further recruitment tool by IS.

Only time will tell how effective any government plan to prevent radicalisation can be but there is no doubt that the issue needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.