DIRECTOR GENERAL SPEAKS ON TERRORISM, TECHNOLOGY AND OVERSIGHT

Address by the Director General of the Security Service, Andrew Parker, to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) at Thames House, 8 January 2015.

Introduction

1. It's good to welcome you here to Thames House for my second public speech.

2. I want tonight to do two things – to look back at the year that has passed since I last spoke publicly and to look ahead to the challenges that MI5 faces in 2015 and beyond.

3. And in so doing, I'd like to offer my reflections on some of the significant events that have shaped and will shape the UK's national security.

4. I have three key themes tonight, which together account for large parts of my working life:

a. the long haul we face in combatting the threat from Islamist inspired terrorism, particularly – but certainly not only – in relation to Syria;
b. the chronic yet critical challenge we face from technological change and the steps taken to respond to that; and
c. the increased public visibility of the oversight and accountability that is so important to MI5's work.

The threat

5. So first to the threat. But before I lay out the overall picture, I wanted to say something about the dreadful events of yesterday in Paris, when twelve people were killed in a terrorist attack. It is too early for us to come to judgements about the precise details or origin of the attack but it is a terrible reminder of the intentions of those who wish us harm. As you would expect, we are offering our French colleagues our full support as they respond.

6. I'm going to talk tonight about the full range of terrorist threats that the UK faces. In describing the overall threat, it would be surprising if I didn't focus first on the ongoing and increasing challenge from Syria. I spoke a year ago of MI5's increasing focus on this growing threat. It has continued to expand and to morph, not least with ISIL coming to the fore.

7. Around 600 extremists are among the many Britons who have travelled there. A significant proportion has joined ISIL.

8. I won't dignify the group with its self-adopted propaganda label 'Islamic State'. Scholars have rightly pointed out that it is neither 'Islamic', nor is it a state. Its true nature is visible to all from its visceral brutality – including the murder of hostages – and its indulgence of the very worst imaginable forms of treatment of other human beings. Its hatred is directed against all who do not adhere to its own twisted ideology. The vast majority of its victims are Muslims. It is rightly condemned by Muslim leaders and scholars.

9. ISIL has large numbers of fighters and substantial resources in parts of Syria and Iraq. Its propaganda repeatedly names Britain as an enemy, but how is it a threat to the UK?

10. Well, there are three ways, all of which we have already seen in practice:

a. I've already mentioned the first, which is the senseless and brutal murder of innocent Britons in the region. None of us need any reminder of that.
b. The second is that they are trying to direct terrorist attacks in the UK and elsewhere from Syria, using violent extremists here as their instruments.
c. And, third, they are seeking through propaganda to provoke individuals in the UK to carry out violent attacks here.

11. Despite its medieval tactics, ISIL is a terrorist phenomenon of the modern age. It makes full use of the modern social media and communications methods through which many of us now live our lives. By these means it spreads its message of hate directly into homes across the United Kingdom – both to those seeking it and those who may be susceptible to its distortion and glamorisation of horrific acts.

12. Not all British extremists who have travelled to Syria will want to mount attacks in the UK when they return. But some do have that intent. Some have already tried to carry out acts of terrorism here and elsewhere. Outside Iraq and Syria, we believe that since October 2013 there have been more than 20 terrorist plots either directed or provoked by extremist groups in Syria.

Let me remind you of a few:

- four people were shot dead in Brussels last May by a French returnee from Syria;
- in Canada, a soldier was killed in a hit and run attack and another shot dead outside the parliament building;
- in Australia, the hostage-taking at a cafe in Sydney led to the deaths of two hostages;
- in France, a knife attack on police;
- and other attacks have been foiled – for example, early in 2014 police in France seized improvised explosive devices from a flat linked to another Syria returnee.

13. We know that terrorists based in Syria harbour the same ambitions towards the UK – trying to direct attacks against our country, and exhorting extremists here to act independently.

14. So we in MI5 will continue to work tirelessly with the police, GCHQ and SIS to uncover violent intent directed against Britain, both within the UK and in Syria. An important part of this work is identifying extremists travelling to and from Syria, and taking whatever steps we can to prevent them from getting to the conflict zones.

15. Strikingly, working with our partners, we have stopped three UK terrorist plots in recent months alone. Deaths would certainly have resulted otherwise. But we cannot be complacent. Although we and our partners try our utmost we know that we cannot hope to stop everything.

16. The intelligence task we face is challenging. There are no in-country partner agencies we can work with in Syria. Collecting intelligence about a war zone is difficult, gathering evidence even more so.

17. Nevertheless, when it comes to the UK, as the near-daily media reports show, such extremists must expect to be arrested and prosecuted. In England and Wales, terrorist-related arrests are up 35% compared with four years ago. Since 2010, more than 140 individuals have been convicted for terrorism related offences.

18. We and the police are necessarily focused on preventing the terrorist threat associated with these extremists. But it's an even greater success when individuals faced with ISIL's propaganda turn away from its twisted message. We have seen the human misery that results from the opposite choice: bereaved and broken families, ruined lives, suffering and heartbreak.

19. Meanwhile, other Islamist terrorist threats persist. Al Qaeda continues to provide a focus for Islamist inspired violence and a significant driving force for extremists to plot terrorist attacks against the West. British Islamist extremists still travel out to South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and other theatres to try to obtain terrorist training. And terrorist groups in parts of Africa also pose persistent threats.

20. In Afghanistan in November a terrorist attack on a British convoy in Kabul killed five people, including two members of British Embassy staff. This tragically reminded us again of the risks run and the sacrifices made by all of those who have worked so hard in Afghanistan to safeguard our national security. And in Pakistan, the attack last month on a school in Peshawar, in which over 100 children and teachers were killed, underlines the brutality of the Islamist terrorist threat we face, and the terrible cost that it seeks to inflict on innocent people around the world.

21. So, in summary, we face a very serious level of threat that is complex to combat and unlikely to abate significantly for some time. From the totality of this picture, two aspects are worth noting.

22. First, the number of crude but potentially deadly plots has gone up. Last year's attacks in Canada and Australia were examples. Such attacks are inherently harder for intelligence agencies to detect. They are often the work of volatile individuals, motivated by terrorist propaganda rather than working as part of sophisticated networks. They often act spontaneously or after very short periods of prior planning.

23. Such people often act alone. But even when violent intent is solely the work of one individual and they share their specific plans with no one else, it is almost always the case that someone, a member of the public or a friend, has had some prior insight into the dangerous direction they are moving in and the violent destination they are hoping to reach. So, as we go forward into 2015, we will need more help from the public in these sorts of situations. Such assistance will be invaluable when it comes to enabling MI5 and the police to save lives.

24. The second aspect worth nothing is that, alongside this greater volume, we still face more complex and ambitious plots that follow the now sadly well established approach of Al Qaeda and its imitators: attempts to cause large scale loss of life, often by attacking transport systems or iconic targets. We know, for example, that a group of core Al Qaeda terrorists in Syria is planning mass casualty attacks against the West.

25. It was primarily the rising threat from Syria – not just ISIL – that led the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre to raise the threat level for international terrorism from 'substantial' to 'severe' last summer. 'Severe' is an evidence-based judgement meaning that an attack on the UK is highly likely.

26. Overall, that worsened and more complex threat picture is the first trend I want to lay out. I'll come to the second in a moment.

Other threats

27. But I don't want to pass on without mentioning other threats that require our attention.

28. Whilst there has been great progress in Northern Ireland, dissident Republicans continue to carry out terrorist attacks aimed at the police, prison officers and others. There were more than 20 such attacks in 2014, most of which – thankfully – were unsuccessful.

29. The key statistic is that for every one of those attacks we and our colleagues in the police have stopped three or four others coming to fruition.

30. Northern Ireland experience teaches us that terrorist threats are enduring; that it requires sustained long-term effort and teamwork to counter them; and that it's unrealistic to expect every attack plan to be stopped, even where the perpetrators may in some cases have been on our radar for many years.

31. MI5's origins more than a century ago lie in protecting the United Kingdom against espionage threats and we remain at the forefront of that fight today.

There are two particular challenges for us here:

- the first is that some of our adversaries operate at industrial scale to build and deploy highly intrusive capabilities which, unlike us, they use without any of the constraints of the legal and ethical norms of democratic and open societies; and
- the second is that the internet now provides ever increasing opportunities for the conduct of cyber espionage and sabotage remotely.

32. We and partner agencies continue to achieve considerable success in defending the UK from such attacks. But the challenge is significant, growing in scale and changing in nature. Responding to it depends on the partnership between the Intelligence community, wider Government, key parts of the private and public sector and our international allies.

The capability challenge

33. So to the second trend: the way in which technology-related change is affecting our ability to deal with these threats.

34. The range and severity of threats the UK has faced over the years has meant that we have needed to build substantial security and intelligence capabilities. MI5, with our close partners in GCHQ, SIS, and the police together embody an intelligence and security effort of a quality that is the envy of many partner nations.

35. It is focused on those who threaten harm, not on the private lives of the population at large. All of it is set within a robust legal framework that governs, properly constrains and, through oversight, holds us to account. Having that framework is vital to the legitimacy and public consent that we need to do our work. And it is intrinsic to the sort of country we are protecting.

36. MI5 operates with the tools, capabilities and resources provided to us by the Government and Parliament. All three of these areas saw significant developments in 2014 as the wider context in which MI5 does its work changed alongside the developing threat picture.

37. I've said before why the ability to access terrorist communications is vital to MI5's ability to keep the country safe – let me explain now in a bit more detail why this is so.

38. Interception of communications, which includes listening to the calls made on a telephone, or opening and reading the contents of emails, form a critical part in the Security and Intelligence Agencies' toolkit. And one – it is always worth reiterating - that we can only exercise with a warrant signed by the Secretary of State after careful consideration of our reasoning and the necessity and proportionality of the case.

39. Interception alone does not enable the Agencies to investigate and disrupt threats to the UK. It is one of a number of capabilities and techniques, which work together to build an understanding of the threat that an individual or a network poses, be that from espionage, terrorism or the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

40. It provides us with an insight into the activities and associates of individuals involved in planning or facilitating terrorism. It helps to build broader and deeper coverage of their activities of concern. And it helps to identify means by which to disrupt their activity before they damage the national security of the UK or endanger lives.

41. Changes in the technology that people are using to communicate are making it harder for the Agencies to maintain the capability to intercept the communications of terrorists. Wherever we lose visibility of what they are saying to each other, so our ability to understand and mitigate the threat that they pose is reduced.

42. The value that visibility of online communications can bring to understanding terrorist threats is clear. Just a few weeks ago it was revealed in court that the first person in the UK to be convicted of terrorist offences in connection with the Syria conflict had received advice on how to access

extremist training and weaponry in Syria through online contact with other extremists based overseas.

43. And this is not an isolated incident. Almost all of MI5's top priority UK counter terror investigations have used intercept capabilities in some form to identify, understand or disrupt plots seeking to harm the UK and its citizens. The further reduction of this capability will seriously harm our ability to investigate and disrupt such threats in the future.

44. For the evidence, look back over recent years. Consider the case of the largest and most serious terrorist plot that we have ever faced – Operation OVERT. Between 2008 and 2010 ten individuals were convicted of plotting to blow up multiple transatlantic airliners. The investigation employed a range of intelligence and evidence gathering techniques in order to understand the risks posed by the conspirators.

45. A key part of the evidence which brought the plotters to justice was coded conversations by email, forensically retrieved by police following their arrest, between the conspirators and Al Qaeda linked extremists in Pakistan, in which they discussed the preparations for their attacks and the selection of targets.

46. Or consider the 2012 conviction of nine individuals for planning to attack the London Stock Exchange and other iconic targets in the capital. Information recovered forensically following the group's arrest indicated that electronic communications over the internet played a key role in how the group met and stayed in touch, including through internet forums and other publicly available communications methods.

47. None of this is a surprise. The internet has changed so many aspects of our lives – better in so many ways, revolutionising commerce and communication, providing greater choice and better access to information for us all. But also, as the examples show, it offers the same advantages and opportunities to terrorists too. They use it to spread propaganda, to radicalise impressionable individuals, to arrange travel, to move money. But most of all to communicate with one another, to plan and organise.

48. And that is why the capability to intercept these communications is so important to MI5 – the ability to monitor the terrorists' communications as they plan is central to our chances of knowing their intentions and stopping them. So, if we lose that ability, if parts of the radar go dark and terrorists are confident that they are beyond the reach of MI5 and GCHQ, acting with proper legal warrant, then our ability to keep the country safe is also reduced.

49. The ability to access communications data is likewise vital to our ability to protect our national security. Such data has been crucial to MI5 and to the Police in detecting and stopping many terrorist plots over the last decade. We use those powers carefully, only where it is necessary and

proportionate to do so. But unless we maintain this capability, our ability to protect the country will be eroded.

50. The passage of emergency legislation in the summer underlines how important these issues are and how seriously Government and Parliament is prepared to take them. Since then there have been some improvements. But, as the Prime Minister made clear a few weeks ago, there remains more to be done.

51. Alongside the passage of that legislation, we also saw the launch of important new work to consider the vital questions of longer term agency capability and the legislation that should enable it. The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament has been considering the issues of Privacy and Security since the summer of 2013. Added to that we also have the review work that David Anderson QC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, is leading for the Government. We also have the independent panel which the Royal United Services Institute has brought together.

52. I welcome all of this and we are engaging with each body. It is never for the Director General of MI5 to say what the final answers should be to these sorts of questions. I am a public servant and it is for Ministers and Parliamentarians to decide on how our society can best address the challenges and choices we face.

53. But it's right that senior intelligence professionals should contribute to the debate and help ensure that in so far as possible it is grounded in a proper knowledge of the facts and the consequences of different options. So you have seen in recent months Director Comey of the FBI speak forcefully of the dangers to the United States of 'going dark'. And Robert Hannigan, the Director of GCHQ, has highlighted the challenges the UK's security and intelligence agencies face and the need for a mature debate about privacy in the digital age. I strongly support what they both said.

54. I've said before and I'll say again MI5 does not browse through the private lives of the population at large. We need to have powerful capabilities that enable us to range widely, with the potential to reach anyone who might threaten national security – but with our efforts always concentrated on the tiniest minority who actually present threats. That is because this is a free country under mature, liberal democracy. It is this free country that it is MI5's task to protect against those who seek to harm it.

55. We all value our privacy – and none of us want it intruded upon improperly or unnecessarily. But I don't want a situation where that privacy is so absolute and sacrosanct that terrorists and others who mean us harm can confidently operate from behind those walls without fear of detection.

56. I often hear the privacy and security debate mis-characterised as if the two are somehow are a trade-off: more security means less privacy, that for us to be able to keep you safe you have to accept less freedom in your daily life.

57. The reality is that the opposite is true. Our driving purpose is to protect the freedoms of the majority by identifying and focussing on the small number of people who threaten our safety, security and freedoms. This can only be achieved with effective powers to find out what they are doing and to stop them.

58. If we are to have the best chance of preventing such harm, we need the capability to shine a light into the activities of the worst individuals who pose the gravest threats. They use the same communications tools as the rest of us. But technological and market changes risk closing off areas where we need to be able to operate. The dark places from where those who wish us harm can plot and plan are increasing. We need to be able to access communications and obtain relevant data on those people when we have good reason to do so.

59. That is the second trend. There is still a lot we can do and there have been some positive developments. But sustaining our reach is still a profound challenge and one that we must do more to tackle if we are to do our job.

Oversight

60. Alongside the increased threat and the changing capability landscape, it has also been a year of significant developments in terms of oversight.

61. Let me be clear at the outset – accountability and professional ethics have always been central to MI5's mission. Put simply that mission is to keep the country safe, but the way in which we do it – with an enduring commitment to necessity and proportionality – is just as vital to safeguarding the sort of country we live in too.

62. As the DG of MI5, I know particularly well the skills, expertise and care that my officers bring to their work – years, even decades, of experience of gathering intelligence, assessing it, using it to investigate threats and then to disrupt them.

63. MI5 is steeped in an ethos that prides itself not only on the outcomes we achieve but the ways in which we do our work. Professionalism and a deep commitment to acting only in ways that are necessary and proportionate are at the centre of our mission.

64. And rightly we are also subject to an extensive system of external oversight and authorisation to assure that we are meeting these high standards.

65. First and foremost I am accountable to the Home Secretary, who is in turn accountable to Parliament and the British people, a responsibility that she treats with the utmost seriousness. As well as the important general responsibilities that this entails, the use of our most intrusive powers requires her to consider and, where satisfied, authorise individual warrants. And similarly, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland performs the same duties, with the same rigour for our work in Northern Ireland.

66. Second, MI5 is overseen independently by Parliament through the Intelligence and Security Committee, strengthened by the Justice and Security Act of 2013.

67. Third, our internal processes that govern our intrusive work are inspected by two independent commissioners (senior serving or retired judges). This means that any warrant or authorisation can be subject to their learned and forensic scrutiny and that – rightly – MI5 staff know that they must prepare all cases with rigour and precision.

68. Fourth, we are held to account with regard to any complaints or alleged breaches of human rights by an independent tribunal presided over by a senior judge – the Investigatory Powers Tribunal.

69. Now all of that may sound like dry process that is not readily meaningful to those not steeped in the detail of National Security work. So let me give you a sense of what it means in practice for me as the Director General of MI5.

70. Last year, I made four appearances before the Intelligence and Security Committee. We submitted hundreds of pages of evidence to them, fully disclosing detailed, TOP SECRET information about our capabilities and actions.

71. I see the Home Secretary regularly, sometimes as often as two or three times a week for discussions about MI5's work. I brief her in person and in writing on the most serious threats we are investigating and we discuss the wider policy and operational questions that arise. She herself, as she recently said publicly, spends hours each week considering our warrants and coming to her own view as to whether the intrusion we wish to make is necessary and proportionate.

72. We have had a series of visits by the two Commissioners in which they have rigorously examined and tested a sample of the full range of warrants and internal authorisations which authorise our intrusive work case-by-case.

73. From my position, I know that the oversight to which MI5 is subject is searching and intensive. It is right that it should be. But that is not always evident to the public because much of the detailed substance can only be dealt with secretly. The arrangements Parliament has created for our

oversight are fully equipped and able to deal with the most sensitive material, and do so.

74. The fact that it is done in secret means that we can always engage with these arrangements with absolute openness and candour, as our overseers have often said. But despite that necessary secrecy, there is still a need for oversight bodies to explain publicly whatever they can about their work and what they find. That transparency is improving all the time. There is still more that can be done.

75. The recent Intelligence and Security Committee report about the circumstances surrounding the horrific murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby – as well as being the serious consideration of a dreadful event that was required – demonstrates the rigorous application of the new model of oversight that was created by the Justice and Security Act.

76. As its very detailed and comprehensive report shows, the Committee did not stint from its task or pass lightly over the complicated realities of intelligence work. Even though the report concludes that, given what was known at the time, the attack was not preventable, we acknowledge that there are lessons that we need to learn and ways that we can improve. I take this very seriously. How we are responding to the Committee's recommendations will be set out in full in a detailed Government response in the coming weeks.

Conclusion

77. I have spoken of several trends tonight. My sharpest concern as Director General of MI5 is the growing gap between the increasingly challenging threat and the decreasing availability of capabilities to address it. It is that gap that led Government to bring forward fast-track legislation twice last year. And, not least because of the sunset clause in the recent DRIPA legislation, it is that gap which Government, Parliament and society will need to consider again in 2015 and 2016: what are the right intrusive powers, at what scale, and under what oversight, to ensure sufficient security against the threats we face.

78. But I don't want to sound either unduly pessimistic or to suggest we face some sort of unmanageable crisis. We do not. There are serious challenges, but for more than four decades the UK has faced down different styles and shapes of terrorism. The going is getting tougher but there are good reasons for confidence in our enduring ability to respond. This country has in MI5, SIS, GCHQ and the police strong institutions with deep reserves of knowledge and skill to deploy. It's well-understood that we can't guarantee to stop everything, but we continue to strive to get as near to that as we can.

79. I believe that there should be no more MI5 than is necessary to deal with the worst of the security problems the country faces. I will only ever seek the resources, tools and powers that are actually needed to deal with the worst – those who genuinely present a threat to our country.

80. And I believe that we must debate and consider the implications of technological change for public protection. We increasingly face a world in which those who pose a serious threat may be able to operate beyond our reach. There is a legitimate desire for privacy of ordinary citizens, which I share and support. But we must beware of the opportunities that are created for those who mean us serious harm. If we are to do our job, MI5 will continue to need to be able to penetrate their communications as we have always done. That means having the right tools, legal powers and the assistance of companies which hold relevant data. Currently this picture is patchy.

81. MI5 has no desire to seek sweeping powers for their own sake or loosen our long-held commitment to necessity and proportionality. You should not imagine that MI5 is always arguing for new powers or more tools – sometimes we've advised that further powers are not necessary.

82. MI5 is made up of men and women who only joined to do the organisation's work in a proper and ethical way and who only stay because that is the sort of organisation we are committed to remaining. As Prime Ministers and Home Secretaries have said from time to time, the confidence they have in MI5 comes not just from knowing our capabilities and track record, but from knowing the sort of people we are.

83. As the Director General of MI5, it is my duty – and my privilege – to lead an organisation devoted to keeping the country safe. But, just as importantly, whilst I and my staff take great pride in the work we do and the contribution we make to our society, we never lose sight of the fact that it will be an even better day when we can do less of it, whenever that may be.

84. Finally, I would like to pay tribute to the extraordinary and often unrecognised efforts of all those who work hard to keep the country safe against many dangers. The men and women of MI5, together with GCHQ, SIS and the police, and courageous members of the community who assist us together make a formidable team, on which much depends. They all have my deep thanks.

85. May I also express my great appreciation for the support and practical assistance we receive from the wider public. Opinion polls consistently show most of our fellow citizens positively support us in the difficult work we do. We value that enormously and I'm grateful. We will continue to do our very best to keep earning that trust.

08 January 2015

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MI5's London headquarters is known as "the ziggurat".

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