



Manchester, the General Election and Britain's Security Narrative

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Summary

The appalling attack on concert-goers in Manchester will be the defining news event of the 2017 general election campaign. Yet polls suggest that the attack has not shifted popular opinion in the predictable direction of a “strong” incumbent government characterised by muscular counter-terrorism interventions at home and abroad. After sixteen years of “war on terror” a clear difference has emerged between the leadership of the two main parties on the consequences of this open-ended war. Whoever wins the election, the longer term opening up of space for discussion on Britain’s security narrative can only be good for British democracy and wider security.

Introduction

In the middle of April 2017 the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, called a general election when the Conservative Party was more than 20 points ahead of the opposition Labour Party in the opinion polls. Mrs May already had a reasonable working majority in parliament and the election was essentially called over the issue of the Brexit negotiations, the stated aim being to provide a “strong and stable” government before the full negotiations started.

Given that the Labour Party was riven with divisions over both policy and the leadership, and with leader Jeremy Corbyn widely characterised as unelectable by the majority of the print media, the expectation was that a landslide victory was highly likely. That outcome has diminished during the course of the campaign and at the time of writing (eight days before polling), the

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Conservatives do seem likely to be returned to power but with a much smaller than expected majority. Even a hung parliament is now regarded by some analysts as possible if rather unlikely.

Following the Manchester Arena attack this briefing examines the election campaign so far with particular attention to security policy issues and considers whether some of the arguments raised will have a longer-term post-election influence on the debate around security, whichever party wins on 8 June.

Manchester and after

On the evening of 22 May and right in the middle of the election campaign, a bomb was detonated at a popular music concert at the Manchester Arena by a British Islamist of Libyan origins, killing 22 people and injuring over a hundred. Many of the casualties were young girls because the lead performer, Ariana Grande, was particularly popular with such an audience. The attack received world-wide media coverage and was the worst of its kind within the UK since July 2005 when 52 people were killed in four bomb attacks in London on three underground trains and a bus.

Because of the severity of the attack and the terrible consequences, nation-wide election campaigning was suspended by the main parties for three days, resuming on 26 May. On that day the Prime Minister was at a G7 Summit at Taormina in Sicily and calling for increased support for cyber security, not least in response to terrorism. On the same day Mr Corbyn made a speech in which he suggested that a UK foreign policy involving substantial military interventions across the Middle East, North Africa and South West Asia was not necessarily the right approach and might even increase the risk of attack. The speech was roundly condemned by those of a conservative persuasion, but

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early opinion polling suggested that Mr Corbyn's scepticism about the outcome of the war on terror resonates with many voters or, at least, has not been the electoral impediment that conventional wisdom has long assumed.

Whatever the result of the forthcoming election, the terrible attack in Manchester and the subsequent discussion on how to make Britain more secure will have a long-term impact on security thinking, not just because of this difficult period but more because of a very clear difference that has emerged between the leadership of the two main parties. The Conservative Party has taken a traditional line on the need to maintain strong defences, to work to destroy the main terrorist movements such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) and to increase defence spending, not least in relation to what is seen as an emerging Russian threat. With Britain part of a coalition facing major challenges from IS and from Russia, a re-elected Conservative government is presented as essential.

This approach is generally popular and would be expected to be a vote-winner, which makes it even more interesting that the Labour Party's manifesto has put much more emphasis on an increased commitment to peacekeeping, conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Perhaps more significant in the long term was a speech made by Jeremy Corbyn at Chatham House on 12 May. This was his main foreign policy presentation of the whole election campaign – indeed, it followed a long period of near silence from the shadow cabinet on foreign and defence issues – and was notable for taking a very different view to the political norm. His approach was summed up early in the speech:

“ “Too much of our debate about defence and security is one-dimensional. You are either for or against what is presented as ‘strong defence’ regardless of what that has meant in practice. Alert citizens or political leaders who advocate other routes to security are dismissed or treated as unreliable.” ”

His views on the war on terror were unequivocal:

“ “This is the fourth general election in a row to be held while Britain is at war and our armed forces are in action in the Middle East and beyond. The fact is that the ‘war on terror’ which has driven these interventions has not succeeded. They have *not* increased our security at home – many would say just the opposite. And they have caused destabilization and devastation abroad.” ”

Corbyn’s speech represented a radically different position to that of the Conservatives with their very clear approach to international issues encapsulated in that core election theme of “strong and stable”, implying a continuing of the rigorous pursuit of a military victory against IS supported by a robust commitment to a well-funded counter-terrorism system at home. Corbyn’s further speech four days after the Manchester atrocity, while roundly condemning the appalling act, did not stray from the central theme of his Chatham House speech of the urgent need to rethink the UK’s approach to IS and like-minded paramilitary groups.

In all normal circumstances in the current UK political environment, the government of the day would expect to gain plenty of electoral support for its security posture, and the Conservative government, especially, would expect increased support in the aftermath of the Manchester attack. That may well be

the case as the last week or so of the election campaign plays out, but what happens in the longer term may prove to be much more significant.

Mr Corbyn, essentially, has adopted a very different approach to international security and whether it will open up space for longer-term political discussion may not be dependent on the election result. This is no place to predict outcomes and there are, broadly, three possibilities – Labour gets a disastrous result in line with polls at the start of the campaign and Mr Corbyn stands down; the Conservatives win narrowly in which case he will almost certainly stay; or there is a hung parliament in which case he may succeed in forming a minority administration with a second election in the autumn the outcome.

In all three cases, including the first, what the Chatham House speech may have done is to open up the debate on UK security in a manner which more truly reflects the unease that many people feel about the approach in recent years to responding to IS, al-Qaida and the like. It is the opening up of space that is significant here, combined with what is clearly the current prospect of very long drawn-out wars from Libya through to Afghanistan.

Equally in all three electoral outcomes, but particularly the third, a serious reconsideration of the UK's security narrative would probably receive backing from the other parties of the left and centre. The Greens have a particular interest in conflict resolution. The SNP, though strongly protective of Scottish military units and industries, is overt about combating IS by “more than military means”. The Lib Dems seem torn between counter-terrorism, liberal interventionism and conflict prevention narratives, albeit committed to multilateralism and human rights. There may therefore be something of a consensus across a significant part of the political spectrum that sees itself in different ways as the “progressive” wing of UK politics.

If IS and like-minded groups were on the verge of a final defeat with no prospect of their being succeeded by other movements, then the current government approach would be largely accepted. Further debate would be unlikely and other approaches to security “dismissed or treated as unreliable” as Mr Corbyn put it.

There are, though, plenty of indications that IS and the rest are not ceasing to pose a threat to the Levant or the West, the Manchester attack being just one grim example. In Iraq, Mosul has not yet fallen after eight months of intense fighting in spite of the Iraqi government expecting the operation to be finished within three months. In the process, the Iraqi Army's elite Special Forces have taken severe casualties calling into question the ability of the government to maintain control once Mosul does fall. Elsewhere in central and northern Iraq, the government relies on some very dubious, often sectarian militia allies. In Egypt President Sisi faces a growing IS-linked insurgency, and the Libyan link with the Manchester bomb is a reminder of the parlous state of that country. There remain serious security concerns in at least a dozen countries, not least Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen, Bangladesh, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. Western coalition states involved in the fight against IS all fear internal attacks.

Conclusion

Thus, after more than fifteen years of the war on terror, failed or failing states in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen and Somalia, close to a million people killed and over eight million people displaced, the argument for some serious rethinking on Western approaches to security is hardly difficult to make.

This is where Jeremy Corbyn's Chatham House speech is so significant since it breaks away from a near-universal Western state consensus and may be much more in tune with what many millions of people may be thinking. Whatever the outcome of the general election next week, space has been opened up for much wider debate. Independent organisations such as Oxford Research Group that take a critical but constructive approach to security will have a particular responsibility to aid the quality of that debate.

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