

Still learning the lessons

One line stands out from the long-awaited report into last year's July 7 London bombings, released last week by the British Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC). It says: "Across the whole of the counter-terrorism community, the development of the home-grown threat and the radicalisation of British citizens were not fully understood or applied to strategic thinking."

It is a realisation that not only dominates the thoughts of those investigating the London atrocities, but will also be at the heart of western counter-terrorism for years to come.

When Britain was attacked, it was not, in and of itself, a surprise. Following September 11 and Madrid, and the British role in Iraq, the threat was clear, and in the months before July, John Stevens, former Metropolitan Police commissioner, publicly warned that an attack was inevitable. The surprise was that the threat emerged from within.

The story of the July bombers has, thus, already become a model for the west's intelligence community: the tale of a group of relatively apolitical young Muslims, brought up in, and well integrated into, the country, who were radicalised (by elements including charismatic preachers) into politically and theologically motivated activists determined to die and kill.

Until that day, the emphasis of British security agencies was on foreign nationals. Only sparse resources were focused on "home-grown" elements, and this lack of resources formed the main emphasis of the ISC report.

Three of the four bombers were "known": they were filmed during surveillance of other suspects, yet were considered peripheral figures and none was even identified.

The report confirmed that British authorities do not now believe there was a fifth bomber, and thus that no al-Qaeda "mastermind" had been co-ordinating the attacks. Al-Qaeda's fingerprints are, nonetheless, all over the operation.

For many families of the 52 victims, the ISC did not go nearly far enough, and its report can rightly be criticised for its reluctance to ascribe

"British authorities grossly underestimated the power of extremist rhetoric as a terror motivator"

blame, and for its sanitised conclusions that place more emphasis on resource limitations than on fundamental organisational and operational failures.

Yet what the report correctly highlights is that, no matter how effective a state's security regime, it is impossible to intercept every terrorist cell, especially when they are of the small, independent, home-grown variety. Quite appropriately, the report emphasised what must be changed to profoundly diminish the likelihood of fellow countrymen being radicalised and recruited in future.

The only substantive measures initiated in this regard, however, have been attempts to prosecute and ban specific extremist groups and preachers. For years, such elements were either ignored or allowed to operate freely, revealing that British authorities grossly underestimated the power of extremist rhetoric as a terror motivator.

This may have been the greatest pre-July failure – the direct link between such preachers and groups, and the ensuing activities of British Muslims like failed shoe-bomber Richard Reid.

The report concluded by calling for the "lessons that have been learned about the potential diversity of those who can become radicalised..." to be heeded. It said the ability to stop future attacks would be hugely dependent on understanding and identifying such elements, and on social initiatives and co-operation with Muslim communities.

As has been illustrated by the ISC, however, the authorities are still playing catch-up, and may be for some time.