

# Brexit and Beyond: How Security Threats are Constructed

Written by Jack Gallagher

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## Brexit and Beyond: How Security Threats are Constructed

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JACK GALLAGHER, JUL 12 2018

### Introduction

In this essay will argue that it has become increasingly difficult to define the meaning of security because, as opposed to being objectively produced, security is intersubjectively socially constructed. This essay uses a 'securitisation' framework (Buzan et al., 1998) in order to analyse the process that occurs when a referent object is securitised. Within security studies, the key scholarly debate relates to the widening or narrowing of security definitions. (Fierke et al., 2016: 15) In the 1990s there was a widening of the agenda, a move away from thinking about security in a purely militaristic sense (Waever 1996: 22). The point of securitisation is to demonstrate there are no *definite* security threats: referent objects are given meaning and then become security threats. This is part of the reason as to why defining security has become increasingly enigmatic. In the sections to follow, I will use a multi-level approach. This is due to the way that 'securitizing moves' (Buzan et al., 1998: 25) can be enacted by a variety of actors on multiple levels. Analysis of one level would therefore be inappropriate for accurately demonstrating the complexity of security. By adopting such theoretical framework, this essay will argue that security should be thought about as a social construct. Because of this, in this essay will not debate what a security threat is, but instead analyse how and why threats become securitized.

The immediately succeeding sections to this introduction will explain the key theoretical concepts and define key terms, which will be used within the essay. The sections following from this will analyse case studies as I seek to demonstrate that framing a threat in security terms is not only conceptual but incurs 'real-world' consequences. Firstly, in this essay I will analyse the UK government's anti-terror policy and place it within the framework of securitisation theory. By analysing the Prevent strategy, in the essay I will argue that contrary to 'pure' securitisation theory, speaking security is not the sole way of constructing security and policy tools can also be used. Furthermore, this section will evaluate how the intensity of securitisation can change over time and argue that there is not a single mark of security, but a spectrum. Secondly, the essay will turn to evaluate the complexity of securitisation by examining how the Leave campaign sought to securitise the migration policy of the European Union. This section will evaluate how the campaign managed to translate and construct migration into a security issue to such a powerful degree. In short, this essay will analyse what happens when something transforms into a security threat, how and why this process occurs, and the reasons this has meant defining security has become increasingly difficult.

### Constructing security: a theoretical framework

Securitisation theory emerged from the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute in the 1990s (Burgess 2012: 2) and has enjoyed a remarkable rise to prominence within the idiolect of International Relations (McDonald 2008: 565). As mentioned, the theory set out a new framework for security studies and a mediating approach within the wide-narrow debate. In regards to defining securitisation, it should not simply act as shorthand for the construction of security. Conversely, securitisation is the process whereby an existential threat is established which dictates extraordinary political measures be taken (Buzan et al., 1998: 25). However, threat is not securitized by "virtue of pronouncement" (Burgess 2012: 2) but correspondingly requires the acceptance by an audience. Subsequently, the presentation of security is a "self-referential practice" (Buzan et al., 1998: 24), not an objective one as assumed by realists.

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Nevertheless, despite the convincing arguments put forward by the Copenhagen School, this essay will not simply regurgitate the rhetoric of such scholars. This essay will divert from the original 'purist' securitisation theory which only identifies securitizing moves in terms of language, but this essay will seek to analyse securitizing moves beyond speech (McDonald 2008: 568) by exploring the UK's Prevent strategy. Furthermore, this essay, will not seek to present a deterministic route from object to security threat. Instead, this essay will use foundations from the constructivist/securitisation framework in order to analyse how securitisation can differ in its purpose, intensity, and stability. This essay will thus adopt a radically constructivist approach, viewing security as at its heart a "social praxis" (Buzan et al., 1998: 204).

## **Prevent: The evolution of the UK's securitisation of terrorism**

This section will analyse the UK government's anti-terror policy and place it within the framework of securitization theory. This section will argue that the securitisation of Islamic radicalisation the Prevent strategy (Home Office 2011) seeks is intense. Its permeation into public spheres, which do not necessarily link to radicalisation results in a 'security creep'. Therefore this section will argue how the processes of securitisation and security creep have blurred the definitions of security beyond 'Clausewitzian' conceptions (Clausewitz 2008).

Securitisation of terrorism in the UK was not traditionally as strong as in America however, this changed though from the mid-2000s to today (Smith 2010: 100). Along with a strategy of Prevention, there has been a temporal evolution of the British securitisation process due to policy changes. Therefore this section will argue how security is not a black and white issue. This may be a truism, yet nonetheless, it still holds importance. More usefully, the development of the UK's counter-terrorism policy demonstrates the way that security threats exist on a spectrum; the intensity of securitisation therefore differs and as such arises a problem of producing definitions of security.

The 7/7 bombings did result in an "urgent consideration of the need to understand and prevent a British domestic Islamist terror threat" (Baker-Beall et al., 2014: 38). In 2011 the updated Prevent Strategy was published in which the coalition government issued its official counterterrorism policy. As such, the degree that terrorism was securitised increased dramatically. According to sub-section 3.39, "there should be no 'ungoverned spaces' in which extremism is allowed to flourish without firm challenge and legal intervention." (Home Office 2011: 9) Such declaration issues a strong mandate for security creep to emerge. This security creep is demonstrated through the policy's reference to education. Schools are given an important role in counter-terrorism (Home Office: 69), as one of three sectors mentioned in the documents, the education system is securitised by claiming that radicalisation can threaten British values.

The 'British value' rhetoric that runs through the Prevent strategy displays the intricacies of the securitisation process (Miah 2017: 75). Such rhetoric is not necessarily as pertinent to defence companies but more so to local communities.

Therefore while a threat may be securitised to different audiences, the same techniques are not the same for each one. The frequent 'British value' lexical markers create the Muslim community as the other (Kay 2006: 91), and a more visible 'representation' of the security threat (Miah 2017: 71) for communities. Subsequently, within local communities, Prevent puts pressure on Muslims (O'Toole et al., 2015), excluding individuals and driving them into dark spaces. Despite government rhetoric, the policy seems specifically targeted at Muslims and as a consequence, the securitisation of terrorism through Prevent has resulted in the entire community being suspected (Thomas 2012: 77). This represents the diversity of the spectrum, which I referred to earlier. The construction of Muslims as a 'suspect community' (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009) threat is subtler than the threat of a tank on a border and displays the intricacy and complexity of securitisation. Prevent counter radicalisation, with regard to communities specifically, constructs a unique and curious state of suspicion toward the Muslim community and is its greatest failure.

The increasing securitisation of Muslim youths and lack of effective education means that it is more difficult to build resilience against radicalisation (Thomas 2012: 136). The increasing emphasis on police-led surveillance following Prevent is now being deepened in the education system (Home Office: 71). The scope of power and extraordinary

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political measures allowed through Prevent seem to encroach on the academic freedom established under the 1986 Education Act (DfE 1986). Prevent addresses radicalisation as a linear pathway (O'Donnell 2015) that consequently signals ignorance towards the spectrum of security. Through the identification that radicalisation was necessary but not a definite pre-cursor to terrorism, Prevent left room for security creep to emerge (Edwards 2014: 57). A direct causal link is created between education and radicalisation. As such, measures are taken to protect students through restriction and monitoring (Durodie 2016: 6) which deterministically are perceived as mitigating solutions to the threat of radicalisation.

In summary, this section has analysed the UK's Prevent counter-terrorism policy using a securitisation framework and argued how the policy does not account for the complexity of radicalisation as a security threat. Despite trying to widen conceptions beyond state and military security; Prevent uses this same approach when trying to counter radicalisation as a community and societal level. While Prevent threatens the autonomy of education from security, more worryingly is the ontological assumptions that permeate through Prevent and dictate its securitisation of social policy and Muslim youths.

## **Securitising EU migration: The EU referendum and the intensity of security**

The securitisation of immigration and asylum during the 2016 EU referendum campaign was a highly controversial process. This section will strive to remain apolitical in this matter and not delve into a general Brexit discussion. Instead, this section argues that through 'speech act' (Fierke et al., 2016: 253) in newspapers the leave campaign intensified the extent that immigration and EU migration policy was securitised. This section will not be over simplistic however. This section acknowledges the UK's preceding ambivalence towards the EU's security capacity, and also the securitisation of migration in other European countries such as Sweden (Lazaridis and Tsagkroni 2015: 207). Notwithstanding these details, this section will argue how the Leave Campaign intensified the securitisation of the EU, and evaluate how such intensification contributes to the increasing difficulty to define the meaning of security.

This section is not disputing the potential security threat that EU migration policy incurs (Chambers 2017: 5), however instead is focusing on how the Leave campaign constructed it as such a powerful threat. In a Daily Telegraph interview, Michael Gove said that the security of Britain was at threat from the ECJ's intervention in the surveillance capabilities of British intelligence agencies, according to Gove, Britain outside the EU "would be safer" (Gove 2016). The vast and dynamic policy response which saw initiatives such as the European Arrest Warrant, Action Plan on Terrorism, and Aviation security measures be implemented (Bossong 2013: 40) was sidelined through the intense securitising moves toward migration. Leave supporters claimed that Brexit would remove two key security threats: the European Convention on Human Rights and immigration (Dearlove 2016). Major General Thompson, in a piece for the Telegraph (2016) also made a securitising move against EU migration policy by asserting it prevents the EU policing its borders and that remaining in the EU would leave Britain vulnerable to Daesh terrorists. Unsurprisingly Daily mail editorials (Tapsfield 2016) also contributed to the construction of EU policy as a security threat through inciting fear with reference to uncontrollable "waves of migrants" (Slack 2016). However as Buzan (1998) rightly argues, securitisation hinges not just on speaking security, but audience acceptance. The degree to which this securitisation was successful is shown by the fact that 33% of voters deemed immigration as the most important Brexit issue in June, an increase of 5% from the previous month (ISPOS 2016). Immigration was securitised to such an extent that through leaving the EU and the Schengen Agreement, it would allow the taking back control of British security.

Securitising immigration, asylum, and refugee was not just with regard to an existential crisis of community preservation but was also a "political game" (Huysmans 2006: 61) for the Leave Campaign in 2016 who socially constructed on the socio-political insecurity during the EU referendum campaign. Therefore this represents a further difficulty in defining security, in that securitisation is not just about the language but also about the extraordinary political action that such process enables.

This section above has analysed how this form of securitisation depended on "discursively constructed threat and fear generation mechanisms" (Cap 2017: 67), to foster support for leaving the EU. As opposed to security risks being accepted automatically, this section has problematized the securitisation of immigration during the 2016 referendum

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campaign. Inspired partly by Weldes (1996), this section has demonstrated that security threats are socially constructed, and do not exist without their acceptance by an audience.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, defining security is extremely challenging, and this essay has not made such task any easier unfortunately. However, defining security, as I have explained in this essay, is not necessarily the most useful way to approach the topic. The purpose of this essay has been to use the constructivist theoretical framework of securitisation to analyse how and why security threats come about as opposed to what they are. In doing so, I have argued how in essence security is the outcome of complex social praxis. The referent object in itself is not created; instead it is the meaning of security, which is attached, that is socially constructed through discourse or policy (Fierke 2016: 249). In this essay I first analysed how the Prevent Strategy's approach to radicalisation resulted in a security creep, but also a subtle securitisation of Muslims on a community level. In this section, I argued that security needs to be thought about as a spectrum, and that securitisation can differ in its intensity depending on the audience. Secondly, the essay examined how the leave campaign securitised the migration policy of the EU during the 2016 referendum campaign. Through speaking security, the relevant actors enhanced the threat of migration. Part of this evaluation argued that part of the difficulty in confronting securitisation is the vested interests that exist. Subsequently, security is not something, which is an objective fact. This essay has argued that security is socially constructed intersubjectively and thus definitions will inevitably be problematic.

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*Written by: Jack Gallagher*  
*Written at: University of St. Andrews*  
*Written for: Dr Simon Taylor*  
*Date written: February 2018*