By Nick Watts, Great North News Correspondent

Recent developments in North Africa should remind us how quickly things can change. As a result of this and other developments, the British government is reviewing how it conducts its counter terrorism activity, according to Baroness Neville Jones speaking at the RUSI in London on Tuesday.

As well as North African events, Baroness Neville Jones reviewed recent attempts by Al-Qaeda (AQ) and its sympathizers to stage terrorist attacks on Britain, or on Western interests. These have included the suicide bombing in Stockholm and the New York Times square attempted bombing. More worrying was the recent case of an airline worker who was convicted of attempted terrorism, which could be the precursor of a "sleeper" approach to infiltrate and attack from within. The attempt to put a printer cartridge bomb into an aircraft was also a new development.

The message is clear; the terrorists have not gone away and seem to be trying new approaches to achieving their aim of mass casualty events. Even a failed attempt has a certain propaganda value. Baroness Neville Jones also reminded the audience that the alert regarding Northern Irish terrorism was recently revised upwards to severe. Whilst the "core" of Al-Qaeda seems to be contained, recently events in places such as Yemen and Somalia demonstrate that its adherents, or sympathizers, are still looking for ways to attack the west.

Recent developments in North Africa do not directly assist the aims of AQ. The advent of chaos in a country must always be a cause for concern. Particularly worrying is the situation in Yemen, which has not only seen attacks on British Embassy staff, but was the origin of the printer cartridge bomb. Ransoms extracted from kidnappings in North Africa and elsewhere are also thought to be the source of funding for several autonomous AQ groups. By contrast the "Arab awakening" gave western governments the opportunity to develop new relationships in the region based on shared values. If managed well this would further weaken the narrative of the extremists.

In response to this the British government has been reviewing the set of legal instruments it inherited from its predecessor. It will not alter the CONTEST strategy, but it has been reviewing the "Prevent" strand. Some of the measures which the last government enacted have been abolished and others, such as the 28 day detention provision, will be held in reserve against a contingency. The government sets great store by being seen to be on the side of the citizen against extremists, as a way to convince minorities that radicalization will harm them as much as anyone. Shared values should bring people together, not emphasize differences.

The government is aware that previous measures were seen as being both heavy handed and discriminatory. Particularly contentious were the section 44 stop and search powers, which have been repealed. On the other hand, it is reasonable to expect the help of local mosques and community leaders to identify those youths who might be susceptible to radicalization. The recent attack on Stephen Timms MP at his constituency surgery exemplifies the dangers of

individuals who are radicalized by internet based material.

In the "Protect" strand of Contest, which addresses the threat of terrorism, the government must also encourage the building in of resilience measures into the architecture of what are known as "crowded places" such as shopping centres and transport termini. Measures to make air transport safer, including air cargo, rely on co-operation with partners abroad, whether government or agencies. Technology can assist this process, but the human element is never far from the surface. Which is why the conviction of someone who was trying to gain access to information about airline operating routines is worrying.

In the "Prepare" strand there has been some publicity about the metropolitan police receiving advanced firearms training as a result of the Mumbai attack. The threat of an armed attack on the London Olympics, while not directly mentioned in the speech, must have been one consideration. The government will publish a revised "Prevent" strategy shortly. It is the government's firm hope that a better executed Contest policy will mean that there is less need for the "prepare" strand, but maybe not just yet.