

The Intelligence and Security Committee's (ISC) annual report for 2012-13 reflects on what has been a busy year for Britain's security agencies. The past 12 months encompassed the London Olympics and the recent developments relating to the interception of communications by the US and British listening establishments. The ISC is unlike other parliamentary committees due to the nature of its work. Its remit is to scrutinize the work of the security agencies like a normal select committee scrutinizes a government department. However, when it was originally established the decision was made to make this committee report to the Prime Minister through the Cabinet office. New legislation will change this arrangement, but the report is edited (redacted) to remove sensitive material before it is published. Nick Watts reviews what's made it into print

The list of challenges faced by Britain's security agencies seems to get longer; a fact which was tragically reinforced by the killing of Drummer Rigby in Woolwich. As well as the potential threat to the 2012 Olympic Games, the report covers developments in the field of counter terrorism, nuclear proliferation and the evolving cyber security threat. The report also mentions work undertaken by intelligence operatives in support of UK forces in Afghanistan. Like other Departmental scrutiny reports the ISC notes developments in cost saving efforts to meet the government's overall expenditure targets.

Despite the fears of a "spectacular" the London Olympic Games passed off without incident. Notwithstanding this the field of counter terrorism has kept the agencies busy. The ISC notes approvingly that the Security Service (MI5) and the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) have been collaborating to address this issue. The nature of the threat has been changing. The Al Qaeda "franchise" may have been diminished in its heart lands, but it has been spreading to encompass areas such as Somalia, Yemen and the North African Maghreb. The attack on the In Amenas gas plant in January this year is a reminder of their lethal intent and capability.

More worrying has been the rise of home grown self-starters; individuals or small groups who set out to attack targets in Britain. In April 2012 a group was arrested near Luton and have recently been sentenced. The attack on Drummer Lee Rigby also reflects this trend. This latter event is still under investigation and is not covered in this report, but it illustrates the challenge faced in trying to identify individuals and small groups. The draft Communications Data Bill was, in part, aimed at addressing this risk. The metadata of individual e-mail or internet traffic is examined to identify who is accessing dangerous web-sites and with whom they are chatting via social media. This legislation has been shelved, but political pressure to reintroduce it may

mount.

Developments in Syria also give the agencies cause for concern. Individual jihadists will find their way to join the struggle against the Assad regime and will return radicalized. An additional worry is those regions of the world with weak governance where radicalisation can take place. Syria also poses a threat in the area of weapons of mass destruction proliferation. There have already been reports of the use of chemical agents by both sides in this region. The risk of a major stockpile falling into the hands of those who could use nerve agents is not as far-fetched as many of us might like to think.

The cyber security risk is also addressed in this report. It is predominantly an area where criminal activity poses the major risk. But this masks activity which is state sponsored. Attempts to steal secrets from commercial and defence targets are noted. Nearer to home the report also notes the continuing threat from dissident Republican groups and notes that one prison officer was killed by such groups in November last year. The attempts to kill police officers have so far been unsuccessful, but occur regularly. The report also notes some of the useful work being carried out in Afghanistan by the combined efforts of the Defence Intelligence elements working with their SIS counterparts.

The report looks at some of the housekeeping matters, which make familiar reading to those used to such things; efforts to reduce back office costs, investment in new IT programmes and the challenge of recruitment and retention. This makes rather strange reading when the accountability of payments to agents is under consideration, but there seem to be no horror stories this year!

Recent developments which have captured the headlines are not scrutinised in detail here, although the ISC has noted that it has received a report on the Prism and related UK disclosures. We will have to wait until a subsequent report to learn what the committee thinks about that.