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## A *JIH* SPECIAL FORUM ON BREXIT: IMPLICATIONS FOR UK AND EUROPEAN INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES

*Collected and Edited by Dr. Christopher Moran*

On 23 June 2016, in a landmark referendum, Britain voted to leave the European Union (EU). Together with the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States later that year, the referendum, colloquially known as “Brexit”, marks the biggest shake up of the political order since the end of the Cold War. In the same way that 1940 has been labelled the ‘fulcrum’ of the twentieth century, with historian David Reynolds arguing that the fall of France was instrumental in shaping the pattern of international politics for nearly 50 years, so 2016 might well be viewed in years to come as the ‘fulcrum’ of the twenty-first, setting in motion a sequence of events that define several generations.<sup>1</sup>

While it will take years, if not decades, for the political, economic and social consequences of Brexit to become fully apparent, the implications for security, both in the UK and across Europe, plus the impact on intelligence agencies responsible for achieving it, are likely to be felt much sooner. Depending on which side of the Brexit fence one sits, the picture is either a cause for concern or optimism. Among the most interesting and passionate voices in this heated debate have been national security practitioners. Indeed, a noticeable feature of Brexit has been the willingness of senior intelligence officials to put their head above the parapet, eschewing the tradition of neutrality and impartiality in matters of policy, to talk about the issue. American spooks have been similarly vocal

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<sup>1</sup> D. Reynolds, ‘1940: Fulcrum of the Twentieth Century?’, *International Affairs*, Volume 66, No. 2 (April 1990), 325-350.

in contributing to public discussions about President Trump. A sign of the times perhaps?

Before the referendum, among the intelligence officers to make the case for Britain remaining in the EU were Sir John Sawers, a retired head of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6), and Professor Sir David Omand, a former Director of Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). Given the cross-border nature of contemporary terrorist, criminal and cyber threats, they argued, Britain needed more, not less, security cooperation with Europe. ‘Terror networks operate across borders, and so must we if we are to stop them’, Sawers declared.<sup>2</sup> By choosing to leave the EU, they claimed, Britain would lose access to valuable information-sharing initiatives and databases, including involvement with EUROPOL, which boasted Robin Wainwright (a Briton) as its Director, and the European Arrest Warrant, which, in allowing for the speedy extradition of suspects between EU member states, is generally regarded as a vital tool in combatting transnational or cross-jurisdictional threats. ‘We are part of an established information sharing network with our partners whilst still retaining control of our borders. The best of both worlds’, announced Omand, ‘Why jeopardise the flow of information we receive?’<sup>3</sup> For Sawers, a further concern related to the economic impact of Brexit. If, as he and many economists predicted, economic and commercial malaise took effect, the corollary of this would be less public funds available for essential intelligence work. Moreover, a weak post-

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<sup>2</sup> J. Sawers, ‘I am a former MI6 chief and a lifelong patriot. Here’s why I’m voting Remain’, *Telegraph*, 16 June 2016.

<sup>3</sup> V. Oliphant, ‘EU just “gets in the way” of security services, blasts former CIA Director’, *Express*, 25 March 2016.

Brexit economy would be fertile ground for terrorist and criminal activity, which thrives on uncertainty and angst.<sup>4</sup>

Speaking from the opposite end of the Brexit spectrum, Sir Richard Dearlove, another former head of SIS, suggested that leaving the EU would have little, if any, impact on Britain's liaison relationships with European intelligence agencies, irrespective of what pundits and politicians contend.<sup>5</sup> Such relationships, he stressed, existed on a largely bilateral basis and did not require EU membership. According to Dearlove, European security bodies such as EUROPOL or the Club de Berne were fairly insignificant actors in the fight against terrorism, whilst the recent Islamic State attacks in Paris and Brussels confirmed that intelligence sharing between European spy agencies is painfully poor and thus not something Britain – Europe's undoubted intelligence superpower – should be unduly worried about losing. Europe, of course, has nothing even remotely resembling a common or federal intelligence service, which some scholars see as a major structural weakness.<sup>6</sup>

A dyed-in-the-wool Atlanticist, Dearlove underlined that Brexit presented an opportunity for Britain to strengthen its bilateral intelligence sharing arrangements with its NATO allies, including the United States, which were far more valuable to UK security than any cooperation within the EU. Echoing Dearlove, from across the Atlantic, William Binney, a former technical director at the US National Security Agency (NSA), has claimed that Brexit would not make 'one bit of difference' to Britain's

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<sup>4</sup> P.H.J. Davies has made the same argument. See 'UK security will both gain and suffer from Brexit. The EU will only lose', <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/11/07/uk-security-will-both-gain-and-suffer-from-brexit-the-eu-will-only-lose>.

<sup>5</sup> R. Dearlove, 'Brexit would not damage UK security', *Prospect Magazine*, April 2016.

<sup>6</sup> C. Hill, 'Renationalizing or Regrouping? EU Foreign Policy since September 11, 2001', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Volume 42, No. 1 (2004), 143-163. See also R.J. Aldrich, 'Intelligence and the European Union', in E. Jones, A. Menon, and S. Weatherill (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 627-42.

secret links with European and American partners, whilst also pointing out that leaving the EU would give Britain greater flexibility to set national policy on surveillance powers and data retention.<sup>7</sup>

With Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty having now been invoked, triggering the stopwatch on a notional two-year timeframe for Britain's complete withdrawal from the EU, it is an apposite moment to look closely at what the future might hold not only for British intelligence and security agencies, but also for their counterparts in an increasingly fractured Europe. Accordingly, the *Journal of Intelligence History* has put together the following special forum, with short conversational-style contributions from a diverse range of experts. A key objective behind the forum was a desire to inject some much-needed academic balance and nuance into the debate, which thus far has been plagued by accusations of scaremongering on both sides and - to use a phrase that has rocketed into the global lexicon - "fake news".

The journal would like to thank all of the authors for their excellent work, timely delivery, and enthusiasm for the task.

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<sup>7</sup> M. McLaughlin, 'Brexit won't harm UK security, says US former spy chief', *The Scotsman*, 10 September 2016.