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# **The securitization of asylum:** Protecting UK residents

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the concept of the securitization of asylum and its potential effects on the human security of the resident population of the United Kingdom. By focusing on the effects of securitization on members of the host community rather than refugees, this paper represents a perspective that has not received a great deal of attention in the existing body of literature. While it is often assumed that security measures are undertaken for the good of the resident population, it is important to note that fear is also a risk that must be taken into account. This paper argues that the association of asylum seekers with terrorism in public discourse in the UK could potentially lead to a decrease, rather than an increase, in the human security of the resident population by exacerbating their fears of both asylum seekers and terrorism.

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# 1 Introduction

In the past few decades, public discourse in the UK has framed the concept of asylum in increasingly negative terms, even going so far as to cast asylum seekers as a threat to the security of UK residents. While it is possible that asylum seekers may, in fact, pose such a threat to security, it is important, as Hammerstad states, to note that the issue of ‘forced migration’ can:

become over-secritised to the point where it is in danger of creating threats where before there were none, while at the same time undermining the international refugee protection regime in the name of an increasingly amorphous claim to ‘security needs’ (Hammerstad 2008: 1-2).

Thus, while reasonable security measures are often a necessary component of asylum policy, caution must be observed in order to avoid ‘over-secritizing’ the issue to the detriment of the security of asylum seekers and refugees.

While many have written about the securitization of asylum in the United Kingdom, and the impact that this process has on asylum seekers and refugees (Rudiger 2007; Bosworth and Guild 2008; Zard 2002), little attention has been given to the effects that this phenomenon has on UK residents. While security endeavors are often perceived to help the resident population of a state, Buzan cautions that:

efforts to achieve security can become self-defeating, even if objectively successful, if their effect is to raise awareness of threats to such a pitch that felt insecurity is greater than before the measures were undertaken (Buzan 1991: 37).

This indicates that the ‘over-secritization’ of asylum could also have an impact on the level of security felt by residents of the host country. In order to analyze this concern, this paper examines the impact that the securitization of asylum may have on residents of the UK in the context of human security.

Though this paper examines the putative link between asylum seekers and terrorism, asylum seekers have also been conflated with undocumented workers or ‘illegal immigrants’ (Hayter 2003; Malloch and Stanley 2005). Through this association, they have been portrayed as a threat to various aspects of UK society that remain vital to the human security of state residents, such as the ‘health and welfare services’ (Malloch and Stanley 2005: 54). The implication of links between asylum seekers and terrorism is, therefore, only one facet of a broader discourse on immigration- and asylum-related securitization rather than a brand new phenomenon (Meyers 2004; Huysmans and Buonfino 2008; Malloch and Stanley 2005).

While this characterization has obviously negative implications for asylum seekers, the hidden risk of the securitization of asylum is its impact on the resident population of the UK. The conflation of asylum seekers with terrorism has potentially serious implications as terrorism is, by nature, intended to induce fear (Bauman 2006).

Securitizing actors, therefore, run the risk of exacerbating fears of terrorism by associating asylum seekers with terrorists and simultaneously claiming that asylum seekers are present in large numbers in the country. As ‘freedom from fear’ is a fundamental aspect of human security (Human Security Centre 2005), an assessment of the effects of the securitization of asylum on the human security of UK residents must examine whether or not fears of terrorism or asylum seekers have increased as a result.

One major effect of the successful securitization of asylum in the UK was to break down the label of a ‘refugee’, causing an artificial distinction to develop between perceptions of the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ (Zetter 2007). While refugees are often conflated with asylum seekers in public discourse (Bagilhole 2003), UK policy often differentiates between refugees and asylum seekers, adopting a distinctly more favorable view of the former than of the latter, regarding ‘the majority of asylum seekers [as] “bogus” and “undeserving”’, and ‘the minority granted Convention status [as] the “deserving”’ (Sales 2002: 463). Thus, as Zetter states, ‘the refugee label is no longer a right but a prized status’, while the ‘label “asylum seeker” ...is demarcated by the wholesale withdrawal or reduction of established rights’ (Zetter 2007:181). Despite the frequent inability on the part of the public to distinguish between refugees and asylum seekers (Hobson et al. 2008), efforts at securitization appear to be largely directed towards asylum seekers rather than refugees. This paper will, therefore, focus primarily on the effects of the securitization of asylum seekers.

This paper will examine the potential implications of the fear that may be induced by the securitization of asylum seekers in public discourse in the UK, specifically analyzing its impact on the human security of the resident population.

The first section of this paper describes the human security framework, and the reasons for which it is a useful vehicle for examining the impact of securitization on UK residents. The second section examines the use of securitization as a method of framing a threat. The third section applies the securitization framework to the issue of asylum, showing the ways in which asylum has been securitized in connection with terrorism. This section highlights the historical discourses of terrorism, immigration and asylum, which eventually led to the emergence of a perceived link between asylum and terrorism. The final section analyzes the ways in which fears may develop or be exacerbated as a result of the securitization of asylum.

## 2 Human security

While states often play an active role in protecting their residents, it is important to consider the effects that security measures and the relevant public discourse may have on the resident population. The securitization of asylum could be viewed as a threat to UK residents in the sense that it may stimulate public fears of both terrorism and asylum seekers. In order to better understand this idea, it is necessary to examine it through the lens of human security, analyzing the way in which fear-inducing actions can be defined as a threat to the security of an individual.

This type of threat is better described with human security theory than with traditional security theory because: 1) The parties responsible for creating the threat exist within the accepted framework of society. 2) The affected party is not the state, but the resident population of the state. 3) Fear can affect individuals within a society without affecting the society as a whole.

Human security is founded upon a framework that values 'freedom from fear' as a key component of security. The concept of human security can be defined as the reduction of perceived threats to society from the macro to the micro level, changing the referent object of security 'from the state to the individual' (MacFarlane 2004: 368). Beyond this, a number of scholars have put forth different definitions of human security, advocating either a 'narrow' or a 'broad' definition for the concept. The 'narrow' definition is promoted by those who define human security as 'freedom from fear', focusing solely on violent threats, and the 'broad' definition is promoted by those who extend the definition by including 'freedom from want', expanding the focus of the field to cover other possible issues such as 'rights, governance, development, the environment, and health' (MacFarlane 2004: 369).

This paper uses a 'narrow' definition of human security to avoid an 'unnecessary broadening of security that weakens the analytical coherence of the concept' (Ewan 2007: 184). Krause states that a 'broad vision of human security...does not allow us to see what is distinctive about the idea of "security", and how it is inextricably tied up with the threat and use of violence' (Krause 2004: 367-368). This supports the central focus of this paper: the potential threat to personal security that could arise from fears resulting from the portrayal of asylum seekers as a source of violence. While the focus of the paper could be expanded to examine fears that the presence of asylum seekers leads to a decline in the standards or availability of health care, or a decrease in employment opportunities, such an approach would risk expanding the scope of the analysis too far (MacFarlane and Foong Khong 2006). Since the causes and effects of fear in relation to personal security may be vastly different than those linked to economic or health security, this paper will focus solely on 'freedom from fear' in the context of physical violence in order to maintain a streamlined focus. Using this narrow approach, human security provides a framework for assessing fear as a threat to the individual.

The discipline of traditional security studies, on the other hand, typically examines threats to the state, rather than to residents of the state. This methodology is a useful way to analyze conflicts between states, but could present some difficulties in examining other types of conflicts (Buzan 1991). If an event or action has an adverse impact on the security of individuals without undermining the position of the state, it becomes difficult to analyze through the lens of national security (Buzan 1991). This is exemplified by the widespread use of state power to harass, oppress and harm resident civilians. According to Mack, ‘in the last hundred years, far more people have died at the hands of their own governments than have been killed by foreign armies’ (Mack 2004: 366). Such examples undermine the concept that states exist to protect their residents and the idea that the only relevant referent object of security is the state.

In addition, it is important to note that some threats, such as terrorism, can affect the security of both the state and the individual (Buzan 1991). On the state level, a terrorist attack is a violation of sovereignty and territorial borders, while on an individual level the attack is both a physical and mental violation of personal security. Terrorism, as the name implies, is usually intended to cause fear in the population of an area or state, while also inflicting physical harm on some members of the community (Wolfendale 2006). While the physical damage inflicted upon the population of a state is a distinct threat to both national and personal security, the fear that is generated by terrorist acts can affect individuals while potentially having no effect on, or even strengthening the state’s position of power relative to its own citizens (Katz 2006). The use of fear by a state to strengthen its position of power is exemplified throughout history, for example under authoritarian states such as the Soviet Union (Los 2002), or democratic ones such as the United States (Robin 2004). The state, though not responsible for terrorist acts, can use fear of such acts to exert a higher level of control on its population, or to increase its legitimacy as a protecting force (Robin 2004; Wolfendale 2006). Thus, fear can sometimes be an asset to the state, even if it presents a danger to the resident population of the state.

Due to aforementioned reasons, the apparatus of traditional security studies appears to lack the necessary tools to analyze fear as a threat to the security of state residents. Fears related to security are not always linked to the reality of a situation. While certain threats may not actually pose a great danger to a population, the effects of fear can sometimes be more serious than a threat itself. Fear may have negative psychological and even physical effects on affected individuals (Gray and Ropeik 2002; Gigerenzer 2004; Hassett and Sigal 2002), leading to the conclusion that fear ‘can be a debilitating form of insecurity’ (Human Security Centre 2005: 47) and, therefore, ‘a problem in its own right’ (Furedi 2006: 3). Such insecurity can be promoted by an actual threat, but greatly enhanced<sup>1</sup> by other actors such as the government or the media (Wolfendale 2006). In this way, a relatively small threat may become, through the inducement of

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<sup>1</sup> For example, McDermott and Zimbardo state that ‘raising—as well as lowering—terrorist alarms produces negative public mental health outcomes and increases depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the population at large’ (McDermott and Zimbardo 2007: 359).

fear, a greater threat to the security of individuals. Therefore, actors who serve to exacerbate the fears of others are, in their own right, a type of threat to the human security of those individuals. Thus, it is important to examine the role that public discourse plays in linking asylum seekers to terrorism in the UK in order to gain a better perspective on securitization and its effects on human security.

### 3 Securitization

The securitization, or characterization and acceptance of asylum seekers as a threat to the personal security of residents of the UK fits well within the parameters of the human security framework that denominates the individual as the referent object of security. Securitization theory is well-suited to complement the issues discussed in this paper as it allows the designation of a referent object of security, allowing for analysis to take place outside the traditional framework of the nation-state and the military sector (Buzan et al. 1998).

While securitization is a dynamic theory with a number of different interpretations, it is important to begin with a discussion of the original ideas put forth by the Copenhagen School<sup>2</sup>. The Copenhagen School's vision of securitization contains two core elements, the 'designation of an existential threat requiring emergency action or special measures and the acceptance of that designation by a significant audience' (Buzan et al. 1998: 27). The perceived existential threat that is evoked by the securitization of an issue does not necessarily have to be real. The definition of 'existential' is different for every type of referent object of security. Rothschild notes that 'different entities (such as individuals, nations, and "systems") cannot be expected to be secure or insecure in the same way' (Rothschild 1995: 55; Buzan et al. 1998: 25-26). Buzan notes that 'actual threats, as well as being impossible to measure, may not be perceived', while 'the threats that dominate perception, may not have much substantive reality' (Buzan 1991: 114-115). For securitization to take place successfully, the referent object must only perceive its current mode of existence to be threatened. Buzan et al. state that:

the existential threat has to be argued and just gain enough resonance for a platform to be made from which it is possible to legitimize emergency measures or other steps that would not have been possible had the discourse not taken the form of existential threats, point of no return, and necessity (Buzan et al. 1998: 25-26).

On this note, Balzacq stresses that public acceptance or 'moral support' of a securitizing move, while subordinate to the 'formal support' of the relevant policy-making body, is essential for the securitizing actor to avoid 'breaking bonds with constituencies [and wrecking its] credibility' (Balzacq 2005: 184-185). Though the securitization of asylum seekers will be described in greater detail in the following section, it is helpful to note that asylum seekers do not actually need to pose a danger to the personal security of

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<sup>2</sup> The Copenhagen School includes, among others, Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap De Wilde.

residents of the UK in order to be both portrayed and perceived as a threat of this nature. If asylum seekers are successfully securitized, the resident population may potentially perceive them to represent a greater threat to security than they actually do. In this way, the securitization of asylum may aggravate fears within the population, and negatively affect the human security of residents.

The effective presentation of an existential threat depends on two conditions. First, the 'legitimacy' of the securitizing actor must be considered (Balzacq 2005: 190). According to Stritzel, the relevant 'actors [in a given social context] are usually endowed with an unequal ability to influence the evolution of an individually proposed meaning into a collectively held representation' (Stritzel 2007: 369-370). While the state is often a powerful securitizing actor, other actors may play an influential role as well (Waever 2005). Likewise, though the state plays an important role in the securitization of asylum seekers in the UK, the media, individual politicians and others may also serve to designate them as a threat to the physical safety of the general populace. Even though various actors may attempt to start or facilitate the securitization process, those that are perceived as more legitimate will likely have greater success. For example, Balzacq states that 'since the audience is not fully informed, for instance, on the temporal proximity of threats, it usually relies on state officials' discourses because it thinks that the latter, who are the site of constitutional legitimacy, must have "good reasons" to assert, in this case, that "X" represents a threat to a state's survival' (Balzacq 2005: 190). This can also apply in the context of human security when, for example, the state is perceived to have more information on a threat to individuals' safety (Altheide 2006).

Second, both the manner and context in which the threat is presented must be taken into account. A threat may be delineated through both a 'speech act' and visual communication. According to Buzan et al., a 'speech act' is a vehicle through which 'an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus, by labeling it as security, an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means' (Buzan et al. 1998: 26; Waever 1998). It is important to note, however, that:

the speech-act of securitization is not reducible to a purely verbal act or a linguistic rhetoric: it is a broader performative act which draws upon a variety of contextual, institutional, and symbolic resources for its effectiveness (Williams 2003: 526).

In addition, Williams stresses that visual communication can also serve as a catalyst for securitization, potentially affecting individuals' perceptions of issues like asylum and terrorism (Williams 2003: 524-526). McDonald writes that 'incorporating visual representations into the securitization framework...may involve simultaneously rethinking the centrality that state political elite have in the framework itself' (McDonald 2008: 569). Owen states that 'the public's perceptions of and reactions to events are an important component of security affairs, and they are shaped largely by media coverage' (Owen 2003: 240). Thus, the effects of media coverage must, at least, be considered in any major securitizing move despite the fact that the media may be 'less likely to be seeking to engage in particular emergency measures or in a position to undertake them' (McDonald 2008: 569-570).

Though the threat may be presented in a variety of ways, ‘the words of the securitizing actor need to resonate with the context within which his/her actions are collocated’ (Balzacq 2005: 182). A securitizing actor should, therefore, attempt to associate previous ‘traumatic’ events with the threat at hand to enhance the persuasiveness of the securitizing move (Balzacq 2005: 182-183). When linked to something that is ‘generally held to be threatening’, the viability of a securitizing move can be enhanced, and the chances of success increased (Buzan et al. 1998: 32-33).

In addition, Buzan et al. write that in the face of ‘persistent or recurrent’ threats, certain issues become ‘institutionalized’ as security problems (Buzan et al. 1998: 27-28). In this way, these topics are automatically associated with security and ‘the need for drama in establishing securitization falls away, because it is implicitly assumed that when we talk of [these issues] we are by definition in the area of urgency’ (Buzan et al. 1998: 28). Thus, other issues can become securitized by association with institutionalized terms of security. Norman refers to terrorism as ‘the epitome of a security problem’, which implies that it has attained the status of an ‘institutionalized’ threat to security (Norman 2006: 47). Staun echoes this sentiment, stating that ‘by defining something or someone as terrorist a claim to use extraordinary measures (security measures) against that person or organisation and to do it with special urgency or necessity is posted’ (Staun 2009: 14). In recent years following the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, a climate of security relating to terrorism has developed in the European Union (Norman 2006: 47). As a result, terrorism has been used as a justification for securitizing moves in many aspects of policy making and public discourse (Norman 2006). An association between asylum seekers and terrorism can, therefore, be equated with the classification of asylum seekers as a threat to security.

A successful process of securitization results in an issue being framed in such a way that ‘special or emergency measures’ are deemed acceptable and necessary to deal with the threat in question (Buzan et al. 1998: 27). Buzan et al. state that ‘securitization is not fulfilled only by breaking rules (which can take many forms) nor solely by existential threats (which can lead to nothing) but by cases of existential threats that legitimize the breaking of rules’ (Buzan et al. 1998: 25). The laws governing rules and procedures regarding asylum in the UK are supposed to fall within the framework of international refugee and asylum law. This paper, however, will show that the portrayal of asylum seekers as a threat to the personal security of UK residents is one of the most recent steps in a series of securitizing moves that appear to be designed to influence the passage and acceptance of measures that reposition asylum outside of the guidelines established under international law (Malloch and Stanley 2005; Huysmans and Buonfino 2008).

## **Application of the Securitization Framework to Asylum in the United Kingdom**

The concepts described in the previous section are helpful in explaining the ways in which asylum has been securitized in the UK. This process has taken place on a number of levels in public discourse, and appears to have successfully gained credence among residents of the UK.

There are a number of different actors who actively seek to portray asylum seekers as a security threat or facilitate this characterization without the express goal of securitization, including politicians, the government, other public figures and the media.

Though asylum seekers have been portrayed in a negative light for a variety of reasons, this paper focuses specifically on their designation as a threat to the personal security of residents of the UK. According to Malloch and Stanley, ‘the depiction of asylum seekers in terms of liabilities, a risky group that needs to be prevented, contained and, preferably, repatriated is one that permeates liberal democracies’ (Malloch and Stanley 2005: 54). This securitizing move hinges on the premise that asylum seekers are, among other negative things, potentially dangerous and have the capacity to carry out terrorist attacks against residents of the UK, thus threatening the existence of the referent object of security. Since terrorism has become a part of the institutional framework of security, drawing an association between asylum and terrorism greatly facilitates the ease with which asylum itself can be securitized (Norman 2006).

While the reasons behind a securitizing move cannot always be accurately identified, it is helpful to examine the special or emergency measures that accompany any successful securitization in order to gain a better understanding of the motives of the primary securitizing actors. With regard to asylum, the most obvious developments of this nature are visible in the legislative history of the UK. The laws that have been introduced seem to bend or break the rules of the international legal framework regarding the acceptance of asylum seekers, thus circumventing the obligations outlined therein. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has expressed concern about a number of policies and practices employed by the UK to deal with asylum seekers (UNHCR 2005a; UNHCR 2005b; UNHCR 2007; UNHCR 2008). For example, the UK has, according to UNHCR, adopted ‘an inappropriate interpretation of Article 33(2)<sup>3</sup> [of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees]’ in its ‘definition of “particularly serious” by classifying crimes such as ‘shoplifting’ and

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<sup>3</sup> Article 33 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees states that:

- 1) No Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.
- 2) The benefit of the present provision may not, however, be claimed by a refugee whom there are reasonable grounds for regarding as a danger to the security of the country in which he is, or who, having been convicted by a final judgment of a particularly serious crime, constitutes a danger to the community of that country (United Nations 1951).

'graffiti' as grounds for 'an exception to the principle of refoulement to apply' under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 and the Specification of Particularly Serious Crimes Order 2004 (UNHCR 2008: 2-3, United Kingdom 2002; United Kingdom 2004). This appears to contradict the idea that Article 33(2) is only to be used 'as a measure of last resort, taking precedence over and above the application of criminal sanctions and justified by the exceptional threat posed by the individual' (UNHCR 2008: 3). By allowing even asylum seekers who qualify for refugee status to be expelled from the country over a minor crime, the UK seems to endorse the concept that those who exhibit even the slightest criminal tendencies present an inherently serious danger to its residents. Such an approach seems to reinforce the idea that asylum seekers represent an existential threat to the security of UK residents and, as such, must be dealt with by 'extraordinary' means. In addition, the increasing use of detention appears to correspond with the idea that asylum seekers are undesirable because, among other reasons, they may be dangerous (Finney and Robinson 2007; Home Office 2005). This is reflected, not only in the relevant legislation, but in speeches given by politicians, government publications and media coverage of asylum-related issues.

The asylum system in the UK has become more restrictive in nature in recent decades, a trend that can also be observed in the broader context of immigration in the UK. According to Meyers, 'Britain kept a liberal immigration policy until the early twentieth century' (Meyers 2004: 64). While restrictive measures regarding asylum are a relatively recent development, the UK has a somewhat longer history of legislating limitations on immigration dating back to the 1905 Aliens Immigration Act (Meyers 2004). These general restrictions have limited traditional avenues of immigration from many countries, and possibly contributed to an increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK from these countries (Bloch 2000; Hayter 2003). The general antipathy towards immigration that has developed over the years in the UK is possibly even more potent with regard to asylum seekers. The Independent Asylum Commission found widespread negative attitudes among respondents towards asylum seekers and the asylum system in the UK. Some of the most common responses to the 'CITIZENS SPEAK consultation' included notions that 'there are too many asylum seekers, and too many of them are "bogus"' and that 'asylum seekers tell lies to stay in the country' (Hobson et al. 2008: 14). In addition, the Commission found that 'there was clear confusion between economic migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and illegal immigrants' (Hobson et al. 2008: 14).

While often conflated with other issues of migration, asylum seekers are often seen as especially suspicious or dangerous due to the possibility that their identity or origin may not be identifiable (Malloch and Stanley 2005). The Independent Asylum Commission found that 'people view "asylum" as an overwhelmingly negative term with associations including mental illness, oppressive and disordered institutions, criminality, terrorism, benefit fraud and "bogus" foreigners' (Hobson et al. 2008: 15). Possibly as a result of the 'asylum-migration nexus', or the fact that 'many migrants and asylum seekers have multiple reasons for mobility' (Castles 2003: 17), Malloch and

Stanley state that ‘the issue of “asylum” has become enveloped in concerns about economic migrants, illegal immigrants and the spectre of terrorist activists’ (Malloch and Stanley 2005: 53).

According to Bloch, restrictions on asylum began to emerge in the UK as a result of an increasing volume of asylum applications at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s (Bloch 2000; Schuster and Solomos 1999). These restrictions manifested themselves most prominently in 1993 with the passage of the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act, which ‘became the first piece of primary legislation dealing specifically with asylum to be introduced into UK Law’ (Bloch 2000: 30). This act, and further acts passed in the 1990s, imposed restrictions on asylum through measures that made it systematically more difficult to enter and remain in the UK on the grounds of asylum. These restrictions had a number of effects including a reduction in benefits for asylum seekers and additional criminal penalties for ‘deception’ (Zetter et al. 2003: 92-98). In addition, asylum seekers began to be detained more frequently throughout the 1990s. This pattern was underscored by the introduction of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, which ‘stepped up the practice of detention’ (Welch and Schuster 2005: 402). Such developments seem to indicate that a general desire to prevent so-called bogus asylum seekers from entering the UK has existed since the early 1990s. Zetter writes that it is these types of ‘state policies and practices which effectively criminalize refugees for seeking asylum, ...[generating] yet more labels such as “clandestine” or, worse still, “illegal” or “bogus” asylum seekers’ (Zetter 2007: 183)<sup>4</sup>.

The conflation of asylum seekers with terrorism is, however, a more recent development that has manifested itself following a paradigm shift seemingly induced by the passage of the Terrorism Act of 2000 and the attacks of September 11th, 2001 on the United States. Until the passage of the Terrorism Act of 2000, terrorism legislation primarily focused on the conflict in Northern Ireland. Historically, this conflict has been the greatest source of terrorism in the UK (Landman 2007), and many of the measures implemented to deal with it have been put into use following the 2000 Terrorism Act and 9/11 to deal with terrorists and asylum seekers alike. The first important measure relating to the conflict was the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act of 1922, which established a number of exceptional security measures in Northern Ireland with the intent of maintaining public order following the partition of Ireland. Boyle et al. state that ‘it conferred wide powers of arrest, questioning, search, detention and internment on the police and troops as agents of the Ministry of Home Affairs, and gave almost completely unrestricted power to the Minister to make regulations with the force of law’ (Boyle et al. 1975: 38). This piece of legislation remained in effect until the passage of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act in 1973 (Gross and Aolain

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<sup>4</sup> Zetter notes that a variety of other derogatory labels for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants have developed in recent years, often conflating the three. In order to illustrate this point, he highlights a number of labels such as: ‘spontaneous asylum seekers’ (with implications of fecklessness and presumably different from a planned asylum seeker), ‘illegal asylum seekers’, ‘bogus asylum seekers’, ‘economic refugee/asylum seeker’, ‘illegal migrant’, ‘trafficked migrant’, ‘overstayers’, ‘failed asylum seeker’ (note not failed refugee), ‘undocumented asylum seeker/migrant’ (Zetter 2007: 184).

1999: 96). According to the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr. William Whitelaw, the 1973 Act was intended to replace the Special Powers Acts with a more focused piece of legislation dedicated to fighting terrorism (House of Commons 1973). Despite the shift in focus from maintaining public order to preventing terrorism, the nature of the two acts was essentially the same, an effective abrogation of the rule of law in the sense that under them the security authorities retained the power to arrest and detain anyone they pleased without having to give any justification and without fear of being called to account in respect of any decisions later shown to have been unjustified (Boyle et al. 1975: 37-41).

The 1973 act was notable because, 'for the first time in United Kingdom statute law, terrorism was defined as the use of violence for political ends, including any use of violence for the purpose of putting the public in fear' (Rees 1981: 84). This was followed by the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act of 1974, which expanded the scope of anti-terrorism provisions to deal with attacks 'connected with Northern Irish affairs' anywhere in the UK. This stood in contrast to previous legislation, which had focused only on terrorism in Northern Ireland (Rees 1981: 86). The next fundamental change in the nature of terrorism legislation in the UK came with the passage of the Terrorism Act of 2000. This act was notable because, according to the Privy Counsellor Review Committee, it 'was intended to put counter-terrorism legislation largely on a permanent basis with application not only to Irish terrorism, as had been the main focus hitherto, but also to other international and domestic threats' (Privy Counsellor Review Committee 2003: 20; United Kingdom 2000a). While, according to Lord Carlile, 'there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism'<sup>5</sup> (Carlile 2007: 3), the definition that was initially outlined in the Terrorism Act of 2000 frames the context in which terrorism is currently viewed under UK law (United Kingdom 2000b)<sup>6</sup>. Though it did not draw a direct link between asylum seekers and terrorism, this act positioned the terrorist threat as, at least partially, international in nature. This shift in policy seems to have moved the securitization discourse on terrorism conceptually closer to that of asylum.

The new focus on international terrorism was intensified by the attacks of September 11th, 2001, a trend that has also been reflected in subsequent changes in asylum-related legislation. Prior to 9/11, asylum and security legislation in the UK did not specifically associate asylum seekers with terrorism (Malloch and Stanley 2005). Following September 11th, however, some politicians began to associate asylum seekers with 'potential or suspected' terrorists and refer to the asylum system as a possible way for

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<sup>5</sup> As Jenkins states: 'The problem of defining terrorism is compounded by the fact that terrorism has recently become a fad word used promiscuously and often applied to a variety of acts of violence which are not strictly terrorism by definition. It is generally pejorative. Some governments are prone to label as terrorism all violent acts committed by their political opponents, while anti-government extremists frequently claim to be the victims of government terror. What is called terrorism thus seems to depend on one's point of view' (Jenkins 1980: 1). This statement, while almost 30 years old, nicely reflects the difficulty that is, even today, encountered in attempting to define terrorism.

<sup>6</sup> For a complete definition, see United Kingdom (2000b) *Terrorism Act, Chapter 11*, London, HMSO.

terrorists to enter the UK (Huysmans and Buonfino 2008: 773; Malloch and Stanley 2005) and, in response, restrictive asylum measures were expanded to include concerns that terrorists may potentially exploit the asylum system.

The linkage of asylum with terrorism in security discourse is what Buzan terms an attempt 'to graft a newer securitization on to an older one' (Buzan 2006: 1104). According to Zanchettin, 9/11 gave new force to the drive for 'restrictionist policies' and 'allowed what has become labelled as the "asylum crisis" to rise to the top of the British government's domestic priority list' (Zanchettin 2005: 151). Bosworth and Guild state that the passage of the 2001 Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act (ATCS) 'established firm legislative links between asylum and terrorism by including measures meant to deny prospective or suspected terrorists access to asylum and allowing applicants' fingerprints to be kept for ten years in order to prevent multiple claims by such individuals' (Bosworth and Guild 2008: 708). Tsoukala notes that, despite the aforementioned association, 'there is no explanation given as to why asylum seekers are believed more liable than migrants to be involved in terrorist activities or as to why foreigners are believed more liable than nationals to commit terrorist attacks in the UK' (Tsoukala 2006: 612). The Privy Counsellor Review Committee echoed this sentiment, holding that the 2001 ATCS Act focused unduly on foreigners as the main source of 'al Qaeda-related' terrorism in the UK, since a relatively high percentage of terrorism suspects are British (Privy Counsellor Review Committee 2003: 54). While the law was changed with the passage of the 2005 Prevention of Terrorism Act, changing measures of 'indefinite detention' to 'control orders'<sup>7</sup> and allowing them to be applied equally to foreigners and UK citizens (McGhee 2008: 106; United Kingdom 2005), asylum seekers still face the possibility of indefinite detention, 'even without [proof] that s/he poses a flight or security risk' (Bosworth and Guild 2008: 711). It could, therefore, be argued, that this discrepancy seems to indicate that asylum seekers are considered to be more dangerous or undesirable than other types of migrants, despite the fact that 'anecdotal evidence suggests that it is unlikely that would-be terrorists are more likely to gain access to the UK through the asylum process than any other entry route given that this requires the applicant to make themselves known to authorities and undergo in-depth security checks' (IPPR 2005: 33).

According to Huysmans and Buonfino, the 2001 ATCS Act represents the point at which 'the nexus between the fight against terrorism and immigration and asylum was legislatively institutionalised' (Huysmans and Buonfino 2008: 775). These initial, indirect legal associations between asylum seekers and terrorists became more pronounced in later years, causing asylum seekers to become more frequently considered to be criminals or terrorists by default (Bosworth and Guild 2008). In support of this idea, Tsoukala states that 'when the asylum issue rises again, in 2003, the terrorism-asylum nexus is so solidly established that its defenders can claim further emergency measures' (Tsoukala 2006: 612). This shows that asylum has become

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<sup>7</sup> For a complete definition of control orders, see United Kingdom (2005) *Prevention of Terrorism Act, Chapter 2*, London, HMSO.

associated with terrorism to the degree that it is no longer necessary to 'dramatize' the problem to draw a connection between the two issues (Buzan et al. 1998).

Furthermore, some UK media outlets have done much to popularize a negative conception of asylum seekers. Asylum seekers have been associated with a wide variety of negative concepts including terrorism (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; Greenslade 2005; Gross et al. 2007; ICAR 2006). While the media presumably do not have the same interests as the government in facilitating the securitization of asylum, it appears that they play a vital role in the process. The media act as a complementary force to the aforementioned legal and political discourse. According to Lewis, 'politicians are an important source of facts and information, and can determine whether an issue is deemed to be a problem', while the media have an 'impact on the public debate...largely through spreading myths and misleading information rather than direct influence' (Lewis 2005: 22-23). As Greenslade states, 'there was no widespread public outcry against asylum-seekers prior to a press campaign of vilification which had the effect of legitimising public hostility' (Greenslade 2005: 29).

Furthermore, an analysis conducted in 2002 indicates that images used by the media in the sample examined 'overwhelmingly placed the emphasis of the coverage, both visually and verbally, on the communication of risk and fear' (Buchanan et al. 2003: 22). This study also found that 'the dominant stereotype that emerged from both the print and broadcast coverage of asylum was that of the young dangerous male breaking into Britain and threatening our communities' (Buchanan et al. 2003: 24). This type of coverage is connected with the securitization of asylum that has taken place in the UK since the turn of the millennium. According to Gross et al., the association of asylum with negative terms such as 'crisis, chaos, lack of control, crime, terrorism, foreigners (black and Muslim) and threats to social cohesion' has, since then, become so ingrained in media discourse that 'the simple mention of the word asylum now seems to be enough to connote this entire conceptual field' (Gross et al. 2007: 9).

While the association between asylum seekers and negative concepts such as terrorism is not always intended, it can still have an effect on the way in which asylum is viewed (Gross et al. 2007). Public opinion of asylum seekers seems to echo both policy developments (ECRI 2004) and media coverage (Lewis 2005). The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) also states that 'reports indicate that the anti-asylum rhetoric from some sections of public discourse have inflamed the situation further by implying that the asylum system is being used by terrorists to gain access to the country and by depicting asylum seekers as coming in unmanageable numbers' (ECRI 2004: 33). The perception that asylum seekers are both dangerous and unstoppable does much to contribute to a climate of insecurity and fear. In this way, many media outlets appear to facilitate the ideas about asylum seekers put forth in political discourse and the law, and by extension the securitization of asylum in the UK.

## **Securitization and Fear**

One of the unfortunate by-products that may result from the securitization of asylum is fear. According to Warr, ‘the perceived seriousness of an offense affects fear by altering the functional relation between fear and perceived risk (i.e., sensitivity to risk). Sensitivity to risk, in turn, affects fear by determining the “output” of fear produced by a given “input” of perceived risk’ (Warr 1987: 40). Thus, securitization, and the accompanying ‘special or extraordinary measures’, can increase the level of fear felt by individuals by exacerbating the ‘perceived risk’ of the occurrence of a dangerous event. While it is important to note that fear can induce individuals to avoid danger, the natural purpose of fear becomes ‘dysfunctional’ and harmful when it is ‘out of proportion to objective risk’ (Warr 2000: 455). As the likely consequences of falling victim to a terrorist attack are death or serious injury (Zeidner 2005), the perceived seriousness of the event is extreme. Therefore, an increase in the perceived risk of an attack can reasonably be assumed to have a significant effect on the level of fear among residents. Given the lack of concrete evidence regarding the ostensible link between asylum seekers and terrorism (IPPR 2005), it seems possible that the securitization of asylum in public discourse in the UK may induce a fear of asylum seekers that is disproportionate to the risk that they seem to pose to the personal security of residents.

The ways in which the purported link between asylum and terrorism may contribute to the development of fear among UK residents are best described through the use of the availability and representativeness heuristics.

First, individuals are often not aware of the actual frequency of terrorist attacks, the number of asylum seekers that are present in the UK or the proportion of terrorists that enter the UK through the asylum system. As a result, perceptions of these figures are likely approximated using the ‘availability heuristic’, an ‘[estimation of] frequency or probability by the ease with which instances or associations [can] be brought to mind’ (Tversky and Kahneman 1973: 208). Thus, a ‘continued preoccupation with an outcome may increase its availability, and hence its perceived likelihood’ (Tversky and Kahneman 1973: 230). Perceptions of the number of asylum seekers in the UK (Newman and Lewis 2007; Malloch and Stanley 2005; ECRI 2004) and the likelihood that terrorists will try to exploit the asylum system (Huysmans and Buonfino 2008; Feller 2006; Gregory 2009) may, therefore, be exaggerated by the prominence of these themes in public discourse in the UK.

As the risk of falling victim to a terrorist attack is perceived to be ‘difficult to control (or avoid)’ through personal action (Slovic 2004: 985), individuals must rely on external forces, such as the state, for protection. The possibility that terrorists may be taking advantage of the asylum system to enter the country, combined with perceptions of a large number of asylum seekers in the UK, seems likely to lead some individuals to the conclusion that terrorists are more ubiquitous in the UK than the reality of the situation reflects. As one of the ways in which a state may preclude terrorist attacks is to prevent terrorists from entering its territory, an exaggerated perception of the number of terrorists in the UK is likely to increase the perceived risk of terrorism among residents.

In addition, Tversky and Kahneman state that ‘people typically rely on the representativeness heuristic, in which probabilities are evaluated by the degree to which A is representative of B, i.e., by the degree of similarity between them’ (Tversky and Kahneman 2004: 203-204). Thus, the conflation of asylum seekers with terrorists would likely increase the propensity to treat asylum seekers as potential terrorists (Bosworth and Guild 2008).

Asylum seekers are often perceived to possess a degree of anonymity due to the difficulty that sometimes occurs in verifying their origin and identity (Malloch and Stanley 2005). This has led some to the conclusion that terrorists consider the asylum system to be an easy way to enter the UK (Huysmans and Buonfino 2008; Feller 2006; Gregory 2009). If this were true, the asylum system would represent a gaping hole in the security apparatus of the UK, which would essentially facilitate the entry of terrorists into the country. One can easily follow the progression of this line of thought to the conclusion that asylum seekers are to be feared as potential terrorists.

Charteris-Black refers to similar ideas regarding immigrants in general:

In fact, this is double metonymy in which a particular example of an immigrant, ‘the terrorist’, represents a sub-category of immigrants – ‘illegal immigrants’ – that in turn represents the whole category of ‘immigrants’. Because some immigrants are illegal immigrants and some illegal immigrants are terrorists, an illogical link can be made between terrorists and all immigrants (Charteris-Black 2006: 574).

Likewise, because some asylum seekers are terrorists, the entire asylum system is tainted by the possibility that any asylum seekers could be terrorists. When viewed in juxtaposition with the public discourse that seems to indicate that asylum seekers are present in overwhelming numbers in the UK (Newman and Lewis 2007; Malloch and Stanley 2005) and the fact that it is not possible to identify asylum seekers by sight alone, it is not hard to see how their presence might be perceived to increase the risk of terrorism and, by extension, the level of fear among residents.

Furthermore, though it would be impossible to distinguish an asylum seeker from another person from his or her appearance alone, there exist a number of stereotypes and conceptions in the public mind. Lynn and Lea state that ‘in defining and categorizing those who would be “Other”; visible difference, ethnicity, religious belief and language (among other qualities) may all be used’ (Lynn and Lea 2003: 428). These stereotypes may lead, in conjunction with the aforementioned prejudices relating to terrorism, to the assumption that those who fit the image of an asylum seeker are also likely to be terrorists. Thus, as Bauman states ‘a few suicidal murderers on the loose will be quite enough to recycle thousands of innocents into the “usual suspects”. In no time, a few iniquitous individual choices will be reprocessed into the attributes of a “category”’ (Bauman 2006: 122). In this way, the residents of the UK who may fit the imagined profile of an asylum seeker may not only have to contend with their own fear of asylum seekers, but also the repercussions they may face as a result of stereotyping or racial profiling. The representativeness heuristic comes into effect in this situation as

well. The conflation of asylum seekers and terrorists, as well as the conflation of both of these categories with certain groups of the 'Other', seems likely to lead some to the conclusion that individuals who appear to be members of these groups are also likely to be asylum seekers and terrorists. Sivanandan states that this is reflected in:

the racism directed at Muslims on the basis of religion, signified this time not just by race or immigration status (refugee, asylum-seeker, and so on), but by dress and appearance as well – combining the characteristics of both asylum seeker and terrorist, reflecting the combined 'war' on asylum and on terror (Sivanandan 2006: 2).

The climate of securitization that has developed around the 'War on Terror' appears to have resulted in violent reprisals and hostility against those who are perceived to fit the image of a terrorist<sup>8</sup>. As evidenced by the corresponding increase in race-related crime, minority racial and ethnic groups appear to have taken much of the blame following the attacks on September 11th, 2001 and the 7/7 London bombings in 2005 (Lusane 2005).

Finally, the asylum system in the UK is unlikely to be vulnerable to widespread exploitation by terrorists due to the stringent security screenings that are part of the application process (IPPR 2005). This idea is supported by Gregory, who states that actual instances of asylum seekers being 'charged and convicted of terrorism-related offenses' are uncommon (Gregory 2009: 12). In addition, it is important to note that there are other ways in which terrorists might gain access to the UK such as business, student or tourist visas. Furthermore, it is possible that UK or EU citizens might commit terrorist acts. This is not to say that terrorists never enter the country via the asylum system, but rather to highlight the fact that it is not the only way that they could.

By casting asylum seekers as terrorists, the relevant securitizing actors may increase fears of terrorism and facilitate a more generalized fear of the 'Other'. As 'psychological distress' may '[stem] from living with a heightened state of alertness and harboring a fear of the unknown' due to the presence of 'an unpredictable threat that could strike indiscriminately' (Hassett and Sigal 2002: 1809), both of the aforementioned phenomena, if tangible, have the potential to be devastating in their impact on the human security of the residents of a multicultural society such as the UK.

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<sup>8</sup> While terrorism does not have a universally accepted definition, the term does seem to carry an implicit, if nebulous, meaning for most people. Jenkins illustrates this point nicely with the following statement: 'During the 1980s, the U.S. had a lively subculture fascinated by survivalist and paramilitary matters, and this interest sustained an active trade in weaponry and military equipment. One such catalogue of the era sold an "antiterrorist knife," a complex (and expensive) weapon loosely modeled on the knife made famous in Sylvester Stallone's Rambo films. The description of the object was interesting. Admittedly, if one ever was in single combat with a terrorist, the weapon might be invaluable, but it was never entirely clear what particular features of the blade fitted it for antiterrorist warfare. This ludicrous object sometimes comes to mind when we hear discussions of terrorism that assume without question or discussion the exact shape of the problem' (Jenkins 2003: 5).

## 4 Conclusion

The security discourses surrounding asylum and terrorism in the United Kingdom have grown closer in recent years as the focus on terrorism has become more oriented towards international threats, and securitizing actors have begun to link asylum with terrorism. The portrayal of asylum seekers as undesirable became more pronounced in public discourse as a result of an increasing number of asylum arrivals in the UK during the latter part of the 20th century. As a manifestation of what could be classified as anti-immigrant sentiments, this undesirability seems to have been primarily related to concerns other than terrorism such as illegal immigration, race, border control and misuse of the welfare system. The passage of the 2000 Terrorism Act indicated that residents' perceptions of terrorism in the UK had shifted, extending fears beyond the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland to include a greater international threat. This new focus on foreign terrorists appears to have been added to the list of concerns that have been associated with asylum seekers, an inherently foreign demographic. Following September 11th, the restrictions and rhetoric used in connection with asylum seekers became increasingly tied to the security discourse of terrorism.

In discussing the impact of the securitization of asylum on the human security of residents of the UK, this paper seeks to fill an important gap in the existing literature. By approaching the issue from this perspective, this paper challenges the assumption that rigorous security measures are inherently beneficial to the resident population. If securitization and heightened security measures succeed in exacerbating rather than quelling fears among UK residents, then they too present a threat to human security.

While it is difficult to quantify abstract concepts such as fear and security, the potential implications of the securitization of asylum are profound. The link between asylum and terrorism that is promoted in public discourse and the law could potentially aggravate the fears of UK residents with regard to both asylum seekers and terrorism. Such fears may have a negative effect on both the physical and psychological well-being of these individuals, thereby degrading the quality of their human security.

While this paper suggests that the effects of the securitization of asylum may have serious implications, it would be difficult to define a clear solution to the potential problems that may develop as a result. Some possible methods for reducing the potential for fear of terrorism and asylum seekers among UK residents could include accurate and contextualized risk communication<sup>9</sup> (Warr 2000) and a greater 'focus on the positive aspects of asylum and of immigration' (Finney 2003: 14) in public discourse. Such changes, however, should not be made without consideration of their impact on the rights to freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

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<sup>9</sup> Plough and Krinsky state that "risk communication" can refer to any public or private communication that informs individuals about the existence, nature, form, severity, or acceptability of risks' (Plough and Krinsky 1987: 6).

In addition, it is important to note that fear may lead residents to agree to sacrifice a degree of personal freedom in an attempt to enhance their security with the implementation of provisions such as identity cards (Huysmans and Buonfino 2008). Furthermore, reports from *Liberty* highlight a number of measures that have been developed and implemented since the beginning of the 'War on Terror', which raise 'civil liberties concerns' including 'counter-terrorist checks' (Sawyer 2006: 23) and 'control orders' (Liberty 2009). While freedom is not a quality that is inherently vital to personal security, the acceptance of invasive security measures seems to be a distinctly negative development. As increased levels of fear often seem to be used to justify increased levels of security, and the conflation of asylum with terrorism appears to have the potential to heighten fears of both, it is possible that the securitization of asylum in the UK and the resulting 'exceptional' security measures could lead to concerns about the civil liberties and personal freedoms of UK residents. While this paper does not assess the implications of this phenomenon, this topic would be relevant for future research.

Despite the utility of the Copenhagen School's theory of securitization as a basis for the analytical framework of this paper, the approach is not without its flaws. One of the major shortfalls of the Copenhagen School's securitization framework in the context of this paper is the focus that it places on the motives behind a securitizing move. While the state, politicians, the media and other public figures all play a role in the conflation of asylum seekers with terrorism, and the corresponding development or exacerbation of fear, the intentions of these actors in doing so are less clear. The securitization theory put forth by Buzan et al. seems to imply a specific underlying motive on the part of the securitizing actor by stressing its pursuit of the 'right to treat [the issue in question] by extraordinary means' (Buzan et al. 1998: 28). Though the securitizing actor or actors often have motives for attempting to securitize an issue, these motives can be difficult to determine. The 'extraordinary' measures that have been applied to deal with asylum, such as detention and restrictionism, appear to support the notion that the securitizing actor or actors wish to contain and control asylum seekers by means of the securitization discourse. While this may explain the actions of the state, it does not fully explain the motivations behind the securitizing overtures of other actors. For example, individual politicians may attempt to securitize asylum to gain support among their constituents by pandering to anti-immigrant or racist sentiments or to promote asylum seekers as a scapegoat for problems for which they would otherwise be blamed. Thus, while there are a number of possible reasons that the aforementioned securitizing actors may, with or without the intent to do so, portray asylum seekers as a threat to residents of the UK, additional research would be required to establish these motives.

An additional topic that would be relevant for future research is the interaction between the securitization of asylum and the parallel discourses of social and community cohesion. According to Worley, 'community cohesion is a term that has become increasingly popular in public policy debates under New Labour, and signals a shift from previous policies of multiculturalism' (Worley 2005:484). A lack of community cohesion is often cited as the source of problems such as extremism (McGhee 2005) and

the riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in 2001 (Kundnani 2005). The promotion of community cohesion would, therefore, be perceived to be important in plans directed at the prevention of terrorism. While this paper addresses the idea of restrictionism as an ‘extraordinary’ measure to control asylum, the concept of community cohesion appears to frame the second major approach that is used by the UK in an attempt to lower the likelihood of an asylum seeker committing a terrorist attack on its territory. Thus, where asylum policies do not focus on restricting<sup>10</sup> ‘bogus’ asylum seekers’ access to UK territory, they tend to focus on the integration of ‘successful’ asylum seekers and, by extension, the promotion of community cohesion (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2005). The interplay between these discourses reflects a powerful contradiction. While the ultimate goal for ‘successful’ asylum seekers appears to be integration, asylum policy in the UK seems to be dedicated to preventing this from occurring before the refugee status of an asylum seeker is ultimately confirmed. The use of detention and restrictions on the entry of asylum seekers into the UK, along with the securitization of asylum, seem unlikely to foster future community cohesion between refugees and members of the host community. This disjuncture seems to reinforce the somewhat artificial divide between perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees. In addition, the approach of promoting integration and community cohesion may hide an underlying fear that even ‘successful’ asylum seekers, or refugees, may become terrorists. While issues of integration and community cohesion lie somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that these issues relate to the securitization of asylum and, therefore, warrant further examination.

In conclusion, the legal developments and public discourse regarding terrorism and the UK asylum system seem to have had a negative impact on the lives of asylum seekers. While this has been highlighted by numerous authors, it is also important to recognize that these laws, and the associated public discourse may also have a potentially negative impact on the lives of residents of the UK. The impact of the securitization of asylum on the human security of UK residents is an important issue that deserves further research. While this paper addresses this often overlooked aspect of refugee studies, it is the hope of the author that further research will address some of the outstanding issues raised in the analysis.

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<sup>10</sup> The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee reports that ‘a key element in discouraging [asylum] claims is through more effective border controls’ (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2004: 39).

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