

The New Prevent Strategy: Still A Lot to Learn

Dr Fahid Qurashi

Muslim Council of Britain: Soundings: Responding to Prevent 2011

The recently released Prevent Strategy Review 2011 was accompanied with much fanfare and debate on the new direction Prevent would be taking. Its release was preceded by comments and speeches made by those in government hinting at some new ideas that would underpin the revised counter terrorism strategy. By way of confession, I must admit I read the new Prevent Strategy Review document with what turned out to be a naïve sense of optimism. After all the criticisms made of the earlier counter terrorism policies [and especially of PREVENT- see Kundani, 2009] I was keen to see evidence that crucial lessons had been learnt but instead found statements that suggested otherwise:

‘We have seen no evidence that *Prevent* work has damaged police and Muslim community relations’ (p.99, original emphasis)

I found this to be a staggering claim not least because so much research contradicts this claim (see for example, Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011; Thomas, 2010; Haley 2009; Khan, 2009; Kundani, 2009). It is a claim indicative of a policy review in which much hasn’t been learnt from past mistakes. Take for example the Channel referral system and its implementation in the education system. Through my own research, I have found that teachers have repeatedly and wrongly referred young Muslim students for a Channel intervention over such trivial issues as enquiring about halal food, and prayer facilities in schools. Yet the new strategy seems to be oblivious of this kind of fallout and maintains that staff should continue to ‘help to identify, and to refer to the relevant agencies, children whose behaviour suggests that they are being drawn into terrorism or extremism’ [p.69]. Aside from the ethical quagmire of asking teachers, who form a crucial part of a support network on which young people depend upon, to report their students to the authorities because they demonstrate signs of a poorly defined and articulated ‘problem’, my research also suggests this approach is leading to a criminalisation of young people. The new Prevent Strategy goes further than its predecessors (for which a Preventing Extremism Unit within the Department for Education was sufficient) and calls for censorship of the internet and closer ties between local authorities and Prevent teams and schools, colleges, and universities. This securitisation of the education system seems to run contrary to the ethos of what an education is supposed to be about, namely, engendering within students the capacity to think about and ask critical questions. This has serious implications for academic freedom and the free flow of ideas, particularly in universities, given that the state is now in the business of regulating what does and does not constitute acceptable debate and discussion (consider for example the definition of extremism [p. 107] which is now defined at the level of ideas and not just actions).

This brings me onto the second problem of definition. The new Prevent Strategy broadly defines terms like extremism, terrorism (which conveniently ignores the state) and radicalisation. This will consequently lead to a silencing and at worst criminalisation of dissent

(something which is already taking place). Even against the previous counter terrorism policies the definition of extremism has been broadened and the new Prevent Strategy declares that there are 'groups whom we would *now consider* to support an extremist ideology' [p.6, emphasis added]. A fundamental problem here is that the state is using broadly defined terms precisely to control things which it has no right to do so, like censoring the internet, using teaching staff and those working in the health service to report back to the authorities. It seems to me this is something which is more than simply about fighting terrorism and more broadly relates to marginalising and criminalising dissent, in order to create a dissent-free depoliticised mainstream majority. On the issue of free speech, the new Prevent Strategy states 'Challenging ideology is also about being confident in our own values-the values of democracy, rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom of speech and the right of all men and women to live free from persecution of any kind' [p.44]. However, in my own research, I have found that in some instances those who vocally dissent in Muslim communities are marginalised and labelled as extremists and referred to Prevent officers. It seems then that there are many disparities between guidelines and practice on preventing extremism. As an aside I also find it interesting that the new strategy is so enthusiastically singing the praises of Britain as a country which respects civil liberties, freedom, and human rights and then in the same breath outlines measures to prevent extremism which restrict civil liberties, freedom, and human rights.

The third issue I take with the new Prevent Strategy is its failure to consider the role of the state in the process of radicalisation. Making claims such as Prevent needs to reach those that are 'most susceptible to terrorist propaganda' [p.7], the obsession it has with identifying the 'personal issues that can lead to radicalisation' [p.18], and emphasising the challenge that the community must take up in challenging extremist ideology, gives the impression that those responsible for the Prevent Strategy Review are working in a vacuum by failing to consider the wider social context. When the potent issue of foreign policy is mentioned in the Prevent Strategy Review, it is almost immediately dismissed as a factor of radicalisation because the oppression wrought by foreign policy in the Muslim world is merely 'alleged oppression' (p.18). In a similar vein the Prevent Strategy Review argues that the government needs to do more to challenge extremist ideas that Muslims are deliberately being mistreated around the world, as if non-deliberate mistreatment of Muslims isn't a problem. Instead, the Prevent Strategy Review makes a link between religion and terrorism and radicalism and terrorism. The impression it wants to impart to its readers is that through no fault of its own, the state is being targeted by extremists and terrorists who send their extremist radicalisers to prey on the vulnerable in society and recruit them to their cause, without seriously considering the consequences of its own actions. What is also apparent is that there is no real appreciation of the agency of the individual. There is no appreciation of the fact that someone is not brainwashed but rather chooses to join Hizb-ut-Tahrir. There is no real analysis of why someone could be radicalised beyond the fact that they are 'vulnerable' because it raises difficult questions that require serious introspection. Why is it the case that 'at present the greatest threat to the UK as a whole is from Al-Qaida and groups and individuals who share the violent Islamist ideology associated with it?' [p.6] Maybe it's because all of the major wars and interventions the UK is taking part in are in the Muslim world. Instead, the Prevent

Strategy chooses to locate the causes of radicalisation in the psychology of the individual because it vindicates the state, by suggesting that 'Group bonding, peer pressure and indoctrination are necessary to encourage the view that violence is a legitimate response to perceived injustice' [p.17]. And just as an aside, the use of bureaucratic language in the document with terms such as 'our interests overseas' (gas and oil, and control over areas of strategic importance) and 'national security' (maintaining the status quo) attempt to cover up inconvenient truths; namely the untold suffering of millions to secure 'our interests overseas' and 'national security', and that these same 'terrorists' and 'extremists' were friends of ours when they were acting in our interests (see Curtis, 2010). So, the argument that preventing extremism is about engendering a respect for the rule of law, democracy, human rights, equality and so on is a ruse because the state itself has consistently abused these same values.

Finally, I want to take issue with the overall orientalist tone of the new Prevent Strategy. Considering the new Prevent objectives and 25 priority areas of Prevent it is clear that the strategy is aimed at Muslim communities. In several different places the strategy makes reference to 'our British values'. 'There is evidence to indicate that support for terrorism is associated with rejection of a cohesive, integrated, multi-faith society and of parliamentary democracy.' [p.5] And again 'we will not work with extremist organisations that oppose our values of universal human rights, equality before the law, democracy and full participation in our society' [p.1]. In essence the argument is that British Muslims are to be blamed for the extremists and terrorists amongst their ranks because they don't adopt our preeminent enlightened values, but instead choose to stick to their own lesser value system. And anyone that fails to adopt our values *will* be radicalised into an extremist. It is this kind of thought process which meant the previous Prevent strategies could not be considered successful and it is a shame to see this thought process re-emerge in the new strategy.

By way of conclusion, it seems to me that not only does the revised Prevent strategy demonstrate a poor intellectual understanding of the phenomenon to which it is attending; it also does not seriously consider key issues in the process of radicalisation. This shouldn't come as much of a surprise when you read, 'We want to *contain* and challenge radicalisation and minimise the risks that it may present to our national security' [p.64, emphasis added]. In ignoring the role of the state and the treatment of Muslims (both home and abroad), the new strategy suggests that the state wants to continue acting as it is but contain and neutralise any dissent and other repercussions that may result from its actions. This new Prevent Strategy then, reads more like a policy which has been tweaked to better achieve that end. Trying to prevent the radicalisation of Muslims whilst they are systematically mistreated both at home and abroad, and believing it will be successful, is a flawed thought which is bound to present obstacles for any Prevent policy. As a point of academic interest, we might want to balance our research on radicalisation by thinking about why it is that more British Muslims are not angry and being radicalised in the face of the current reality.

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