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‘Paving the way for Extremism: How Preventing the Symptoms Does Not Cure the Disease of Terrorism’

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Introduction

The British government’s controversial counter-terrorism strategies and policies have come under fierce opposition with critics arguing it has not actually prevented extremism but has manifested itself into a political and ideological campaign that unfairly targets the Muslim community.[1] Moreover, such strategies have marginalised the Muslim community in the UK from wider civic society and created an atmosphere of hate and anger. The Prime Minister of Great Britain, David Cameron in 2010, spoke at a conference in Munich about security, radicalisation, and multi-culturalism, sparking a debate about how the UK monitors and deals with extremism. Blaming the doctrine of ‘state-multiculturalism’ the British coalition government argued for a more ‘active muscular liberalism’ which would identify the root causes of extremist ideologies[2]. Moreover, this paranoia and hysteria has led to a social, political, moral and theological debate about Islamism, Muslims, and terrorism which is fuelled by the way Britain is portrayed across the world as a country where extremist organisations employ tactics of persuasion, indoctrination, radicalisation and the promotion of religious intolerance. [3]

In 2010, the UK government review of counter-terrorist legislation and policy included examining the broader counter-terrorists strategies i.e. CONTEST. The focus of CONTEST is to reduce the risk to the UK from international terrorism, and has four key strands which include Prevent. The others are; Pursue-which aims to stop terrorist attacks; Protect-which endeavours to strengthen systems against terrorist attacks; and Prepare for a terrorist attack by mitigating its impact[4]. Part of such counter-terrorism policies in Britain has led to an erosion of trust between Muslim communities and law enforcement agencies.

The Social Impact

Furthermore, the Prevent Strategy 2011 is being driven by state led policies, embedded within vague and ambiguous local initiatives that lack both clarity and detail and in effect get Muslim communities to act as informants who provide intelligence on their local community. [5] After the events of July 7, 2005 the British government came under immense scrutiny to improve its security and resilience in the face of the ‘new’ terrorist threat. Indeed, this led to a shift in counter-terrorism policy which now examines not just international terrorism but terrorist threats closer to home. Since those attacks on British soil, the UK has seen a flurry of counter-terrorism

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legislation that has led to a heightened atmosphere with the current terrorist threat being (at the time of writing) 'substantial.'

Inevitably, within this climate of fear, British Muslims have become deeply suspicious of counter-terrorism policy including strategies such as Prevent. Fenwick and Choudhury (2010) argue that; "*Counter-terrorism measures are contributing to a wider sense among Muslims that they are being treated as a 'suspect community' and targeted by authorities simply because of their religion.*" [6] The government vision for the Prevent programme is to establish an institution of law abiding Muslims that value the British way of life and engage within society, thereby at the same time reducing the risk of home-grown terrorism and extremism.

This is something the previous Prime Minister of Britain, Gordon Brown, argued was a principle grounded in the narrative of 'winning hearts and minds' i.e. using softer forms of engagement with communities as opposed to heavy handed counter-terror tactics which are counter intuitive and risk further alienating Muslim communities. However the new strategy remains flawed and passive in debate and discussion of critical issues.

Indeed, the new Prevent Strategy 2011 will lead to problematic relations between policing and community engagement by creating barriers that will impact upon partnership work within a societal context. Prevent 2011 aims to create more local activism amongst Muslim's within society that gets them to accept the responsibility of helping identify would be extremists and at the same time improving community approaches with the police. Moreover theoretical studies in relation to the process of extremism include the adaptation of the 'social network theory', which views extremism as a social movement and social progression. Furthermore, this model uses societal causal factors to describe how actors that use different modes of recruitment tactics such as personal meetings, social activism and indoctrination influence people.

This model also takes into account concepts of behavioural and environmental factors that contribute to wider causes of extremism. It is clear that socio-economic and cultural factors do play a role in determining who becomes an extremist however Prevent does little to move the debate forward. Within such a framework the impact on local communities has been immense. Indeed recent research in this area indicates that many Muslims feel they are being discriminated against within society as a result of counter-terrorist strategies such as Prevent often leading to an increase in hate crimes committed against them. [7]

Defeating terrorism requires a more coherent, clear and constructive analysis of the problem such as factors that often lead to someone feeling they wish to commit an act of terror and although Prevent aims to cure the disease of terrorism it fails to do so in a number of ways. For example it has alienated the Muslim community, led to poor relations between Muslim communities and wide civic society, increased tensions between the police and local communities and fuelled further dissent and anger amongst many Muslim communities who feel they are being unfairly

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targeted. Therefore, the disease will only spread as a result of such ill-informed policies and the only way to eradicate it will require much more emphasis on communication and dialogue.

Prevent 2011

The Prevent Strategy 2011 contains three main objectives; firstly, tackling the ideological causes and challenges of terrorism; secondly to prevent people from being drawn into terrorist related acts by ensuring advice and support measures are provided to people who are deemed at risk of extremism; and finally promoting partnerships between institutions working together to tackle the risk of radicalisation and extremism. Although in principle this notion of tackling terrorism seems objective it is in practice similar to previous Prevent strategies in that it lacks clarity when it comes to defining key terms and above all fails to distinguish between extremists and Muslims.

In an in-depth study conducted by Fenwick and Choudhury which sought to explore the issues of both Muslims and non-Muslims across Britain about the impact of counter-terrorism laws and policy revealed that British Muslims felt the lack of accountability as regards the policing of Prevent and were concerned with all government counter-terrorism strategies which had undermined the government's central focus of community cohesion. Indeed, the Prevent Strategy 2011 has the potential of making Muslim communities more suspicious of law enforcement agencies leading into a growing sense of fear and a lack of trust in the British political system. Jarvis and Lister conducted a series of focus groups with Muslim communities that aimed to examine British Muslims views as regards UK counter-terrorism policy. They found that Muslim communities and police relations had been damaged by counter-terrorism strategies such as Prevent[8]. Furthermore, this type of analysis has led to a perception by Muslim communities that they have been unfairly targeted and treated as a 'suspect' community due to the nature in which counter-terrorism policy has solely focussed on identifying Muslim citizens as extremists. Research also indicates that many Muslims feel they are being discriminated against as a result of counter-terrorist strategies such as Prevent often leading to an increase in hate crimes committed against them[9].

Moreover, the broader literature suggests that Muslims in the UK feel that law enforcement agencies (such as the police) have begun to use a deliberate campaign of surveillance with regards to addressing the threat from terrorism. Thus, one of the debates about the new Prevent Strategy 2011 is the manner in which it is becoming labelled as an agenda for 'spying' upon local Muslim communities. For example, initiatives such as Project Champion which involved the police using covert and overt surveillance cameras in predominately Muslim areas of Birmingham (in the UK) was heavily criticised for breaching rules of liberal democracy and human rights and also at the same time targeting vulnerable minority communities[10]. This in

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effect has constructed a 'suspect' community within the dictum of community engagement for counter-terrorism purposes.

Overall, the Prevent Strategy 2011 aims to eradicate and prevent extremism through the identification of extremists by tackling the 'root' causes of that ideology (i.e. the radicalisation process which is where people support extremism and, in some cases, join terrorist groups). According to the British Home Secretary, Theresa May, the previous Prevent policy was flawed because it failed to identify the threat of extremism[11]. However, the Home Secretary does fail to identify what the terms 'extremism' and 'radicalisation' actually mean or provide any robust research or insights as to whom might be an 'extremist' or how to identify characteristics of someone that has been 'radicalised'. The problem with this lack of detail is the potential to profile activities and people as extremists or terrorists without evidence, for example the police could use their powers of investigation to arrest innocent Muslims purely because of their ethnicity, name, and religion. Moreover, her speech has the potential to instil fear as well as raise public sentiment, thus leading to more discriminate acts against law abiding Muslim citizens whom are viewed as extremists. Indeed, this government narrative has previously led to unpopular counter-terror legislation, suspicion and intrusive powers of surveillance against Muslim communities.

Conclusion

Muslim communities reject terrorism but are increasingly, in political discourse being asked questions about their patriotism and stance on British values. These are deliberate attempts that provide a nuance for discrimination and prejudice. The only way to prevent extremism is for the state to interfere less and begin to try to understand the causes and drivers for radicalisation. Societal issues such as gang culture; bullying, deprivation and a lack of education would be some examples. Furthermore, there needs to be more dialogue and communication. Political pressures on local police forces have meant a higher level of policing in mainly Muslim areas that has further fuelled dissent and alienation. Moreover, the Prevent Strategy 2011 acts as a double-edged sword; on the one hand it encourages Muslims to integrate and help support community engagement but on the other hand it uses counter-terrorism policies to 'spy' upon Muslim communities.

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Notes

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