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Prevent/Resilience Strategies: Are they Inclusive or Divisive?

By David Lowe   Published 06 July, 2016

Introduction

Over the last ten years Prevent/Resilience strategies related to countering extremism and reducing the number of people vulnerable to being drawn towards extremist causes linked to terrorism have been subject of criticism. The two main criticisms centre on defining extremism and the role of the police. By focusing on violent extremism linked to extreme Islamist ideology, the strategies have created a 'them and us' division in society with Muslim communities becoming a suspect community. Linked to countering violent extremism, Prevent strategies are perceived as another layer of intelligence gathering where rather than being seen as involved in community policing initiatives, Prevent officers are seen as spies passing on intelligence to their colleagues in counter-terrorism units. This has not only resulted in Prevent strategies struggling to achieve their aims, they have created divisiveness within society.

While this article's main focus is on the UK's Prevent strategy, it includes a comparative study with other states Prevent/Resilience strategies looking at the rationale behind their creation and the problems that emanated since their introduction. With Prevent/Resilience strategies focusing on violent extremism related to extreme Islamic ideology, this study examines how in using the terms radicalisation and alienation the divisiveness between Muslims and the rest of society developed. As the UK is the first Western state to place strands of their Prevent strategy on a statutory footing, these suspicions nor the divisiveness has diminished. Imposing a statutory responsibility on public authorities to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism has created anxiety among staff in those authorities, especially in the education sector. This has resulted in the creation of pressure groups opposed to carrying out this role. With the UK government proposing to introduce a Counter-Extremism Bill, this article argues it is imperative the Bill provides legal certainty. In relation to a statutory definition of extremism that will underpin the provisions contained in the Bill and guide action to be taken by the appropriate authorities, it needs to be related to all forms of non-violent extremism. In addition to this, it is also imperative that the accusation of Prevent police officers being an extension of counter-terrorism investigations by passing on intelligence is dispelled. In doing so it is recommended there is greater openness and transparency of Prevent officers' role in the community and examples of how they deal with all forms of extremism are released, not just those linked to extremist Islamist terror groups.

The Introduction of Prevent/Resilience Strategies 2005-2008

The Madrid bombing and the killing of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gough in 2004, along with the London bombing in 2005 were watershed moments for a number of European

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states in evaluating their counter-terrorism policies. Prevent strategies, aimed at deterring the vulnerable being drawn into terrorism became a much stronger element to tackle the 'home grown' terrorist. Along with the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway introduced a comprehensive national strategy to prevent the radicalisation of those more vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism, with other European states developing a less comprehensive programme led at local level. The example of local level led strategy in Germany where Berlin authorities adopted an institutionalised format and created the Islam Forum Berlin was also considered by other states. Following the 2003 Bali bombing by Al Qaeda resulting in the deaths of many Australians, the Australian government developed its Resilience strategy.

Resilience was designed to prevent the growth of home grown terrorism by introducing programmes and activities focusing on social harmony, the promotion of Australian democratic values and the integration of 'suspect' communities into broader Australian society. Examining the best approach in the adoption of prevent strategies, the European Union (EU) recognised the diverse approaches to the integration of Muslim communities could be problematic in introducing a uniform policy to be introduced in all of its Member States. This diversity ranged from the UK embracing multiculturalism, Germany and Spain doing little to integrate their Muslim communities, to France eschewing multiculturalism and offering citizenship to Muslims only if they embraced the French language and French norms. As a result, in 2005 the EU Commission issued a document to be considered by its Member States in formulating their prevent style strategies. The document is explicit that extremism is not just religious extremism:

> 'The ideologies and propaganda have varied and included extremism of different types – whether from the extreme left or right, anarchist and religious or in many cases nationalist. All of these groups have tried to terrorise democratic states to concede political transformations by non-democratic means. ...The Commission believes that there is no such thing as "Islamic terrorism", nor "catholic" nor "red" terrorism. None of the religions or democratic political choices of European citizens tolerates, let alone justifies, terrorism. The fact that some individuals unscrupulously attempt to justify their crimes in the name of a religion or an ideology cannot be allowed in any way and to any extent whatsoever to cast a shadow upon such a religion or ideology.' [my emphasis]

As Member States introduced prevent strategies focused solely on violent extremism linked to Islam, the EU's wide definition of extremism appears to have gotten lost. Having such a narrow focus not only alienated Muslim communities, these strategies resulted in many Muslims joining or being inspired by Islamist groups' narrative.

Radicalised, Alienated or Marginalised towards Violent Extremism: It's a Muslim Thing

Introduced within years of the Madrid and London bombings, and the Al Qaeda attacks on the US in 2001 (9/11) could explain why the early prevent strategies ignored other forms of extremism and focused solely on Islamist extremism. The US' response to 9/11 was to declare a war on terror.

As a result, this phrase constructed in the public imagination a cultural clash between the progressive West and culturally resistant Islam. It was not just in the public imagination, this concept was also present in government departments responsible for drafting early Prevent blueprints. This is evidenced by the many initial prevent strategies which effectivly singled out Muslim communities as being vulnerable to radicalisation and susceptible to isolation and marginalisation. By implicitly focusing on reforming the values and attitudes of British Muslims, the UK's 2008 Prevent strategy alienated many Muslims who objected to the stigmatising effects of this focus. They saw Prevent demonising them and holding all Muslims responsible for terrorism. This was evident in the well-meaning, but misguided strategic document issued by the UK's Department for Communities and Local Government on preventing violent extremism where the aim was to win 'hearts and minds'. The problem came in the priorities the document set in broadening the provision of citizenship education in supplementary schools and madrassahs and, as violent extremists exploit a lack of understanding of Islam, in promoting faith understanding in the education system. As the Muslim community was singled out creating a distinct other in society, this 2007 strategy did not conclusively treat the problem of detachment of state from non-state. In stating that the principal threat the UK faced came from radicalised individuals using a distorted and unrepresentative interpretation of Islam to justify violence, the 2006 UK Government's strategy document on countering international terrorism focuses solely on Islam and the role

of Muslim communities in the UK. This approach is not unique to the UK, it is evident in many states' prevent documentation.

The US' 2003 strategy for combating terrorism has a goal of diminishing conditions terrorists seek to exploit. It recognised factors such as poverty, deprivation, social disenfranchisement and unresolved political disputes that can result in individuals being vulnerable to radicalisation. The US did not look internally at combating this threat, rather it looked externally stating it can diminish these factors through its foreign policy such as the US-Middle East partnerships. Another example is the Dutch 2007 action plan on preventing people at risk of slipping away from Dutch society and democratic legal order. The plan's main focus is on young Dutch Muslims concerned about their identity as they look for guidance on what it is to be a Muslim in today's world. It appears the shock of the devastation of the 9/11, Madrid and London attacks where, without warning, 3,221 civilians were killed by extreme Islamist groups resulted in the initial prevent strategies focusing solely on the Islamist terror threat. Even though states like the UK and Spain had a wealth of experience in countering terrorism during protracted terrorist campaigns with the Provisional IRA and ETA respectively, a concern was that the operational methods chosen by Islamist groups like Al Qaeda was new and unfamiliar ground. This required a radical change in the strategy used for countering terrorist groups.

Not all Radicals are Terrorists

Linking radicalisation to terrorists' violent extremism is a 21st century connection. During the 1968-1997 Irish Troubles the UK sustained violent terrorist activity carried out by loyalist and republican groups. This included attacks on hard and soft targets ranging from bombing 10 Downing Street, to bombing British military and civilians on both sides of the Irish Sea. In official government documents and academic literature covering the Irish Troubles there is hardly any a reference to radicalisation processes adopted by either republican or loyalist groups to recruit people to their cause. Linking radicalisation directly to violent extremism widens the parameters of activity associated with terrorism. Support of a causal connection can be seen by the UK's early definition of radicalisation which is:

> '… a process whereby certain experiences and events in a person's life cause them to become radicalised, to the extent of turning to violence to resolve perceived grievances, are critical to understanding how terrorist groups recruit new members and sustain support for their activities.'

It is questionable if the term radicalisation is appropriate in these circumstances. Edwards in his *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* sees the above definition as incoherent, as to be radicalised is to undergo a kind of influence to the point of turning to violence, adding that many people holding radical views are not involved in terrorism.

Another problem in associating radicalisation with violent extremism is in assessing who has been radicalised to terrorist causes. Does it only include those who engage in violent extremism or does it also include those who support violent extremism or understand why people become violent, or even those who disapprove of violence but have sympathy with various groups' causes or feel these groups have legitimate grievances. While these may be radical thoughts, it would be dangerous legal ground to assume that those who have sympathy for or feel that certain groups have legitimate grievances are violent extremists. Edwards study shows the majority of those who hold radical views are not involved in terrorism. Supporting this point a Demos Report recommended that governments should distinguish between radicalisation that leads to violence to that which does not. It states it is possible for people to read radical texts opposed to Western foreign policy or support the principle of Islamist groups fighting in conflict zones in the Middle East while being vocal in denouncing Islamist inspired terrorism in Western countries. The Report adds that provided their message does not involve intolerance or a threat to the democratic order, such individuals can become important allies if it leads to them becoming engaged in political and community activity. As Anthony Richards' research found in the International Affairs Journal, such radicals have come into contact with individuals contemplating violent acts and successfully dissuaded them.

Preventing the Vulnerable From Being Alienated

In identifying those who are vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism, early prevent strategies looked to address structural problems with a firm emphasis on tackling disadvantage and inequalities, improving the educational performance, employment prospects and housing conditions of Muslims. This is to help prevent individuals from being

alienated. An alienated individual is one isolated from the machinations of civil society and can become subject to an extremist view whereby both the individual and the wider social structure come to see each other as a threat. This process of alienation is compounded when the individual has an inability to interact with the social sphere thereby seeing themselves as an 'island', separated from his/her peers, unattached to them, having few bonds or ties of any enduring nature. As a result, alienated individuals are more likely to engage with radical groups when they perceive themselves to be isolated from and not represented by social constructs of the broader community. To counter this, prevent strategies promoted greater integration to deradicalise extremist religious groups.

Accepting that alienation theory is credible, a mistake that can lead to further problems with any strategy is applying a one-cap-fits-all approach. It is important to distinguish extremist religio-political groups from orthodox religious groups who choose to separate themselves from wider society. In trying to sustain a way of life for its members, some orthodox groups may appear to have gone through the process of alienation as they separate themselves from mainstream society. In such circumstances Maleiha Malik writing in the *International Review* warns that: '

> A liberal democracy ... has to respect the rights of individuals who choose to isolate themselves from mainstream society, but who respect the limits of law.'

If liberal democracies deny isolated but law-abiding religious groups their way of life, rather than starting out with any political goals or interest in joining the liberal public sphere, then will they become politically active posing an extremist threat? Strategies that ignore all forms of extremism and focuses just on the open element of extremism creates 'the other' to be treated with suspicion, and, a damaging them and us division in society. These approaches are not new. It occurred in the UK where, following the 1974 Birmingham bombing by the Provisional IRA the Prevention of Terrorism Act was introduced resulting in a divisiveness in British society as Irish Catholics and British born Catholics of Irish descent were treated as a suspect community.

The Divisiveness of Early Prevent/Resilience Strategies Related to Violent Extremism: The Example of the UK

Gallis et al's study into integration policies in Europe identified that government policies can have the opposite impact on what they are trying to achieve by actually contributing to alienation. Being mainly implicitly, but sometimes explicitly focused on reforming the values and attitudes of British Muslims as a whole, early UK prevent strategies alienated many Muslims who objected to the stigmatisation. This is seen in Arun Kundnani's 2009 empirical study for the Institute of Race Relations on the UK's Prevent strategy. It containing scathing responses revealing the Muslim community's rejection of Prevent and how divisive it was.

The study reveals that members of mosques which took advantage of Prevent money to resource their libraries, no longer got involved with that mosque. More disturbing is the response by younger Muslims to Prevent. A voluntary sector manager said his organisation became opposed to dealing with Prevent as the young people it dealt with were not 'buying' into Muslims working against Muslims, with the worker saying:

> 'This will only lead to more extremism. [Prevent] has created mistrust and organisations like ours are consequently devalued. Our organisation is now under scrutiny because we are opposed to getting involved with the Prevent agenda'.

A manager of a youth project that worked with Prevent said among young Muslims there is a stigma attached to those who accept Prevent funding, seeing it as 'dirty money'.

By focusing on violent extremism linked to Islamist causes not only did early Prevent strategies alienate Muslim communities, it also created problems regarding the perception of the police's role in Prevent. The main concern over the policing of Prevent centres on allegations that it is another method open to the police for intelligence gathering. Kundnani's Report claims Prevent projects were being used to 'trawl for intelligence' with intelligence analysts in place to carry this out. The elaborate mapping of Muslim communities as a major Prevent objective in fostering close relations between counter-terrorism policing and non-policing local providers facilitated information not just on individuals whose opinions are considered as extreme, but also the local Muslim population in general.

In 2009 media reporting brought these suspicions of the police role in Prevent into the public arena. The BBC's Panorama programme reported intelligence gathering was being

carried out by the police in Prevent and, in making claims that intelligence gathering was a key component of Prevent, the UK newspaper, The Guardian, reported:

> 'Serious concerns that the Prevent programme is being used at least in part to "spy" on Muslims have been voiced not just by Islamic groups, but youth workers, teachers and others. Some involved in the programme have told The Guardian of their fears that they are being co-opted into spying.'

It was the police role in funding decisions and the mapping Muslim communities that damaged and muddied perceptions about their role in Prevent. As Yahya Birt observed:

> 'It has raised questions about how to preserve relationships of trust, confidentiality and professional integrity for those working with disadvantaged communities, and particularly with young Muslim people. ... [Prevent] has raised questions of police interference in the political relationships between local authorities and Muslim communities'.

Although in response to the negative media reporting the police stated Prevent was a strategy aimed at blocking radicalisation and reducing the supply of terror recruits, not a 'Trojan Horse' dedicated to intelligence gathering, the damage the police's role in Prevent was done. The residue of this damage has not dissipated over time, it is still present with the recently revised Prevent strategy. In 2015 a former senior Metropolitan Police senior officer claimed that Prevent is a 'toxic brand' and 'widely mistrusted'. Although this claim was denied by the president of the National Association of Muslim Police, these suspicions remain and appear to be deepening. It is not now simply a case for damage limitation, this accusation must be dispelled. As the UK Government has revised Prevent, introduced a Counter- Extremism strategy, placed a statutory obligation on agencies to report those vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism and is proposing to introduce a Counter-Extremism Bill, it is imperative the police role is clearly delineated if Prevent is to achieve its aims.

Current Prevent/Resilience Strategies

In 2011 the UK Government revised the Prevent strategy with three main objectives:

> 1. Respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat faced by those who promote it; 2. Prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure they are given appropriate advice and support; 3. Work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation that need to be addressed.

Compared to the 2007 version, among the key changes in the UK's 2011 Prevent strategy the term 'violent extremism' is abandoned and replaced by non-violent extremism, which includes all forms of extremism leading to terrorism. While the UK's 2011 strategy looks at the wider aspects of extremism, it appears the UK is alone among Western states with its strategy covering non-violent extremism. For example, while there are similarities in the developments contained in Australia's 2015 Resilience strategy with the UK's such as having an emphasis on identifying and diverting at-risk individuals and government agencies and communities working to reduce the driver of radicalisation, the position on extremism has not changed. It states Australia's task is to limit the spread and influence of violent extremist ideas.

The UK's 2011 Prevent strategy addresses the issues related to the connection between the police and intelligence gathering. Acknowledging the police collection of information for community mapping was confused with covert operation activity leading to allegations based on a misunderstanding about the process for supporting vulnerable people, the 2011 document states:

> '...we emphasise that it must be a guiding principle of prevent that the programme is not used as a means for covert spying on people or communities. We do not believe that has been the case. It must not be. Data collected about people for the purposes of Prevent must be necessary and proportionate.'

The 2011 Government White Paper CONTEST document reinforces this saying the relationship between Prevent and Pursue (investigation and disruption of terrorist activity) must be carefully managed as Prevent is not a means for spying or for other covert activity.

Placing Prevent Strategy Obligations on Statutory Footing

The UK is the first Western state to legislate certain prevent obligations. Staff at specified authorities now have a statutory duty to prevent people being drawn into terrorism. This is causing great consternation to many staff members of the specified authorities listed in Schedule 6 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, none more so than among staff employed in education. This has led to uncertainty as to what level of extremist behaviour or words expressed needs to be before determining if it should be reported to their local Prevent police team. Teachers' fear of falling foul of section 26 has led to some referrals resulting in sensationalist national media coverage, portraying the work carried out by Prevent police teams in a negative light. Recent examples include a 10 year old boy from Lancashire who wrote in school that he lived in a 'terrorist house', a four year old boy from Luton who mispronounced 'cucumber' saying 'cooker-bomb' and drawing a man cutting something with a knife, and, on Merseyside an 8 year old boy who after learning of the plight of Syrian refugees said he wanted to fight terrorists. Negative media headlines like these and those related to the counter-radicalisation strategy in general damages the good work carried out by Prevent police teams and those they work with. The accelerant resulting in strident opinions decrying Prevent has been the section 26 'General Duty' requirement that authorities take preventative action. This has led to a general misunderstanding and uncertainty by many staff members in the authorities as to their statutory obligation and the primary purpose of Prevent.

As a result the education sector saw the formation of pressure groups such as 'students not suspects', 'Educators not Informants', and 'Education not Surveillance'. The aim of these groups is the repeal of the section 26 requirement placed on education establishments. The National Union of Teachers 2016 annual conference debated this issue. Seeing the statutory obligation as shutting down open debate about topical issues, the teachers perceived Prevent as creating suspicion and confusion. Arguing that Prevent disproportionately targets Muslims, they subsequently voted for the strategy to be withdrawn from schools and colleges. Underpinning these suspicions and confusion is the lack of a clear and precise legal definition of what amounts to extremism. It is imperative that one looks beyond extremism linked to the narrow extreme Islamist narrative, such extremist behaviour has to be inclusive of all forms of extremism. This includes extremism related to far right organisation that in 2016 has produced terrorist violence in the UK as seen in Liverpool in February that the far right group National Alliance calls the 'Battle of Liverpool' and with Thomas Mair who, influenced by the far right narrative, murdered a Labour MP, Jo Cox in June.UK's Counter-Extremism Bill: Can Legislation be More Inclusive and Less Divisive? In the Queen's Speech 2016 it was revealed that during the 2016/17 parliamentary session the UK government will introduce a Counter-Extremism Bill. When one considers the problems and issues related to previous Prevent strategies, the UK is taking a bold legislative move. To help prevent people being drawn into extremism the Bill is expected to include:

1. Banning orders for extremist organisation who seek to undermine democracy or use hate speech in public places; 2. Disruption orders to restrict people who seek to radicalise young people; 3. Powers to close premises where extremists seek to influence others.

What is important is that what is perceived as extremism covers a broad range of extremist activity displayed by all in society, not just a form of activity linked to one community. To achieve this, and as it will underpin the provisions contained in the Bill, it is important the Bill contains a definition of non-violent extremism that provides legal certainty compliant with the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights. It is important a balance is drawn between the rights of expression and thought where one can be critical of government decisions and state actions while protecting citizens' security. The difference between the two is that the former narrative is simply critical, while the latter's narrative espouses the removal of religions, political discourse or certain groups from society. It is the latter that forms extremist thought which can draw the vulnerable towards terrorist activity. It is imperative that any legislative move towards countering extremism not only has legal certainty in protecting rights, but also does not tolerate thoughts that dangerously impinge on the rights and beliefs of others. Any legislative move designed to counter extremism must contain all forms of extremism espoused by all groups in society. In doing so, such moves are more likely to be inclusive, not divisive. By having such legal certainty it will guide staff in the agencies required to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and the courts regarding what actions amounts to non-violent extremism.

Conclusion

It is not just the UK, but many other states that have faced criticism relating to their initial prevent/resilience strategies. Most of that criticism emanates from the early strategies' focus

on radicalisation related to violent extremism linked to Islamist groups. The context in which these strategies were formulated can help to explain why this approach was adopted.

Developed and introduced shortly after 9/11, 2003 Bali bombing, 2004 Madrid bombing and the 2005 London bombing by individuals linked to Al Qaeda, one can appreciate many nation states' concern in preventing further indiscriminate attacks carried out by Islamist groups. One approach to help in minimising this threat was in adopting prevent/resilience strategies at pre-criminal level to help those susceptible to becoming radicalised.

Unfortunately those initial strategies had the adverse effect. By focusing solely on the Islamist threat it alienated many nation states' Muslim communities. Due to the deep suspicion of funding provided by prevent strategies and with the agencies associated with the strategies, none more so than the police, it resulted in a divisive society. Muslim communities did not see the police involved in prevent strategies as community or neighbourhood officers helping the community, rather they were perceived as spies for counter-terrorism investigators, with prevent strategies being a vehicle for intelligence gathering on suspect communities.

Even though later versions of prevent strategies have been developed with many aims refocused, the residue of suspicion remains. This may be due to many states still linking radicalisation to violent extremism. Australia's Resilience strategy is still aimed at challenging violent extremist ideologies. While not explicit, in the documentation it is implicit the Australian government is challenging ideologies linked to Islamist groups. It is possible, and understandable, the recency of the Sydney hostage siege in December 2014 by an Islamic radical that resulted in three deaths (including the hostage taker) could help to explain this approach. With the inquest into this siege being conducted in April 2016, (Australian Associated Press 2016), clearly this tragic event still remains in the Australian psyche.

By placing a responsibility on staff in certain agencies to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism, the UK is the only Western state to legislate part of their Prevent strategy. The residue of suspicion has led to a degree of contempt, especially among staff involved in education. Despite it being eleven years after the EU's recommendation, in its Counter-Extremism 2015 strategy that the UK introduced a definition of non-violent extremism ranging from far right to Islamist extremism, but this has not prevented the formation of pressure groups opposed to Prevent. This could be problematic for the UK government when it introduces its Counter-Extremism Bill. To counter those who vehemently oppose Prevent strategies the UK government must address two key issues. Firstly, ensure there is legal certainty in a legal definition of non-violent extremism by not containing subjective or disputed terms and ensure it covers all forms of extremism. In doing so, in protecting rights of expression and thought, it must be drafted in a way that ensures compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights.

This can be supported with a clearly written accompanying codes of practice, drafted in a style that can be easily understood by staff working in agencies unfamiliar with criminal justice processes. Secondly, dispel the accusation that Prevent is another method of spying on the Muslim community. This can be achieved with Prevent officers operating with greater transparency and accountability in the community and stressing that the Prevent officers' role is more closely aligned to pre-criminal community policing, not the criminal investigative pursue strand. In order to help eliminate the divisiveness in society that currently exists, without revealing specific details of cases, data and examples of the various forms of extremism dealt with by Prevent officers should be regularly released, especially those not related to extreme Islamist ideology.

About the Author

David Lowe is a principal lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University's Law School. Prior to becoming an academic, he was a police officer for 28 years with the UK's Merseyside Police.

The majority of David's police service was as a detective in the United Kingdom's Special Branch Counter-Terrorism Unit. His research in the area of policing, terrorism and security has been published in books and journals and he is regularly used by the television, radio, and the print media for commentary in these areas.

Article picture: Photograph of Brittania statue, taken 13th June 2008 on Plymouth Hoe, Plymouth, United Kingdom. Source: Wikipedia
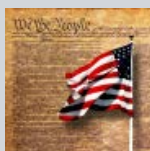
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