Thomas, Paul. "Failing to *Prevent?*." *Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism: Failing to Prevent*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 135–144. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849666015.0007>>.

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Conclusion

Failing to *Prevent*?

Writing this book some years after the 7/7 attacks of July 2005, the impact of those events remains powerful. For those who lost loved ones that day, or those who were injured, the impact will be permanent and very personal. For Britain as a whole, though, the impact is also likely to be long-lasting. Whilst the 9/11 attacks on New York led both to many more fatalities and to very significant foreign policy responses, American public opinion could at least reassure itself that the airliner attacks were perpetrated by foreigners who had come to the United States. For Britain, the shock was different, as the 7/7 attacks were carried out by four young Yorkshiremen, all raised and educated, and some born, in Britain – ‘ordinary’ young Britons with regional Yorkshire accents who had willingly killed themselves in order to also kill fellow Britons in the name of their understanding of Islam. That reality of domestic terrorism, sometimes based on suicide attacks, is something that the United States now also has to confront, and it is a threat that inevitably raises profound questions of identity, separation and commonality in society and around how states based on democracy and the rule of law should respond. Such questions have not lessened over the past few years despite the lack of any further such Islamist terrorist attacks – the number of foiled plots, some leading to convictions, and the sheer good luck of no injuries in the failed 21/7 attacks on London and the 2007 car bomb attempts on both central London and Glasgow Airport, means that few people are under any illusions about the scale of the threat that Britain faces from Islamist violent extremism.

A home-grown threat?

Whilst commentators from different places on the political spectrum have been quick to offer ready-made explanations for such a domestic terror threat, whether that be neo-imperialist and Islamophobic British foreign policy or an Islamic culture committed to both separation and conflict, any reasonable reading of the academic evidence available cautions against simplistic understandings of causes and motivations. Chapter 1 outlined the different main understandings of what is driving Islamist violent extremism in Western countries and highlighted that all these explanations have both strengths and significant flaws and limitations.

Islamist terrorists and plotters, whether it be the 7/7 attackers in their 'suicide videos' or others captured in recent years, such as Roshonara Choudhry after her attempted murder of MP Stephen Timms, have stressed British foreign policy as their motivation, and it is clear that misguided foreign adventures have made Britain significantly less safe. However, the ideology that drives Islamist violent extremism was strengthening its influence on young British Muslims well before the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions, as shown by the number of terrorists plotting attacks on Britain and other Western countries before 2003, or even before 2001. That raises the question of the Islamist 'single narrative' and how and why some people who subscribe to it are attracted further towards violent extremism.

The 'single narrative' has its roots in the political reaction to the failure of secular, socialist-tinged nationalism in the Muslim and Arab worlds, and to the energetic propagation internationally of very literal and conservative, even reactionary, forms of Islam by oil-rich dictatorships keen to protect their privileged positions. However, why is this 'single narrative' attractive to some young British Muslims? The context of a heightened Islamic identity among young Muslim in Britain and other Western countries can be understood not as a reactionary look backwards but as a modernist phenomenon, a response to globalisation by second and third generations of Muslim settlers coming to terms with being a Muslim minority in increasingly secular but nominally 'Christian' countries. For many young Muslims, this prioritisation of Islamic faith identity, as confirmed by the empirical data presented here, is a positive and progressive development that allows them to negotiate their place both within their own communities and within wider society. For a small minority, however, it can be a vehicle for antagonism, or even hatred, towards non-Muslim 'others' and to Western society in general.

A number of explanations have been offered for the drift towards violent extremism of this small minority of British, and indeed, Western Muslims. Poverty is one such explanation, and indeed it is true that the Pakistani- and Bangladeshi-origin communities, who comprise the large majority of British Muslims, are the poorest and most disadvantaged ethnic groups in terms of employment, living conditions and educational achievement. However, that marginalised situation is improving rapidly and, more importantly, many of the young British Muslim terrorists have been well-educated and from comparatively comfortable backgrounds. Here, it is clear that any issue of disadvantage is about how violent extremists view 'their' people, rather than their personal situation. Similarly, the argument that the Islamist terrorism threat is a product of extreme mosques runs up against the fact that the majority of British Islamist terrorists have *not* been radicalised through mosques. Instead, they have often been comparatively ignorant of Islam, being 'born-again' or recent converts who move straight from ignorance to extreme interpretations of Islam through private study circles or speakers,

rather than community-based mosque involvement. That rapid process of radicalisation for many highlights the central importance of group dynamics, peer group operation and the role of charismatic leaders within them, as the vitally important research of social psychologist Scott Atran shows. Atran's investigation of the 9/11, Madrid and Bali Islamist bomb plots shows how group links, loyalties and dynamics are vital, with 'my people' for such terrorists often not even being the *ummah*, but their small and tight friendship group that has become their world. All the evidence suggests that such groups of British Islamist plotters have radicalised themselves and formulated outline terrorist plans before, or in tandem with, making any contact with 'Al-Qaeda central', with some, such as the Madrid bombers, having no contact at all. This Islamist threat is one of small, leaderless cells inspired by the 'single narrative' and not a traditional, hierarchical terrorist 'army' controlled until his death by Osama Bin-Laden.

The relevance of community cohesion

This all cautions against simplistic understandings of the terrorist threat that Britain faces, but there are wider contextual issues that need to be considered. The most important, arguably, is the position of many British Muslim communities and the state of British 'race relations'. The 2001 riots involving young Muslims in the northern towns and cities of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford prompted a very significant government rethink and new priorities for policy approaches to 'race relations'. A new priority of 'community cohesion' was promoted, and this book has argued that community cohesion is vital, not only to respond effectively to the threat of Islamist violent extremism but also to understand how this threat can grow and harden within corners of British Muslim communities, in the same way as support for violent racist extremism can and does grow within some parts of white communities. Community cohesion clearly identifies the dangers of ethnic communities living separate lives, whether physically or culturally, and the extent to which this can harden distinct and mutually antagonistic 'identities'. Such ethnic segregation is clearly most stark in ex-industrial areas where communities of all ethnic backgrounds have highly restrained housing, employment and leisure options, and the fact that large portions of British Muslim communities live in such areas indicates how distinct, separate and inwards-looking identities might develop within parts of communities. Similarly, many of the white, working-class men attracted towards the far-right political organisations like the BNP and EDL over the past few years come from monocultural, 'segregated' white communities left marginalised and impoverished by de-industrialisation and neoliberalist policy responses to it. In both cases, segregated physical and cultural spaces

combined with inequality can lead to oppositional identifications and a racialised understanding of the social and economic conditions creating their community's marginalisation.

The community cohesion analysis also identifies the problematic impact of well-intentioned governmental 'political multiculturalism' or equal opportunities policies since 1981. Those policies have had many positive impacts, especially in significantly reducing many aspects of ethnic minority marginalisation and disadvantage in Britain, but have also had significant downsides. In particular, they have essentialised and reified ethnic identity, engaging and privileging separate and distinct 'ethnic' identities at the expense of both commonality and other forms of identity. Such a policy focus on ethnicity has arguably 'opened the door' for a growth in faith-based identity, which, in the case of Muslims, has interacted with real domestic and global political events to produce very strong Muslim identification within distinct and often segregated Muslim communities. The community cohesion analysis is that such strong and separate ethnic or faith identities, whether Muslim, or racialised whiteness, and policy acknowledgement and indulgence of them, is not viable in Britain's increasingly diverse society and that continued drives for 'equality' for distinct communities *must* be balanced by an approach of encouraging greater commonality and more de-centred and intersectional personal identities. This is particularly true in a political and indeed societal context where class and the reality of class-based inequality is increasingly denied. Community cohesion has become a major policy priority since 2001, and research by the author discussed in this book suggests that, rather than being the 'death of multiculturalism', cohesion represents a new and potentially productive phase of a multiculturalism re-balanced to focus more strongly on commonality as well as diversity. This community cohesion perspective argues very strongly that if there is a problem of antagonistic and oppositional 'identities' within specific communities, the answer is not more work with, and focus on, that specific identity but instead, quite the reverse – productive ways forward have to focus more on commonality, more cross-ethnic contact and dialogue, and on equal and genuine participation in society. It also argues for more intersectional, de-centred and 'cooler' forms of identity to be recognised and supported, rather than further reification of essentialised ethnic/religious 'hot' identities that will inevitably lead to conflict in an increasingly diverse society. This is the context in which we can and should discuss the effectiveness of any 'hearts and minds', anti-violent extremism programme such as *Prevent*.

Failing to *Prevent*

I have taken some time here to restate both the complexities of what causes and motivates Islamist violent extremists, and the key arguments of the

community cohesion analysis of ethnic relations and identity in modern British society, because this book has argued that *Prevent* to date, as designed and implemented by national government, has largely disregarded both, and that this goes a long way to explain why *Prevent* has been ineffective and so reviled. We *do* need an effective anti-violent extremism ‘hearts and minds’ programme, particularly one targeted at young people living in tense and marginalised areas, but *Prevent* so far has not been it.

Past and present British governments do deserve credit for including a ‘hearts and minds’ preventative element within the overall CONTEST counterterrorism strategy and for attempting to operationalise this through partnership activity with, and resourcing of, sections of Muslim communities. Such approaches demonstrate awareness of the lessons from other counterterrorism campaigns, namely that a securitised overreaction, a kicking in of doors and a crackdown on entire communities, is the worst and most counterproductive approach possible, and that partnership and dialogue is vital to secure the ‘human intelligence’ that will ultimately expose and defeat those committed to violent extremism. However, the manner in which *Prevent* has been designed, operationalised and managed means that it has largely failed in those terms, as it has left Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike feeling that it is actually about surveillance and control of one specific, entire community, rather than partnership, whilst also failing to effectively engage educationally with those at risk of attraction to violent extremism. This book has attempted to detail those significant flaws and drawbacks of *Prevent*, as it is currently conceived and constructed, in order to identify more productive policy approaches, and those flaws are briefly summarised here.

From the perspective of this book, the greatest failing of *Prevent* to date has been its flat contradiction to, and malign effect upon, the policy priority of community cohesion outlined above. The book has presented clear evidence that *Prevent* has not just failed to work in tandem with that drive for greater cohesion and integration but has also undermined it and squeezed the space into which community cohesion thinking and practice was growing at ground level. Contrary to the cohesion analysis of unhelpfully overdeveloped, specific ethnic identities, *Prevent* has focused only on the ‘Muslimness’ of British Muslim communities and individuals through its monocultural and broad-brush focus on Muslims only, and in its practical working through religious organisations and leaders. That has been exacerbated by *Prevent*’s clumsy and inappropriate ‘social engineering’ within Muslim communities, through attempts to encourage more varied and polyphonic forms of leadership, and by the overt promotion of particular types of Islamic religious thought and practice, something that is surely entirely inappropriate for a democratic Western government to engage with. Much of that ‘social engineering’ activity has been driven by the ‘values-based’ perspective on *Prevent*, which sees the danger of Islamist violent extremism as closely connected to ‘values’ and

outlooks in wider, mainstream sections of some British Muslim communities, something that must be tackled in order to disrupt the ‘conveyor belt’ towards violent extremism. The June 2011 *Prevent* review appeared to represent a triumph of that ‘values-based’ approach to the detriment of pragmatic, ‘means-based’ engagement with conservative Muslim communities who may hold arguably illiberal social ‘values’ but who have the ability to divert young Islamists away from the path towards violent extremism.

That monocultural focus on an entire community has further hardened a ‘defensive’ and essentialised Muslim identity that had already been encouraged over previous years by policies of political multiculturalism that privileged ethnic specificity and by Islamophobic political and media scrutiny. That Muslim defensiveness has been hardened also by *Prevent*’s complete lack of interest in the growing threat of far-right racist violent extremism. *Prevent* emerged as the BNP, a political party whose members have very significant criminal records for terrorist offences and serious acts of violence, was growing politically, but any threat of far-right violent extremism was being dismissed, fuelling the Muslim sense of an unbalanced political scrutiny. That disinterest was reiterated by the *Prevent* relaunch in June 2011, only for the Norway massacre weeks later to expose a substantial and growing far-right, pan-European network that looked and sounded a lot like extremist Islamist networks. This highlighted the fact that *Prevent* had misrepresented the nature of both Islamist and far-right violent extremism, overemphasising the organisation of the former and badly underestimating the latter.

As the community cohesion analysis of the lessons from the 2001 northern riots suggested, such a monocultural focus on one community has also had the predictable effect of promoting ‘envy’ in other ethnic and social communities, who are jealous and questioning of a substantial funding stream aimed at one community only whilst, wrongly, claiming that there is no ‘extremism’ in their communities. It is clear from the empirical evidence discussed in this book that community cohesion, with its focus on cross-community work, has significant support from policy makers and practitioners at the local level, and was making developmental progress prior to the appearance of *Prevent*. For that reason, practitioners on the ground struggled to see the distinction between cohesion and *Prevent*, and wanted to address the dangers of oppositional and separate identities, and attraction to violent extremism through further development of cohesion-based approaches and practice. Such cohesion-based, community-based *Prevent* interventions locally would play to the strengths and experience of the practitioners being asked to deliver it on the ground, but instead the UK approach to *Prevent* to date has meant there is clear evidence that such professionals have not felt comfortable trying to implement a programme aimed at Muslims only, and one supposedly overtly concerned with terrorism – they have felt themselves to be lacking

in the skills, educational clarity and political support from above, just as educational practitioners did in a different era when asked to implement overt anti-racist programmes with white young people often holding strong racist views.

The efforts of local authorities to take a cohesion-based approach to *Prevent* that would circumvent these problems, and potentially enable more productive and holistic practice approaches to *Prevent*, have been increasingly thwarted by national government through the control it exercises via reporting mechanisms such as NI 35, and by the very significant control exercised over local *Prevent* operations by the Police and Security Services, something hardened by the decision of the coalition government in June 2011 to give the Home Office total control over *Prevent*. In contrast, there was no immediate sign of the new cohesion and integration policy strategy promised by the coalition government from the early days of their election. In this long absence, policy focus on cohesion, and any national funding or political support for it, has progressively withered.

Nothing has poisoned *Prevent*'s chances of progress to date more than the clumsy and overblown roles for the Police and Security Services within local *Prevent* design and delivery. Whilst accepting that a total distinction between the Pursue and *Prevent* arms of CONTEST is impossible to always maintain, the police have got their role in *Prevent* badly wrong in their eagerness to build community engagement with Muslim communities, and the downsizing of the police's role in *Prevent* announced in the June 2011 *Prevent* review implicitly accepted this. No 'hearts and minds' programme that asks British Muslims to rethink certain assumptions and be prepared to pass on information is ever likely to succeed when led so overtly and inappropriately by the police and Security Services in ways that completely blur, or even break, important boundaries and demarcations around professional roles and responsibilities. In many local areas, police have not only led local *Prevent* arrangements but also played a strong role in the delivery of supposedly education-based engagement with young people and communities. That is simply not their job, those are not job roles they are trained or equipped to do, and this reality has badly damaged efforts to build coalitions of support against violent extremism. Whether this overblown police and security service role in *Prevent* has represented 'spying' in any organised sense is hard to say, but it has given the clear impression of being surveillance, and that charge has not gone away, leaving *Prevent* as a tainted 'brand'. The June 2011 review of the *Prevent* strategy has put funding and monitoring of local *Prevent* activity directly in the hands of the Home Office/OSCT, and the danger here is that the influence of Police and Security Services on what remains, in the 25 new target areas, community-based educational interventions aimed at young people will only grow further.

Prevent: A better way

Work that fulfils the aims of *Prevent* will be needed for the foreseeable future, but it can and should be done differently to the present approach, and that different approach can also be a better and more effective one. We do need anti-extremism ‘hearts and minds’ work, but it needs to be congruent with community cohesion, and so aimed to young people and communities of *all* ethnic, faith and social backgrounds, partially in recognition of the fact that other forms of violent extremism also pose a threat. That is not just to ensure that *Prevent* supports wider efforts to develop and promote cohesion and integration work, but because overdeveloped, singular and oppositional ethnic or faith-based ‘identities’ are the starting point for the drift towards violent extremism for a minority, so anti-violent extremism approaches need to counter ‘hot’, singular identities through stress on commonality, complex personal identifications and plurality, not reinforce those singular identities.

That argues for a much stronger and better resourced cohesion and integration strategy than Britain has at present, one that actively encourages ‘meaningful direct contact’ between people of different ethnic, social and geographical backgrounds through a variety of means. Where does that leave *Prevent*? Would anti-violent extremism work be sidelined by a growth in generalised cohesion work? This book would argue for a *Prevent*-funded strand of cohesion activity that focuses directly on political debate and democratic participation of young people, but which does this through multiethnic, cohesion-based activity. The UK Youth Parliament/ACPO initiative ‘Project Safe Space’¹ has shown that such work is possible within a *Prevent* framework, enabling robust debate among young people of different backgrounds around issues of equality, politics and foreign policy. An expansion of such an approach, specifically targeted at areas where racial tension and extremism activity are viewed as problematic, would enable policy to address greater cohesion, the democratic participation of young people and tackling the attractions of violent extremism in tandem. Similarly, the Youth Parliament scheme itself nationally and locally has shown great success in encouraging young people of different ethnic and social backgrounds to engage in political debate and represent other young people. That is another forum where real political conflicts can be discussed in ways that teaches the skills of, and encourages involvement in, democratic political processes. Leading community development organisation, the Young Foundation, has been developing a youth leadership scheme, ‘Uprising’,² which has trained and supported young leaders from different ethnic and social backgrounds to develop work with young people, with the young leaders trained within an explicit cohesion and anti-discriminatory environment. All those initiatives show that we already have models of work with young people and communities that explicitly address issues of politics, identity and attractions of extremism, and do so within a framework of cohesion and

integration. Those examples go alongside the exciting community cohesion practice that is starting to develop locally, such as in Oldham, and which has been discussed in this book. Such an approach to both *Prevent* and cohesion would build on existing frameworks and structures, and would not need to start from scratch, as the coalition government's misjudged National Citizen Service seems determined to do. What such a cohesion-based approach to *Prevent* would require is much more support for practitioner training and experience-sharing than has taken place to date. A properly funded national programme of training and support for anti-extremism community-based practitioners, such as youth workers, teachers and community-based activists from a variety of backgrounds, would be a significant policy advance, whilst costing merely a proportion of the money wasted on the misguided *Prevent* programmes to date. Such an approach would need national politicians to focus on educational rather than surveillance-based approaches and show trust in those involved in local design and delivery.

In arguing for such a cohesion-based approach to future *Prevent* work, it must be acknowledged that there will sometimes be a need for monocultural work, for instance, with young Muslims who are questioning what Islam suggests about responses to current political realities or white young people expressing racialised resentment and attraction towards far-right groups. However, having such specific and targeted monocultural work within an overall cohesion-based framework is very different from the current top-down *Prevent* focus on Muslims as an entire community. Similarly, there will be a continuing need for Channel, or a similar programme, that engages with vulnerable individuals at risk of active radicalisation of various types, but approaching this both through a cohesion framework and a closer tie-in with existing youth offending and child protection structures will again make Channel appear less of surveillance-based 'fishing expedition' than it is at present.

Will any of the proposals outlined above ensure that any future acts of Islamist, or far-right, violent extremism will be avoided in Britain? No, because no 'hearts and minds'-type *Prevent* programme can ensure that. What a cohesion-based approach to *Prevent* activity *can* achieve is remove the current stigma around the tainted *Prevent* brand and instead build real resilience within individual communities and between communities. Such resilience would enable individuals to be more aware of violent extremism and how to avoid it, to better speak out against those promoting violent extremism within communities, and to articulate for commonality when extremists argue for separation, conflict and the necessity of killing fellow citizens setting out on their morning commute to work.

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