

IRFAN SHAH

10. PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM SCHEME AND THE NEXUS OF CONTROL

Irfan Shah was born 20th June 1979 in Barking; he lived in Ilford with his parents and five brothers. He attended Cleveland Junior School and Loxford High School. As a 16 year old he left school to pursue a career in professional cricket. He received his first semi-professional contract with the London Cricket College, which lost its funding two years later and had to close. Needing to earn a living he found retail work, but after three months he received a call from the Lords MCC Ground Staff who offered him a contract as a semi professional cricketer.

He spent 3 years at Lord's and learnt the skills and aptitude needed to become a professional sportsman. In 1999 he signed a professional contract with Hampshire County Cricket Club. He toured South Africa twice and spent six months in Perth, Australia, which he found challenging, especially during Ramadan. His contract with Hampshire finished in 2002 and Irfan settled back in Ilford.

In 2004 he was offered a job as a Club Development Worker with Frenford Clubs and started a YMCA Diploma in Youth and Community Education, which he completed in 2009. He married in 2004 and now has two young girls. In 2006, he and his wife went to Hajj on pilgrimage. He continues to reside in Ilford and still works for Frenford Clubs. Irfan achieved a BA Hons in Youth and Community Education in 2011.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will focus on the issues and boundaries that were crossed with regard to the recent history of anti-terror laws and in particular the Prevent strategy that was linked to the state sponsored Prevention of Violent Extremism scheme (PVE). It will look at how Prevent impacted on young people and ask who might have benefited from such legislation. Following the devastating, tragic and barbaric terror attacks labelled by their dates, '9/11' and '7/7', many young Muslims often felt and found themselves to be effectively made scapegoats. However the state's response was to devote over £140 million to making young people the focus of a strategy that quickly took on the mantle of 'combating violent extremism'. With Prevent now disappearing below the political horizon to make way for the National Citizenship Service, it is perhaps

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timely to look at how such policies can be something more damaging than merely temporarily counterproductive of their own logic.

PREVENT

Following the 7/7 bombings the message from government was that Muslim communities needed to take the initiative. Prime Minister Tony Blair along with Ruth Kelly, as the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, accused the Muslim Council of Britain of not doing enough to fight extremism. The government resisted significant demands for a full public inquiry into the 7/7 attacks, as Tony Blair insisted that a new initiative needed to be put in place to combat the growth of violent extremism. The Government launched its Action Plan, 'Preventing violent extremism: winning hearts and minds' in April 2007 and announced the Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder Fund; Prevent. Prevent was one of four strands of the Government's long-term strategy to countering violent extremism and was linked to CONTEST¹, the governments international counter terrorism strategy, which was summed up in four words;

- * Pursue
- * Prepare
- * Protect
- * Prevent

The Pathfinders fund was badged as PVE or Preventing Violent Extremism programme as the Home Office moved towards the use of the term 'Prevent' to describe the area of work.

The purpose of Prevent was straightforward; to stop people becoming or supporting terrorists and violent extremism. It was a response to the belief that such an aim could not be achieved solely by the work of the police or the Security Service.

The Prevent programme was summarised as follows:

Four key aims;

- 1) promoting shared values
- 2) supporting local solutions
- 3) building civic capacity and leadership
- 4) strengthening the role of faith institutions and leaders

Five key objectives;

- 1) challenging violent extremist ideology and supporting mainstream voices
- 2) disrupting those who promote violent extremism and institutions where they might be active
- 3) supporting individuals who are being targeted and recruited
- 4) increasing the resilience of communities
- 5) addressing grievances

PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM SCHEME

There were two strategic enabling functions;

- 1) developing understanding, analysis and information
- 2) improving strategic communications.

Local authorities receiving Prevent funding would be measured against the indicator, NI 35 which concentrated on the following four areas:

- a) Understanding of and engagement with Muslim communities
- b) Knowledge and understanding of the Preventing Violent Extremism agenda
- c) Effective development of an action plan to build the resilience of communities and support vulnerable individuals
- d) Effective oversight, delivery and evaluations of projects and action.

MUSLIM FOCUS

Youth groups and Local Authorities applied for funding under the Prevent banner but found so called radicalised young people difficult to identify. In my area of practice, the London Borough of Redbridge, on the borders of East London and West Essex, the Local Authority established a Preventing Violent Extremism program (PVEP). Initially Muslim youth were targeted with the aim of identifying any who would admit to holding extremist views and/or violent intentions. However, unsurprisingly it proved difficult to find young people willing to sign up to the program. So a new appellation, the Muslim Inclusion Program (MIP), was adopted. At a stroke this excluded everyone except Muslims as, in practice, only Muslims were overtly targeted, but the PVEP could in theory have been used as a means of prevention of any type of extremism (for example racist/Fascist extremism). However, the change of title also worked to deceive young people as the MIP had the same aims as the PVEP, focusing on religion and the possibility of radicalisation. But, at the same time this approach was intrinsically unfair and discriminatory, in that just one section of the community was to receive resources. While there are other examples of state, local authority and private funding being focused on particular groups, over short and long terms, for instance young parents, young people at risk etc., in this situation it was *all* young Muslims who were being targeted, as it was they that were seen to be the most likely group to be exposed to radicalisation. JUST (the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights) spoke out against the PVE strategy in an open memorandum whilst giving evidence to the Communities and Local Government Committee inquiry in 2010, stating;

The government's PVE project has led to the abandonment of funding traditional community development, capacity building and empowerment work with BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) communities, replacing instead with community cohesion, anti-extremism and anti-terrorism approaches which have put Muslim communities under the intense spotlight of the far right and the press and media. It is vital that all young people can access youth clubs,

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activities and projects and by only allowing the Muslim community to benefit from this program, the government has created resentment and hatred amongst young people outside of the Muslim faith.

According to a document produced by the Reading Muslim Crisis Group², in one London borough, those working with young people, under the auspices of PVE were told to add information to databases they held to highlight which youths were Muslim. They were also asked to provide information, to be shared with the police, about which streets and areas Muslim youngsters could be found on. Given this, it is too easy to conclude that Muslim communities were effectively being subjected to surveillance to a degree that was hard to justify (spying). This would seem to be potentially damaging any relations or possible partnership opportunities that could happen by handling funding in this way.

The Prevent funding was mainly accessed by local authorities but was also available to small organisations and groups working with Muslims. So it is not surprising that organisations and local authorities reacted to this in a similar way as they might other funding streams; to facilitate projects and salaries to run the same. The funding came under close scrutiny from Muslim groups, non Muslims and MPs. The An-Nisa Society in a document, entitled 'A Response from the Muslim Community' by Khalida Khan (March 2009) responded to the steps taken by the government through the introduction of Prevent strategy. In short she concluded that the Muslim community was being treated as potential terrorists and the Prevent strategy looked to Muslims to act as a surveillance mechanism of themselves. Khan made the point that there was no consultation with Muslims about the introduction of Prevent scheme, that did not have the backing of MPs and some local authorities, such as Bradford Council.³

A manager of a project in London said:

I think part of the point of the [Prevent] programme is to spy and intelligence gather. I won't do that.⁴

In another London borough wardens on council estates were told to inform on people not because they were suspected of crimes, but because they were supposed to be susceptible to radicalisation. According to a Guardian source, who had been involved in Whitehall discussions on counter-terrorism:

There is no doubt Prevent is in part about gathering intelligence on people's thoughts and beliefs. No doubt.

He added that the authorities feared "...they'd be lynched" if they admitted Prevent included spying.¹³

MONEY WELL SPENT?

Millions of pounds were spent on the Prevent scheme. It is hard not to agree, given the cost of terrorist activity in terms of human life and suffering, that as a society we need to look at the way we live, the way in which we interact with each other and the decisions we take. We also need to think about the implications that our

actions have on others. As I interact with the young people that come to the youth club where I work, which includes young people of all faiths, I ask myself, ‘Would the money allocated to Prevent have been beneficial to the young people I work with?’ I refrained from applying to the scheme as I saw it as alienating the non-Muslim young people we worked with. On 17 June 2009 the Guardian reported that 230,000 young people aged between 16 and 18 were not in employment, education or training. Nearly 15,000 anti social behaviour orders had been issued between April 1999 and December 2008 according to the Home Office Crime Reduction Statistics reported in 2009. At the same time the teenage pregnancy rate was higher than any other country in the European Union. Of course, in 2011 youth unemployment and crime rates amongst the young are far worse than two years ago, and even if young people were in danger of being radicalised there is no apparent evidence that this is more or less the case because of PVE strategy. So perhaps this demonstrates that the resources devoted to Prevent might have been put to better use supporting young people back in to education, funding youth services and positive activities, such as training and short courses to increase skills. The UK Youth Parliament told the House of Commons Committee in March 2010⁵ that overwhelmingly, young people did not approve of tokenistic youth organisations. They asked, ‘Why is there a Young Muslim Advisory Group but not a Young Christian Advisory Group? Why is there not a Young Hindu Advisory Group?’ It was stated that it seems, ‘that it is all tied to the one community when the problem is not exactly with that community’. The Youth Parliament also criticised the government for not providing democratic engagement for young people,

I see that as a criticism of you guys [MPs] because there are not any opportunities for young people from those backgrounds to get involved in events like, Project Safe Space. We did one conference in Slough and the opinions we got there from the young people were very different from the opinions we got in the North East and the North West of England. They are not given the same opportunities as us because we are going into those communities but we are not getting the funding to continue doing that work, giving those young people youth leadership opportunities and stuff like that.⁶

Young people are giving a clear message of wanting more support. This being the case it seems something worse than a waste to throw millions of pounds on a relatively few young people just because they happen come from a Muslim background. It appears obvious that radicalisation (a phenomenon that has never been clearly articulated, identified or quantified) is not the source of youth disaffection or dissatisfaction. However, the resources devoted to Prevent were seductive. Redbridge, like other beneficiaries, drew down hundreds of thousands of pounds from the government, although even after the re-development of the programme only around 20 members got involved by way of incentives (bribes) such as free pizza, trips and a residential. For all this, radicalisation was not a central focus as issues ranging from family breakdowns to belonging to street

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gangs took precedence. However, are these not the same issues that all young people potentially face from all backgrounds?

A NEXUS OF CONTROL

The above demonstrates that Prevent was ineffective by any measure and chronically ill-conceived. It was effectively set of inappropriate ideas and aims to be serviced by agencies that effectively attempted to use the resources for other means, probably, as seemed to be the case in Redbridge; the intended use was something of a practice cul-de-sac. However, it is perhaps too straightforward to understand Prevent as a stand-alone failure in policy. Section 45 (Exercise of power) of the Terrorism Act (2000) was designed to give the police powers to stop and search any vehicle or person and seize ‘articles of a kind which could be used in connection with terrorism’, in a specific area over a period of time. Unlike other stop and search powers that the police could deploy, this did not require the police to have ‘reasonable suspicion’ that an offence had been committed, to search an individual. In January 2010 the stop-and-search powers were ruled illegal by the European Court of Human Rights. This judgement was vindicated by subsequent findings. In March 2011, Corinna Ferguson, a lawyer for human rights group Liberty, said:

A threefold increase in anti-terror stop and search is the clearest signal that these powers are being misused.

At the same time it was reported that Asians are more than twice as likely to be stopped than whites.⁷ However other facets of the 2000 Act continued to be used. Section 41 of the Act provides the police with the power to arrest and detain a person without a warrant for up to 48 hours if they were suspected of being a terrorist. This period of detention could be extended to up to seven days if the police could convince a judge that it was necessary for further questioning. This section marked a break from ordinary criminal law where suspects need to be charged within 24 hours of detention or be released. This period was later extended to 14 days by the Criminal Justice Act 2003 and to 28 days by the Terrorism Act 2006. Section 58 (Collection of information) created the offence, liable to a prison term of up to ten years, to collect or possesses, ‘information of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism’.

While much of this legislation might be portrayed as necessary given a declared ‘war on terrorism’, the impact on the freedom young people and the focus on young Muslims (the groups that are apparently most associated with potential acts of terrorism) has yet to be fully felt. However, the consequences of socially mediated and legislated mistrust and suspicion are probably predictable; a group who are not trusted by society will not trust society – too quickly mistrust gives birth to contempt, just as the progeny of continued suspicion is alienation of those continually under suspicion.

CONCLUSION

The Prevent scheme isolated a minority community while subjecting the majority to discrimination (they did not have access to the funding). The Prevent scheme had initially started as way of combating potential radicalisation of young Muslims. However as many Muslims and non Muslims have stated, this is not the way to deal with a global situation. Perhaps some of the actual and supposed resentment from Muslims towards the West is an indirect result of foreign policy and the treatment of Muslim people at an international level? I am confident if the government wants to eradicate the potential for the radicalisation of young people, then it must look at the education and welfare system as they affect young Muslims. As a youth worker of some experience I see that Muslims are often left behind in education and social integration. This barrier must be addressed if young people are not to become targets of the hardliners. I am extremely disappointed that the resources used to fund the Prevent scheme were primarily focused on young Muslims alone as this seemed to do little more than fuel the resentment felt towards the Muslim community.

On 16 October 2009, in the Guardian, the Director of Liberty, Shami Chakrabarti branded Prevent as the biggest spying program in Britain in modern times and an affront to civil liberties. But this apart, the program was extremely flawed as the cases below, some of the many reported by the Reading Muslim PVE Crisis Group, demonstrate:

- *In the Midlands, funding for a mental health project to help Muslims was linked to information about individuals being passed to the authorities.*
- *In a college in northern England, a student who attended a meeting about Gaza was reported by one lecturer as a potential extremist. He was found not to be.*
- *A nine-year-old schoolboy in East London, was referred to the authorities after allegedly showing signs of extremism – the youngest case known in Britain. He was “deprogrammed” according to a source with knowledge of the case.*
- *Within the last month, one new youth project in London alleged it was being pressured by the Metropolitan police to provide names and details of Muslim youngsters, as a condition of funding. None of the young Muslims have any known terrorist history.*
- *In Birmingham the programme manager for Prevent is in fact a senior counter-terrorism police officer. Paul Marriott has been seconded to work in the equalities division of Britain’s biggest council.*
- *In Blackburn, at least 80 people were reported to the authorities for showing signs of extremism. They were referred to the Channel project, part of Prevent.*
- *A youth project manager alleges his refusal to provide intelligence led to the police spreading false rumours and trying to smear him and his organisation.⁸*

Prevent needs to be understood as just one facet of a whole control nexus that, despite Prevent’s demise, still surrounds young Muslims. While its seeming

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replacement, the National Citizenship Service (NCS), does not seem to have the same overt capacity for surveillance, many young Muslims that might take part, given legislation of the recent past and other social legislative control that seems to apply more specifically to them than other groups, will (or perhaps should) enter into this unguarded. Article 2 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that,

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion.

Prevent did not reach Muslim youth in a way designed to redirect them from the possibilities of radicalisation. The government could do more to combat violent extremism by addressing the very issues that young Muslims are facing, such as education and the high rate of unemployment, but these are not issues that the NCS has the capacity to deal with in any meaningful way. There is also a need to address foreign policy, which gives the impression that Britain is against the Muslim states and only wants to follow the example of the USA; for many young Muslims (and non-Muslims) we are not living in an independent nation at all, but a sort of client/servant relationship with a monolithic, but increasingly cumbersome international bully state. Is it surprising if anyone might be alienated from such a marriage of inconvenience?

I have had discussions with non Muslims who feel that Muslims need to stop using foreign policy as an excuse and look within their own communities. I would tend to agree and disagree, as I also feel that the Muslim community, and all communities, need to unite and stand against oppression. Unfortunately with former leaders such as Hosnei Mubarak of Egypt and the Saudi Princes, there has been little chance of this. Although the events of the first part of 2011 might signal hope in this direction, these two countries have been true examples of yielding to the worst of modern Western colonialism and as such remain colonial states. This is an example of the frustration that young Muslims face; the West will talk to dictators but will not talk to the democratically elected Hamas in Gaza. There are two potential consequences of this as Fanon (1965 and 1967) observed; the outcome of colonial relations for the colonised are disaffection and/or apathy.

Young people in general often find themselves subjected to discrimination on many fronts but discrimination is generated socially and as such something that needs to be degenerated, not on only an individual and legislative basis, but on a social scale. If we are not to create groups of people who feel outside society, who are made to feel like permanent 'suspects' by implication, with no stake or interest in society, our social activity needs to be of an inclusive nature. It seems society, schools, local authorities, professionals and the policy makers are far too quick to make rules and policy without consulting young people. Of course, some decisions need to be made based on facts and long term development and sometimes young people have not reached that specific time in their life where they can make certain

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decisions. However the restrictions and pressures that are placed on them are not entirely fair.

Terrorism laws are used effectively to terrorise while legislation aimed at combating drugs, knife and gun crime, which in reality are applicable only to a small section of young people, impact on the majority and do more to alienate them from the adult world than anything else. How is it fair to treat all young people as if they all, and not just a minority, are potentially criminal? Is this the shameful result of us not really knowing our young people? They walk the streets (and will do even more so following the massive cut backs in the youth service from 2011) largely as an anonymous threatening presence, rather than the vibrant hope they could be. Prevent and the consequences of the poorly conceived and clumsily delivered terrorist laws provide examples of how we socially and negatively categorise young people. If we are to harness the hope of young people, all our young people, we need to stop this and begin to know them personally, as people, not religious, age or racial categories, who are understood as more or less threatening or dangerous according to the category they are placed in. This depersonalisation has a huge cost for them and the whole of our society, perhaps the world.

NOTES

- ¹ The official name of the United Kingdom's Counter-Terrorism Strategy
- ² Reading Muslim PVE Crisis Group - <http://pvecrisisgroup.com>
- ³ Khalida Khan (2009) *An-Nisa Society Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) & Prevent*.
- ⁴ *Britain: Government anti-terrorism strategy 'spies' on innocent*. Data on politics, sexual activity and religion gathered by UK government by Vikram Dodd <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=15722> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/oct/16/anti-terrorism-strategy-spies-innocents>
- ⁵ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcomloc/65/6506.htm>
- ⁶ *91. The Youth Parliament witnesses criticised the lack of opportunities for truly 'democratic' engagement for young people* <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcomloc/65/6506.htm>
- ⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/5251053/Police-accused-of-abusing-powers-as-anti-terrorism-stop-and-searches-treble.html>
- ⁸ <http://pvecrisisgroup.com/2009/10/17/government-anti-terrorism-strategy-spies-on-innocent/>

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