# The scope and limits of combatting violent extremism in the United Kingdom

## El alcance y los límites de la lucha contra el extremismo violento en el Reino Unido

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**Abstract**: This article situates the debate on the United Kingdom's Prevent policy in the broader framework of the global paradigm for countering violent extremism (CVE), which appeared at the end of 2015. It argues that omission of a nuanced focus on the social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics of radicalised people has led to a tendency to introduce blanket measures which, inadvertently and indirectly, have had harmful results. Moreover, although Prevent has been the fundamental element of the British government's counterterrorist strategy since 2006, it confuses legitimate political resistance of young British Muslims with signs of violent extremism, thus giving credence to the argument that Prevent is a form of social engineering which, in the last instance, *pacifies* resistance by reaffirming the status quo in the country's domestic and foreign policy.

**Key words**: radicalisation, combatting violent extremism, islamophobia, Prevent policy, United Kingdom

**Resumen**: *Este artículo sitúa el debate sobre la política Prevent del Reino Unido en el marco más amplio del paradigma global de lucha para combatir el extremismo violento (CEV) que surgió a finales de 2015. Se argumenta que la omisión de un enfoque matizado sobre las características sociales, culturales, económicas y políticas de las personas radicalizadas ha acarreado una tendencia a introducir medidas generalizadas que inadvertida e indirectamente conducen a resultados perjudiciales. Es más, a pesar de que Prevent ha sido el elemento fundamental de la estrategia antiterrorista del Gobierno británico desde 2006, esta política confunde la resistencia política legítima de los jóvenes musulmanes británicos con indicios de extremismo violento, lo que da credibilidad al argumento de que Prevent es una forma de ingeniería social que, en última instancia,* pacifica *la resistencia por medio de la reafirmación del statu quo en la política interior y exterior del país.*

**Palabras clave**: *radicalización, lucha contra el extremismo violento, islamofobia, la política Prevent, Reino Unido*

Given the problems of terrorism, it is inevitable that counterterrorism legislation needs to be implemented. However, what is the concern over freedom and liberty when certain legislation directly affects ordinary citizens? What are the implications for human rights in particular? How do the actions of terrorists create pressures on human rights? The need to eliminate terrorism is important, but how have the policies introduced to limit radicalisation, which is seen as a precursor to radicalisation, worked in reality? How have the recently developed global paradigms for countering violent extremism (CVE) affected the policies of limiting terrorism and political violence? Have governments taken the wrong approach to deradicalisation by focusing on moderating groups instead of focusing on the structural determinants? What is the nature of the politicisation of the CVE paradigm? If terrorism is such a difficult concept to define, does this also apply to radicalisation and therefore deradicalisation? While this topic raises numerous questions, this discusses appreciate the nature of the UK Prevent policy and the implications it raises for cohesion in society, situating the Prevent policy debate in the wider framework of the CVE paradigm that emerged in late 2015.

It is argued that in omitting a nuanced approach to the social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics of the radicalised, there is a tendency to introduce blanket measures that inadvertently and indirectly lead to negative outcomes. While Prevent has been the outward-facing component of the UK government's counter-extremism strategy since 2006, it conflates legitimate political resistance among young British Muslims as indications of violent extremism, providing credence to the argument that Prevent is a form of social control, ultimately mollify resistance by re-affirming the status quo on domestic and foreign policy. In this vicious circle, Prevent adds to *structural* and *cultural* Islamophobia, which are amplifiers of both Islamist as well as far right radicalisation (Abbas, 2019b). 'Safeguarding' vulnerable young people is imperative in this social policy, but the language of inclusion is absent.

# New challenges without new solutions

The events of 9/11 and subsequent instances of terrorism and violent extremism linked to Islamic radicalism across the world, especially during the period of the rise and fall of the Islamic State, have created new challenges without obvious answers. Since the 2015 United Nations General Assembly[1], numerous

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1. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly 70/109 "A world against violence and violent extremism". See: https://undocs.org/es/A/RES/70/109

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governments have introduced the CVE policy paradigm to prevent, disrupt, or generate a counter-narrative to avert, intervene, or build community resilience against further instances of violent extremism. As the concept's reach has grown, this CVE policy, known as Prevent in the UK, aims to protect against 'would-be terrorists' based on various assumptions about the sociological, psychological or behavioural characteristics of the 'radicalised' (Coppock and McGovern, 2014). However, Prevent is not without its critics in academia, the education sector or civil society groups. The UK government, however, with countering violent extremism policy led by the Home Office, remains steadfast in rolling out Prevent, including introducing the Prevent Duty in 2015 to cover a whole host of public sector organisations, in particular in education and health (Blackbourn and Walker, 2016). It is now law for these and other public sector bodies to ensure they tackle the threats of violent extremism, including reporting on visible differences in appearance among young people, as it is regarded as an indication of radicalisation. However, the policy limits opportunities for building trust and engagement. It

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gives succour to far right extremist movements that grow from how the policy prioritises Muslim groups. It also adds to Islamophobia, both a consequence *and* a driver of further hate, intolerance, and violent extremism, all of which will be discussed below.

In discussing UK CVE in general and Prevent in particular, the sociological, political, and cultural limits of the paradigm can be seen through a left-realist perspective. The theory originated in the 1970s, at a time of rapid economic transformation as a result of de-industrialisation, globalisation and technological change, with the working class and ethnic minority groups facing the brunt of the decline (Young, 1999), which also affected hegemonic masculinity (Dekeseredy and Schwartz, 2010), through which male violence emerged as an ecological consequence. This formulation of perspectives helps gauge perspectives on Prevent within the wider global CVE paradigm, and the repercussions raised for critical criminology research in this area. In deconstructing these responses, new ways of addressing violent extremism (VE) must concentrate energies on localised interventions and engagements, depoliticising the Prevent and CVE concepts in the process. The problems are local, as are the solutions. Hence, programmatic directives should not define the policy approach from above, but rather through the aspirations of communities in specific localities in the wider struggle against radicalisation from below. It will be argued that British Muslim

communities, moreover, need to take greater ownership of both the problem of *and* the solutions to violent extremism – not because Muslims and Islam are the cause of the malaise – but, rather, in the absence of the UK government efforts to empower communities, these groups have only themselves to rely on. This is an uneasy task in the current climate of the general disconnect between British Muslims and the state (Abbas, 2019a).

## "A Muslim paranoia narrative"

From early 2015 to late 2017, Islamic State carried out numerous acts of VE and terrorism across the world and in the West in particular (including three in four months in the UK in early 2017 (Vidino et al., 2017). The history of 'war on terror' deradicalisation is of policymakers concentrating on religion *and* ideology as both the cause of *and* solution to violent extremism. In the case of Muslim groups, the aim is to resolve problematic religiosity by replacing it with a moderate or a liberal Islam, while in the process instrumentalising proxy actors drawn from Muslim communities. It includes those who have turned away from Islamic extremism or regressive Islamism, now embracing a post-modern renaissance as so-called enlightened individuals. The focus on counter-terrorism is to dismantle the mechanics involved in plots, but much of the ideological perspectives on the drivers and solutions to terrorism have fixated on Islam. The reality is to securitise diversity, focusing on deradicalisation based on the notion that individuals move from low-level to vociferous radicalisation and, eventually, to violence and extremism (Abbas, 2011).

However, radicalisers, in reality, mobilise young people attracted to unifying concepts, presented as empowering groups through a holistically conceptualised notion of collective identity that transcends national borders. By portraying their aims as addressing the wrongs that emerge out of the post-war periods of migration and settlement of various Muslim minority groups hailing from lands once under colonial rule, radicalisers focus on racism, inequality, social division and the collapse of multiculturalism or respect for differences in society. However, extremism is a symptom, not a cause of instabilities, insecurities, and patterns of anomie experienced by various groups. Here, religion is a convenient umbrella – a suitable instrument of mobilisation. It is not the first point of departure in determining radicalisation or violent extremism, especially in the diasporic context, although, given the limited approach taken by the UK government, Muslim-owned and led deradicalisation initiatives that do not use the language of CVE but offer routes to self-empowerment provide greater assistance (Abbas, 2019b).

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Since its inception, Prevent has encountered various levels of criticism from actors arguing that its agenda is counterproductive and divisive (Archer, 2009). In 2011, the UK government reviewed its CONTEST (counterterrorism) strategy. This reassessment considered countering ideology central in the battle against terrorism. Moreover, the legal remit of Prevent expanded to emphasise its work alongside different agencies, including health, education, and social services. A youth element also became a feature of the policy content. Therefore, the UK government widened its counterterrorism strategy to target not just terrorism, but also ideology (Richards, 2011). Consequently, Prevent re-emphasised the dominant notion of individuals necessarily being on a direct path towards violent extremism as the primary problematic, even though it identified a significant conflation between social cohesion and counterterrorism. It has led to charges of exclusivism, not inclusivism, and the fostering of existing divisions (Edwards, 2016). The review of CONTEST created two implications for policy. First, the importance of building resilience among communities confronted with radical Islamist extremist narratives. Second, the realisation

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of a specific policing, security and intelligence mandate to engage in overt and covert counterterrorism measures, to establish counter-narrative schemes as part of the communication and information battle, and to mitigate the nervousness among government and communities generated by its dissemination. The latter also included the significance of building community trust in policing authorities tasked with targeting areas of high Muslim residential concentration and other measures associated with risks of radicalisation once connected with a Prevent funding model that allocated budgets based on residential concentration levels of British Muslims (Awan, 2011).

The toxicity of the Prevent brand is palpable. The 'at risk' versus 'risky' dichotomy blurs ambiguous lines given the politicisation of radicalisation from above, the consequences of placing too great an emphasis on 'Muslimness' (Heath-Kelly, 2017) and the structural determinants of radicalisation from below. In a paradoxical development, the removal of ethnic inequalities from the mainstream discourse of diversity and difference sees ethnic and religious differences given specific weight in the counterterrorism domain (Lewis and Craig, 2014). Efforts to clarify the separation between social cohesion and counterterrorism add to confusion among politicians and civil servants. It intensifies the atmosphere of alarmism towards British Muslims, fanning the flames of far right sentiment based on anti-immigration, anti-religion, and anti-multiculturalism conceptualisations

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– a 'Muslim paranoia narrative' (Aistrope, 2016). A hostile media and political discourse fashions these conditions, deepening and widening the realities of Islamophobia in the process. It leads to levels of violence against Muslims that spike after incidents of terrorism across the world (Awan and Zempi, 2016). In a charged and toxic atmosphere, relations between the state and British Muslim communities are restricted, reduced to a top-down system of design and delivery understood as ideological in design and implementation (Thomas, 2012).

## A policy *cul-de-sac*

The main concern with Prevent is the mentoring system known as Channel. Once an individual is referred, Channel implements a one-to-one methodology that works with vulnerable young people to educate, motivate, and inspire them away from paths towards violent extremism. The UK government argues that this system has prevented several young people from joining the Islamic State as foreign fighters. However, it is unable to permit access to original case files or even anonymised case material regarding particular individuals or groups. The Channel model is of interest to other counterterrorism agencies across the world, including in France and Germany, with Denmark promoting its unique mentoring approach, known as the Danish 'Aarhus model' (Bertelsen, 2015). However, whether mentoring alone is the dominating enabler or if a particular mechanism associated with deradicalisation from Islamist extremism emerges due to Channel or other similar systems remains unclear. Dealing with terrorism and political violence requires introducing complex research questions to generate effective policy interventions.

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With so many disparaging voices on the UK government's counter-extremism approach, Prevent endures immense discussion in a charged intellectual, policy and community space. Ongoing concerns relate to impact and effectiveness, but disagreements over the viability of the Prevent policy agenda also remain. The dominant hegemonic discourse in government policy thinking is to centre on specific interventions regarding British Muslims, in the process alienating a body of people unable to engage in the political process. For groups without the ability to be the interlocutor that the government encourages, it raises the prospect of 'policed multiculturalism' (Ragazzi, 2016). With a persistent gaze on Muslims

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as associated with terrorism and radicalism, they are largely hesitant about government attempts to engage with groups through this lens of CVE (Abbas, 2021). However, with different groups signalling their interests, the Prevent discourse is the centrifugal force underpinning these counter-competing voices.

The negative discourse on religion in society, in particular among Muslim communities in the West, has a profound effect on stigmatising communities. First, it creates the impression that Muslim communities are homogenous, powerless and unable to organise themselves against violent extremism. It takes away their agency and narrows the lens through which state-community relations take shape. It causes groups encountering various internal ethnic, sectarian, and cultural divisions to become further disengaged. It also raises suspicions that governments are only interested in a type of liberal Islam, which is pro-integration; one based on values and nurturing identities, rather than the structural realities affecting all marginalised communities. Second, the narratives of exclusion and victimisation are powerful within the wider context of Muslim communities in the process of integrating into society. Much evidence supports claims of exclusion and disadvantage, but it is ignored or relegated to the bottom of the pecking order of social policy priorities, even when it is apparent radicalisers routinely instrumentalise it in their recruitment of would-be jihadis. This discourse on the 'left behind' also concerns the aspirations of former white working-class communities suffering downward social mobility.

Many Muslim groups who came to the West, particularly to Western Europe as part of a post-war migration process, now existing as third and fourth generations, also experience instances of economic and cultural alienation. Dominant state actors draw attention to cultural questions within communities concerning such issues as the treatment of women, female genital mutilation, or grooming of vulnerable young women. It further distances a body of people looking to the state for answers to structural struggles they suffer as communities within neighbourhoods. Analysis of social media from the Islamic State challenges the assumption that religious narratives encourage vulnerable young people to turn to violent Islamist radicalisation to generate answers to their worldly exertions. Less than ten per cent of its output referred to religion alone (Schuurman et al., 2016). Rather, the likes of Islamic State focused on grievances, which are rooted in the experience of Muslims in the West and the East. With relative ease, it permits radicalisers to play on the injustices of racism and exclusion, vilification in the media, political marginalisation, and cultural isolation. The present approach to Prevent/CVE, especially in the UK and in other parts of Western Europe, runs the risk of reproducing the very outcomes it wishes to counter.

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In understanding the drivers of VE among Muslim communities, and of former white working-class communities who turn to far right extremism, the symbiotic effects of culture and structure, in addition to the psychological dimensions, generate a systematic understanding of relations between the individual, communities and of wider society (Abbas, 2019b). Differences of opinion emerge between state actors and the wider communities, resulting in politicisation and polarisation, not always prevention or protection. In the midst of discernible identity claims based on a sense of belonging and the need for participation, acute issues face British Muslim groups in the current period. It indicates institutionalised Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiment, which has surfaced as problematic outcomes of the failed 'war on terror' and the global 'war on terror culture' that has ensued ever since. Moreover, terrorism has not abated.

From August 2014 to December 2017, when Islamic State declared itself as the caliphate, over fifty acts of terrorism across the world were carried out, with Western Europe and North America on the receiving end of many of these attacks. No single profile identifies the archetypical terrorist. Rather, perpetrators are from diverse backgrounds, many of whom with numerous social, economic and cultural apprehensions over their existence as Western Muslims.

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The unmistakable characteristic is that all of the British assailants implicated in acts of violent extremism, radicalisation, or terrorism are products of British society (O' Donnell, 2015). Yet, somehow, policymakers struggle to profile the 'potential violent extremist'. As governments endeavour to promote the notion that vulnerable young people are at risk of radicalisation, subsequently committing acts of VE, it stigmatises an entire group, and disregards instances of political resistance, turning it into *pre-violent extremist criminal thought*, which is policed and securitised, including the silencing of legitimate dissent or criticism.

Contemporary radicalisations are the reality of global issues with local reach. Radicalisers know that their recruitment strategies fill a vacuum, as local leaders are unable to address the concerns of the disaffected young, where much of radicalisation also reflects on youth rebellion. Broad policy measures advance to a concentration on a narrow range, adding to distrust, and disproportionality. It yields negative consequences due to a heavy-handed, universally directed approach that casts the net far too wide. With increasing numbers of young Muslims vulnerable to extremism, it is notable that all were born since the onset of the global 'war on terror'.

# Still shooting in the wind

Education is an essential vehicle for change, but education is increasingly securitised. In the process, it stigmatises existing isolated individuals, especially in schools and in higher education (Qureshi, 2015). Prisons are another area of critical research, as they are networking and learning opportunities, as well as spaces targeted by the radicalisers. Overcrowding and pre-trial detention spaces are also crucial issues. Those coming out of prisons endure implications for education and employment training. In these spaces, a consensus is emerging, but gaps remain in understanding the subtleties of CVE strategies and if they have any impact at all. This omission includes intervention and rehabilitation – i.e. detection, recruitment, assessment and evaluation, all involving many layers and levers, including schools, counter-narratives and the pre-criminal space. The concentration on the broad rather than the narrow is the main problem, where the broad refers to wider public-focused elements and the narrow refers to ideology. Ideology is the tipping point. It takes in young people and it is through debunking ideology that they return to normalcy, but it is separate from religiosity (Dawson, and Amarasingam, 2017).

> As with other countries confronting the threats of VE from groups of a radical Islamist or far right character, the often-complex but perennial question is how to achieve the balance between individual freedoms and national security.

While counterterrorism is the notion of an overarching framework that seeks to create a set of policies and interventions that deal with terrorism through active counter-narratives, as well as operational matters of security, policing, and intelligence, counter-extremism is the notion of building community resilience and capability to defend and counteract problematic characteristics affecting threats to national security. Young individuals in the process of donning a hijab or showing attitudinal changes towards specific norms and values, once regarded as an acceptable reality of multiculturalism in the recent past, now face extensive objectification. But the lack of public engagement about Prevent by the UK government creates disengagement on the part of the public concerning the state. For Muslim communities who shoulder acute trials regarding their visibility and their negative representation in media and politics, in particular for women, additional fears arise (Zempi and Chakraborti, 2014). In turn, voices who have little or no opposition or engagement from government or mainstream media fill the anti-Prevent vacuum.

As with other countries confronting the threats of VE from groups of a radical Islamist or far right character, the often-complex but perennial question is how to achieve the balance between individual freedoms and national security. An

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effort is required to decouple the idea that radicalisation is always a security risk or that radicalisation will necessarily lead to violence or terrorism. The net result is a 'disconnected citizenship', further alienating religious and ethnic minority groups facing the toxic penalties of an enduring gaze upon them (Jarvis and Lister, 2012). In reality, polarisation poses a greater threat than radicalisation, pitching indigenous minority and majority groups against each other. It results in ideological, cultural, and political conflict rather than violent extremism or terrorism. The family is also crucial, although it is necessary to ensure that attention placed on the family does not promote the 'suspect community' paradigm (Spalek, 2016).

In reality, far right groups are increasingly committing acts of terrorism relative to their violent Islamist counterparts (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020). The impact of the dysfunctionality of the Prevent programme leads to a breakdown in trust, limiting the opportunities for engagement. However, the power of the state to define the problem *and* the solution is a limited means of policy development, becoming an issue of authoritarian control rather than a social policy seeking to alleviate a problem grasped in collective terms. Further questions on Prevent concern social and political contextualisation, measurement and evaluation, and the implications of wider counterterrorism policy. One type of violent extremism should not be a political or policy priority over other kinds, given the range, extent, and impact of within-group violent extremisms. Questions also remain as to whether British citizens are safer due to Prevent. If the risk of violent extremism remains, does it mean that the policy has thus far been unable to deliver on its stated goals?

It is discomforting that these questions remain unanswered, especially as Prevent is the brand that the UK exports to the wider CVE world as a flagship model as well as how it affects British Muslim-state relations in such discernible terms.

## Unanswered questions

Since 2010, the UK government has shut out from its policies the Muslim Council of Britain, the largest and most influential British Muslim umbrella group. It suggests British Muslim communities have to organise themselves in response to Islamophobia and radicalisation from below. In this self-organisation, British Muslims are required to take the lead in tackling both Islamophobia and radicalisation, not because they are specific Muslim problems, but rather the state is incapable or unwilling to address precise issues. This is especially as current undertakings by the UK government to enhance existing counterterrorism legislation have led to accusations of a 'pre-crime' agenda

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(Altermark and Nilsson, 2018). Much involves behind-the-scenes operations, but the tremendous pressure to produce tangible deliverables leads to an extensive politicisation of radicalisation, fuelling existing misunderstandings, granting a licence to gross generalisations. Effective intervention needs to be sensitive to the background of every individual to understand where best to introduce the intervention. It also means the depoliticisation of Prevent, especially when the approach conflates activism with extremism (Lowe, 2017). A left-realist critical criminological perspective suggests room for de-radicalisation programmes, but it needs to be community-owned and led, which means that the present top-down system of selection and processing of individuals for referrals needs to be democratic, open, and transparent.

British Muslims are under pressure because of the limitations to government domestic and foreign policy, but Prevent has the consequence of widening divisions and creating further mistrust. The foremost impediment with the top-down Prevent policy is that it is devoid of any real input from the Muslim communities affected by it, apart from predetermined interlocutors straddling divergent communities. The other issue with Prevent is the

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assumption that Islamist terrorism is akin to religious interpretation. It is a useful ruse on the part of commentators and policymakers as it takes attention away from the wider workings of society, including aspects of institutional, structural, and cultural racism, which derives from as well as leads to further Islamophobia. Terrorism is about the impact of the deed as a message of defiance of the voiceless; those left behind by the democratic process, those most pushed down by the workings of society, and those identified as having the least to offer the rest of society.

The decline in public services since austerity 2010 has plagued Britain. It led the UK government to take a direct focus to a particular reading of the *problem* and the *solution*, taking matters back to a time when the general perspective on Islam and Muslims, specifically in the aftermath of the events of 9/11 and 7/7, was negatively focused on religion, culture and identity. The emergence of reactionary and dogmatic policies and programmes, demonising and vilifying a community of communities, shifts the attention away from realistic checks on liberal democracies in the current era, projecting these concerns onto some of the most exposed and vulnerable groups in society. A sense of persecution of a global faith community at the hands of supra-national interests in different parts of the world further blights the judgements of young people with chequered personal histories and troubled lives.

If the focus is only on vulnerabilities, it avoids the stigmatisation directed at entire communities and faith groups. It allows practitioners and policymakers to appreciate the holistic dynamics foremost in understanding and limiting violent extremism. It sanctions different sections of British society to coalesce around themes that embrace the human condition as a collective, avoiding the deleterious consequences of an 'us' and 'them' mentality.

## Enduring criticism

The main reasons for this criticism is that among those resisting it the most, Prevent is thought to be strict surveillance-, policing- and securitising-driven initiative with the explicit aim of locating all of the issues to the paths that lead to violent extremism firmly within the domain of British Muslim communities and the religion of Islam. Across the social science academy, there is a firm belief that Prevent is disingenuous at best (Kundnani, 2011). At worst, it is potentially further worsening community trust in the institutions of the state. However, while there is considerable heat on the topic, there is little or no independent evaluation or assessment of the Prevent initiative, whether as a policy instrument, operating out of the centre, or as a local area experience.

There is no doubt that the Prevent brand is toxic. However, a particular issue is that there is very little or no response on the part of the government to defend Prevent. If government ministers were able to speak freely on the question of the success or otherwise of Prevent, several developments to confidence and trust of the policy could appear. There is certainly a sense that the perceptions are far greater than the reality, but it is important to note that Prevent is not a singular concept. There are different types of modes of engagement while the dominant perspective is that referrals are what tend to occur most of the time. There is no blanket approach as such, while great efforts are made to ensure proportionality. However, the criticism is that it is too big in its reach and capacity to include a wide segment of the population, some of whom are only associated with the idea of radical Islamism because of a general tendency of conservatism based on faith traditions. Alternatively, it is too small because it is not working hard enough to catch more vulnerable people who are increasingly searching for the capacity to enter into the theatre of violent extremism. There is also particular rhetoric among senior parliamentarians that the Prevent policy is working sufficiently and given the levels of security and confidentiality associated with the material under scrutiny, it is impossible to permit much of the behind-the-science data to enter into the public domain. What this does is to create an information dissemination vacuum which is

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ultimately filled by more critical voices within certain sections of the media as well as social media, organised individually or collectively as part of efforts to debunk Prevent as a form of mass state surveillance.

Despite the public and private outcry, the vast number of cases, professionals and practitioners working in this area are getting on with the business of improving and delivering Prevent policy because, in the absence of an alternative, there is no alternative to doing nothing at all. At the same time, in the absence of a substitute to the Prevent policy, critics in the academy or among civil society organisations are unable to demonstrate a substitute for what is a pressing concern for national security. With all the implications for how minorities are seen in society in more general terms, the irony is that by removing the space that has been created by Prevent, there is likely to be greater securitisation of Muslim communities, not less. That is, the harder counterterrorism framework will take over the space that is left. Opportunities to pursue more community-engaged processes would be eliminated ultimately. This is especially important to take into consideration given that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has seemingly disappeared from the space for community engagement as the front-facing aspect of counter-terrorism policy (as might have been part of government thinking and policy a decade or so ago). It is left to the Home Office, traditionally the home of policing and security, to take over this area. With the removal of Prevent altogether, there could be even further dominance by the Home Office. The policy of 'community cohesion', which was a legacy of antiracism, race equality, and multiculturalism thinking until the time of the events of 9/11, has completely disappeared. The space created by Prevent has been to not just only work with the harder end of counter-terrorism at one end of the spectrum but also reach right into the community to work directly with vulnerable individuals to safeguard and protect them and society from the threats and realities of VE. Because of austerity and the failure of such notions of the *Big Society*[2], MHCLG no longer has such a role to play (Abbas, 2019b).

While there are problems with Prevent, there are also concerns with the ideas put forward by those who oppose it. For example, many discuss the successes of the Aarhus model. However, if one looks at the details of the model, is it is no more than a variation of Channel, focusing in particular on mentoring. Undoubtedly, there is a certain body of young men and women who engage in Islamic radicalism and violent extremism from underprivileged backgrounds, where the wider experience has been alienation, perhaps mental illness, and issues of criminality in several cases

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2. Note from the editor: For more information, see: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-10680062

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relating to convicted terrorists and those known to have taken part in the so-called Islamic State, for example. However, a significant number of people with similar backgrounds enter gangs and engage in violent crime. Some are involved in child sexual exploitation or part of organised international and national crime. Therefore, in this respect, one cannot rest on the notion that VE can be entirely explained away as a function of disenfranchisement and marginalisation when there are other individual and group factors determining extremism and violence of religious or ideological nature that need to be taken into consideration.

When a young individual is in the process of donning a hijab or showing certain attitudinal changes towards certain norms and values that would have been regarded as acceptable in the recent past suddenly decides to withdraw altogether from their peer groups, it suggests that something far more complex is perhaps going on. This is where Prevent is supposed to come into its element as an assessment tool, separating considerate social behaviour from actions that reflect a potentially more problematic outcome. No policy is perfect, as any history of social policy would inform. It is no surprise that professionals working within the framework of supporting the delivery of Prevent policy in their local areas regard Prevent as imperfect, needing revision, restructuring, rebranding and perhaps even re-rationalisation in the light of greater thinking and understanding in this area. However, the lack of public engagement on the part of UK HMG about Prevent creates mistrust, distrust, and disengagement on the part of the public concerning the state, and especially for Muslim communities, which face particularly acute challenges regarding their visibility and their negative representation in media and politics. The vacuum is subsequently filled by the critical voices who have no opposition or critical engagement from the government, the academy, or the mainstream media.

## Concluding thoughts

When it comes to CVE as a strategy or as an agenda, one has to make a clear distinction between experiences in the East and the West. In the eastern part of the world, development, corruption, despotism, and militarism have convoluted the issues in a significant way. In the West, issues of minority status, anomie and questions of identity politics are distinct issues. Therefore, in terms of attempting to identify a grand unifying concept that helps to present a generalisable CVE model, one has to take into consideration the psychological level, where there is the intersection between the push and the pull factors, an area of research that remains untested. If one is interested in the empowerment of local changemakers at the

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local area level, this requires far more political ownership than the current state of play suggests.

CVE is useful because it focuses attention on a certain team but the agendas might be very different: namely peacebuilding; security and counterterrorism; integration, assimilation, and social cohesion; de-radicalisation and re-radicalisation; and development. There is also the difference between preventing violent extremism and countering violent extremism (PVE and CVE), with the former refers to getting into the communities before the issues emerge. Context remains important whichever part of the world is of interest. The realities of the social and political environment are important to take into consideration for governments but also in the academy. Moreover, the social and political may not be enough. It may well be more question of the psychological, where there is the question of humiliation, based on injustices and grievances.

That is what one recognises as a moving terrain, from the geopolitical and national level and at the community and neighbourhood level, the latter affecting families. Perhaps it is therefore an idea to omit a discussion of CVE and revert to peace and security. This will take attention away from an

**Overcoming the issues of structural cultural and economic marginalisation facing Islamist and far-right groups are given minimal attention, leading to the entrenchment of many of the social pressures that face groups, some of which are a direct inroad into patterns of extremism and violence.**

'us' and 'them', for which Prevent is also somewhat responsible. A distorted focus on CVE and Prevent has numerous adverse effects, including isolating, homogenising and essentialising Muslim groups. It also means governments and communities have nothing to talk about, except liberalising Islam to motivate others to engage in VE by exploiting grievances. This seems to be an omitted area of social research because it is beyond the scope of much of CVE, resulting in it becoming a straitjacket VE to a reducible concept at the level of religion and identity. Research and policy thinking on VE needs to return a focus on individuals and communities in context to ensure fair, just and specific social change and programme outcomes.

In these circumstances, Prevent can unintentionally add to structural and cultural Islamophobia, which are amplifiers of both Islamist and far right radicalisation. 'Safeguarding' vulnerable young people is imperative in this social policy domain, but the language of inclusion in this is absent. Overcoming the issues of structural cultural and economic marginalisation facing Islamist and far-right groups are given minimal attention, leading to the entrenchment of many of the social pressures that face groups, some of which are a direct inroad into patterns of extremism and violence. The wider

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political landscape in which this policy development has occurred has also seen a shift towards authoritarian populism and majoritarian nationalism, which is leading to greater issues of polarisation, intolerance, and xenophobia across all sections of British society.

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