Do the Roots of Violent Radicalisation Lie Where The UK Government Suspects They Do?
Written by Jack Holland

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In February I was asked to appear on the Islam Channel's 'Politics and Media' discussion programme to discuss the British Government's counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) and particular elements of it (PREVENT). In particular, we looked at the recently published Home Affairs Select Committee report, which assesses Prevent in light of some of the major criticisms it has received. Here, I recap some of my own concerns with the Prevent Strategy, before assessing the findings of the 2012 Home Affairs Select Committee report, 'Roots of Violent Radicalisation'. Rather than simply highlight the strategy's limitations, I offer a series of concrete steps that could be taken to improve PREVENT.

PREVENT: Wrong, Dangerous and Undemocratic

To be blunt, the Government's updated counter-terrorism strategy 'Prevent' is a muddled mess. To start with, the document is riddled with tensions and contradictions. For instance, Bin Laden's name is spelt in two different ways within the first three pages. More worryingly, despite claiming repeatedly to not be about Muslims or Islam, the new strategy repeatedly emphasises the exceptional nature of the threat from Al Qaeda and radical Islam. Equally problematically, Prevent is also based on a flawed view of the 'process' of radicalisation. The government should take note of 'academic' insights. There is no such thing as an objective, uniform and systematic transition from non-radicalised to radicalised to terrorist. There is no identifiable, quantifiable and therefore preventable 'process'. Radicalisation occurs in a number of ways, in a number of contexts, for a number of reasons. The 'conveyor belt' theory of radicalisation, around which the strategy is devised, as an individual supposedly moves through a number of pre-determined phases, has long been discredited.

Assuming that a lack of respect for 'mainstream British values' increases the chances that an individual may be radicalised is not only wrong, but also hypocritical, dangerous and undemocratic. First, such 'values', far from being fundamental to a sense of 'Britishness', are in fact fluid, contested constructions, as they should be. Second, revering the armed forces and military populism might be seen as 'mainstream British values'. David Cameron's calls in Munich for a more 'muscular liberalism' – defending 'western values' at home and promoting them abroad – attempts to establish universalism (a belief that our values apply everywhere) and interventionism (a belief that where our values are not shared they can be imposed) as 'mainstream British values'. These are not values that all Britons share and nor should they be. Those who oppose them are no more inclined to 'radicalisation' and terrorism. Because of the hypocritical and dangerous language of 'mainstream British values,' however, opponents of such policies are more likely to be marked out as un-British, anti-British and/or a potential threat to such values. The result is that oppositional voices are more inclined to silence when confronted with the narratives of national identity (see work by Ron Krebs, Janice Mattern and myself). By talking in the language of British values, Prevent makes it harder for citizens to voice concerns and alternatives to policies they oppose. Dialogue and debate are central to a functioning, healthy democracy. The government's revised counter-terrorism strategy stifles both: it damages our democracy, without making us any safer.

So what should the Government do?

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The government should:

Not exceptionalise the 'Islamic' threat.

Despite claiming to not be about Muslims or the Islamic faith, Prevent repeatedly asserts that the greatest threats facing the United Kingdom come from Al Qaeda and radical Islam. This is false and is based on a narrow, ahistorical understanding of terrorism. It creates a false image of a community that is seen to be more inherently vulnerable to terrorist temptations.

Not treat terrorism as an exceptional form of violence.

By treating terrorism as an exceptional form of violence, the government naturalises exceptional forms of response and risks missing other important acts of violence. Existing legislation is able to cope with terrorist violence in the vast majority of cases.

Not focus on extremism rather than violent extremism.

Is Pacifism an extreme position to take? Is a belief in a woman's right to choose? Or a belief that Israel has the right to defend itself? In the government's new counter-terrorism strategy such questions matter, because Prevent deliberately fails to distinguish between extremism and violent extremism. In a functioning democracy it is vital that views are aired, extreme or otherwise. Perhaps the electoral collapse of the BNP after increased media exposure is a useful example of how to democratically defeat extremism. Advocating violence should not be tolerated, but freedom of speech means hearing and contesting all non-violent views, even those that appear extreme or that you do not like.

Not protect a 'way of life' instead of life itself.

By focusing on 'mainstream British values' and the likelihood of radicalisation as a function of proximity to these ideal type morals, the government has shifted the focus of counter-terrorism away from the very thing it should protect: life. Instead, the new focus is on a particular 'way of life', not shared by all Britons and unilaterally dictated from government.

Not be blind to the role of British foreign policy.

In contrast to the emphasis on the Islamic faith and British values, Prevent mentions foreign policy on only four occasions, with one fleeting and oblique reference to Iraq. Rather than recreating unhelpful dichotomies, the government should adopt an inclusive and reflexive logic, which acknowledges that foreign policy can and has played a part in radicalising and alienating Britons, whether Muslim or not. With drawdown in Afghanistan imminent, there is a window of opportunity for such critical self-reflection, which might be used as a basis to move forward.

Why do all of these advisory statements begin with 'not'? Because it is a simple and unfortunate truth that, right now, the government's counter-terrorism strategy is flawed. Prevent is based on outdated and discredited theories of radicalisation, which underpin a hypocritical, dangerous and undemocratic strategy. The risk of these flaws goes beyond failing to protect us. As in Northern Ireland previously, the updated strategy risks making things worse, by perpetuating and exacerbating the problem that current government policy seeks to overcome. These criticisms have not fallen upon deaf ears, but nor have they been fully dealt with. At the start of February, the Home Affairs Select Committee released a report titled 'Roots of Violent Radicalisation', which assesses the updated Prevent strategy in view of some of the criticisms that have been launched against it.

Reviewing Prevent: The Roots of Violent Radicalisation

The focus of the report is the various arenas in which radicalisation is suspected to take place. I use the word 'suspected' because that is precisely what the report makes clear: religious institutions, universities, prisons and the

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internet are places in which we might more clearly be able to witness, identify and observe radicalisation, but there is very little evidence to suggest that any of these forums drive the process of radicalisation.

On the first – religious institutions – the report makes some important progress and should be applauded. Churches, mosques and synagogues are not places of radicalisation. In fact, research has shown that getting communities to participate and engage with such institutions decreases the risk of radicalisation for young people. The media-hyped culture of 'radical clerics', the report suggests, was a passing fad that never warranted the attention it was afforded.

On the second and third – universities and prisons – the report makes some progress but also continues to exhibit worrying tendencies, fueled by misunderstandings of terrorism and radicalisation. 'Roots of Violent Radicalisation' does acknowledge that much uncertainty exists about the role of universities and prisons in processes of radicalisation. "Much of the uncertainty relates to the fact that a number of convicted terrorists have attended prisons and universities, but there is seldom concrete evidence to confirm that this is where they were radicalised" (HASCR, paragraph 38). The report relies on select instances of particularly poor social science, relating to correlation and causation. The relationship between universities and radicalisation is correlative not causative. Getting a degree does not increase your chances of turning to radical violence. Rather, as the report acknowledges, terrorists "tend to be educated to a similar level… as the broader population in which they live" (HASCR, paragraph 27).

Universities and colleges are not places where radicalisation is driven, but rather sites in which radicalisation "may best be identified" (HASCR, paragraph 38). When it does rarely occur, universities can be a useful window through which to view radicalisation, but they are not its engine. What is particularly remarkable is that, despite acknowledging this fact, once stated, the report goes on to *imagine* and stress the *potential* for universities to foster radicalisation, despite the self-professed lack of empirical evidence for such concerns. Similarly, is it really surprising that prison and radicalisation demonstrate a correlative relationship? I would suggest that holding violent extremist views might well land you with a jail term, making it extremely hard to demonstrate that prison causes radicalisation, rather than radicalisation leading directly to a spell in prison. The relationship between prisons and radicalisation is likely far messier and more complex than the report implies.

On the fourth – the Internet – the report makes its largest and potentially most troubling claims. In contrast to universities, prisons and religious institutions, 'Roots of Violent Radicalisation' argues that the Internet is a dangerous site of radicalisation, which requires monitoring and action. Here, the report delivers an array of metaphors to describe the role the Internet plays in the process of radicalisation. It is referred to as a 'feature' and a 'forum', as the report acknowledges that radicalisation usually occurs in private and requires face-to-face contact. This real-world socialisation is almost always essential to ensure the degree of affiliation that violent radicalisation requires. As the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) has reported, there is no evidence to suggest that the Internet plays a *dominant* role in radicalisation. The report is left to note the unremarkable obviousness of the fact that "the internet does seem to feature in most, if not all, of the routes of radicalisation" (HASCR, Q232). It is possible to argue that the internet does seem to feature in most, if not all, aspects of contemporary British life. The internet facilitates, enhances and quickens many things, of which radicalisation might be one. It is not, however, the root cause of the problem. Like universities, prisons and religious institutions, the Internet is a forum in which the problem might be particularly visible.

Visibility is not necessarily a bad thing. The report notes that terrorism arises because of a lack of information, not its excess. Radicalisation occurs where democratic processes have failed and people feel alienated from representatives. Bringing violent extremist arguments into the light usually exposes them for the illogical, incomplete and paranoid ideas they are. Whether you subscribe to a Wikipedia-style model of Habermasian democracy, in which the internet offers the potential for an ideal speech situation leading to truth and optimal policy, or a Foucauldian model of competing discourses, the Internet must be engaged with and allowed to flourish in order to limit the opportunities for and logic of radicalisation. The ICSR have shown that 'pulling the plug' does not work. The limits of state jurisdiction ensure that radical material can easily be hosted through ISPs outside of the UK, over which the British Government has no jurisdiction. Better, is to invest in alternative narratives to those on offer from radical sources. After all, as the report clearly acknowledges, although 'demographically unremarkable', a sense of *grievance* is the one thing that does unite those harbouring radical beliefs. Addressing this grievance and

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recognising it as a political issue that if left unaddressed can inspire political violence is essential to a British counter terrorism strategy. More democracy, dialogue and discussion is the solution, not a draconian and damaging policy of Internet regulation.

The internet has been referred to by police spokesmen as the 'Wild West' of modern terrorism. And yet the language of 'frontier justice' – encircling terrorists, reining them in, calling their hand, smoking them out of their caves, and capturing them Dead or Alive – has been a feature, most notably, not of the internet but, of contemporary Anglo-American foreign policy. The rule of law has ceased to apply most explicitly in the realm of international affairs: of pre-emptive war, drone strikes, rendition and indefinite detention. The Prevent workstream simply does not afford sufficient attention to the issue of British foreign policy. The Home Affairs Select Committee report acknowledges the role that foreign policy, media Islamophobia and police powers in the name of counter-terrorism have all played in the 'process' of radicalisation. And yet there is precious little discussion of them.

What then, should the Government do?

The government should:

Focus exclusively on violent extremism

'Roots of Violent Radicalisation' acknowledges that extremism and violent extremism are two different things. The former, it tells us, is a problem for society at large to deal with, not an issue for counter-terrorism strategy. Discussions of extremism – divorced from violent sentiments – should then, I argue, be left out of the counter-terrorism strategy.

Separate the Roots from the Routes of violent extremism

'Roots of Violent Radicalisation' acknowledges that the 'sites' of radicalisation Prevent discusses are usually routes rather than roots of radicalisation. They are conduits not causes of terrorism. They are places where we might best witness radicalisation, not its cause.

Focus on grievance

An official Congressional report into terrorism once noted that terrorists are usually of average height (FRDLoC, 1999 p.51)! It is extremely difficult to identify any one characteristic that defines terrorists. It is therefore noteworthy that 'Roots of Violent Radicalisation' is able to identify grievance as the one uniting factor for those susceptible to radicalisation. The report even acknowledges the three areas that should form the basis for future policy focus: British foreign policy; xenophobia and discrimination in the media and culture at large; and the role and impact of policing in the name of counter-terrorism.

'Roots of Violent Radicalisation' then has taken steps to address my first recommendation for Prevent. No longer is Islamic terrorism discussed in isolation. The actions of Anders Brievik in Norway have ensured that other 'types' of terrorism are now also on the political agenda. On the others, however, much work remains to be done. Many of the clues are contained within the Home Affairs Select Committee report, but they have not yet made it into a revamped counter-terrorism strategy.

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