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Rehabilitating the Prevent Strategy

Fahid Qurashi

William Shawcross has been appointed by the government as the Independent Reviewer of the Prevent Strategy. The government announced the creation of the Independent Review as part of the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act in 2019. His appointment follows the removal of the previous incumbent in the role, Lord Carlile, following a legal challenge from Rights Watch UK over his suitability for the post given his prior support of the strategy. The original remit of the review included a focus on delivery, implementation, and recommendations for improvement as a means to respond to “justified criticisms and complaints”. Carlile stated that he was interested to hear from “supporters, critics and everyone in between to see the evidence of what is and isn’t working.”

However, with the appointment of Shawcross, the remit of the review has seemingly narrowed to focus only on “the strategy and delivery of the Prevent programme” and “recommendations for the future”. This has been confirmed with the recently published terms of reference that outlines a narrow set of objectives. It suggests that the review will be limited in its scope and will focus on how well Prevent has been integrated into the public sector as part of safeguarding agendas and as a legal duty. Most troubling, a key objective of the review is to find ways to respond to criticisms and complaints – reinforcing concerns that this is a rubber-stamping exercise. Taking his lead from the narrow framing of the review, Shawcross has indicated that he wants to hear from a narrower range of people too, primarily Prevent practitioners, to understand how the strategy works, how well it is working, and how it can be further refined.

From the beginning of this process, there has been no explicit acknowledgement of the deleterious impact the strategy has specifically had on Muslim communities. Instead, the government used colour-blind language to speak of “criticisms and complaints” when Carlile was appointed, and Shawcross used a colour-blind approach in speaking about the need to

protect against “all forms of terrorist influence”.

Yet the reality is that the Prevent strategy has disproportionately targeted Muslims with its focus on ‘Islamist extremism and terrorism’ (which can be evidenced in the Channel referral figures, and the targeting of Prevent funding (Kundnani, 2009) to local authority areas with higher Muslim populations), and Muslim communities and organisations have been its leading critics precisely because it has ensnared them into its web. Calls for an independent inquiry into the Prevent strategy, for example by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, have been based specifically on the grounds that it discriminates against Muslims and therefore has an Islamophobic character. This glaring omission from the remit of the review raises questions about its purpose and focus.

Some have heavily criticised the government for appointing Shawcross to the role, citing his previous role as director of the right wing neoconservative thinktank, the Henry Jackson Society, which has been accused of pushing an Islamophobic agenda. By way of illustration, a former associate director of the thinktank, Douglas Murray, was accused of defending far right organisations such as the English Defence League (they “had a point”), and stated in a 2006 speech entitled ‘What are we to do about Islam?’: “conditions for Muslims in Europe must be made harder across the board”.

Shawcross himself has similar form. As director of the Henry Jackson Society in 2012 he stated, “Europe and Islam is one of the greatest, most terrifying problems of our future. I think all European countries have vastly, very quickly growing Islamic populations” (Grierson and Dodd, 2021). In his book, *Justice and the Enemy*, he appears to support some of the most heinous practices of the ‘War on Terror’, including the use of torture (which he rationalised with reference to the levels of authorisation required to torture a prisoner and the controlled environment in which it took place, and with the absurd notion that the intent of the torture was not to inflict intense pain or to cause lasting physical damage), and the use of offshore prisons such as those at Guantanamo Bay, where torture and abuse have been widespread and prisoners have been held without charge for years (Shawcross, 2012). Furthermore, as Chairman of the Charity Commission, a quarter of the most formal statutory investigations that were initiated in his first two years in the role (2012-2014) were launched against Muslim charity organisations, often on the basis of guilt by association.

On the face of it then, Shawcross appears to be a poor choice to lead an independent inquiry on a strategy that is based on Islamophobic notions about the nature of Muslims and Islam, that has institutionalised a discursive association between Muslims, Islam, extremism, and terrorism in local authorities, in higher education, schools, and the National Health Service with dire consequences for Muslims, and in doing so, has further entrenched the institutionalisation of Islamophobia (Younis and Jadhav, 2019; Qurashi, 2017; Sian, 2013; and Kundnani,

2009). This view, however, can only be sustained if one actually considers the review to be an independent process with a wide ranging remit to look at all of the evidence on the delivery and impact of the strategy.

Instead, Shawcross is a political appointment whose selection was determined by a longer term desire of the government to defend the Prevent Strategy because it functions as a key intelligence gathering tool in Muslim communities and public institutions (Qurashi, 2018). An independent inquiry led by Shawcross affords it a veneer of legitimacy in the face of widespread critique from academics, human rights organisations, and Muslim communities. In 2016, over 140 academics from across the world signed an open letter expressing concern about the implementation of the Prevent Strategy. Over the last few years, a range of organisations have condemned the strategy, including the University & Colleges Union, the National Union of Teachers, Rights Watch UK (2016), and the Open Society Justice Initiative (2016). Then there is the widespread condemnation from Muslim communities, informed by case evidence amassed over years, of the harms of the strategy in schools, colleges, and universities (see Prevent Watch). Since 2015, when the Prevent strategy became a legal duty, its logic has spread into new spaces such as the Muslim home (Fernandez, 2018). Numerous children (some as young as two years old) have been the subject of family court orders and separated from their parents over fears of ‘radicalisation’ and made wards of court or placed into foster care following an interim care order.

The appointment of Shawcross indicates that the government does not take these concerns seriously, which can only serve to further alienate Muslim communities harmed by the strategy, and undermine the credibility of the review.

Detoxifying the Prevent Strategy

Concerns about the Prevent strategy have led, in the words of former Chief Superintendent of the Metropolitan Police, Dal Babu, to the Prevent strategy becoming a ‘toxic brand’, and since at least 2015, the government has made a concerted effort to detoxify its image. These efforts have included a suggestion by the Home Affairs Select Committee to engage in a simple public relations exercise to rebrand the Prevent Strategy to ‘Engage’ (without any amendments to the strategic objectives of the strategy) (HM Government, 2017). Indeed, finding new innovative means of reaching and disseminating the rationale of the Prevent strategy to a broader audience in Muslim communities has been key to government attempts at detoxifying Prevent. Mimicking an earlier practice of linking deradicalization and counter-terrorism with community cohesion (see Husband and Alam, 2011) to achieve greater buy-in from Muslim communities and to enhance the legitimacy of the strategies, local authorities are now linking

deradicalization and counter-terrorism agendas with hate crime agendas. It has given rise to the new term ‘hateful extremism’ coined by the Commission for Countering Extremism (HM Government, 2019). Furthermore, the ‘Building a Stronger Britain Together’ (BSBT) programme, which was created in 2016 as part of the counter-extremism strategy, has been used as a new channel to reach hundreds of civil society organisations for the purposes of tackling extremism.

Before that, following the 2011 Prevent Review, the Home Office charged RICU with identifying credible partners to deliver its narratives as well as developing more professional counter-narratives. The then Home Secretary Theresa May later claimed that RICU had been “road-testing some quite innovative approaches to counter-ideological messages”. These new approaches were informed by counter-insurgency information warfare tactics that relied on deception (Sabir, 2017). One of the companies RICU contracted, Breakthrough Media Network Ltd, produced online videos, social media content, websites, and more, which it then channelled through supposedly independent Muslim civil society organisations as independent grassroots led counter-extremism campaigns to shape perceptions and conversations (Hayes and Qureshi, 2016).

Beyond public relations exercises and deception, the Home Office has engaged in research and evaluation exercises of Prevent projects with narrowly defined terms and tight timeframes to legitimise the strategy. One such research and evaluation exercise from 2016, with a budget of £100,000, invited expressions of interest to evaluate Prevent projects (in 2015 130 such projects existed) in a six-month timeframe (from October 2016 to March 2017). The tight timeframe only allowed for the most superficial evaluation of all the Prevent funded projects in existence at the time. Nonetheless, the exercise functioned to buttress the strategy with a veneer of respectability through academic collaborations and research findings. Such findings have been used to defend the Prevent strategy against criticisms. For example, in the government’s response to the aforementioned Home Affairs Select Committee report on radicalisation (HM Government, 2017), headline findings from impact evaluations were used to defend the Prevent strategy from criticism:

“Headline findings from our impact evaluation show that these projects have increased awareness of the dangers of radicalisation, reduced factors associated with extremism and improved knowledge of what actions to take when concerned about an individual.”

In other examples, findings from surveys commissioned by the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism at the Home Office (see ICM, 2019) have been used by Prevent practitioners to claim that there is widespread support for the Prevent strategy, including amongst Muslims.

In more recent years, the Home Office has delivered Prevent roadshow events across the

country to raise positive awareness of the Prevent strategy and promote its positive impacts. The roadshow has attempted to rebrand Prevent in more positive terms through confident, unapologetic events that offer local communities a (controlled) space to raise concerns about the strategy that can be dealt with by Home Office employees (as opposed to more critical voices) and demonstrate a reflective learning posture on the Prevent Strategy (by admitting to past mistakes). At one such event I attended, this new posture was contrasted with previous styles of delivery and implementation to demonstrate the lessons that had been learned, and a new willingness to learn and listen. Examples of new learning included an appreciation that not all Muslims were extremists. In his speech, one of the Home Office employees said:

“It’s the extreme interpretations which are problematic and need challenging. We like Muslims and Islam and it does have a place here, but we don’t want extremism”.

There was also an attempt at articulating a complex understanding of radicalisation as a product of the interplay between religious theology and psychological factors (but no acknowledgement of socio-political factors).

Given the politics of Shawcross, and his narrower focus in the review, his appointment is of a piece with other ongoing attempts to defend and legitimise the Prevent Strategy. In both appointments to the role the government has sought to make a safe appointment that will defend the strategy and lay the blame for the toxicity of the strategy elsewhere. Previously, Scotland Yard dismissed criticism of the strategy on the basis of its ignorance and a desire amongst some to see it fail. Nazir Afzal, former Chief Prosecutor for North West England, who also interviewed for the role, claimed that the second selection process was rigged in favour of Shawcross and that he was simply interviewed to give an impression of open selection.

Ending Prevent

It seems quite clear then, that the Independent Review of the Prevent Strategy will not offer any meaningful insights into the workings of the Prevent Strategy. The review process is a political stunt aimed at revitalising the Prevent Strategy rather than learning some tough lessons. Going forward, the only sensible option left is to end the Prevent Strategy because of the immense levels of harm it has inflicted and its institutionalisation of Islamophobia. There is nothing to be gained from a strategy that views and criminalises whole communities as suspect, demonises an entire faith, and attempts to predict and tame the future (badly) with catastrophic consequences. The most recent Channel referral figures showed there were more than 6,000 referrals in the past year and almost 90% of the people referred to the programme were not deemed to be at risk of radicalisation. This does not include the many thousands more that are wrongly referred internally (whether at school or in the workplace).

There is already an acknowledgement and appetite amongst a range of people, communities, and organisations to end the Prevent Strategy. Former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Max Hill QC, argued the government should consider scrapping all anti-terror laws and instead more effectively utilise existing legal structures that respect the rule of law because of the sheer number of terrorism offences that overlap with conventional crimes. In a similar vein, former Scotland Yard counter-terrorism officer David Videcette, made the case for the use of disruption tactics often used against organised crime gangs. The architect of the Prevent Strategy, David Omand, argued that Prevent was created because of a perceived need to do something and that if it didn't work it would be scrapped (Pettinger, 2020). Finally, last year, a UN Special Rapporteur recommended that the Prevent strategy be suspended because of its impact on racial equality (UNHR, 2020).

Instead of pinning hopes on the review, communities and organisations should continue to raise awareness of the harms and Islamophobia of the Prevent Strategy and unite behind a call to end the disastrous strategy.

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