



The UK Prevent Strategy: A Literature Review, 2011-2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Kingdom's Prevent strategy remains both one of the most ambitious and contested counter-terrorism approaches of the post 9/11 era.

It represents among the first ever large-scale soft-power counter-terrorism approaches in history. However, from its inception, it has faced questions over its effectiveness, and concerns that it disproportionately targets British Muslims and encourages an increase in anti-Muslim bias, both at a civil-society and state level.

'Pre-Crime' and Soft-Power Counter-Terrorism

Due to its very nature, Prevent often operates in the 'pre-crime space'. Prevent and the Channel project in particular are, in effect, government interventions into the lives of citizens who have yet to commit a crime.

While the term 'pre-crime' carries some sinister and dystopian connotations, and is presented by some Prevent critics in such terms, crime prevention efforts have been employed in Western democracies for generations in order to confront a range of criminal behaviours. The kind of youth intervention work upon which Channel is largely based, which has been used for decades to steer youth away from drugs, gang involvement and crime, is widely celebrated and accepted as an important social contribution. The only unique component of Prevent is that it is applying this principle to terrorism.

Prevent represents the biggest soft-power counter-terrorism effort in history and, at its core, it is based on averting the creation of young (often ethnic minority) criminals through the use of state funds and support.

There is little doubt that, in the UK, there remains a need for government efforts to prevent its citizens from becoming involved in terrorism. There are ample opportunities for a range of stakeholders to intervene in an individual's life prior to their engagement in a criminal, terrorism-related act.

Particularly in the case of lone-actor terrorists, many people involved in the offenders' lives often suspected there to have been a problem prior to the attack or attempted attack. It seems reasonable, therefore, that there exists an official mechanism through which either friends, family, teachers, social workers, or others can seek assistance and alert those capable of assisting. Not only would this help reduce lone-actor terrorists, the UK's most immediate challenge, but it could also avoid the criminalisation of young, often misguided, British youth by waiting for them to commit a crime before intervening.

Prevent and 'Radicalisation'

While the term 'radicalisation' came into popular use in the media and academia after 9/11, the study of how and why people become involved in radical and violent (often political) behaviour is not new. Early usage of the term 'radicalisation' emerged in academic work before 9/11 and in relation to a range of groups, most of which were not Islamic in nature,

including extreme right and left movements in Europe, and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.

Those who oversee Prevent's delivery, and the wider government, have embraced the concept of radicalisation as part of the effort to prevent terrorism. For critics, the fact that radicalisation is the underlying concept which shapes Prevent renders the entire project ineffective and even prejudicial. For supporters of this approach, however, Prevent must address radicalisation if it is to be, in any way, a useful component of countering terrorism in the UK.

Popular critiques of radicalisation and Prevent rely in part on speculation and unproven assumptions. For these scholars and anti-Prevent activists, Prevent must be largely done away with, or at least taken completely out of the government's hands due to its reliance on the radicalisation concept. The most influential of such work is based on a conspiratorial view of both government and academic work on terrorism and counter-terrorism.

The very concept upon which Prevent is premised, namely addressing the processes which lead to violent radicalisation, is largely rejected by this body of work. They view radicalisation as an inherently divisive, and, in some cases, racist and anti-Muslim concept, and see it being used by Prevent in order to criminalise Muslims. In addition, they reject any connection between extremist ideology and violence, referring often to 'so-called' Islamic extremism as little more than a smoke-screen for racism and discrimination against Muslims.

Some critical works on radicalisation also often put forward their own views on the true reasons for individual involvement in terrorism. They mostly fall under the category of grievance-driven violence. Jihadist terrorism, in particular, is presented as purely reactive, and the result of Western foreign policies in Muslim majority states.

Undoubtedly, radicalisation is imperfect both as a term and a concept. Yet, many critiques rest on assumptions that are now dated, such as claims that studies on radicalisation have little to no theoretical or empirical grounding, and that they only focus on the role of ideology.

Qualitative approaches note the importance of a period prior to violence, which includes the adoption of extreme ideas. Emerging data on lone-actor terrorists find that, despite claims by detractors of both Prevent and radicalisation, ideology almost al-

ways plays some role, albeit with varying degrees of importance.

Yet, while radicalisation studies certainly often draw connections between ideology and violence, it is usually presented as one of a number of factors, and often a secondary one. The study of radicalisation has come on leaps and bounds thanks in part to data-driven approaches, with most analysts regarding attacks as ideologically motivated while not relying on ideology as the sole driver.

Presenting or framing the study of radicalisation as a racist conspiracy among scholars and Western states, so as to downplay the state's role in pushing people to terrorism, ignores a wealth of advanced data-driven and theoretical approaches which inform the study of why individuals become terrorists.

Prevent and 'Suspect Communities'

The majority of the literature which covers this topic seems in agreement that Prevent treats British Muslims as 'suspect communities', and that it has followed historical trends of fearmongering and persecution against a foreign 'enemy within'. Anti-Prevent activism has also rallied around this concept. Yet, while there is little doubt that racism fuels much anti-Muslim activism in the West, the evidence that it drives Prevent is thin.

In addition, widely cited studies which claim that Muslims feel persecuted by Prevent are based on small sample sizes, while other polling with larger samples suggests that most Muslims have not heard of Prevent, but are supportive of its underlying premise.

Similar polling on the Prevent Duty has suggested that, while university staff are uneasy about the focus on British values due to the potentially exclusionary nature of the concept of Britishness, they also broadly agree that the Duty is a 'proportionate response' to the threat of terrorism in the UK.

Prevent and Counter-Messaging

Counter-messaging or counter-narratives form part of many counter-radicalisation programmes in the West, but their utility and effectiveness remain in question.

How Prevent conducts counter-messaging, apparently through the government's Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU), remains shrouded in mystery. There is little official information on this, and much of what is currently publicly

available is the result of leaks rather than government transparency. As such, it remains impossible to measure the success of such efforts.

It is important to note, however, that broad-based, often online, counter-messaging campaigns which come directly from the government are among the least effective approaches, although it is unclear if Prevent engages in this. Scholars note that the availability of a message does not necessarily equate to its reach or impact. They also warn that there remains a lack of understanding of how propaganda and strategic communications influence individuals, and thus a rigorous analytical framework through which to empirically analyse success and failure of counter-narrative campaigns remains elusive.

Many counter-narrative campaigns also ignore the fact that narratives are socially constructed. In order to achieve some level of resonance, they must be rooted within the social environment. Local networks are therefore required for dissemination; a ‘constellation of relationships’ ensures that messages do not exist in a space devoid of meaning and context.

While it seems logical that some official effort is made to counter the narrative of extremists, it is still unclear what difference being exposed to such materials makes. In one of the only studies of its kind, on extremist materials found in possession by convicted UK terrorists, it was noted that, in most cases, they were also in possession of counter-narrative materials that had little to no impact on their radicalisation process.

Prevent Referrals and Identifying Vulnerability to Extremism and Terrorism

The question of both defining and measuring vulnerability is one of the most pressing challenges facing Prevent. At present, a number of vulnerability indicators described in Prevent guidance are vague and lack clear connections to violent radicalisation. These include “people with mental health issues or learning disabilities”, religious converts who are “less well-informed about their faith”, and “young offenders and people vulnerable to offending”.

This lack of specificity and clarity may account for the high numbers of Prevent referrals (particularly from the education sector) which are not adopted as Channel cases. In the year between 2020 and 2021, of the 4915 total referrals made to Prevent, just 688 (14%, or 1 in 7) were taken up as cases. This suggests

that Prevent is casting a very wide net, and may not be working as efficiently as it can.

Many referrals which are not taken up may have a more appropriate referral or support mechanism that is related directly to mental health or other social services, rather than extremism and terrorism. Referring so many cases which are possibly unrelated to extremism in any serious way risks further damaging the image of Prevent and strengthening claims that it is a policy which securitises the state’s relationship with its citizens.

One method which Prevent has used in order to overcome the challenge of determining who is simply ‘vulnerable’, and who is ‘vulnerable to radicalisation’, is the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF). The VAF is inspired by the ERG22+, a risk assessment tool developed by psychologists to determine the future risks posed by British terrorism offenders in prison. The ERG and VAF are based on 22 indicators of vulnerability.

For some academic and activist critics of Prevent, the ERG and VAF approaches are rooted in racism and Islamophobia. Some also argue that it is a system which is unscientific, and therefore unverifiable. In addition, the ERG22+ was initially devised to determine the risk posed by terrorist offenders in British prisons, as opposed to members of the public who have committed no crimes, and who Prevent is concerned with.

Efforts are being made to validate the ERG, which have taken into account some of these limitations. Thus far, these are largely government publications, however, and there has yet to be sufficient independent peer review, due to the fact that the full ERG document has not been made publicly available.

This problem also extends to the VAF, which uses the same 22 indicators of the ERG, and which it appears has yet to be subject to any (publicly available) internal scientific verification. It has, however, been assessed by a number of scholars who, overall, have found it to be a useful, if flawed, mechanism for identifying individuals vulnerable to extremism and terrorism.

Neither the full ERG nor VAF documents used by assessors have been made publicly available for full independent peer review. Until this changes, it is not possible to come to a final and well-informed view of the utility of either.

INTRODUCTION

Since its introduction in 2003, the UK's Prevent strategy remains both one of the most ambitious and contested counter-terrorism approaches of the post 9/11 era. Placed within the country's CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy, it sits alongside traditional hard-power measures, such as the pursuit and arrest of terrorists. As such, it represents among the first ever large-scale soft-power counter-terrorism approaches in history. However, from its inception, it has faced a number of accusations and criticisms, including questions over its effectiveness, and concerns that it disproportionately targets British Muslims and encourages an increase in anti-Muslim bias, both at a civil-society and state level.

After providing a brief overview and objectives, activities and history of Prevent, this report will review the literature on the programme, which is available in the public domain, in order to gain a better understanding of its key weaknesses and strengths. Following this, it will identify the existing gaps in our knowledge of Prevent.

OVERVIEW AND HISTORY

1. What is Prevent? Objectives and Activities

In its present form, the Prevent strategy is run by Homeland Security within the UK Home Office (formerly the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, OSCT). Its three key objectives are listed as:

1. Tackle the causes of radicalisation and respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism.
2. Safeguard and support those most at risk of radicalisation through early intervention, identifying them and offering support.
3. Enable those who have already engaged in terrorism to disengage and rehabilitate.¹

In order to achieve these objectives, Prevent pursues a number of activities. Some are publicly acknowledged, while others remain more obscure to the public, an issue which informs some of the main criticisms of the strategy among its detractors.

In pursuit of the first objective, Prevent engages in a range of online and offline activities. Offline, it seeks to empower local communities to push back against extremist ideology and address the causes of radicalisation by providing funding to local civil-society organisations. According to the 2018 CONTEST strategy, which includes some of the most up-to-date information on Prevent, the government provides support to “civil society organisations across the country to deliver a wide range of projects working with schools, families and in local communities to build their awareness of the risks of radicalisation, their resilience to terrorist narratives and propaganda, and to help them know what to do if they have concerns that someone may have been radicalised”.²

While the details of all of the funding provided by Prevent for this work are not in the public domain, one of the most prominent case studies is London Tigers.³ A youth football team, London Tigers received over £500,000 in funding between 2012 and 2014 from Prevent (via OSCT) to run its Building Community Resilience programme, which “works with young people from hard-to-reach communities to build their resilience to radicalization”.⁴ By 2017, London Tigers claims to have offered support to over 1,000 “young people that could be vulnerable to gangs, drugs or radicalisation”. This approach, which rolls counter-radicalisation into long-standing efforts to prevent involvement in gangs and drugs,

1. “CONTEST: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism,” HM Government, June 2018, 31.

2. CONTEST 2018, 33-34.

3. “Strong Cities Network: Member Case Study,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, available at: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKewiy6vCN-bb2AhU3REEAHRp4CDIOFnoECAUQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fstrongcitiesnetwork.org%2Fen%2Fpublic-private-partnerships%2F-london-london-tigers-bcr-final%2F&usq=AOvVawIzgwRiLurvCgeNN6ikhX_k

4. CONTEST 2018, 34; Published FOI request “SFOI 9713 London Tigers PVE Project.”

characterises one of the ways Prevent currently views the challenge. This is also what shapes many of the activities associated with Prevent's second objective, namely safeguarding and supporting people deemed to be most at risk of radicalisation through early intervention, identification and offering support. Perhaps the most significant component of this objective is the Channel project, an early intervention and safeguarding programme, inspired by gang and drug youth intervention schemes which have proven popular throughout deprived areas in Europe and the United States for decades.⁵

Piloted in 2007 and rolled out across England and Wales in 2012, Channel is described in its official documents as "a multi-agency approach to identify and provide support to individuals who are at risk of being drawn into terrorism".⁶ Individuals who are referred to Prevent and are subsequently deemed 'vulnerable' to being drawn into terrorism are referred on to Channel for specialist consideration and possible support. These are loosely defined in Channel documents as individuals who are: accessing extremist materials; espousing extremist narratives; demonstrating acute behaviour changes in relation to the Channel definition of extremism; have had potentially traumatic exposure to conflict zones; and are acutely intolerant towards people from different ethnic backgrounds, cultures or other protected traits, as defined in the 2010 Equality Act.⁷

The Channel definition of extremism comes from the UK government's 2011 Prevent Strategy and its 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy, which defines it as: "the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and respect and tolerance for different faiths and beliefs. We also regard calls for the death of members of our armed forces as extremist."⁸ Among the critiques of Prevent discussed below are both the definition of 'vulnerable' used by Channel,

which for some is too general, and the definition of 'extremism', which does not clearly mention extremist behaviour, one of the core concerns of Prevent.

The Channel approach adheres to the principle of early intervention, and relies on referrals from various public sectors, including education and law enforcement, of individuals who may be showing signs of radicalisation towards violence. According to this thinking, it is possible and necessary to conduct early interventions before the individual is radicalised and considering taking part in violence.⁹ Because radicalisation processes are diverse, comprehensive intervention programming addresses a number of questions, including: How are individuals identified? How is risk and vulnerability to radicalisation measured? How can accelerated radicalisation processes (and faster mobilisation to violence) be isolated from more gradual processes and assessed? How should intervention be staged? Once staged, how should intervention transition to de-radicalisation processes, and how are those processes monitored and evaluated?¹⁰

To answer the first question, identification of at-risk individuals, those devising Channel first turned to studies of convicted terrorists in the UK using an assessment framework adopted by the UK's National Offender Management Service (NOMS) called the Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG22+). Based on individual factors from each of the cases of terrorist offenders in prison, psychologists Monica Lloyd and Christopher Dean built an assessment framework to judge the risk of involvement in future violence posed by imprisoned terrorist offenders.¹¹ Once vulnerability factors from these past cases could be identified and pooled into the assessment framework, they were adopted by Channel as the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF).¹²

When Channel adopted the assessment framework, it organised those vulnerability factors into

5. James C. Howell, "Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, December 2010; Finn-Aage Esbensen and Cheryl L. Maxson (ed.), *Youth Gangs in International Perspective Results from the Eurogang Program of Research* (Springer, 2012).

6. <https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/council/transparency/access-to-information/service-and-project-specific-privacy-notice/counter-terrorism-channel-programme/>

7. "Channel Duty Guidance," 6.

8. "Prevent Strategy," HM Government, 2011, 107. "Counter Extremism Strategy," HM Government, 2015, 9.

9. Rashad Ali, "Roots of Violent Radicalization," Counter Extremism Consultancy, Training, Research and Interventions, February, 2012.

10. Rashad Ali, "De-radicalization and Integration: The United Kingdom's Channel Programme," Program on Extremism, October, 2015.

11. Ali, "De-radicalization and Integration."

12. Rita Augestad Knudsen, "Measuring radicalisation: risk assessment conceptualisations and practice in England and Wales," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 12 (1) (2018).

three broad dimensions: 1) engagement; 2) intent to cause harm; and 3) capacity to cause harm; the three together forming Channel’s referral process.¹³ Engagement factors, sometimes called ‘psychological hooks’, detail the different push and pull factors that drive individual radicalisation processes, including perceived grievances, threats to self, identity searching, adventure-seeking, family/friend/close social circle involvement in extremism, and mental health issues. Intent to cause harm, however, includes a number of factors that mark a separate stage in which individuals are ready to carry out violent acts. Intent factors range from dehumanisation of perceived outgroups to attitudes that justify violence.¹⁴ Capacity to cause harm denotes the smallest pool of the three, specific to individuals who have the personal capability, resources, and/or networks to successfully carry out an attack. Operational skills and attack equipment are two obvious factors here.¹⁵

Using the VAF, local area ‘Channel Panels’ – panels of experts from local civil-society and public sectors, like education, social services, mental health, along with religious figures – review each individual case referral to determine whether to provide a specialist intervention mentor, and who that mentor should be.¹⁶ Part of Channel’s Prevent duties include making sure that panel leadership either use the risk assessment framework or establish another one, develop capabilities to deal with risk, and maintain accountability, both within the panel and publicly, for communicating those duties.¹⁷

One of the most critical dimensions of Channel Panels’ duties is to ensure that panel leadership and law enforcement share information built on relationships of trust, and that Channel programming

would not “involve covert activity against people or communities”.¹⁸ Part of that trust stems from the fact that, once panel leadership have agreed on intervention, referred individuals consent to taking part in the programme voluntarily.¹⁹ However, it is important to note that, prior to a referral being passed to a Channel Panel, the case is first reviewed by police in order to ensure that the individual is not already subject to police investigation.

The police are also the primary institution which decides if an individual is at risk of radicalisation, and if they should be referred to Channel. This gives the police a prominent role in a programme which strives not to criminalise those who become involved in it, and is often pointed out by critics of Prevent as evidence that Channel, and Prevent more generally, is used to clamp down on dissent and criminalise those who express dislike for the state and/or its counter-terrorism policies.²⁰

The selection of those who will conduct a specific intervention is largely dependent on panel assessments, which address how to tailor the intervention to the needs of the individual. Once they begin, however, interventions can shift to include the involvement of anyone evaluated to be appropriate and/or necessary, and can last from several months and up to two years.²¹ The first stages are aimed at building trust and confidence between the intervention providers and the individual. One of the defining questions providers face in these critical initial stages is what role religion should play, and whether religious components to intervention measures are effective, necessary, and/or ethical.²² In response, Channel practitioners claim that programmes do not aim to shape religious and political beliefs but rather chal-

13. See statutory guidance explaining the framework, “Channel: Vulnerability assessment framework,” Home Office, October 2012, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/118187/vul-assessment.pdf.

14. In this context, ‘outgroup’ refers to those who do not belong to the specific extremist in-group. For more, see J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (MIT, 2018).

15. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/118187/vul-assessment.pdf

16. Rashad Ali, “De-radicalization and Integration: The United Kingdom’s Channel Programme,” Program on Extremism, October, 2015. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/downloads/Rashad%20Ali.pdf>

17. “Prevent Duty Guidance: for England and Wales,” U.K. Home Office, 2015. https://www.lbhf.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Prevent_Duty_Guidance_for_England_and_Wales.pdf

18. “Prevent Duty Guidance: for England and Wales,” U.K. Home Office, 2015. https://www.lbhf.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Prevent_Duty_Guidance_for_England_and_Wales.pdf

19. “Prevent Duty Guidance: for England and Wales,” U.K. Home Office, 2015. https://www.lbhf.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Prevent_Duty_Guidance_for_England_and_Wales.pdf

20. Aislinn O’Donnell, “Securitisation, Counterterrorism and the Silencing of Dissent: The Educational Implications of Prevent,” *British Journal of Education Studies* 64 (1) (2015).

21. Ali, “De-radicalization and Integration: The United Kingdom’s Channel Programme.”

22. Haras Rafiq and Rashad Ali, “Haras Rafiq and Rashad Ali: When will the authorities learn that extremists can’t be used to tackle other extremists?,” Conservative Home, December 21, 2010.

lunge individuals who justify violent behaviour, using a range of methods to encourage them to reconsider these beliefs. The ways in which mentors tackle these and other difficult challenges are closely monitored and evaluated, both throughout the intervention and after the programming concludes.²³

The most significant recent development in Prevent, which is aimed at addressing objective two (safeguard and support those most at risk of radicalisation through early intervention, identifying them and offering support) is the Prevent Duty. Introduced in 2015 after it was recommended by the Prime Minister's task force on tackling radicalisation and extremism, it constituted part of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act. One of the key motivations for the introduction of the Duty was a desire to respond to the emerging challenge of young, often school-age Britons travelling or attempting to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State (IS). It was inspired by pre-existing efforts (although not legal duties) to safeguard individuals, in particular young people, from harms, such as physical and sexual abuse and involvement in gangs. The Prevent Duty makes it a legal requirement for a range of institutions, including local authorities, schools and universities, police, and health bodies, to show "due regard" to the need to prevent people from being radicalised and drawn into terrorism.²⁴

Putting a duty such as this into law is unprecedented in the history of counter-terrorism legislation anywhere in the world and, much like the original introduction of Prevent, is an ambitious innovation. To give a sense of how rare a move this is, the only other statutory duty of this type which exists in both England and Wales is related to the reporting of cases of female genital mutilation (FGM). Introduced in 2003, the law "requires regulated health and social care professionals and teachers in England and Wales to report known cases of FGM in under 18s which they identify in the course of their professional work to

the police"²⁵. Since April 2016 certain public bodies in Wales have been under a duty to report known or suspected child abuse and neglect, but no such legal requirement exists in England.²⁶

Part of the Prevent Duty is ensuring that institutions have systems in place to make referrals to Prevent, and that their staff become more familiar with the signs of extremism. Prevent referrals can be made by any member of the public, and family and friends of radicalised individuals are encouraged to pursue these, but referrals largely come from the police and educational establishments, which taken together typically account for around six in ten referrals.²⁷ The main reason for a Prevent referral is when an individual expresses views consistent with known extremist movements, in particular jihadists and various iterations of the extreme right. One of the common misconceptions about the Duty is that it legally obligates individuals within institutions such as schools to make Prevent referrals if they notice signs of extremism. It does not. The legal duty rests only with the institution, which must have a plan in place to protect individuals in their care from extremism, and for staff to make referrals and make sure they are aware of how the process works.

One way in which schools aim to fulfil their Prevent Duty by building pupils' resilience is the promotion of fundamental British values. These are defined in Prevent Duty guidance as "democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs".²⁸ This aspect of the Duty is intended to inoculate British youth from extremist messages they may encounter both on- and offline by equipping them with an understanding and appreciation of a set of values which stand firmly against those promoted by extremists, in particular those from extreme right and jihadist movements. This approach has been met with some criticism, which will be discussed in more detail below.

23. Ali, "De-radicalization and Integration: The United Kingdom's Channel Programme."

24. Revised Prevent duty guidance: for England and Wales (Updated 1 April 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance/revised-prevent-duty-guidance-for-england-and-wales>

25. Mandatory reporting of female genital mutilation: procedural information, HM Government, October 2015, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mandatory-reporting-of-female-genital-mutilation-procedural-information#:~:text=A%20mandatory%20reporting%20duty%20for,force%20on%2031%20October%202015>

26. "Child protection: Duties to report concerns", House of Commons Library Research Briefing, February 2020, available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06793/>

27. Table 1: Sector of referral of those referred, discussed at a Channel panel and adopted as a Channel case, 2015/16 to 2020/21, in Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme England and Wales, April 2020 to March 2021: data tables, HM Government, 2021.

28. "The Prevent Duty: Departmental advice for schools and childcare providers".

In order to meet the requirements of the Prevent Duty at the local-authority level, particularly within those areas which have been identified as priority areas due to an increased risk of radicalisation, Prevent officers must work to build relationships with the local community and co-ordinate at local and regional multi-agency levels to “assess the local picture, coordinate activity and to put in place arrangements to monitor the impact of safeguarding work”.²⁹ Education authorities are also a priority for the Prevent Duty, with around a third of Prevent referrals coming from this sector every year.³⁰ Prevent Education Officers are tasked with helping ensure that schools, colleges and universities develop clear policies to protect students from being drawn into terrorism, and to increase their resilience to violent extremist recruitment. Alongside local authorities and education, the UK health sector also has a unique involvement with the Prevent Duty and referral process due to the connection between mental health and lone-actor terrorism, described by the head of MI5 in 2022 as the UK’s most immediate challenge.³¹

The third and final objective of Prevent – to “enable those who have already engaged in terrorism to disengage and rehabilitate” – is also its most recent. Introduced in the 2018 CONTEST strategy, but piloted since late 2016, it is often referred to as the Desistance and Disengagement Programme (DDP). In a departure from the pre-criminal space previously occupied by Prevent, DDP seeks to deal with those who have already been involved in terrorism-related activity. In many cases, those participating in DDP are on probation after committing a terrorism-related offence or are subject to court-ordered restrictions, such as Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIMs), or have returned from involvement with a terrorist group abroad (most commonly ISIS in Syria and Iraq) and are under Temporary

Exclusion Orders (TEO). As CONTEST 2018 makes clear, Prevent’s involvement with DDP represents an overlap with Pursue, another of the four components of CONTEST, which is focused on stopping terrorist attacks, both in the UK and abroad.³²

Little is currently in the public domain about the details of DDP, but its work consists of tailored individual interventions and support. Unlike the voluntary nature of involvement in Channel interventions, however, DDP can be mandated by a court, and refusal to take part may, in some circumstances, be a criminal offence. The nature of support offered varies, but is described as “mentoring, psychological support, theological and ideological advice”.³³ In order to deliver this support, DDP sometimes works with private organisations specialising in de-radicalisation work, although there is no public information on who these partners are. While the current number of DDP interventions is unknown, in 2018 the target for the following year was set at 230 individuals. A freedom of information request from *The Guardian* also found that, between the launch of the pilot scheme in October 2016 and 2018, 116 people went through DDP.³⁴ Perhaps the most notorious known case of DDP involvement is that of the British jihadist preacher Anjem Choudary.³⁵ The programme was seemingly unsuccessful in changing Choudary. Since his release in prison in late 2018, he has continued to disseminate his extreme interpretation of Islam, mostly via his Telegram social media channel.³⁶

1.2 The Three Prevents: A History

Prevent in its current form can be considered as the third iteration of the strategy, which was marked by the introduction of the Prevent Duty in 2015. This section will offer a brief overview of the evolution of

29. CONTEST 2018.

30. It should be noted that the year ending 31 March 2021 saw the lowest proportion of referrals received from the Education sector (1221, 25%) since comparable data are available, attributed by the Home Office as likely due to the closure of schools and universities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme England and Wales, April 2020 to March 2021: data tables, HM Government, 2021.

31. Joint address by MI5 and FBI Heads, available at: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/speech-by-mi5-and-fbi>

32. CONTEST 2018; MS Elshimi, “Desistance and Disengagement in the UK’s Prevent Strategy,” in Stig Jarle Hansen and Stian Lid (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Deradicalisation and Disengagement* (Routledge, 2020).

33. DDP Factsheet, available at: <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2019/11/05/fact-sheet-desistance-and-disengagement-programme/>.

34. Jamie Grierson, “Extremists living in UK under secretive counter-terror programme,” *The Guardian*, 5 April 2019.

35. Fiona Hamilton and Richard Ford, “Hate preacher Anjem Choudary must go on anti-extremism course,” *The Times*, 29 October 2018.

36. Based on the author’s observation of extremist activity online.

Prevent, starting with “Prevent 1”, dating from 2006 to 2011.³⁷ As one of the “four P’s” of the UK’s CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy (Pursue, Protect, Prepare, Prevent), published in July 2006, much of Prevent was delivered by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). It listed three overall objectives:

1. Tackling disadvantage and supporting reform – addressing structural problems in the UK and overseas that may contribute to radicalisation, such as inequalities and discrimination;
2. Deterring those who facilitate terrorism and those who encourage others to become terrorists – changing the environment in which the extremists and those radicalising others can operate; and
3. Engaging in the battle of ideas – challenging the ideologies that extremists believe can justify the use of violence, primarily by helping Muslims who wish to dispute these ideas to do so.³⁸

Immediately noticeable is the strategy’s clear and singular focus on the threat from violent jihadism, with no mention of other types of extremism. While there was considerable early buy-in from Muslim organisations, who were invited to contribute to improving the strategy, it soon began facing its biggest and most enduring criticism; that its emphasis on the threat of Islamic extremism ignored emerging threats from other extremist movements (in particular, the extreme right), risked stigmatising British Muslims writ large, and that it was an effort to both surveil and curtail free speech related to British Muslims criticising their government. These arguments came from academia, as well as human rights and Islamic activist groups.³⁹ However, this focus on

jihadism at the time should be understood in the context of the July 7, 2005, al-Qaeda-linked attacks in London, alongside the fact that extreme-right-wing violence had yet to emerge as a significant terrorist threat.

As its association with the DCLG suggests, Prevent 1 focused on empowering local Muslim community groups in the UK, which it was hoped could engage in “the battle of ideas” noted in objective 3 above, while also working to dissuade British Muslim youth from extremism by offering them other, often community-focused, options. Between 2008 and 2011, Prevent provided £45.7 million in public funds for over 1,000 projects across the United Kingdom under the Area Based Grant (ABG).⁴⁰ Funding went to a wide range of local community groups who claimed to be able to help combat radicalisation, including youth sports clubs, debate and discussion forums intended to provide “safe spaces to discuss current affairs or grievances”, and mosque leadership and management committees.⁴¹

Prevent 1 was characterised by its merging of community cohesion with counter-terrorism. While there is a connection between the two, it was also argued that connecting them in such a way was a mistake. It ‘securitised’ the relationship between the state and British Muslim communities, while providing millions in funding for activities which were, in most cases, only very loosely, if at all, connected to preventing radicalisation.⁴² On top of this, it was unclear how the government was gauging the impact and success of the initiatives it had funded under Prevent. Among the most impactful criticisms of these aspects of Prevent 1 was the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee report on Prevent released in 2010. According to its findings, there was a significant lack of trust towards Prevent among both “those delivering and receiving services”. It was also critical of the joining together of Prevent and cohesion work, noting that connecting the two gave negative conno-

37. When CONTEST was first developed in 2003, Prevent was limited to building engagement with Muslim communities. The programme, as recognisable today, was developed by the Home Office after 7/7 and consolidated in CONTEST 2006. The use of “Prevent 1”, “Prevent 2” and “Prevent 3” is inspired by Paul Thomas’ similar historical breakdown and categorisation. See: Paul Thomas, “Britain’s Prevent Strategy: Always Changing, Always the Same?,” in Joel Busher and Lee Jerome (ed.), *The Prevent Duty in Education* (Springer, 2020).

38. “Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom’s Strategy,” HM Government, July 2006.

39. Among the most prominent Islamic activist groups is CAGE, while civil liberties groups such as Liberty have been long-time critics of Prevent along these lines.

40. “Prevent Strategy,” HM Government, June 2011.

41. “Prevent Strategy,” 2011.

42. Katherine Brown, “Contesting the Securitization of British Muslims,” *Interventions* 12 (2) (2010).

tations to cohesion work, and it recommended that “all community cohesion work and work focusing on shared values should be decoupled from the *Prevent* agenda”.⁴³ It also argued that *Prevent* was too narrowly focused on jihadism, and should widen its focus to include all forms of extremism.

A number of reports from influential NGOs, while supportive of its goals, were also critical of *Prevent*, and influenced the shape it would take in the future. Among these was a study published by Policy Exchange in 2009, which identified a number of key problems. The most consequential of these critiques was that *Prevent* had ignored a connection between non-violent extremist thought and violent extremist action. As a result, the programme had partnered with non-violent Islamist groups, who it was believed could use their credibility amongst target populations to prevent individuals from taking part in violence. The authors were particularly critical of the role played in choosing *Prevent* partners by local authorities and the police, who were the lead organisations at the time. They recommended instead that the term ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’, which was widely used in government at the time, be changed to ‘Preventing Extremism’, and that the role of choosing *Prevent* partners be taken up by a specialised expert unit based in Westminster, rather than such decisions being made at the local government and police level. The report also set out new “criteria for engagement” with local Muslim groups, which sought to prevent future partnerships with organisations that espoused extreme and illiberal values.⁴⁴

There were a range of other criticisms of *Prevent* at this time, including a claim that those individuals and organisations in receipt of *Prevent* funding were being asked to spy on local communities and report to the police and security services, thus overlapping with the Pursue strand of *CONTEST*.⁴⁵ While this claim was made repeatedly by some academics, leading media organisations and anti-*Prevent* activists, there remains no evidence that any spying was conducted as part of *Prevent* work.⁴⁶ A more convincing

explanation is that this approach, while somewhat haphazard and fraught with messaging and public relations problems, reflected both the government’s acceptance that it alone could not prevent radicalisation of British Muslims and that partnerships may help to prevent British Muslims from feeling stigmatised by allowing them to play an active role in soft counter-terrorism policies.⁴⁷

Prevent 2 emerged largely as a result of a review of *Prevent* by Lord Carlile of Berriew published in 2011. The review concurred with some of the criticisms of *Prevent 1* noted above, stating that the reviewer’s consultations with experts found that there was widespread agreement that “*Prevent* funding should not be used for the much wider objectives of promoting integration and community cohesion... this created the impression that the Government was supporting cohesion projects only for security reasons and in effect ‘securitising integration’”.⁴⁸ The review also suggested that far too much funding was provided to organisations, without enough understanding of how precisely they prevented radicalisation and how to gauge their success in doing so. Lord Carlile also believed *Prevent* was too limited in its focus on jihadism, ignoring the threat from extreme-right terrorism.

Likely influenced by the arguments put forward by Policy Exchange, the review also noted that, under *Prevent*, the government had partnered with some organisations that rejected British values, and that there needed to be a clearer understanding and agreement from *Prevent* and its local partners about the importance of holding and promoting such values, and criticising those who do not. This also influenced the recommendation from the reviewer that *Prevent* should take a broader view of the causes of terrorism, looking beyond simply violent extremism, and also challenging non-violent extremists whose “ideologies are drawn upon by terrorists to justify violence”.⁴⁹ Partly as a result of this, *Prevent* stopped working with a number of groups deemed to hold non-violent extremist views, and the strategy adopt-

43. Communities and Local Government Committee – Sixth Report Preventing Violent Extremism,” HM Government, 2010.

44. Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, “Choosing our Friends Wisely: Criteria for Engagement with Muslim Groups,” Policy Exchange, 2009.

45. Madeline-Sophie Abbas, “Producing ‘internal suspect bodies’: Divisive effects of UK counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities in Leeds and Bradford,” *British Journal of Sociology* 70(1) (2018).

46. Among those who investigated these claims was the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, which concluded that “information required under *Prevent* does not constitute ‘intelligence gathering’ of the type undertaken by the police or security services”.

47. Derek McGhee, *Security, citizenship and human rights: Shared values in uncertain times* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

48. “*Prevent* Strategy,” 2011, 30.

49. Alex Carlile, “Report to the Home Secretary of Independent Oversight of *Prevent* Review and Strategy,” HM Government, 2011, 5.

ed a definition of extremism that focused more on ideology and values than violent behaviour.

Changes seen in Prevent 2 included the shift of the running of Prevent work within communities from DCLG to the OSCT, in part a reflection of a rejection of such a close official relationship between social cohesion and security and counter-terrorism, along with a view that local government was not well placed to assess the suitability of local Prevent partners. Other changes to the original Prevent included an overall reduction of the Prevent budget, and an apparent end to national funding for local Prevent partners, which would now have to come out of local government budgets. Instead of relying on local partnerships and community work, Prevent turned to the Channel project, which was piloted in the years leading up to the introduction of Prevent 2, and relied on individual interventions to prevent violent radicalisation through counselling and mentorship. Prevent was now also tasked with addressing all forms of extremism, rather than its initial sole focus on jihadism. This also included non-violent extremism, which the Conservative government at the time, under David Cameron, had become increasingly concerned about.⁵⁰

Implemented in 2018, the current version of the programme, Prevent 3, represents less of a shift than Prevent 2 did, but has introduced a number of significant and controversial elements. Already described in detail above, the defining feature of Prevent 3 is the Prevent Duty, alongside the introduction of specific de-radicalisation efforts under DDP. Below is a review of the literature with a focus on academic and other research papers which have analysed aspects of Prevent since 2011. It is organised using the three main objectives of Prevent, beginning with tackling radicalisation.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

1. Tackle the causes of radicalisation and respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism

1.1 Radicalisation

Through official use of the term, those who oversee Prevent delivery, and the wider government, have embraced the concept of radicalisation as part of the effort to prevent terrorism. For critics, the fact that the underlying assumption of Prevent is that radicalisation is a major cause of terrorism renders the entire project ineffective and even prejudicial. For supporters of this approach, however, Prevent must address radicalisation if it is to be in any way a useful component of countering terrorism in the UK.

Undoubtedly, radicalisation is imperfect, both as a term and a concept. There is little widespread agreement beyond that it is a process which an individual goes through, and is used in connection with terrorism. In some official and academic definitions, radicalisation is seen as a process leading to terrorism, which begins with the adoption of an extremist ideology, thus making a direct link between extreme ideas and violent action. Others, however, question the wisdom of making such direct connections, often pointing out that the majority of people who hold extreme ideas never resort to terrorism. Whether or not radicalisation should entail the adoption of extreme ideas, either as a mid or end-point of the process, remains subject to much debate.

John Horgan, for example, has argued that too many studies of radicalisation fail to acknowledge that the adoption of extremist ideology represents one of a wide number of factors which may encourage involvement in terrorism, and that “not every terrorist necessarily holds radical views”.⁵¹ Alex Schmid has also questioned the utility of the term, suggesting that its varying definitions and lack of specificity mean that “the popularity of the concept of ‘radicalisation’ stands in no direct relationship to its actual explanatory power regarding the root

50. For more on then Prime Minister David Cameron’s view on this issue, see his speech at the 2011 Munich Security Conference. “PM’s speech at Munich Security Conference,” February 2011, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference>.

51. John Horgan, remarks at START Symposium, “Lessons learned since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001,” Washington DC, 1 Sept. 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/TenYearA>, accessed 14 May 2013

causes of terrorism”.⁵² He and many others also argue that studies on radicalisation are disproportionately focused on jihadist terrorism, and not enough has been done to apply this term to other forms of extremism. While he acknowledges problems associated with the term, Schmid also admits that radicalisation remains an important term and concept for academics and policy makers, as long as they follow five important guiding principles:

1. See it as a process that can affect conflicting parties on both sides in a confrontation;
2. Remain aware of the fact that radical opinions do not necessarily lead to political violence or terrorism;
3. Detach radicalisation, to some extent, from radicalism, and link it more to the process of growing commitment to and engagement with (violent) extremism;
4. Apply it not only to individuals and small groups but also to larger collectivities;
5. Analyse radicalisation not only on the micro- but also on the meso- and macro-levels.⁵³

The term and its policy influence has also been criticised in the context of Prevent, although the utility of these contributions is mixed. The most valuable of these come from academics who study how and why people turn to terrorism. Noemie Bouhana, for example, notes that too many studies of radicalisation focus on the individual, ignoring both the wider group and structural levels. She instead suggests focusing more on radicalising environments, or ‘hot spots’, which shift attention from why radicalisation happens to where.⁵⁴ In his analysis of how the Channel project identifies those who are ‘vulnerable’ to radicalisation, Paul Thomas argues that, while there are a number of factors which may contribute to one’s involvement in terrorism, “there is little agreement over why people make this [radicalisation] journey”.⁵⁵ As a result, he argues that any

programme which seeks to identify those who are in the process of radicalising will be flawed, as it cannot be certain that anyone subject to the Channel process or Prevent more widely will ever participate in violence.

This author’s own observation is that one of the enduring problems, which becomes clear when analysing Prevent documents, is a lack of sufficient explanation about which works have directly influenced the thinking of policy makers who develop and oversee the programme. There are no academic works directly cited, for example, in this explanation of radicalisation provided in official documents:

Government and academic research has consistently indicated that there is no single socio-demographic profile of a terrorist in the UK, and no single pathway, or ‘conveyor belt’, leading to involvement in terrorism. Terrorists come from a broad range of backgrounds and appear to become involved in different ways and for differing reasons. Few of those who are drawn into terrorism have a deep knowledge of faith. While no single factor will cause someone to become involved in terrorism, several factors can converge to create the conditions under which radicalisation can occur. These include background factors, aspects of someone’s personal circumstances, which might make them vulnerable to radicalisers, such as being involved in criminal activity; initial influences, peoples, ideas or experiences that influence an individual towards supporting a terrorist movement; and an ideological opening, or receptiveness to extremist ideology.⁵⁶

While more transparency is needed in order to better understand the sources Prevent uses to determine its understanding of radicalisation, a trained eye may be able to identify which influential studies of radicalisation have influenced the thinking. References to criminal activity are likely influenced by work conducted by Peter Neumann and Rajan Basra on what is often referred to as “crime-terror nexus”,

52. Alex Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review,” ICCT, 2013

53. Schmid, “Radicalisation.”

54. Noemie Bouhana, “The Moral Ecology of Extremism: A Systemic Perspective,” UK Commission for Countering Extremism, 2019.

55. Thomas, “Britain’s Prevent Strategy: Always Changing, Always the Same?”

56. CONTEST 2018, 103.

or other related studies on the criminal pasts of terrorists.⁵⁷ The discussion of “initial influences, people, ideas or experiences” is likely to have multiple sources, chief among them being Marc Sageman’s work on the role friend and family networks play in encouraging participation in violence, with the pre-existing connection these networks have to terrorist groups being a key determining factor.⁵⁸ While “ideological opening” is almost certainly a reference to what Quintan Wiktorowicz, in his work on the radicalisation of members of the UK-based pro-jihad al-Muhajiroun movement, calls the “cognitive opening”. Rooted in sociology, the term is used to describe a period in an individual’s life where, due to a major life-changing event, they become receptive to new ideas about how the world works and their role in it.⁵⁹

For Prevent, the adoption of extreme ideas is considered an important step in the process of becoming a terrorist. However, the current definition of extremism used by Prevent and reproduced below is focused almost solely on ideas, and makes no mention of direct participation in violence:

vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas.⁶⁰

This definition reflects the changes to Prevent brought in after the 2011 review, which seek to challenge the underlying ideas of terrorist movements, and promote British values as a bulwark against extremist ideologies. However, it also risks falling into the same trap as some studies of radicalisation by giving too much attention to extreme ideas and values over behaviour, and not differentiating between

the two clearly enough.⁶¹ While, as will be discussed below, extreme ideas often form a crucial part of violent radicalisation, this current definition of extremism is perhaps too narrow.

Other popular critiques of radicalisation and Prevent rely in part on speculation and unproven assumptions. For these scholars and activists, Prevent must be largely done away with, or at least taken completely out of the government’s hands due to its reliance on the radicalisation concept. In some cases, they also suggest that terrorist prevention work should be handed over to, or at least directly influenced by, them.⁶² The very concept upon which Prevent is premised, namely addressing the processes which lead to violent radicalisation, is largely rejected by this body of work. They view radicalisation as an inherently divisive, and, in some cases, racist and anti-Muslim concept, and see it being used by Prevent in order to criminalise Muslims (despite there being no criminal charges related to involvement in Prevent and Channel). In addition, they reject any connection between extremist ideology and violence, referring often to ‘so-called’ Islamic extremism as little more than a smoke-screen for racism and discrimination against Muslims.⁶³

The most influential of such works comes from Arun Kundnani, whose critiques, in some ways, match those described above, but go further, and are based on a conspiratorial view of both government and academic work on terrorism and counter-terrorism. According to him, radicalisation was devised after 9/11 in order to target and demonise Muslims and Islamic belief and practice, and emerged as part of an attempt to take attention away from what he views as the true causes of radicalisation, namely government policy, both foreign and domestic:

The radicalisation discourse was, from the beginning, circumscribed by the demands of counter-terrorist policy-makers rather than an attempt to objectively study how terrorism

57. Peter Neumann and Rajan Basra, “Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus,” ICSR, 2016; Alex Schmid, “Revisiting the Relationship between International Terrorism and Transnational Organised Crime 22 Years Later,” ICCT, 2018.

58. Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*.

59. Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 5.

60. “Revised Prevent duty guidance: for England and Wales (Updated 1 April 2021),” HM Government.

61. David Lowe, “The Problems Associated in Defining Extremism: The Case of the United Kingdom,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40 (11) (2017).

62. One anti-Prevent group, Cage, has attempted to present itself as the gatekeeper of alternative approaches to Prevent. See: “Beyond Prevent: A real alternative to Securitised policies,” Cage, 2020.

63. Katy Sian, “Born radicals? Prevent, positivism, and ‘race-thinking,’” *Palgrave Communications* 3 (6) (2017); Asim Qureshi, “PREVENT: Creating ‘radicals’ to strengthen anti-Muslim narratives,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8 (1).

comes into being.... Answers to the question of what drives this radicalisation process are to exclude ascribing any causative role to the actions of western governments or their allies in other parts of the world.⁶⁴

He goes on to question the academic integrity of those who pursue such work and rely on the term, suggesting they are funded by the state in order to be mouthpieces and apologists for it:

This is not solely a matter of biases introduced by funding, revolving doors between government agencies and thinktanks, or other institutional pressures but rather a matter of ideological assumptions that determine what counts as legitimate and illegitimate within the terms of this discourse.

Kundnani's claim (repeated most recently in a report for anti-Prevent activist group Cage) that states and their funding are the driving forces behind radicalisation studies, and that scholars are incentivised to downplay this, is more of a conspiracy theory than a clear and substantiated argument.⁶⁵ Nowhere does he show evidence of state funding shaping research; rather, it seems that, in his view, simply being in receipt of state money or working to influence the Prevent policy is *de facto* evidence of collusion. If anything, the connection between academia and policy making is one which is celebrated and encouraged in a range of fields, and this should be no different in the case of preventing terrorism.

In addition, keen scholars of extremism and political violence will note that early usage of the term 'radicalisation' emerged in academic work before 9/11, and in relation to a range of groups, most of which were not Islamic in nature, including extreme-right and left movements in Europe, and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.⁶⁶ Scholars of social movements in particular, including many from outside Western nations, have relied on the term, often when studying counter-cultural (particularly feminist) movements of the 70s and 80s, to describe the process of previously peaceful social movement mem-

bers taking on higher risk, often violent, forms of activism.⁶⁷ Wiktorowicz was inspired directly by the work of sociologists John Lofland and Rodney Stark from the 1960s, and many other influential theories are based on long-standing scholarly efforts to better understand how and why individuals undergo both value and behaviour changes.⁶⁸

Social movement scholars have also sought to understand why people take part in what they define as "high-risk activism". Indeed, the language of the 1986 study on the topic by Douglas McAdam, which seeks to provide a model for understanding the processes which can lead to radical high-risk activism (including violence), can be easily recognised by any current student of radicalisation:

The model emphasizes the importance of both structural and individual motivational factors in high-risk/cost activism; contending that an intense ideological identification with the values of the movement disposes the individual toward participation, while a prior history of activism and integration into supportive networks acts as the structural "pull" encouraging the individual to make good on his or her strongly held beliefs.⁶⁹

The approach of scholars such as McAdam, and Lofland and Stark, was part of an attempt to move beyond a monocausal explanation which relied solely on the existence of grievances as the reason for individual involvement in political violence and other extreme behaviour. Thus, even a cursory review of the literature which inspired many influential radicalisation studies after 9/11 demonstrates it is a concept which has been used by scholars for decades, whether or not they directly use the term radicalisation.

Therefore, while the term only came into popular use in the media and academia after 9/11, the study of how and why people become involved in radical and violent (often political) behaviour is not new. If

64. Arun Kundnani, "Radicalisation: The Journey of a Concept," *Race and Class* 54 (2) (2012).

65. "The Science of Pre-Crime: The Secret 'Radicalisation' Study Underpinning Prevent," Cage, 2016.

66. Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Siri Gamage, "Radicalisation of the Tamil middle class and ethnic violence in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 24 (2) (1997).

67. Donatella della Porta and Gary LaFree, "Guest Editorial: Processes of Radicalization and De-Radicalization," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 6 (1) (2011).

68. John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30 (6) (1965).

69. Douglas McAdam, "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer," *American Journal of Sociology* 92 (1) (1986).

anything, some of the more far-reaching and suspicious criticisms of the term, characterised by Kundnani's contribution, are more a matter of semantics than anything else, and appear to lack grounding in, or any real knowledge of, how the study of radicalisation emerged.

There are a number of obvious reasons why radicalisation came into more popular usage after 9/11, not least that this period saw a historic rise in terrorism in the West and around the world, leading to a rise in scholarship on its causes. It is, however, undeniable that, since 9/11, there has been a disproportionate focus on Muslims in radicalisation studies, an imbalance which is being slowly redressed, particularly since a recent upsurge in extreme-right activity.

Some critical works on radicalisation also often put forward their own views on the true reasons for individual involvement in terrorism. While there are a variety of different arguments here, they mostly fall under the category of grievance-driven violence. Jihadist terrorism, in particular, is presented as purely reactive, and the result of Western foreign policies in Muslim majority states. As Kundnani's influential paper on Prevent and radicalisation put it, when studying the roots of terrorism, emphasis must be placed on "the political interaction of western foreign policy and Muslim terrorist groups".⁷⁰

Perhaps the most famous recent example of this position among the anti-Prevent movement was Cage's claim that British ISIS executioner Muhammad Emwazi had been radicalised because of his experience of being approached by British counter-terrorism authorities as a possible recruit. Cage has reported that Emwazi had been in communication with the organisation during a two-year period beginning in 2010, and that they had worked on his case when he claimed he was being harassed by UK security agencies.⁷¹ In this case, British domestic policy was blamed: "suffocating domestic policies aimed

at turning a person into an informant but which prevent a person from fulfilling their basic life needs would have left a lasting impression on Emwazi. He desperately wanted to use the system to change his situation, but the system ultimately rejected him."⁷² Such monocausal grievance-focused approaches fall short of offering a convincing explanation for how and why individuals become terrorists.

While the study of radicalisation is not without its flaws, many critiques noted here rest on assumptions that are now dated, such as claims that studies on radicalisation have little to no theoretical or empirical grounding, and that they only focus on the role of ideology.⁷³ At their best, studies of radicalisation have emerged from established fields while using a variety of tried and tested academic methods, and to better understand the processes which precede an individual's involvement in political violence. These include social movement theory, social network analysis, social psychology, sociology, and criminology.⁷⁴ While radicalisation studies certainly often draw connections between ideology and violence, it is usually presented as one of a number of factors, and often a secondary one.

Among the most recent studies which appear to be influential within Prevent and Channel is Bouhana's criminological 'moral ecology of extremism' approach, which argues that radicalisation must be understood as a process which is impacted more by *where* someone is rather than *who* they are. She argues that criminological studies find that "much of the risk associated with this kind of complex social problem emerges from the interaction between individual and context. Whether someone will become involved in crime depends in a large part on their environment – where they are, as much as who they are."⁷⁵ She points out the key issues with existing radicalisation studies, including that they focus too much on ideology, and lack specificity as to what the problem is. She also warns that Prevent's focus

70. Kundnani, "Radicalisation."

71. "Jihadi John: 'Radicalised' by Britain," Cage, February 2015.

72. "Jihadi John: 'Radicalised' by Britain," Cage, February 2015.

73. Derek M. D. Silva, "Radicalisation: the journey of a concept, revisited," *Race and Class* 59 (4) (2018).

74. Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising* [Social Movement Theory]; Donatella Della Porta, "Radicalisation: A Relational Perspective," *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018) [Social Movement Theory]; Fathali Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* 60 (2) (2005) [Psychology]; Arie Perliger and Ami Pedhazur, "Social Network Analysis in the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence," *Political Science and Politics* 44 (1) (2011) [Social Network Analysis]; Frazer Egerton, "The Internet and Militant Jihadism: Global to Local Re-Imaginations," in Athina Karatzogianni (ed.), *Cyber-Conflict and Global Politics*, (Routledge, 2008) [Social Network Analysis]; Emily Corner, Noemie Bouhana, and Paul Gill, "The multifinality of vulnerability indicators in lone-actor terrorism," *Psychology, Crime, and Law* 2 (2019) [Criminology].

75. Bouhana, "The Moral Ecology of Extremism," 9.

on extremism and reducing its risks sets too broad a policy goal, with no clear goals or verifiable results. She notes, however, that Prevent's use of a 'priority areas' approach, whereby certain parts of the UK are identified as requiring specific attention, is supported by criminological research: "The very notion of Prevent priority areas implies that radicalisation, too, is thought to concentrate geographically, and early research findings support this."⁷⁶

Emerging data on lone-actor terrorists, in particular that which has become available online via social media over the last decade, has also enabled those studying radicalisation to provide data-driven and often quantitative assessments which draw from a variety of extremist actors, not only focusing on jihadism but also on the extreme right. Many of these find that, despite claims by detractors of both Prevent and radicalisation, ideology almost always plays some role, albeit with varying degrees of importance.⁷⁷ Qualitative approaches which rely on case studies, ranging from right-wing extremist Anders Breivik in Norway to the jihadist Hofstad Group in the Netherlands, note the importance of a period prior to violence, which includes the adoption of extreme ideas.⁷⁸ Such efforts, as Paul Gill puts it, help us "get a sense of how long it takes to move through the gears from adopting a radical ideology toward attack planning and ultimately carrying out the attack".⁷⁹

The study of radicalisation has come on leaps and bounds thanks in part to data-driven approaches, some of which focus on identifying 'pre-attack' or 'antecedent' behaviours, with most analysts regarding the attacks as ideologically motivated, while not relying on ideology as the sole driver.⁸⁰ Some of the strongest work comes from criminology, and one of

the most empirically rich of such studies comes from Gill, Horgan and Deckert, who looked at 19 cases of lone-actor terrorism in the US and Europe, including extreme-right and jihadist terrorism, and concluded that there was an observable process in all cases:

A wide range of activities and experiences preceded lone actors' plots or events... Lone-actor terrorists regularly engaged in a detectable and observable range of activities with a wider pressure group, social movement, or terrorist organization. Lone-actor terrorist events were rarely sudden and impulsive.⁸¹

While there is "no uniform profile of lone-actor terrorists", and there were key differences between extreme-right and jihadist lone-actors, including age range and education levels, one characteristic which they all shared was commitment to an ideology, from which their motivation to act violently partially derived. Relatedly, Gill et al. found that:

A fifth (20.2%) of the total sample converted to a religion before engaging or planning to engage in an event. Not all of those who converted were necessarily religiously motivated offenders, however. Some...were motivated by right-wing ideologies. Others...were single-issue offenders. Of the al-Qaeda-inspired offenders, religious converts account for 37.3%. The religiosity of 29.4% of the al-Qaeda-inspired lone-actor terrorists noticeably increased in the build up to their terrorist event or planned event.

76. Bouhana, "The Moral Ecology of Extremism," 9

77. Ryan Scrivens, Thomas W. Wojciechowski, and Richard Frank, "Examining the Developmental Pathways of Online Posting Behavior in Violent Right-Wing Extremist Forums," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2020); Lieven Pouwels and Nele Schils, "Differential Online Exposure to Extremist Content and Political Violence: Testing the Relative Strength of Social Learning and Competing Perspectives," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28 (1) (2016); Paul R. Baines, Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessy, Kevin Moloney, Barry Richards, Sara Butler, Mark Gill, "The dark side of political marketing: Islamist propaganda, Reversal Theory and British Muslims," *European Journal of Marketing* 44 (3-4) (2010); Daniel Koehler, "Right-Wing Extremist Radicalization Processes: The Formers' Perspective," *Journal Exit-Deutschland* (2014); Simon Copeland and Sarah Marsden, "Right-Wing Terrorism: Pathways and Protective Factors," CREST, 2020.

78. Bart Schuurman, Quirine Eijkman, and Edwin Bakker, "A History of the Hofstadgroup," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8 (4) (2014); Ruud Peters, "Dutch Extremist Islamism: Van Gogh's Murderer and His Ideas," in Rik Coolsaet (ed.), *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge: European and American Experiences*. (Ashgate, 2011); Jacob Ravndal, "A Post-Trial Profile of Anders Behring Breivik," *CTC Sentinel* 5 (10) (2012).

79. Paul Gill, "Towards a Scientific Approach to Identifying and Understanding Indicators of Radicalization and Terrorist Intent: Eight Key Problems," *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 2 (3-4) (2015).

80. Noemie Bouhana, Emily Corner, Paul Gill, and Bart Schuurman, "Background and Preparatory Behaviours of Right-Wing Extremist Lone Actors: A Comparative Study," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12 (6) (2018); Paul Gill and John Horgan, and Paige Deckert, "Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 59 (2) (2014).

81. Gill et al., "Bombing Alone."

Also crucial to note, in the context of Prevent, is the above study's finding that, in the majority of cases, individuals who knew the would-be lone-actor terrorists had some idea of the potential threat they posed: "in the time leading up to most lone-actor terrorist events, other people generally knew about the offender's grievance, extremist ideology, views, and/or intent to engage in violence." More specifically, "in a similar number of cases (79%), others were aware of the individual's commitment to a specific extremist ideology. In 64% of cases, family and friends were aware of the individual's intent to engage in a terrorism-related activity because the offender verbally told them. In 58% of cases, other individuals possessed specific information about the lone-actor's research, planning, and/or preparation prior to the event itself."

The implications for Prevent of findings such as this point to the importance of a government-backed policy which puts mechanisms in place for those "other people" around budding extremists to seek assistance in stopping their friend, associate or family member who they believe may be planning to commit an act of violence. Not only would this help reduce lone-actor attacks, which currently constitute the majority of the terrorist threats in the UK, but it could also avoid the criminalisation of young, often misguided, British youth by waiting for them to commit a crime before intervening.

Kundnani's most valid critique of the radicalisation concept is that it focuses on the adoption of extreme ideas (so-called 'cognitive radicalisation'⁸²) and fails to convincingly explain why some people who hold extreme ideas move to violent action, pointing out that the vast majority of extremists do not become terrorists. This is undoubtedly a problem for the radicalisation field, and few who are part of it would claim to have 'cracked the code' and provided a complete explanation for why some individuals move from extreme ideas to violent action.

Kundnani notes, for example, that Wiktorowicz's theory is based on research of a group, al-Muhajiroun, which is not in itself a terrorist group but rather a terrorist supporting group and wider network with members who "are radical activists, not terrorists, a distinction that gets lost in the attempt to construct a model of 'radicalisation'".⁸³ In the years since Kundnani wrote this, however, there have been developments which undermine this argument, and bolster warnings of the role so-called non-violent extremist groups and ideas play in encouraging violence. Originally proscribed in 2006 for glorifying terrorism, the al-Muhajiroun network contains numerous members who have gone on to be involved in terrorism, including joining ISIS.⁸⁴ According to one recent study of 113 members of the movement, 20 successfully carried out terror attacks, 50 attempted to carry out terror attacks, 19 are—or attempted to become—foreign fighters, and 17 committed crimes in the pursuit of Islamist extremism.⁸⁵ Al-Muhajiroun expert Michael Kenney also found in his research on the group that, while many members of the network were involved only in the dissemination and proselytizing of extreme ideas, "its supporters have been implicated in political violence, including terrorist attacks within and outside Great Britain", and that, since 2014, there has been an "exodus of numerous activists to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)".⁸⁶

Beyond al-Muhajiroun, studies often find that involvement in non-violent extremist activism is an important pre-cursor to violence. Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, for example, argue involvement in violence is not a sudden and unexpected leap but part of a process which often involves extreme but non-violent activism: "Typically, an individual's progress into a terrorist group is slow and gradual, with many smaller tests before being trusted in more important missions, and with many non-violent tasks before being asked to use gun or bomb."⁸⁷ Despite this, they still make a distinction between

82. For more, see: Peter Neumann, "The trouble with radicalization," *International Affairs* 89 (4) (2013).

83. Kundnani, "Radicalisation."

84. Alternative names for proscribed organisation Al Muhajiroun, HM Government, June 2014, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/alternative-names-for-proscribed-organisation-al-muhajiroun>

85. "Anjem Choudhary's Ties to Extremists," Counter Extremism Project, <https://www.counterextremism.com/anjem-choudhary-ties-to-extremists>. Figures correct at the time of publication.

86. Michael Kenney, "What is to be done about al-Muhajiroun?: Containing the emigrants in a democratic society," Commission on Countering Extremism, 2019, 1.

87. Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20 (3) (2008).

radicalisation of opinion and radicalisation of behaviour, noting that there is not necessarily a clear link between the former and the latter. In their careful and well-rounded definition of radicalisation, they describe it as “changes in beliefs, feelings and behaviour in the direction of increased support for a political conflict”. Radicalisation does not simply have one meaning, then, and “can involve the movement of individuals and groups to legal and nonviolent political action (activism) or to illegal and violent political action (radicalism)”.⁸⁸

Criticisms of radicalisation are often too general, and ignore vast quantities of research which offer far more nuanced perspectives than both the critics claim and what they offer as an alternative, namely the monocausal approach noted above. The claim that radicalisation does not explain violent action, which informs the basis of much of the opposition to the study of radicalisation and therefore Prevent itself, is an important critique, but one which misses two key points.

First, it ignores the fact that the theoretical frameworks which have often been used as the basis for many studies of radicalisation have made significant contributions to the understanding of how and why individuals move from ideas to violence. While it is beyond the remit of this review to detail the social movement theory literature, factors include the actions of states in creating conditions which lead to grievances that can be exploited and framed by charismatic recruiters and established recruitment networks in specific geographic regions. The work of Donatella della Porta has made a particularly influential contribution to the understanding of how various factors combine to cause ‘violent mobilisation’.

In addition, this approach is based on established knowledge of how socialisation can influence behaviour, including involvement in violence. To present or frame the study of radicalisation as a racist conspiracy among scholars and Western states that is intended to downplay the state’s role in pushing people to terrorism ignores a wealth of advanced data-driven and theoretical approaches which inform the study of why individuals become terrorists,

and which today focuses as much on right-wing as it does on Islamist extremism.

1.2 The Pre-Criminal Space and Restricting Free Speech

Due to its very nature, the Prevent approach often operates in the ‘pre-crime space’, a term which is used in official Prevent documents, in particular those relating to the Prevent Duty.⁸⁹ Prevent and the Channel project are, in effect, government interventions into the lives of citizens who have yet to commit a crime. In some cases, individuals become involved in Prevent and Channel after expressing ideas which are associated with known extremist groups. There are obvious civil liberty and human rights concerns here, which have been articulated in detail by a range of scholars and activists, some of which are cited below. While involvement in Channel is entirely voluntary and does not entail a criminal record, critics remain suspicious of its methods and the underlying aims of Prevent.

Charlotte Heath-Kelly, in her analysis of Prevent between 2007 and 2017, warns that “with no crime scene evidence or materials demonstrating preparation for a criminal act, the evidence underwriting arrest is replaced by the role of suspicion”.⁹⁰ Due to the post-War on Terror climate, and focus on Islamism and jihadism, she argues that this suspicion is disproportionately directed at minority communities, especially British Muslims, citing early policies of Prevent 1, which prioritised funding for areas with a 5% or higher Muslim population. According to Heath-Kelly, the Prevent Duty’s legal requirement that official institutions take part in Prevent work further reinforced these problems, because it “securitises all bodies as potentially vulnerable to contamination by extremism (even if Muslim and brown bodies still make up the majority of referrals made to the police)”.⁹¹

In a 2016 report critical of Prevent, the Open Society used interviews with 17 individuals who had been subject to Prevent measures to make a number

88. Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalkenko, *Friction: How radicalisation happens to them and us*, (Oxford University Press, 2011).

89. See for example: “NHS England prevent training and competencies framework,” 2015.

90. Charlotte Heath-Kelly, “The geography of pre-criminal space: epidemiological imaginations of radicalisation risk in the UK Prevent Strategy, 2007–2017,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 10 (2) (2017).

91. Heath-Kelly, “The geography of pre-criminal space.”

of claims about the human rights threat posed by the strategy. It argued that:

...even though Prevent does not entail an arrest record or imprisonment, the case studies...demonstrate that Prevent with its labels of “pre-criminality” and “vulnerability to being drawn into terrorism” is perceived by its targets – who have not committed any crime – as extremely intimidating, humiliating and stigmatising. Indeed, being targeted by the government under the rubric of counterterrorism is likely to be inherently stigmatising for someone who engaged in no criminal activity.⁹²

Here, the report concedes that Prevent does not criminalise but rather has been felt, on some occasions, to be stigmatising to those who have been in contact with authorities via Prevent. This study is among the most comprehensive critiques of Prevent available, and is a good source for accessing a collection of the most popular criticisms of the programme. However, its findings, which make a number of sweeping claims, are based on interviews with 17 individuals who, it says, were previously subject to Prevent and had a range of negative experiences. Not only is this a very small sample size, but there is also a possibility of selection bias here – the Open Society is known for holding a negative view of Prevent, and it is not clear if effort was made to find people with positive or neutral experiences of the programme.

Indeed, when looked at alongside polling with larger sample sizes, there are some discrepancies between this study and how British Muslims more widely view Prevent. In 2016, the think tank Policy Exchange commissioned a poll of 3,000 British Muslims, which found that they were largely supportive of counter-radicalisation measures: “British Muslims support a range of counter-measures, includ-

ing those that require government intervention... they are comfortable with state-led intervention”.⁹³ This conclusion echoed earlier research which, while finding that British Muslims felt stigmatised and unfairly associated with terrorism, concluded that Prevent “hardly featured in the focus groups; where only a few Muslim participants had heard of Prevent, non-Muslims had not come across it”.⁹⁴ Far from being the ‘toxic brand’ among British Muslims, which Prevent detractors claim it is, 2019 polling found that, once explained, its basic premise appears to be widely supported, while the majority of those polled do not have any awareness of it.⁹⁵

While the term ‘pre-crime’ carries some sinister and dystopian connotations, and is presented by some Prevent critics in such terms,⁹⁶ crime prevention efforts have been employed in Western democracies for generations in order to confront a range of criminal behaviours. The only unique component of Prevent is that it is applying this principle to terrorism, a form of crime and political violence which few would disagree requires some sort of official preventative effort.

Connected to concerns about pre-crime are claims that Prevent, and in particular the Prevent Duty on university campuses, is also an effort to restrict the speech of citizens critical of the state, especially the voices of British Muslims.⁹⁷ Many academics and campaigners have levelled this claim at Prevent, and in 2019, a report by the Higher Education Policy Institute referred to it as the “single biggest threat” to free speech on UK university campuses. While the study garnered headlines across the British press, upon closer inspection it is an almost exclusively polemical piece of work, with little in terms of original data. Referring to the government’s actions as “Trumpian”, the author, Corey Stoughton, argues that the Prevent Duty’s requirement that universities take steps to mitigate the risks around hosting extremist speakers on their campuses has an

92. Eroding Trust: The UK’s Prevent Counter-Extremism Strategy in Health and Education,” Open Society, 2016, 34.

93. Martyn Frampton, David Goodhart, and Khalid Mahmood, “Unsettled Belonging: A survey of Britain’s Muslim communities,” Policy Exchange, 2016.

94. Tufyal Choudhury and Helen Fenwick, “The impact of counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities,” Durham University/Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011, ix.

95. Jon Clements, Manon Roberts, and Dan Forman, “Listening to British Muslims: policing, extremism and Prevent”, Crest Advisory, March 2020, p. 11, available at: <https://www.crestadvisory.com/post/listening-to-british-muslims-policing-extremism-and-prevent>

96. “The Science of Pre-Crime: The Secret ‘Radicalisation’ Study Underpinning Prevent,” Cage, 2016.

97. “Eroding Trust”; Mathew Guest, Alison Scott-Baumann, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, Shuruq Naguib, Aisha Phoenix, Yenn Lee, and Tarek Al-Baghal, “Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: perceptions and challenges,” Durham University, SOAS, Coventry University and Lancaster University, 2020.

“actual effect of chilling the exercise of free expression”, especially that of ethnic minority students.⁹⁸

While there is little evidence of universities targeting and restricting the speech of British Muslim students, polling has shown that there is a perception among some that they are subject to suspicion and, as a result, modify their behaviour and how they express their political views. A report conducted by SOAS, based on polling of over 2,000 students from a range of religious backgrounds, found that Prevent was seen as discriminatory towards Muslims. However, it also found that Prevent had “limited visibility” among the majority of students and little impact on their lives, but that the strategy “appears to have the effect of discouraging free speech within universities”.⁹⁹

Although it is difficult to determine precisely why this view exists among British Muslims, there are two likely factors. The first is the current Prevent definition of extremism discussed above, and its implementation via the Prevent Duty. Quantitative research on this has often found that references to extremists as being those who do not hold British values can appear exclusionary, especially if observers are under a misapprehension that such a definition is what determines who can and cannot speak on a university campus.¹⁰⁰ Polling and interviews related to the Prevent Duty of around 300 education professionals and Prevent staff, for example, found that the biggest concern among them was the question of British values:

the emphasis placed on the supposed *Britishness* of these values was repeatedly identified as unnecessary and potentially problematic. Specifically, respondents expressed concern that this framing of values played into societal narratives of exclusion, superiority, fixed cultural boundaries and a them-and-us politics that could too easily play into the hands of the far right and others who prosper from sowing division.¹⁰¹

However, the same research also found what the authors described as unexpectedly positive views of the Duty among school and college staff (this did not, however, include university staff, who are likely to have more negative views). While there was “some unease about the Duty”, their survey found more agreement than disagreement with the statement “the Prevent Duty on schools and colleges is a proportionate response to a clearly identified problem”.¹⁰²

Alongside this, it is possible that the campaigning efforts of anti-Prevent campaign groups such as Cage have successfully shaped this negative perception, even among many British Muslim students who have never had any personal experiences with Prevent. It is important to note, however, that Prevent referrals made based on the expression of possible extreme views at universities or other institutions covered by the Prevent Duty do not criminalise the individual referred, nor do they stop an individual from expressing their views. In the minority of cases where referrals are taken up by Prevent authorities, involvement by the individual in Prevent also remains voluntary. Because many Prevent referrals are made on the basis of an individual expressing extreme ideas, the assumption is often that the programme will be focused on changing their beliefs. In truth, however, Channel is more concerned with mitigating the circumstances which increase the likelihood that the individual will be involved in violence, and removing the opportunities for them to move from ideas to action, such as contact with fellow extremists and access to terrorist materials.

It is crucial that involvement in Prevent and Channel remains voluntary, and that the involvement of the police or other law enforcement is avoided as much as possible. Indeed, given legitimate concerns about state interference with the expression of ideas, there may be a need to further separate police activity from Prevent and Channel work, particularly when it comes to referrals from educational institutions. In the year ending 31 March 2021, the Police made the highest number of Prevent referrals.¹⁰³

98. Corey Stoughton, “Free Speech and Censorship on Campus,” HEPi, 2019, 21.

99. Guest et al. “Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: perceptions and challenges.”

100. Babs Anderson, “The securitisation of values: early years leaders’ experiences of the implementation of the prevent strategy,” *Ethics and Education* 15 (4) (2020).

101. Joel Busher, Tufyal Choudhury, and Paul Thomas, “The Introduction of the Prevent Duty into Schools and Colleges: Stories of Continuity and Change,” in Joel Busher and Lee Jerome (ed.), *The Prevent Duty in Education* (Springer, 2020), 38.

102. Busher et al., 3.

103. “Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent programme: England and Wales, April 2020 to March 2021,” HM Government, 2021.

More generally, governments and societies will need to balance the need to prevent terror attacks and steer potential extremists away from criminal action while protecting civil liberties. Other such pre-crime initiatives exist, and with far less controversy. The kind of youth intervention work upon which Channel is largely based, which has been used for decades to steer youth away from drugs, gang involvement and crime, is widely celebrated and accepted as an important social contribution. If Prevent continues to improve its practices and learn from mistakes of the past, such as lack of transparency and a disproportionate focus on Muslims, it may also be able to be seen in a similar light, perhaps even by some of its current detractors.

2. Safeguard and support those most at risk of radicalisation through early intervention, identifying them and offering support.

In the current version of Prevent, while it still operates in the pre-crime space, attention has shifted to ‘safeguarding’ vulnerable individuals from becoming radicalised and potentially involved in terrorism. The key method used in pursuit of this aim is the Channel project and the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF).

2.1 Suspect Communities

The implementation of such pre-crime measures, and the early focus on British Muslim communities for funding under Prevent 1, has led to allegations that Prevent has turned British Muslims into a ‘suspect community’, defined by Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton as:

a sub-group of the population that is singled out for state attention as being ‘problematic’. Specifically in terms of policing, individuals may be targeted, not necessarily as a result of suspected wrong doing, but simply because of their presumed membership to that sub-group. Race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, accent, dress, political ideology or any combination of these factors may serve to delineate the sub-group.¹⁰⁴

The majority of the literature which addresses this question seems in agreement on Prevent treating British Muslims as suspect communities, and that Prevent has followed historical trends of fear-mongering and persecution against a foreign ‘enemy within’.¹⁰⁵ Anti-Prevent activism has also rallied around this concept, with organisations such as Cage arguing that Prevent “views and criminalises whole communities as suspect”, and student activist groups campaigning against Prevent on campuses under the banner of “Preventing Prevent” with the slogan “students not suspects”.¹⁰⁶

Another prominent anti-Prevent academic, Tarek Younis, has written recently that Prevent’s pre-criminal nature is designed to impinge upon the human rights of Muslims (in particular, free speech) and is the result of institutional racism. He argues that Prevent’s focus on mental health support for extremists and potential terrorists is designed to “evade the charge of racism in the management of Muslim political agency”.¹⁰⁷ The claims he makes, however, are largely theoretical, and are based on the assumption that efforts to prevent terrorism among Muslims are mostly the result of a racialisation of Muslims “by which appearance as well as expressions attributed to Muslim bodies and Islam are framed within a so-

104. Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton, “From the ‘Old’ to the ‘New’ Suspect Community: Examining the Impacts of Recent UK Counter-Terrorist Legislation,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 49 (5) (2009);

105. Pantazis and Pemberton, “From the ‘Old’ to the ‘New’ Suspect Community: Examining the Impacts of Recent UK Counter-Terrorist Legislation”; Tahir Abbas and Imran Awan, “The Limits of UK Counterterrorism Policy: Implications for Islamophobia and Far Right Extremism,” *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 4 (3) (2015); Joel David Taylor, “‘Suspect Categories’, Alienation and Counterterrorism: Critically Assessing PREVENT in the UK,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32 (4) (2020); Stefano Bonino, “Prevent-ing Muslimness in Britain: The Normalisation of Exceptional Measures to Combat Terrorism,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 33 (3) (2013); Imran Awan, “‘I Am a Muslim Not an Extremist’: How the Prevent Strategy Has Constructed a “Suspect” Community,” *Politics & Policy* 40 (6) (2012); Charlotte Heath-Kelly, “Counter-Terrorism and the Counterfactual: Producing the ‘Radicalisation’ Discourse and the UK PREVENT Strategy,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15 (3) (2012); Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton, “Restating the case for the ‘suspect community’: A Reply to Greer,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 51 (6) (2011).

106. “The Last Stand: Shawcross and the Prevent Review,” Cage, February 2021; National Union of Students, “Preventing Prevent,” <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/preventing-prevent-we-are-students-not-suspects>.

107. Tarek Younis, “The psychologisation of counter-extremism: unpacking PREVENT,” *Race and Class* 63 (3) (2021).

cial order which sees these as backward, foreign and threatening”.¹⁰⁸

While there is little doubt that racism fuels much anti-Muslim activism in the West, the evidence that it drives Prevent is thin, and Younis struggles to move beyond the theoretical and give concrete examples. One piece of evidence he relies upon is Prevent training materials, which attempt to explain radicalisation (a concept he considers as inherently anti-Muslim) in psychological terms. Highlighting a section of the training which identifies changes of behaviour from ‘the norm’, such as a sudden change in appearance, he argues, again theoretically, that “the measure of deviation from this ‘norm’ is inherently a racialised practice”.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the very act of noticing drastic changes in an individual away from their ‘normal’ behaviour is, in Younis’s view, evidence of racism. He also unconvincingly dismisses Prevent’s recent interest in the extreme-right as an attempt to “revamp their image”, rather than the more likely explanation that it is evidence of an adjustment within Prevent to reflect changing threats on the ground.

Prevent’s generalised language on radicalisation, which lacks specific references to any particular group, and its focus on both Islamist and right-wing extremism, is also, in his view, evidence of intentional ‘colourblindness’, a term often used to explain the lack of references to race and its centrality as an effort to undermine and erase the reality of racism in the West. While this may well be a problem within certain elements of Western society, the claim that this is the primary explanation for Prevent’s inclusion of an all-encompassing and non-specific understanding of radicalisation and extremism is unconvincing and not the most likely explanation. It is more plausible that Prevent uses such general language precisely to avoid targeting or stigmatising any specific group.

Among the few exceptions to this near-unanimous negative view of Prevent and suspect communities within academia is Steven Greer’s 2010 study,

in which he argues that such claims are “built on a series of analytical, methodological, conceptual, logical, empirical, evidential and interpretive errors”.¹¹⁰ Writing in direct response to one of the first academic papers to put forward the suspect communities thesis, by Pantazis and Pemberton, Greer acknowledges the existence of anti-Muslim sentiment in the UK, but questions the claim that this is institutionalised by Prevent. Among his criticisms of the work is that its claims that Prevent is driven by anti-Muslim sentiment have no evidential basis, and instead are either theoretical or purely speculative. These claims, he argues, are also often part of a wider argument that the terrorist threat to the UK is in no way connected to violent Islamism, and any suggestion to the contrary is driven mainly by anti-Muslim sentiment. Indeed, as noted above, in much of the critical literature on Prevent, there is a denial of the Islamist ideological underpinnings of al-Qaeda and ISIS-related terrorism.

Another exception to the rule of academic work attacking Prevent as being racist and intentionally creating suspect communities comes from Jonathan Hurlow, Simon Wilson, and David James, who argue that, while attacking Prevent ‘loudly’ on this basis is popular, there are many “knee-jerk criticisms which have not stood up to scrutiny”.¹¹¹ Among the topics they cover are the negative media stories about Prevent referrals of innocent school children, often from ethnic minority backgrounds, who have been unfairly stigmatised by their teachers and the police. The most well-known (and misunderstood) of these is the so-called terrorist house incident, in which a schoolboy in Lancashire apparently misspelled ‘terraced’ and was referred to the police.¹¹² The story received much attention in the national media, and has since been used by anti-Prevent academics and campaigners as a supposed example of the scare-mongering and paranoid nature of Prevent. However, it was later revealed that that referral was made on the basis of concerns over possible physical abuse at the child’s home, and was unrelated to terrorism.

108. Younis, “The psychologisation of counter-extremism: unpacking PREVENT.”

109. Younis, “The psychologisation of counter-extremism: unpacking PREVENT.”

110. Steven Greer, “Anti-Terrorist Laws and the United Kingdom’s ‘Suspect Muslim Community’: A Reply to Pantazis and Pemberton,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 50 (6) (2010).

111. Jonathan Hurlow, Simon Wilson, and David V. James, “Protesting loudly about Prevent is popular but is it informed and sensible?,” *B7Psych Bulletin* 40 (3) (2018).

112. Caroline Mortimer, “Schoolboy questioned by Lancashire police because he said he lived in a ‘terrorist house,’” *The Independent*, 20 January 2016.

The boy had, in fact, written a fictional story which included the line “I hate it when my uncle hits me”.¹¹³

Relatedly, Lord Anderson of Ipswich, the then Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, warned in 2016 that, while Prevent must be monitored independently, “the problems [with Prevent] have been exaggerated or misrepresented (as may have been the case in the “terrorist house” incident), either inadvertently or in pursuance of a political agenda”.¹¹⁴

It is also worth noting here that, while at times poorly thought out and badly executed (particularly in its earlier phases), Prevent represents the biggest soft-power counter-terrorism effort in history. At its core, it is based on using state funds and support to avoid the creation of young (often ethnic minority) criminals. In other Western nations, in particular the United States, alternative methods are currently preferred to stop budding terrorists, and this often involves informant and sting operations which allow a crime to be committed, albeit in a controlled fashion. In addition, early iterations of Prevent sought to strengthen local Muslim groups by providing them with public funding, in some cases even directly funding openly Islamist groups.

Nonetheless, there is little doubt that, particularly during Prevent 1, more effort could have been made to avoid making British Muslims feel unfairly and disproportionately targeted, nor was there much thought given to how the approach offered plenty of ammunition to those with an interest in the failure of Prevent. As is stated in a 2007 DCLG Pathfinder Fund document: “Our aim is to develop resilient British Muslim communities as part of our response to this threat. The fund will therefore be focused on local authorities with sizeable Muslim communities. As a starting point, authorities with populations of 5% or more should be considered for funding.”¹¹⁵

These 46 words have likely done more damage to the reputation of Prevent among British Muslims, and created more Prevent sceptics, than any other aspect of, or official pronouncement from, Prevent.

It provided one of the foundations for the ‘suspect communities’ claim, and continues to tarnish the strategy’s reputation today, despite the fact that, since 2011, Prevent has both stopped funding via DCLG and now prioritises boroughs on the basis of the amount of terrorist activity taking place within them, regardless of ethno-religious make up.

Alongside this reputational problem are the statistics of Prevent referrals which, until recently, showed a bias towards British Muslims. Some of the first sets of statistics available, which cover 2015 to 2016, showed that, out of over 7,000 referrals, 65% were related to Islamist extremism, compared to 10% for extreme-right extremism.¹¹⁶ In the following year, this proportion remained similar, with 61% for Islamist extremism compared to 16% extreme right.¹¹⁷ In recent years, however, these figures have shifted significantly, perhaps due to a growing perception of an increased threat from the extreme right, which has emerged over recent years (indeed, the early focus on Muslims may also be mainly due to the higher level of threat emanating from jihadists compared to the extreme right). The latest figures, for the year 2019 to 2020, show that referrals for Islamist extremism made up 24% of the overall number, compared to 21% for the extreme right. While critics will point out that, in proportion to the overall UK population, Muslims are still overrepresented in Prevent referrals, it is also clear that the strategy is far from being used to deliberately target Muslims, and is a genuine effort to combat terrorism, which is able to adapt and respond to real changes in the overall terrorism threat picture in the UK.

With both the shift in emphasis away from solely Islamist extremism and the changes in referral statistics seen in Prevent 2 and 3, some have suggested that those who continue to attack Prevent as discriminatory and misguided are focusing on what it was rather than what it has become today. Thomas, for example, suggests that “those original ‘Prevent 1’ controversies have significantly shaped public perceptions and criticisms of the very different content

113. Adam Withnall, “Lancashire Police say ‘terrorist house’ incident not about spelling mistake,” *The Independent*, 21 January 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/lancashire-police-say-terrorist-house-incident-not-about-spelling-mistake-a6824481.html>

114. David Anderson, “Supplementary written evidence submitted by David Anderson Q.C. (Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation) to Home Affairs Committee Countering Extremism Inquiry,” 2016, 29.

115. DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government) “Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder Fund: Guidance Note for Government Offices and Local Authorities in England,” HM Government, 2007.

116. “Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent programme: England and Wales, April 2015 to March 2016,” HM Government, 2017.

117. “Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent programme: England and Wales, April 2016 to March 2017,” HM Government, 2018.

and focus of ‘Prevent 2’ and its post-2015 phase of the implementation of the Prevent Duty”.¹¹⁸

Despite these changes to Prevent, the 2015 introduction of the Prevent Duty added fuel to the flames of anti-Prevent campaigning. Placing public institutions, in particular educational ones, in the position of conducting anti-extremism work did not appear – at the beginning at least – to improve the situation nor assuage criticism of the strategy. Firstly, while there was significant jump in Prevent referrals, the proportion of those that were actually taken up as Channel cases was very low. In the first year after the Duty came in, referrals to Prevent tripled to over 7,000 yet only 5% (378) of Prevent referrals were adopted as a Channel case.¹¹⁹ While the conversion rate of Prevent referral to Channel case – arguably an indicator of the ‘quality’ of the referral – has increased slowly over time, rising to 14% last year,¹²⁰ there is clearly room for improvement. In the three years prior to the Duty coming in, annual education referrals being discussed by a Channel panel were in single figures or tens, with majorities being taken up as cases. The two years following the Duty saw a sharp fall in Channel panel discussions being converted into actual cases, although, as with referral conversion rates overall, the situation has improved slowly over time,¹²¹ suggesting that the sector is becoming better accustomed to its Prevent responsibilities.

Related to this, in an interview with the Open Society, Sir David Omand, who conceived the original Prevent strategy, warned that placing a legal duty upon teachers threatens to make the problem worse and more complex: “If... you impose a legal duty on teachers to report signs of radical thinking amongst

their students then teachers may feel obliged to report to the authorities, and thus start an official process over every minor adolescent rebellious outburst, matters that really could be better handled by them on the spot.” In the same interview, he also suggested that creating a statutory duty meant a potential loss of the moral high ground, which could lead to a reduced buy-in from the very institutions whose assistance is required by Prevent, “Because if you can persuade people of why it benefits everyone to do what you consider best you will get a more positive response than you would if you simply instructed them on what you want them to do”.¹²²

While the strategy still struggles to gain the trust of the minority of British Muslims who are aware of it,¹²³ the polling discussed earlier suggests that the vast majority have little interaction with or knowledge of Prevent, and are generally supportive, in principle, of government interventions to prevent violent radicalisation. As a result, there remains ample opportunity for Prevent to learn from its past mistakes here.

Among the population of professionals who work in institutions subject to the Duty, the view is also mixed. As noted above, a poll of over 300 school and college staff and Prevent practitioners on their views of the Prevent Duty found that their main concern was with the potentially divisive nature of promoting British values, but were supportive of the Duty overall. A clearer picture is needed for the views of university staff, although it is likely that, due to the more complex and political nature of the university environment, in which everyone in question is an adult, there will be more negative views of the Duty. With this in mind, and given that one of the driving

118. Thomas, “Britain’s Prevent Strategy: Always Changing, Always the Same?”

119. Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent programme: England and Wales, April 2015 to March 2016,” HM Government, 2017.

120. In 2015/16, 378 out of 7631 (5%) Prevent referrals were adopted as a Channel case. It was 338 out of 6093 (6%) in 2016/17; 383 out of 7318 (5%) in 2017/18; 558 out of 5737 (10%) in 2018/2019; 692 out of 6287 (11%) in 2019/20; and 688 out of 4915 (14%) in 2020/21. Table 1: Sector of referral of those referred, discussed at a Channel panel and adopted as a Channel case, 2015/16 to 2020/21, in Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme England and Wales, April 2020 to March 2021: data tables, HM Government, 2021.

121. Previous Channel data from 2012 to 2016 published by the Home Office in 2017 showed that in 2012/13, 5 out of 7 (71%) education referrals that were discussed at a Channel panel went on to be adopted as a case. In 2013/14, it was 6 out of 11 (55%); and 58 out of 98 (59%) in 2014/15. Table C.03: Sector of referral of individuals discussed at a Channel panel and who received Channel support by financial year, in Annex B: Previous Channel data, April 2012 to March 2016, Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent programme: England and Wales, April 2015 to March 2016,” HM Government, 2017. Home Office Prevent data showed that 137 out of 319 (43%) education referrals that were discussed at a Channel panel in 2015/16 went on to be adopted as a case. It was 126 out of 393 (32%) in 2016/17; 167 out of 489 (34%) in 2017/18; 215 out of 484 (44%) in 2018/19; 219 out of 436 (50%) in 2019/2020; and 198 out of 332 (60%) in 2020/21. Table 1: Sector of referral of those referred, discussed at a Channel panel and adopted as a Channel case, 2015/16 to 2020/21, in Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme England and Wales, April 2020 to March 2021: data tables, HM Government, 2021.

122. Sir David Omand interviewed in “Eroding Trust,” The Open Society

123. Choudary and Fenwick found that Prevent “was a considerable area of concern in interviews with those who work in Muslim community organisations and civil society.” Choudary and Fenwick, “The impact of counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities,” ix.

forces behind the implementation of the duty was the safeguarding of British school-aged children, it may be worth considering paring down the Duty so that it applies to schools but not higher education establishments.

2.2 Prevent Funding and Counter-Messaging

While the vast majority of Prevent funding for local groups has ceased, partly in response to the claim that Prevent 1 created suspect communities, it does continue today in a much more limited fashion. As noted earlier, the London Tigers continue to receive Prevent funding support. However, how this funding is contributing to the safeguarding of individuals from radicalisation is impossible to determine. There are no publicly available markers or measures by which Prevent determines the success or failure of such initiatives. Internally, audits do take place, and are likely undertaken by the MI5 Behavioural Sciences Unit (BSU) and OSCT's Analysis and Insight Team, but these remain hidden from the public.¹²⁴

According to London Tigers, its work has been a success, but it is not clear what measures it uses to determine this, and there is a lack of publicly available evidence demonstrating that it stops terrorism. Its "goals and objectives" are "to prevent the radicalisation of young people in the 16-25 age bracket". The organisation claims to do so through "intervention and community engagement", using a variety of means, including one-to-one mentoring and "facilitating workshops challenging extremist narratives". Its method for evaluating its success, while of some value, is not detailed enough, and the latest information available publicly is almost a decade old: "In 2012-13 the project met or exceeded all its goals, delivering 33 workshops and engaging with over 300 beneficiaries, helping over 75 obtain a qualification or training."¹²⁵ Assisting in providing qualifications and training can certainly be seen as part of preventing radicalisation by giving participants alternative options and a stake in society; however, this is not sufficient criteria for evaluating its success in preventing terrorism.

Alongside the lack of publicly available evaluations of Prevent work, there also remains a lack of transparency from Prevent about all of its ongoing funding activities, and much of the limited information that is available has been provided by anti-Prevent organisations, who suggest that such secretive efforts demonstrate the deceptive nature of the government and its attempts to develop "government sanctioned activism".¹²⁶ In 2017, Cage leaked a Home Office/OSCT document titled "Local Delivery Best Practice Catalogue: Prevent Strategy". In it are details of the funding provided to groups under the title "Not for public disclosure". While the nature of the funding and groups differs little from past efforts under Prevent, the secretive approach points to an ongoing problematic lack of transparency from Prevent.

Included in the document is information linking some public Muslim organisations engaged in so-called 'counter-messaging' with the government's Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU), suggesting that they are products of, or supported by, the unit. The role of RICU in Prevent also remains unclear and difficult to assess or evaluate, although it appears to be overseeing Prevent counter-messaging work. It is worth noting, however, that the approach of finding local partners to engage in grass-roots counter-messaging efforts is among the most recommended forms of counter-messaging.¹²⁷

Alternative approaches, such as broad-based, often online, counter-messaging campaigns which come directly from the government, are arguably the least effective, although it is unclear if Prevent engages in this. As media scholar Christina Archetti notes, the availability of a message does not necessarily equate to its reach or impact. She also warns that there remains a lack of understanding of how propaganda and strategic communications influence individuals, and thus a rigorous analytical framework through which to empirically analyse success and failure of counter-narrative campaigns remains elusive.

Many counter-narrative campaigns also ignore the fact that narratives are socially constructed. In order to achieve some level of resonance, they

124. Interview with Prevent practitioner, London, January 2021.

125. "Strong Cities Network – Member Case Study: London Tigers," Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

126. "Leaked government document names 'vetted' organisations in receipt of £1.2 million in PREVENT funding," Cage, 3 February 2017.

127. For a useful overview of this see Ben Lee, "Grassroots counter messaging in the UK," CREST, 6 April 2017, available at: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/grassroots-counter-messaging-uk/>.

must be rooted within the social environment. Local networks are therefore required for dissemination; a “constellation of relationships”, according to Archetti, ensures that messages do not exist in a space devoid of meaning and context.¹²⁸ When developing counter-narratives, agencies must therefore be acutely aware of the “layered, asynchronous effects” which “will be difficult to coordinate and will involve multiple agents of action”.¹²⁹ Such networks would aim to diminish the agents and ‘norm entrepreneurs’ within their own borders, as identified by Dina Al Raffie, who act as effective support structures for jihadist and Islamist narratives.¹³⁰ While it seems logical that some official effort be made to counter the narratives of extremists, it is still unclear what difference being exposed to such materials makes. In one of the only studies of its kind, Donald Holbrook analysed the extremist materials found in possession by 10 convicted UK terrorists, and found that, in most cases, they were also in possession of counter-narrative materials that had little to no impact on their radicalisation process.¹³¹

Counter-messaging or counter-narratives form part of many counter-radicalisation programmes in the West, but their utility and effectiveness remain in question. Like other Prevent-funded efforts, their success and impact are very difficult to evaluate, mostly due to their nature, but also because of the current lack of transparency about how they operate and are evaluated by the state.¹³² As a result, how effectively Prevent employs this emerging and inexact method of combating radicalisation remains something of a mystery.

2.3 Measuring Vulnerability, the ERG22+ and VAF

The question of both defining and measuring vulnerability is one of the most pressing challenges

facing Prevent. At present, a number of vulnerability indicators described in Prevent guidance are vague and lack clear connections to violent radicalisation. These include “people with mental health issues or learning disabilities”, religious converts who are “less well-informed about their faith”, and “young offenders and people vulnerable to offending”.¹³³

This lack of specificity and clarity may account for the high numbers of Prevent referrals (particularly from the education sector) which are not adopted as Channel cases. In the year between 2020 and 2021, of the 4915 total referrals made to Prevent, just 688 (14%, or 1 in 7) were taken up as cases. In the two years beforehand it was 11% and 10% respectively. This suggests that Prevent is casting a very wide net, and may not be working as efficiently as it can.¹³⁴ Many of these referrals not taken up may have a more appropriate referral or support mechanism related directly to mental health or other social services, rather than extremism and terrorism. Referring so many cases which are possibly unrelated to extremism in any serious way risks further damaging the image of Prevent as a policy which securitises the state’s relationship with its citizens.

In their analysis of vulnerability indicators in lone-actor terrorists, Emily Corner, Noemie Bouhana, and Paul Gill address the vagueness of some of the Prevent vulnerability indicators, arguing that “this conceptualisation suffers from a lack of specificity as to what the concept of ‘vulnerability’ incorporates”.¹³⁵ They also note that there seems to be a lack of clarity in what the difference is between a ‘vulnerable person’, which can include a wide range of people, and a person who is ‘vulnerable to radicalisation’. Instead, they suggest a more targeted approach using established theoretical approaches from within criminology, including Situational Action Theory (SAT), which views and analyses acts of crime as the result of a mix of dispositional factors

128. Christina Archetti, “Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalisation in the Digital Age,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9 (5) (2015)

129. W.D. Casebeer, and J.A. Russell, “Storytelling and Terrorism: Towards a Comprehensive ‘Counter-narrative Strategy,’” *Strategic Insights* 6 (3) (2005), 4.

130. D. Al Raffie, “Whose Hearts and Minds? Narratives and Counternarratives of Salafi Jihadism,” *Journal of Terrorism Research* 3 (2) (2012), 104

131. Donald Holbrook, “What Types of Media Do Terrorists Collect? An Analysis of Religious, Political, and Ideological Publications Found in Terrorism Investigations in the UK,” ICCT, 2017.

132. Kurt Braddock and John Horgan, “Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39 (5) (2016).

133. “Prevent Strategy,” 2011, 83, 87, 91.

134. Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme England and Wales, April 2020 to March 2021: data tables, HM Government, 2021

135. Emily Corner, Noemie Bouhana, and Paul Gill, “The Multifinality of Vulnerability Indicators in Lone-Actor Terrorism,” *Psychology Crime and Law* 25 (2) (2018).

(such as individual characteristics) and situational factors (such as the individual's environment), and measures vulnerability on this basis.

Others have observed that, in practice, this lack of specificity is found among Prevent practitioners' understanding of vulnerability to radicalisation. In their analysis of interviews with Prevent practitioners, Daniel Peddell, Marie Eyre, Michelle McManus, and Jim Bonworth found that their understanding of vulnerability to radicalisation was "generalised" and that "individuals were characterised as vulnerable because of a personal characteristic that rendered them unable to resist radical discourse, or the influence of the social context in which they lived, or both. All participants viewed mental health issues as a significant factor in personal vulnerability."¹³⁶ These findings, it should be noted, were based on interviews with five Prevent practitioners, so are not representative enough to take a final view on how vulnerability is understood among this population.

While mental illness may not be a specific enough indicator for vulnerability, research on lone-actor terrorists has consistently found that they suffer from mental health issues more than other terrorist actors.¹³⁷ Given that lone-actor terrorism is the most immediate terrorism challenge in the UK today, it certainly is appropriate for this to be taken into account by Prevent practitioners, but current referral statistics suggests that this may need to be done in a more targeted way.

One method which Prevent has used in order to overcome the challenge of determining who is simply 'vulnerable', and who is 'vulnerable to radicalisation', is the Vulnerability Assessment Framework

(VAF) described in the Overview and History section of this report. As already noted, the VAF is inspired by the ERG22+, developed by psychologists Lloyd and Dean to determine the future risks posed by British terrorism offenders in prison. The ERG and VAF are based on 22 indicators of vulnerability, which are broken down into the three domains of engagement, capability and intent.¹³⁸

For some academic and activist critics of Prevent, the ERG and VAF approaches are, like the wider Prevent agenda, rooted in racism and Islamophobia.¹³⁹ Some also argue that it is a system which is unscientific, and therefore unverifiable.¹⁴⁰ In addition, the ERG22+, on which the Channel VAF is based, was initially devised to determine the risk posed by terrorist offenders in British prisons, as opposed to members of the public who have committed no crimes, and whom Channel is concerned with.¹⁴¹ Most ERG assessments have been done on Islamist offenders, thus questioning its validity as a tool which can be applied to other types of extremists.¹⁴²

However, efforts are being made to validate the ERG, which have taken into account some of these limitations.¹⁴³ Thus far, these are largely government publications, however, and there has yet to be sufficient independent peer reviews due to the fact that the full ERG document has not been made publicly available. One study conducted by the Ministry of Justice analysed 171 ERG cases to determine the reliability of the tool and, in particular, the 'construct validity' of each of the 22 indicators, or how valid each of the 22 indicators were as tools used to infer intent on the basis of the observations of those conducting ERGs on offenders. Using a multi-dimen-

136. Daniel Peddell, Marie Eyre, Michelle McManus, and Jim Bonworth, "Influences and vulnerabilities in radicalised lone-actor terrorists: UK practitioner perspectives," *International Journal of Police Science and Management* 18 (2) (2016).

137. Ramon Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism* (Springer, 2012); Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Toward a Profile of Lone-Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual from Radical Opinion to Radical Action," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (1) (2014).

138. In full these are:

Engagement: 1. Need to redress injustice and express grievance; 2. Need to defend against threat; 3. Need for identity, meaning, belonging; 4. Need for status; 5. Need for excitement, comradeship or adventure; 6. Need for dominance; 7. Susceptibility to indoctrination; 8. Political/moral motivation; 9. Opportunistic involvement; 10. Family or friends support extremist offending; 11. Transitional periods; 12. Group influence and control; 13. Mental health.

Intent: 1. Over-identification with a group or cause; 2. Us and Them thinking; 3. Dehumanisation of the enemy; 4. Attitudes that justify offending; 5. Harmful means to an end; 6. Harmful end objectives.

Capability: 1. Individual knowledge, skills and competencies; 2. Access to networks, funding and equipment; 3. Criminal history.

139. Katy Sian, "Born radicals? Prevent, positivism, and 'race-thinking'," *Palgrave Communications* 3 (6) (2017); Qureshi, "PREVENT: Creating 'radicals' to strengthen anti-Muslim narratives," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8 (1).

140. "The Science of Pre-Crime: The Secret 'Radicalisation' Study Underpinning Prevent," Cage, 2016

141. Thomas, "Britain's Prevent Strategy: Always Changing, Always the Same?"

142. Beverly Powis, Kiran Randhawa-Horne, and Darren Bishopp, "The Structural Properties of the Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG22+): a structured formulation tool for extremist offenders," UK Ministry of Justice Analytical Series, 2019.

143. Beverly Powis, Kiran Randhawa-Horne, Ian Elliot, and Kimberley Woodhams, "Inter-rater reliability of the Extremism Risk Guidance," Ministry of Justice, 2019; Powis, Randhawa-Horne, and Bishopp, "The Structural Properties of the Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG22+)."

sional scaling analysis, it presented a mixed view of the 22 indicators, arguing that the ERG “offers promise as a framework for assessment using a structured professional judgement approach but would benefit from further development and refinement”. While it found that the 22 risk factors were “generally consistent in their measurement of the overall risk amongst extremist offenders”, some were too ambiguous to provide enough insight, in particular ‘mental health’ and ‘need for excitement, comradeship or adventure’.¹⁴⁴

This problem also extends to the VAF, which uses the same 22 indicators of the ERG, and which it appears has yet to be subject to any (publicly available) internal scientific verification. It has, however, been assessed by a number of scholars who, overall, have found it to be a useful, if flawed, mechanism for identifying individuals vulnerable to extremism and terrorism. While risk assessments for convicted criminals are an established practice, far less is known about applying this to extremism, and it is a very new and experimental field. As noted by Rita Augestad Knudsen in her paper on risk assessment practice in England and Wales:

Individual ‘radicalisation’- extremism - and terrorism-related risk assessment tools have become increasingly central instruments of counter-terrorism. The scholarship on such tools, however, is still in its infancy, and remains concentrated on methodological issues and on identifying the ‘best’ indicator list for carrying out assessments.¹⁴⁵

Currently, the VAF uses the same 22 vulnerabilities, and it seeks to identify those at risk of radicalisation, not necessarily violence, which suggests that a key indicator for terrorism risk in Channel work includes being cognitively radicalised but not (yet) acting on the extremist ideology adopted.¹⁴⁶ Knudsen also claims the ERG or VAF indicators are focused solely on psychological factors – “they are oriented towards *how* people think” – and do not address

political or societal context. Nor is there any effort to ensure that those using these assessment frameworks take political contexts into account. This, she argues, overlooks the inherently political nature of terrorism, and is an oversight which must be addressed. This is also admitted as an omission by the authors of the ERG, Lloyd and Dean: “we were aware of the common risk assessment error of attributing risk solely to factors within the individual and of overlooking the importance of the environment... contextual influence to be referenced in the assessment report...was not included as a factor in its own right, which was perhaps an omission.”¹⁴⁷ Despite Knudsen’s critique, it is worth noting that among the 22 factors listed by ERG are “political/moral motivation”, “group influence and control”, and “access to networks”. These suggest that the ERG does in fact take into account both political and environmental factors.

Looking at some of the other indicators, Knudsen correctly points out that, without context, some of them would be misleading to rely upon in any radicalisation assessment:

many of the ‘engagement’ indicators, such as a need or desire ‘for identity, meaning and belonging’ might be unproblematically present in certain settings among seeking and questioning individuals; a need or desire ‘to defend against threat’ might be on point if context revealed that someone actually was being threatened. None of the 22 indicators seem to allow for systematically capturing relevant context of this kind.¹⁴⁸

A final key criticism levelled at the VAF by Knudsen is based on who is carrying out the assessments. A tool developed by psychologists which depends on the relevant knowledge, qualifications and experience of those conducting the assessments is currently being used by a range of people who do not fall into this category, including “local authority bureaucrats and police officers”. Knudsen’s final conclusion

144. Powis, Randhawa-Horne, and Bishopp, “The Structural Properties of the Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG22+),” 11.

145. Rita Augestad Knudsen, “Measuring radicalisation: risk assessment conceptualisations and practice in England and Wales,” *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 12 (1) (2020).

146. “Channel: Vulnerability assessment framework,” HM Government, October 2012.

147. Monica Lloyd and Christopher Dean, “The Development of Structured Guidelines for Assessing Risk in Extremist Offenders,” *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 2 (1) (2015), 42-43.

148. Knudsen, “Measuring radicalisation.”

for the VAF is not a positive one: while she acknowledges the utility of the ERG in the context of terrorist offenders overseen by trained psychologists, she believes that the VAF is not fit for purpose, both because of who is carrying out the assessments and the fact that, unlike the ERG, it is being used to assess people for whom there is little to no “evidence-based counter-terrorism-related concern”, as they have not been convicted of terrorism offences, and have only been referred to Channel.

At the time of writing, it appears that neither the full ERG nor VAF documents used by assessors have been made publicly available for full independent peer review. Until this changes, it is not possible to come to a final and well-informed view of the utility of either. This is particularly urgent in the case of the VAF, which takes a number of significant conceptual leaps in dealing with people who have not committed any terrorist offences, while using a framework designed only for assessing people with a history of terror-related crimes.

2. Enable those who have already engaged in terrorism to disengage and rehabilitate

This final and most recently introduced component of Prevent, brought in by CONTEST 2018, is very much in its infancy. Run under the Desistance and Disengagement Programme (DDP), there are few details about how it is conducted or evaluated. There is therefore very little to review in terms of literature, either official, academic or activist, which directly addresses DDP.

However, the rehabilitation element of DDP falls partly under the category of what is often termed ‘de-radicalisation’. While many tend to think of radicalisation as a new field of study (which, as demonstrated above, it both is and is not), it is the understanding of de-radicalisation which is truly in its infancy. The other aspect of DDP is disengagement, and in this field, there is a wider body of established work which focuses on how and why individuals dis-

engage from violence, with less of an emphasis on their ideological rehabilitation.¹⁴⁹

One area where the government has sought to take part in this type of work is in prisons, where it has piloted two related programmes, the Motivational and Engagement Intervention (MEI) and the Healthy Identity Intervention (HII). However, while it is likely they are connected, it is unclear to the author if either of these are directly linked to the Prevent DDP strand.

According to the government, MEI and HII are overseen and conducted by psychologists, and draw directly from the risk factors identified by the ERG22+, which “provided an important foundation” for them.¹⁵⁰ MEI and HII are also influenced by long-standing and trusted theoretical approaches to offender rehabilitation, including the Risk-Need-Responsivity principles, the Good Lives Model and literature on desistance from crime.¹⁵¹ According to UK prison service documents, MEI was designed as a first step, and it attempts to motivate extremist offenders to take part in the intervention process by dispelling myths about it and helping them overcome their distrust of the authorities carrying out the interventions.

For those offenders who require more ‘intensive’ intervention work, defined as those with a deep personal identification with an extremist movement and its ideology, they move on to the HII, which focuses both on de-radicalisation and disengagement, depending on the individual case. For the former, HII seeks to “encourage participants to re-examine their extremist identifications and commitments, and explore doubts they may have had about their ongoing involvement”. In the cases of those who do not appear open to reevaluating their world views, HII instead works to reduce their willingness to behave in ways which harm others, and thus disengage from violence.¹⁵²

In 2018, the UK prison service conducted an evaluation of MEI and HII, which consisted of surveys of 22 individual intervention providers and the same number of offenders who participated. Overall, it

149. The United Nations has conducted this type of work in post-conflict environments since 2005 through the UN Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR). For more, see: <https://www.unddr.org/un-ddr/>.

150. Chris Dean, Monica Lloyd, Carys Keane, Beverly Powis, and Kiran Randhawa, “Intervening with Extremist Offenders – A Pilot Study,” HM Prison and Probation Service, 2018, 2.

151. Dean et al., “Intervening with Extremist Offenders,” 2. For more on these theoretical approaches, see: James Bonta and D.A. Andrews, “Risk-Need-Responsivity Model for Offender Assessment and Rehabilitation,” Public Safety Canada, 2007; Shadd Maruna and Kevin Roy “Amputation or Reconstruction: Notes on ‘Knifing Off’ and Desistance from Crime,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 23 (2007).

152. Dean et al., “Intervening with Extremist Offenders – A Pilot Study,” 2-4.

found that the programmes were “viewed positively by facilitators and participants”. Participants reportedly found that MEI and HII “helped them gain an understanding of their motivations for offending and develop strategies to facilitate desistance”.¹⁵³ The evaluation also found that the main barriers to involvement in these interventions were offenders’ solicitors, who discouraged participation, or a lack of previous engagement between the offender and sentence management staff.

Among the most infamous participants in the HII is Usman Khan, a terrorist offender who was released from prison on licence in December 2018 partly due to what was, at the time, deemed to be his satisfactory completion of HII in November 2015.¹⁵⁴ He went on to conduct a jihadist-inspired terrorist attack in November 2019 near London Bridge, killing two people, including one of his previous intervention providers during a conference on offender rehabilitation.¹⁵⁵ This incident has understandably led to questions about the reliability of extremist prisoner rehabilitation efforts.¹⁵⁶ Soon after the attack, Christopher Dean, a psychologist who helped oversee extremist prisoner interventions, explained that HII sought to “reduce someone’s relationship or identification with a particular group, cause or ideology”, which was often found to correlate with a reduction in their willingness to offend. But he also noted that no one can be “forced” to re-examine their identity, and “we have to be very careful about ever saying that somebody no longer presents a risk of committing an offence”.¹⁵⁷

Many DDP efforts may ultimately be an official effort to change what someone thinks or believes. This seems a tall order, but nonetheless, it forms part of the counter-radicalisation efforts of many Western nations. Some argue that the emphasis should instead be on behavioural rather than ideological change. In other words, not on de-radicalisation but on disengagement via incentivising a change in behaviour without challenging underlying ideas.¹⁵⁸ Given that this forms part of DDP, it may be an im-

portant part of the programme, but again, the extent to which this is emphasised over de-radicalisation is unclear. In the little information that is provided by the government, it does appear to integrate both de-radicalisation and disengagement, describing the programme as including “mentoring, psychological support, theological and ideological advice”, with the aim of both disengaging the individual from terrorism and reintegrating them into society.¹⁵⁹ While this may seem a welcome development, de-radicalisation and disengagement work are fundamentally different in a number of ways, and rolling these into one programme may not be the most effective approach.

3. Conclusion

In the view of this author, there is little doubt that, in the UK, there remains a need for government efforts to prevent its citizens from becoming involved in terrorism. As has been demonstrated, there are ample opportunities for a range of stakeholders to intervene in an individual’s life prior to their engagement in a criminal, terrorism-related act. Research shows that, particularly in the case of lone-actor terrorists, many people involved in the offenders’ lives suspected there to have been a problem prior to the attack or attempted attack. It seems reasonable, therefore, that there exists an official mechanism through which either friends, family, teachers, social workers, and others can seek assistance and alert those capable of assisting. In addition, it represents an effort *not* to criminalise British youth who, for one reason or another, are in the process of making bad decisions which could ruin their lives and those of their loved ones, not to mention potentially end the lives of innocent civilians.

There seem to be few alternative preventative measures available to this, other than harder counter-terrorism efforts, such as sting operations, which, while appropriate in some specific circumstances, should not be the primary method through

153. Dean et al., “Intervening with Extremist Offenders – A Pilot Study,” 1.

154. Fishmongers’ Hall Inquests, Day II, April 27, 2021, pp. 36 & 62, available at: <https://fishmongershallinquests.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/FHI-Day-II-27-April-2021-FINAL.pdf>

155. Matthew Weaver, “Fishmongers’ Hall terrorist Usman Khan was lawfully killed, inquest jury finds,” *The Guardian*, 10 June 2021

156. Douglas Weeks, “Lessons Learned from U.K. Efforts to Deradicalize Terror Offenders,” *CTC Sentinel* 14 (3) (2021).

157. Dominic Casciani, “Top psychologist: No certainty terror offenders can be ‘cured,’” *BBC News*, 2 January 2020, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-50967100>.

158. John Horgan, “Deradicalisation or Disengagement?,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2 (4) (2008).

159. CONTEST 2018

which any liberal democracy deals with its citizens, in particular those who are not even out of their teens, an age group which has been increasingly targeted by a range of extremist and terrorist movements.

However, *how* such a preventative effort should take shape is a highly complex and contested question.

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