

This is an ICSR Insight produced by Senior Research Fellow, Shiraz Maher

The government yesterday published its revised Prevent strategy. This insight will provide a summary of the 113 page document, highlighting key developments, providing a first assessment of the British government's approach, and where it is likely to head. The full Prevent document can be downloaded [here](#).

Summary

There is much to welcome in the revised Prevent document. The government has drawn a line against a culture of extremism that was allowed to grow unchecked in many quarters. The revised strategy consequently aspires to greater ambitions, addressing key theoretical and practical problems which were the hallmark of its previous incarnations.

Success will depend on implementation. Key terms such as 'extremism' or 'Islamism' are poorly defined – too broadly in some cases, and too narrowly in others. However, the test of the policy will be the manner in which these definitions are deployed in practice.

What is most striking is the new commitment to due diligence, the greater emphasis placed on the promotion of liberal democratic British values, and the commitment not to allow extremism to go unchallenged. This is the real strength of the revised initiative – and the standard by which its success will be judged.

Background

The revised strategy is the product of an extensive review process launched last year and overseen by Lord Carlile of Berriew, the government's independent reviewer of terrorism legislation.

Prevent constitutes one of the four strands of the government's overall counter-terrorism strategy known as Contest. It sits alongside other work streams known as Pursue, Protect, and Prepare. Prevent is defined as follows:

Its aim is to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism.

A new practical approach for Prevent

The revised strategy constitutes a fundamental rebalancing of the Prevent strategy. Questions over the direction of Prevent have turned on whether the initiative should concern itself with extremism or terrorism. Two schools of thought exist in relation to this question.

The first suggests Prevent should only concern itself with terrorist activity and can – indeed, in some cases, should – deploy ostensibly non-violent radicals in the hope of diverting potential terrorists into other forms of activism, albeit of a radical nature. Critics have argued that such an approach denies the link between terrorist actors who often draw inspiration from a broader infrastructure of radical preachers and narratives of grievance and victimhood. Whereas Prevent previously operated under the

influence of the former presumption, the revised strategy demonstrates a greater acceptance of the latter proposition. It states:

Terrorist groups can take up and exploit ideas which have been developed and sometimes popularised by extremist organisations which operate legally in this country. This has significant implications for the scope of our Prevent strategy. Evidence also suggests that some (but by no means all) of those who have been radicalised in the UK had previously participated in extremist organisations.

A new theoretical approach for Prevent

Guiding the implementation of the new policy will be a revised overarching philosophical agenda, inflecting the normative values of the state into Prevent work. As a result, Prevent will now operate in the context of a more robust values-led agenda. The document states:

We will not work with extremist organisations that oppose our values of universal human rights, equality before the law, democracy and full participation in our society. If organisations do not accept these fundamental values, we will not work with them and we will not fund them.

This values-based approach will not be limited to simply disengaging from, and a lack of funding for, groups that do not share our universal values. Its theoretical underpinning of the revised strategy means it will be a pervasive theme across all Prevent work streams. Elsewhere the document states:

Challenging ideology is also about being confident in our own values – the values of democracy, rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom of speech and the rights of all men and women to live free from persecution of any kind. Challenge must be accompanied by advocacy of the very systems and values which terrorists in this country and elsewhere set out to destroy.

Clearer objectives

Given the dramatic shift in approach, one of the greatest revisions in the new strategy is the bringing to an end of the ambiguities which previously existed under Prevent. For too long, too many aspects of Prevent work were poorly conceived and ill defined.

The government has now stated three clear objectives around which its endeavours will be focused. These are:

- Challenging the ideology that supports terrorism and those who promote it;
- Protecting vulnerable people; and
- Supporting sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation.

Identifying ideology

Government has previously been reluctant to identify and challenge Islamist ideology. The revised strategy vigorously redresses this omission. Extensive consideration is now given to considering the role of ideology and how Prevent should tackle it. The report states:

All terrorist groups have an ideology. Promoting that ideology, frequently on the internet, facilitates radicalisation and recruitment. Challenging ideology and disrupting the ability of terrorists to promote it is a fundamental part of Prevent.
[...]
It will be vital to challenge apologists for terrorism.

This departure from previous incarnations of Prevent is invested with profound significance and there are some important points to note. The strategy now explicitly recognises that 'ideology plays a central role in the radicalisation process'. It continues:

People who accept and are motivated by an ideology which states that violence is an acceptable course of action are more likely to engage in terrorism-related activity. People who come to believe in such an ideology may be not only willing to kill but also to

sacrifice their own lives. Challenging that ideology is therefore an essential part of a preventative counter-terrorism programme.

The process of challenging extremist ideology will work across all its component parts – theological, political, and social. This will also be complimented by a wider strategy of disrupting propagandists, including the exclusion of those from Britain whose presence is not deemed conducive to the public good.

Protecting vulnerable people

The report identifies that:

Radicalisation is usually a process not an event. During that process it is possible to intervene to prevent vulnerable people being drawn into terrorist-related activity. There are some analogies between this work and other forms of crime prevention.

Support for vulnerable individuals, and intervening in appropriate cases, has been an established policy under previous incarnations of Prevent. The principal method of delivery has been the Channel project on which the police have taken the lead, although it remains a multi-agency initiative. This policy will continue under the revised strategy. The Channel project is explained as follows:

Channel is about stopping people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. It must not be confused with a strategy to deal with extremist organisations. Where people holding extremist views appear to be attracted to or moving towards terrorism they clearly become relevant to Channel multi-agency boards. Otherwise they do not.

The bar for referring potentially vulnerable individuals in such cases remains relatively high and includes:

expressed support for violence and terrorism; possession of violent extremist literature; attempts to access or contribute to violent extremist websites; possession of material regarding weapons and/or explosives; and possession of literature regarding military training, skills and techniques.

From April 2007 to the end of December 2010, figures shows that:

- 1120 people have been referred to the Channel programme;
- The majority of referrals were aged between 13 and 25;
- There were 290 referrals under 16; and 55 referrals under 12.
- Over 90% of the referrals were male;

Supporting sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation

The revised strategy recognises that radicalisation can occur in a range of different sectors and institutions which need to support the overarching aims of Prevent. Those specifically mentioned in the report include: education, the internet, faith institutions and organisations, health, the criminal justice system, and the charitable sector. The report states:

In the UK, evidence suggests that radicalisation tends to occur in places where terrorist ideologies, and those that promote them, go uncontested and are not exposed to free, open and balanced debate and challenge.

Different Prevent schemes apply for each sector, with an emphasis on allowing a flexible approach here.

Other points of interest from the revised strategy

- **Preventing terrorism and promoting cohesion.** Although there is an overlap between promoting cohesion and preventing terrorism, this issue was much too confused previously. There is now an explicit recognition that Prevent work and the broader work of promoting cohesion and integration must be kept separate. Responsibility for the latter will rest with the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

- **Prevent and Pursue.** The report acknowledges that an erroneous perception was allowed to build in parts of the Muslim community that Prevent was essentially a covert operation connected to Pursue objectives. In short, the allegation was that Prevent constituted an elaborate conspiracy to spy on Muslim communities. This was extensively explored during the consultation process.
- **Revised delivery mechanism.** The delivery of Prevent has traditionally taken place through a combination of central departments, local government, policing and local, regional and national community organisations. The Home Office will now monitor the delivery of Prevent much more closely. There will now be Prevent coordinators in up to 25 local authorities. Their role will be to ensure delivery of Prevent objectives by bringing together organisations engaged in Prevent work. As a result, Government Office regional Prevent coordinator posts have ended and local authorities will now be required to work in partnership with Prevent teams in central Departments, and the Home Office in particular. This will allow for much greater due diligence and assistance from the heart of government.

ICSR involvement in the consultation process

Senior members of staff from ICSR were invited to participate in the review process, attending consultation events in Westminster.

ICSR publications cited in the review include:

- Neumann, P. (2010) Prisons and terrorism: Radicalisation and de-radicalisation in 15 countries. London: ICSR, Kings College.
- Neumann, P. and Rogers, B. (2007) Recruitment and mobilisation for the Islamist militant movement in Europe. London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, King's College London.
- Neumann, P. (2009) Joining Al Qaeda: Jihadist recruitment in Europe. London: IISS
- Stevens, T. and Neumann P. (2009) Countering online radicalisation: A strategy for action. London: ICSR.

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