
Counter-extremism and De-radicalisation in the UK: a Contemporary Overview

By: **Gwen Griffith-Dickson¹**

Andrew Dickson²

Robert Ivermee³

‘We cannot arrest our way out of this problem.’

- Police officer to his superiors

‘We cannot be partners and suspects at the same time.’

- Muslim community member to a police officer

De-radicalisation policy carries with it an inherent tension: those who provide the most invaluable support in drawing people away from violent extremist groups generally come from the demographic or community that is under suspicion. This is true even when the extremist ideology is simple for governments and state agencies to understand – such as certain political or nationalist demands – due to the credibility and reach held by members of community. Yet when government lacks not only trust and moral authority with a target demographic, but a theological and cultural knowledge which is central to understanding the nature of the extremist threat (as with violent Islamist extremism), partnering with civil society actors from the community takes on a vital importance. Partnering with community members has therefore been a central and indispensable part of the UK’s Prevent strategy, but how to do so has at times been a disputed, chronically under-researched, ideologically driven political quagmire.

¹ Professor Griffith-Dickson is Vice-Principal - Academic of Heythrop College and Director of The Lokahi Foundation

² Andrew Dickson is a researcher at Lokhai Foundation and currently holding a B.A. from Oxford University in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics

³ Robert Ivermee currently works at University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies

The Lokahi Foundation is currently conducting a long research project, funded by the European Community, to assess the lessons that can be identified from the United Kingdom's responses to extremism and 'radicalization'. In this brief report we set out the historical context in which we undertake this work, and the implicit 'strategic philosophy', of the United Kingdom's approach since the London attacks of July 2005.

The British Experience of De-radicalisation

After 9/11, and accelerating after 7/7, the UK took a particular journey in its counter-terrorism strategy. The attacks in London on 7/7 and the failed attempts on 21/07 influenced the ways in which the UK government, communities and media have defined threat, effectiveness, collaboration and leadership.

One of the most innovative aspects of the UK strategy was the shift from a mainly reactive, law enforcement approach to a more preventative one, beginning under the Blair government, in which communities are key partners in fighting radicalization – this exemplified a tenet held by some counter-terrorist professionals: 'It is communities who defeat terrorism.' This stemmed from a desire to address the deeper causes of terrorism, rather than simply police criminal violent acts, which resulted in one of the four strands in CONTEST, the counter-terrorism strategy: 'Prevent' (the others being Pursue, Prepare and Protect). It also arose from the common-sense observation that prevention is better than cure, or in this case punishment; and as with many other ills, early intervention would be desirable.

What does 'early intervention' mean in this context? Unlike other social or personal ills – learning difficulties, health problems, offending – the early signs of 'radicalisation' were under-researched, but above all, assumed to be ideological. With violent Islamist extremism, the prima facie corollary is that something has gone toxic in an individual's personal religious faith. This raises a host of civil liberties problems, but it also raised an immediate operational conclusion: this work cannot be undertaken without the active engagement of religious 'actors' or 'agents'. This was not a strategy that could be implemented without the intensive engagement of religious citizens; citizens, albeit, from the 'suspected' group. With a number of potential antinomies therefore the UK government under New Labour took the

path of partnership with members of the Muslim community and civic society in order to achieve its counter-terrorism objectives; not least because of its insistence that preventing terrorism was a role or indeed a responsibility for the Muslim community. The response from Muslim community actors was diverse: there was a sincere, often urgent, desire of communities themselves to address the issue. But there was also a palette of sceptical responses, from cynical to hostile.

Predictably, Prevent has suffered years of contention and controversy. The controversies have been difficult to settle on a rational, non-ideological basis. The lack of experience, or a research or evidence base, in demographically-Muslim religious extremism meant that there was no agreed understanding of what programmes, activities, or methodologies constituted effective ‘prevention’; indeed the causes of extremism or radicalisation were (and still remain) highly contested. Worse than contested: in twenty-first century Britain, they were highly politicised; laden with political and religious implications and subtexts. Suggestions of social exclusion, disadvantage, and experiences of racism as the underlying cause invoked familiar left-right debates; those pointing to Britain’s foreign policy were rejected by government ministers and read by some as criticising Western support of Israel. But none were to match the impact and ramifications of the suggestion that religious beliefs or even Islam itself could be held responsible for radicalisation. This remains a point of fervent contention within the Muslim community itself, with specific currents within the faith being pointed to as responsible. The operational consequences of this are momentous for a government committed to partnership working with diverse and even divided communities. Ostensibly, theological judgments had to be made on operational, tactical grounds by secular, religiously unqualified government officials.

For the most part, in the early years of Prevent those methodological and theological judgments were either not consciously taken or taken erratically, leading to the bewilderingly wide variety of projects that arose under the Prevent heading, some government led but the majority from Muslim (and other) community initiatives. Accusations of cynical self-interest were inescapable, not just due to the millions of pounds in government funding available but more importantly the old, inter-denominational scores that could be settled through allegations of links to radicalisation. This controversy became

even more perilous with the injection of party politics into the ‘Prevent’ agenda. Government departments now had tabloid headlines and severe political vulnerability to fear were they to partner with the ‘wrong Muslims’ and inadvertently fund those labelled as extremists or accused of having terrorist sympathies or links.

Four Models of Partnership Working

Strategic and political questions concerning who to partner with thus took centre stage. These questions would ideally be settled by research into and evidence on the effectiveness of particular methods of intervention and types of community partnership. Yet virtually no reliable research into these questions exists - instead, theories have been developed and publicised by different camps, and once more become subject to ideological disputes. However, despite the multiplicity of methods and ideologies put forward and virulent debates over their legitimacy and impact, four broad models can be identified concerning policy on community partnership. This taxonomy was not recognised as such (it is our own analysis); and while the issue constituted the nub of ferocious debates, during the New Labour years no policy decisions were taken.

First, there are those who argue that government and police should partner with and promote ‘moderate Muslims’ who will promote ‘the right kind of Islam’. This model is based on the assumption that violent extremism is based on and engendered by versions of Islam which are deemed incompatible with life in modern Britain: this can be down to social conservatism on issues such as homosexuality or gender, or those who argue that Islam should not be confined to the private sphere but rather carries with it political obligations.

A second model is to encourage the development of a ‘British Islam’ – one which has no problem with secularism and modernity. Again this suggests that certain religious ideologies within Islam are poorly suited to life in a liberal democratic state and are in fact ‘part of the problem’, yet rather than relying on existing movements within Islam this model proposes the generation of a new, modernised version. This is partly because individuals proposing this view also see the existence of ‘Muslim ghettos’ and failures to integrate Muslim and non-Muslim communities to be another contributory factor to violent extremism.

A third option is to identify individuals in the community with the most insider knowledge and greatest credibility in the belief that they will have the greatest possibility of influencing those vulnerable to extremist narratives, even if these individuals are ‘Islamists’ or Salafis. This model is best represented by the policy of engagement promulgated by Dr. Robert Lambert, recently labelled (often pejoratively) as ‘Lambertism’ (although this approach can also be conflated with model 4). Lambert argues that groups who reject political violence yet hold similar religious or political views to those attracted to violent extremist groups, particularly in regards to genuine Muslim grievances about UK foreign policies, are able to steer these individuals towards less violent religious beliefs and channel their grievances into legitimate methods of protest. He supports this viewpoint in *Countering Al Qaeda in London: Police and Muslims in Partnership* by citing the examples of Islamist groups prominently involved in removing Abu Hamza’s influence from Finsbury Park Mosque, and Salafis such as Abdul Haqq Baker from Brixton Mosque responsible for providing an effective counter-narrative to the likes of Abu Qatada, Omar Bakri Muhammad, and Abdullah el Faisal – in both cases, their success was dependent on their ‘street cred’, resting in large part on their local knowledge and religious ideology.

The fourth model is to disregard all theological judgements whatsoever – instead, the individuals who are most operationally effective are those who you should partner with. This is broadly similar to the third model, which also prioritises operational effectiveness, except in this case, operational effectiveness is in no way based on religious ideology – weight is placed instead on psychological, emotional, and social factors, and partners are sought who are in effect ‘good youth workers’.

Channel

One of the most enduring of the programmes to rely on community partnership is ‘Channel’. It represented a systematic response to the question of what mechanics could be put in place to deliver early intervention to those judged to be at risk of radicalisation. Created in 2007 after discussion between the newly-created Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism and a small unit within Association of Chief Police Officers – Terrorism and Allied Matters – and driven forward by David Tucker, it focussed attention

on how to intervene effectively at a pre-criminal stage. The core concept was a process whereby persons of concern were referred to a multi-party panel for assessment; if deemed suitable for an intervention, the referral was made to a community partner to provide an intervention under the monitoring of police and the local authority. Two pilots were held, in Lambeth in South London and Preston in Lancashire, Northwest England. Little direction was given; the two pilot sites were largely left to develop the ethos and *modus operandi* on their own and initially took two quite different interpretations. While Preston was very much focused in the hands of Special Branch and somewhat more covert in personality, Borough Commander Martin Bridger and his team in Lambeth put considerable work into developing community partners as providers of the ‘interventions’ that lie at the heart of Channel. Several of the projects were developed from the charismatic personalities at Brixton mosque, and were the flagship enterprises of a ‘Lambertist’ approach, developed under the aegis of Lambert’s new Muslim Contact Unit in Special Branch.

Channel was rolled out to a further twelve forces not long after, effectively becoming a national programme, before the Lambeth-Preston differences had been fully ironed out or the process fully refined and standardised. Channel now required a national provision of intervention specialists in the community, a programme that was developed and managed by the OSCT with the assistance of the Lokahi Foundation. The OSCT portfolio continued under the broad approach described earlier, in effect ‘let a thousand flowers bloom’. Organisations and projects were not selected on the basis of ideology or religious school of thought; a variety of methods and activities of de-radicalisation were in operation; attempts were made to map projects onto localities, and in areas lacking and clearly needing intervention providers, efforts were made to recruit existing youth work projects into this new field. In an area where a research and evidence base was lacking, due to the new emergence of the threat and the difficulties of gaining access or having adequate sample sizes, this was a rational strategic philosophy. It created a base of activity and participants that could be evaluated and analysed in order to yield some data on which future strategic decisions could be based. Even if that data would initially be inadequately ‘scientific’ – the problems of adequate numbers let alone control groups meant that imposing such evaluative nostrums as a ‘randomised controlled trial’ was hopelessly unrealistic – it at least would have formed the beginnings of a body of evidence to inform future policy.

De-radicalisation 2010-Current

In the event, the thorough outcome evaluation and proposed research did not take place thanks largely to the economic crash and a change of government in 2010. Following a parliamentary review of 'Prevent', key changes in operational policy took place with the new Coalition government, whose overwhelming priority was administering the massive budget cuts required in a new age of austerity. The Coalition came into government determined to simplify and modify New Labour's 'Prevent' strategy, yet the issues detailed above were not decided systematically and strategically, but politically, ideologically, and above all economically.

There were several particular drivers for the new government.

One such driver was the government's own right flank. Having watched and challenged New Labour's policies and programmes from the opposition benches, the new government set about dismantling or recasting programmes with an eye to a more hawk-like attitude towards partnerships. In particular, they marginalised groups that were identified as 'Salafi' or as 'Islamist' (the latter designation in particular being incapable of crisp and undisputed definition). Any group receiving funding had to be scrutinised ideologically or theologically; intervention providers were given a questionnaire into the beliefs of their members as a test of British values, and successful completion of the questionnaire was a condition of funding. Indeed, one of the most interesting shifts was the redefining of the target: the threat to be addressed was no longer 'violent extremism', but simply 'extremism', potentially encompassing any religious views deemed by Government to be extreme. Groups who were more 'socially conservative', with views deemed incompatible with these largely undefined British values, found their funding cut, as 'promoting British values' took predominance over 'empowering communities'.

The media and commentariat had been a particular scourge for the previous government and its departments. The previous mood of vulnerability over partnering with some of the less mainstream groups, and a persistent fear of 'exposure' from conservative commentators and bloggers, hardened into clear-cut decisions to eschew such liaisons. A major motive in the drive to evaluate intervention programmes had in fact always been political; justifying

the funding but also the choice and effectiveness of groups (Salafi groups in particular) through evaluation was always a highly politicised issue for officials and their partners. Now, however, funding was cut off tout court. The ‘evaluation’ had in fact already taken place, and it was ideological.

Once again, it was difficult not to see a degree of settling old scores: groups that had had small-c conservative groups gunning for them for some time, such as the intervention projects run by Brixton Salafis, were abandoned; but so too was Home Office funding for the Quilliam Foundation in a tacit quid pro quo. Quilliam was the darling of conservative opinion but widely distrusted or even mocked by many Muslims. (Quilliam was later picked up and funded by Michael Gove through the Department for Education.)

Hanging over many of these decisions was the need to make substantial budget cuts. Major changes to the operation of Channel have probably, over a few years, saved millions. In many ways the efficiency and professionalism of Channel have improved; but, as detailed below, there have inevitably been changes in the operations and what the service can provide.

The new commissioning and operating model of Channel and various intervention projects has three major changes. First, the Coalition’s broader ‘localism’ agenda was felt here. Activity and processes in Prevent generally that once took place centrally and nationally through OSCT was now devolved to local authorities, who bid for funds from OSCT to carry out work with approved partners. This has had some advantages, as good local relationships between statutory partners and intervention providers and community actors are indispensable. However the time lag and inevitable friction in the bidding process has introduced a partial collapse in some areas of projects other than Channel.

Second, the austerity programme meant that OSCT no longer (for the most part) funded projects and organisations, but rather paid a small and select group of intervention providers per hour for their one-to-one face time in counselling individuals. This makes a considerable saving but led to the sudden termination of wider programmes run by the projects. The aims and achievements of these wider programmes, which often addressed other social needs such as recruitment and participation in gangs, had never been adequately worked out nor

demonstrated through outcome evaluations, leaving them vulnerable to accusations of ineffectiveness or being simply ‘not a priority’ in a time of severe tightening of belts.

Third, the ideology test has restricted the groups who could be worked with. Among the discontinued projects were some of the most effective practitioners; some senior personnel involved in Channel still feel their absence to be a loss to the overall programme.

Lookaheads

One major new issue over the last few years is the evolution of far-right extremist ideology in the UK, as in other European countries. Rather than focussing their ire purely on immigration or race-based issues (though these obviously remain hot-button topics for members), groups such as the English Defence League and British National Party have focussed with ever-deepening intensity on pushing an anti-Islam or anti-Muslim message. Indeed, the English Defence League, arguably the most prominent far-right group in the UK today, was set up in response to an anti-war demonstration by Al-Muhajiroun, and explicitly describes itself as a counter-jihad movement fighting against the spread of ‘Islamism’ and ‘Sharia’. This leads to a symbiotic, cyclical relationship between two extremes: the spread of violent Islamist extremism generates greater support for violent far-right extremism and vice versa.

To call the ‘foreign fighters’ phenomenon a growing or emerging trend would be to understate its prominence – in Europe at least, it currently constitutes the most pressing issue for government, security services and law enforcement, and counter-terrorism professionals. Yet the phenomenon of Muslims leaving their home countries, at least in the UK, to fight jihad in foreign wars is nothing new. This took place in the 1980s in Afghanistan, and in the 1990s in Bosnia. What has changed is the newfound perception of this as a major threat to national security, due to a range of factors not applicable to these previous instances: theological changes in ideology, rationale and rhetoric; the unprecedented number of people going over; the amount of media attention it has generated; the vicious and anti-Western nature of Daesh compared to the groups previous ‘foreign fighters’ had been attracted to; and the mutation of bleedback – the possibility of terrorist attacks being launched by those returning from fighting for jihadi groups in Syria

and Iraq on return to their home nations – from a possibility speculated on by counter-terrorism professionals to a policy actively encouraged by Daesh.

Both of these phenomena have been growing at an alarming pace. But both are now growing into one another, together: the phenomenon of ‘two extremes fuelling each other in recruitment’ is now fusing with the foreign fighters phenomenon. Thus we now have right-wing ‘foreign fighters’ too, who are beginning to take their own war against jihadis from the streets of Britain to the new foreign battlefields to fight so-called ‘Islamic State’.

In the new foreign fighters phenomenon it is also interesting to see how issues that have always been present in the British de-radicalisation landscape are still visible. Indeed, the need for early intervention becomes even more pressing when individuals are considered criminalised, extremist, and ‘too far gone’ for de-radicalisation attempts as soon as they have left the country, having given no prior cause for concern. Yet despite this, government strategy, and the upcoming Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill, remains dominated by a ‘Pursue’ outlook, focussing its attention on enhancing the powers of law enforcement. ‘Prevention’ has focussed largely on developing deterrents such as the threat of removing passports, with many once again worried about the implications for civil liberties of this ‘de-radicalisation’ policy. The landscape of what radicalisation means, how it takes place, and indeed who is vulnerable, has changed dramatically in an extraordinarily short timeframe. Channel and existing de-radicalisation efforts are not rendered irrelevant but current assumptions and practices need rapid adaptation. New initiatives can be conceived, above all by civil society actors, but official response times are slow. And once again, we find ourselves in a position where the causes and solutions to a highly worrying situation are disputed and largely unexplored.

Partnering with individuals within Muslim – and other – communities remains essential for the success of de-radicalisation initiatives; the most effective programmes have been run in partnerships with civil society actors, and the only case of a terrorist attack on British soil being prevented by community intelligence was due to a community-created and mediated project delivered jointly and funded by the police (‘Operation Nicole’, designed and delivered by the Lokahi Foundation and run jointly with the Association of Chief Police

Officers and London's Metropolitan Police Service). This is unsurprising given the theological or ideological expertise of civil society actors; grassroots and community intelligence; knowledge of community actors, networks, forces, and dynamics; and various other skills and resources which are held by community projects and individual intervention providers and not by state or security agencies.

A Strategic Philosophy for the United Kingdom?

It is a long-standing quip on these shores that the English way is to 'muddle through', rather than force an issue into clarity, resolve a perennial dispute, or tidy up a set of imponderable messes. Perhaps the ultimate thrust of the joke is that muddling through is, surprisingly, often a successful strategy.

The guiding approach in the early years was less a strategy than a set of operational premises. Though never systematically articulated as such, let alone explicitly agreed, we argue nevertheless that we can identify guiding principles in operation. These principles were intuitively generated from experience; at its best resembling General von Moltke's '*Fingerspitzengefuehl*' (literally 'finger-tip feeling', a deeply-experienced intuition operating on the ground in the absence of sufficient intelligence or data). We would identify some of these operational intuitions as:

- Communities and citizens have an indispensable and active role to play; they are not merely providers of intelligence
- In the absence of an evidence base, a diversity of responses is appropriate rather than a single approved strategy or approach. Results over time will sort the wheat from the chaff
- Policing is by consent and co-operation, and reciprocity of meeting needs is key to making this work
- Engagement of the wider public is important whether this be the media, the commentariat, opposition members or other public bodies such as universities. However, operationally, this manifested as viewing them more as a feral force to be feared and followed than a society to be engaged and inspired to action

In a climate of agnosticism as to demonstrable causes and effects of the problem and its cure, this was not an ineffective starting point, but a number of other conditions must be put in place to make this an effective medium-term strategy. Sufficient research and evaluation to create an evidence base, above all on the effectiveness of de-radicalisation methods and activities but also on the wider, ‘soft’ end of Prevent, would have allowed for more rational decision-making when the conflicts over ideology hit with the formation of a new government. Politicians, officials, and the police could never communicate to the public with a united, well-founded conviction that these approaches, or those partners, were the right ones to keep the country safe; above all because they lacked the evidence for such assertions.

The Coalition government’s alterations in course were implemented with impacts foreseen and desired, but other outcomes unintended and still unassessed. What still appears to be lacking is the guiding strategic frame that gives a multiplicity of activities some coherence and systematicity, above all in a time when the government policy favours localism but the threat is transnational. We would suggest there was, and still is, a need for an overarching ‘strategic philosophy’ to create and direct the United Kingdom’s response to the ever-evolving threat.

The Lokahi Foundation will disseminate its conclusions in 2015. Neither a history nor a formal evaluation, it takes an approach we term ‘lessons identified’ – for by no means is it clear that these lessons have been learned or previously recognised, let alone agreed. A primary focus, we are finding, will be on the effective working relations and operations between the state and ‘non-state actors’, or ‘civil society actors’ as we now call them. Underlying this pragmatic question of the operations but also the strategic philosophy of this work is the more subtle question of the fundamental settlement between the state and civil society: how citizens and government can co-operate sustainably in matters of safety and security, and ultimately life and death. What is the philosophy of strategy that underpins this conceptualisation of the relation between state and civil society?