**ATC Counter-Terror Module 2: PREVENT**

1. **What is PREVENT?**

PREVENT is one of the main pillars of CONTEST: the UK’s strategy for countering terrorism.[[1]](#footnote-0) The pillars are known as the “four Ps”:

1. **Prevent:** To stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism by detecting those vulnerable to radicalisation.
2. **Pursue:** To stop terrorist attacks by detecting, prosecuting, and otherwise disrupting those who plot to carry out terrorist attacks in the UK or against its overseas interests.
3. **Protect:** To reduce the vulnerability of the UK to terrorist attacks by strengthening border security, the public transport system, national infrastructure, and the like.
4. **Prepare:** To mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack where the attack cannot be stopped, including work to bring a terrorist attack to an end and increase resilience to help with effective recovery in its aftermath.[[2]](#footnote-1)

PREVENT is delivered nationwide with a particular focus on areas considered to be at greatest risk, such as Newham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets, Birmingham, Cardiff, and Manchester.Each priority area then receives funding for a PREVENT coordinator, who the Home Office supports to develop delivery plans relating to PREVENT objectives. Work includes disrupting "extremist" events and speakers, removing material online, intervening to stop people from being "radicalised", and (during the height of the Da'esh insurgency) dissuading people from travelling to Syria and Iraq and intervening when they return.[[3]](#footnote-2)

**2. What does PREVENT mean in practice?**

The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (Section 26) places a statutory duty on certain public bodies to have "due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism", known as the PREVENT Duty.[[4]](#footnote-3) In other words, staff within schools, universities, the police, the NHS, probation services, local authorities, councils, prisons, colleges, and other public institutions have a duty to consider referring anyone they suspect may be vulnerable to becoming “radicalised”. Once individuals have been identified by staff and police within these public bodies, they are sometimes referred to a multi-disciplinary CHANNEL panel for further assessment and a “support plan” is created if it is deemed necessary. Other referrals are screened out and referred to mainstream services , e.g. NHS mental health services.

The Home Office provides guidance on how each body should implement the PREVENT duty. For example:

* **Local authorities** should ensure that publicly owned premises are not used to disseminate extremist views.
* **Frontline school staff** should understand PREVENT, be able to recognise vulnerability to “radicalisation”, and know where to go to seek further help.
* **Universities** should have policies and procedures in place to manage events on campus and the use of all university premises.
* **Police** should support individuals vulnerable to "radicalisation", for example, through the CHANNEL programme, and support partner organisations to deliver PREVENT objectives.
* **Prisons** should offer support to individuals vulnerable to "radicalisation" or move them away from other individuals of concern. Those at risk of "radicalising" others should face the removal of privileges and segregation from others.[[5]](#footnote-4)

**3. The Problems with PREVENT**

The ‘War on Terror’ has generated this shift in the UK’s counter-terror strategy, which was exacerbated by the rise of Da’esh and a series of high-profile attacks in Europe (e.g. Paris, November 2015; Brussels, March 2016; Nice, July 2016) and the UK (e.g. Westminster Bridge, March 2017; Manchester Arena, May 2017; London Bridge, June 2017). Counter-terror legislation is now centred upon the idea that, given the magnitude of the terrorist threat to the UK, measures and policies must exist that pre-empt violent acts of terror and criminalise individuals who are believed to be in the process of committing such acts.

However, due to the inherent difficulty in preventing and pre-empting crime, the application of pre-criminal legislation often results in an arbitrary application of the law. Consequently, individuals perceived to belong to a community at risk are increasingly problematised and even criminalised based on acts that would not typically be considered criminal, ultimately culminating in issues of racial profiling and overt scrutiny of a 'suspect' community: Muslims. Therefore, within this subjective framework, it is inevitable that innocent individuals will become suspect and caught up in the apparatus of security measures; in the case of PREVENT, this has often been primarily based on religious, cultural, or ethnic identities and practices.

PREVENT has thus been heavily criticised by experts, academics, activists, and politicians across all sectors of public life. The concerns primarily centre around its lack of evidentiary basis leading to inadequate training, discriminatory application, and marginalising impacts upon Muslim communities. Ultimately, many have condemned the strategy as counterproductive, including the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, who stated about PREVENT: “It is creating a feeling in the Muslim community that it is being spied upon and unfairly targeted. It is building a climate of mutual suspicion and distrust. Far from tackling extremism, it risks creating the very conditions for it to flourish.”[[6]](#footnote-5)

***Lack of evidentiary basis***

People referred to PREVENT are assessed using the Vulnerability Assessment Framework, which uses the Extreme Risk Guidance (ERG22+) – a system of 22 factors used to spot signs of vulnerability to 'radicalisation' – as a risk assessment tool. The ERG has been criticised for its reliance upon undisclosed research conducted with a small and unrepresentative sample of "al-Qaeda influenced extremists" in prison; the conclusions have been problematically extrapolated as being applicable to the wider population, and the evidence for which is not available for public scrutiny.[[7]](#footnote-6)

Even the original authors of the research – psychologists Monica Lloyd and Christopher Dean – have commented that “the current lack of demonstrated reliability and validity remains the main limitation of the ERG at this time”[[8]](#footnote-7) and stated that "the ERG is a work in progress". Furthermore, there has been no open scrutiny by the scientific community of the evidence provided in the research, nor independent replicating studies or a credible external review process; the ERG is based on a single article by Lloyd and Dean that was published in 2015, rendering the evidentiary basis of PREVENT highly flawed.[[9]](#footnote-8)

***Heavy focus on ideology***

Lloyd and Dean admit that they did not factor political grievance into their modelling, saying it was “perhaps an omission”.[[10]](#footnote-9) This is emblematic of PREVENT’s heavy focus on ideology, particularly in its application, which often obscures due consideration of other factors such as mental health issues, foreign policy, individual isolation, unemployment, socio-economic deprivation, and numerous other factors. However, experts and academics agree that such factors are pivotal in an individual potentially becoming drawn to political violence.The MI5’s own Behavioural Science Unit’s analysis of several hundred terrorists showed they “had taken strikingly different journeys to violent extremist activity” and that few had followed “a typical pathway to violent extremism”.[[11]](#footnote-10)

Additionally, the role of the UK Government's foreign policies as a motivating factor in politically-motivated violence has been postulated by many respected academics, politicians, and former civil servants, perhaps most notably by Eliza Manningham-Buller, head of MI5 from 2002-07, who in her evidence to the Chilcot Inquiry stated that that the Iraq war was a significant factor in increasing the terrorist threat facing the UK.[[12]](#footnote-11)

***Lack of viable definitions***

There are currently no clear working definitions of "extremism", "non-violent extremism", "British Values", nor "radicalisation". With hundreds of thousands of staff having already been trained through the Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent (WRAP-training), these practitioners are attempting to identify "radicalisation" to tackle "extremism" without appropriate guidance as to what it is that they are identifying. This lack of definitions leaves public sector workers in a position to determine risk based on subjective biases and stereotypes. Consequently, a lack of objective understanding causes confusion in PREVENT's application. It has been strategically used to exclude Muslim voices and events through ill-defined and liberally applied labels.

For example, university Islamic and Palestinian societies have routinely seen their events cancelled due to accusations of "extremism" emanating from right-wing groups such as Student Rights (a project of neo-conservative think-tank, the Henry Jackson Society). They seek to shut down opposing debate and exclude pro-Palestine voices that disrupt their neo-conservative narrative. These accusations are often lacking in substance, but the emotional weight of the term "extremism" is sufficient to deter universities or other venues from allowing events that find themselves in this situation. In 2019, counter-terrorism police placed the environmental pressure group Extinction Rebellion on a list of "extremist" ideologies that should be reported as part of the PREVENT programme, only to remove it the following year in the wake of widespread criticism.[[13]](#footnote-12) This highlights how vague and ill-defined terms such as "extremism" are and how they are often used arbitrarily to set a threshold for acceptable social, political, and religious values.

***Inadequate training***

PREVENT-trained public sector workers may often receive only 45-60 mins of online training to identify signs of "radicalisation". Equally worrying is the fact that there appears to be no formative examination nor ongoing assessment for those who have been through PREVENT training. Indeed, this lack of effective training was highlighted by the Home Affairs Committee who noted: "We are concerned about a lack of sufficient and appropriate training in an area that is complex and unfamiliar to many education and other professionals, compounded by a lack of clarity about what is required of them." This has led to PREVENT referrals being made for everyday normative practices of the Islamic faith (e.g. wearing the hijab or starting to pray), cultural practices (e.g. watching an Arabic news channel), or taking an interest in politics (e.g. criticising foreign policy).

An 11-year-old boy was recently referred to the PREVENT programme after a fellow pupil reported him saying during a fire drill that he wished his school would burn down. The boy suffered from anxiety and was experiencing stress due to homework, leading his mum to say: "Being a brown, Muslim, Asian boy does not make you a terrorist."[[14]](#footnote-13) Such referrals indicate that public sector workers tend to base their attitude on subjective judgements rooted in certain stereotypes and biases, as opposed to proper training and research, reflecting the structurally Islamophobic nature of PREVENT, particularly with regards to its application.

**4. The Consequences of PREVENT**

***Impact on children and primary/secondary education***

The largest proportion of PREVENT referrals tends to come from the education sector. Despite the closure of schools and universities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the education sector still accounted for a quarter (25%) of all PREVENT referrals in 2020/21.[[15]](#footnote-14) A report by Rights Watch UK argued that PREVENT is “stifling the fundamental rights and freedoms of children across the UK, including their rights to freedom of expression and belief, and their right to education.”[[16]](#footnote-15) Indeed, shocking cases of PREVENT referrals made against children (such as a four-year-old boy who drew a picture of his dad cutting a cucumber, only for his teachers to mishear him and think he said "cooker bomb") is not merely Islamophobic but can have a long-term impact on their learning and personal development.

The concerns surrounding PREVENT have a high potential to severely impact how children perceive and interact with their education; whether that be through asking questions and participating in debates, engaging in extra-curricular activities and responsibilities, involving themselves in activism and critical thinking, having the confidence to engage in public speaking, or having the motivation to achieve their potential. Case studies also demonstrate that children referred to PREVENT may become more reserved and reluctant to express their views at school, including becoming less likely to speak to their teachers for fear of being re-referred or even separated from their parents.[[17]](#footnote-16) If schools aim to enable children to become well-adjusted citizens who are confident in their social and civic identities and empowered to access opportunities for the benefit of themselves, their families, their communities, and society as a whole, the PREVENT duty is a considerable obstacle to this aim and the life chances of children across the country.

***Impact on universities and academic spaces***

By creating a climate of self-censorship, PREVENT has discouraged free speech within universities, among students and staff of all backgrounds. This applies particularly to Muslims, who feel over-scrutinised and conscious about expressing their views out of fear of becoming the object of suspicion.[[18]](#footnote-17) Universities should be environments where healthy debate is promoted and legitimate expressions of dissent are tolerated. Still, Muslim students have become increasingly worried about voicing their opinions, especially on issues of politics and foreign policy, such as Palestine, for fear of being labelled "extreme".[[19]](#footnote-18) A study led by SOAS finds that students and staff are sometimes discouraged from exploring, researching or studying Islam at university, which can cause them to question simple acts like borrowing a book related to Islam from the library.[[20]](#footnote-19) This limits academic and social discussions about Islam on campus, meaning damaging stereotypes about Islam and Muslims are less likely to be dispelled.

The study also found that among university students, the belief that radicalisation is a serious problem in UK universities and support for the PREVENT strategy is strongly associated with negative views of Islam and Muslims, for example, the statements: “Islam is a faith that preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims” and “Islam is a religion that discriminates against women”.[[21]](#footnote-20) As such, the study observes that “Prevent has a doubly damaging effect of sustaining negative stereotypes *and* disabling the mechanisms universities have for subjecting such stereotypes to critical scrutiny.”[[22]](#footnote-21)

***Impact on the NHS***

The UK is currently the only country globally that has incorporated counter-terrorism safeguarding inside its health service.[[23]](#footnote-22) The pressures of PREVENT put undue strains on the duty of care that the NHS has to its patients, particularly in terms of safeguarding. Research conducted by the University of Warwick noted: "evidence to suggest that the mentally ill are being inappropriately stigmatised as terrorism risks".[[24]](#footnote-23) This revelation has been further compounded by the use of PREVENT to monitor terminally ill people and dementia patients in hospices and palliative care units.[[25]](#footnote-24)

Criticising PREVENT's operation in the NHS, a whistleblower stated that "Patients who don't trust their doctor or nurse may not seek advice from them, which could be potentially life-threatening. Prevent moves people's focus away from care, treatment and support into areas that are police business: counter-terrorism and surveillance.[[26]](#footnote-25) 70% of NHS staff surveyed in Warwick University’s study said they would be likely or very likely to refer someone to the PREVENT programme for the possession of Islamic or anarchist philosophy books, which reinforces the view of the inadequacy of training for public sector workers.

The report by MEDACT “[False Positives – the Prevent counter-extremism policy in healthcare](https://www.medact.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MEDACT-False-Positives-WEB.pdf)” concluded that the Prevent policy in healthcare should be repealed, and highlighted a number of concerns including that PREVENT referrals were disproportionately targeting Muslim and ethnic minority populations, that there was “racial bias” in official training materials, and that found evidence that PREVENT referrals were damaging to people’s mental health and to therapeutic relationships.

**5. The Shawcross Review of PREVENT**

On 26th January 2021, William Shawcross was appointed as "the new Independent Reviewer of Prevent", whose role is to evaluate and make future recommendations for the government's PREVENT strategy.[[27]](#footnote-26) However, Shawcross’ appointment was highly controversial given that he has made numerous Islamophobic statements in the past. In 2006, he wrote an article for the Jerusalem Post entitled, “Yes, the problem is ‘Islamic fascism’”, in which he claimed that Europe is “threatened by a vast fifth column [of Muslims] ... who wish to destroy us”.[[28]](#footnote-27) Furthermore, whilst he was a director of the Henry Jackson Society, he stated: “Europe and Islam is one of the greatest, most terrifying problems of our future. I think all European countries have vastly, very quickly growing Islamic populations.”[[29]](#footnote-28) He has also expressed support for the illegal detention and torture of Muslims in Guantánamo Bay[[30]](#footnote-29) and has been accused of disproportionately targeting and investigating Muslim charities – including those providing humanitarian relief in Syria – whilst he was chair of the Charity Commission (2012-18).[[31]](#footnote-30) Therefore, a coalition of 17 human rights groups and NGOs, including Amnesty International, the Runnymede Trust, and MEND, released a letter in February 2021 boycotting the Shawcross Review of PREVENT.[[32]](#footnote-31)

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