

LESSONS FROM GREAT BRITAIN



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The evolution of the United Kingdom's *Prevent* counterterrorism program

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The United Kingdom has a long experience with terrorism. Anarchists and Fenians bombed targets in London in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and 3,500 people were killed during the Provisional Irish Republican Army's (PIRA) 30-year campaign for a united Ireland. In response, the UK developed a comprehensive range of anti-terrorist measures, including a tough legislative regime. However, there is little historical precedent for the kind of terrorism that threatens the UK in the early 21st century. PIRA did not embrace an extreme ideology, had tangible political demands and waged a campaign characterized by relative restraint. Noncombatant casualties from terrorist attacks were the exception rather than the norm. The mass-casualty, suicide bomb attacks by Islamist terrorists in London on July 7, 2005, were of a very different kind and alerted the British authorities to the fact that they faced a threat from violent extremism of unprecedented and uncompromising lethality.

In the 1990s, UK security services became aware of the activities of foreign extremists, such as Abu Hamza and Abdullah al-Faisal, who preached openly in mosques in London,¹ but most surveillance was still focused on Irish republican splinter groups opposed to the Northern Ireland peace process. Authorities shifted their main attention to Islamists only after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Given British political and military support for the United States' "war on terror," attacks were anticipated from both foreign jihadists and British-born and bred extremists. The danger posed by the latter made efforts to identify the causes of extremism a matter of urgency for the British government, especially

after the July 2005 attacks and the discovery of other similar homegrown terrorist plots.

The current British counterterrorism strategy is known as CONTEST. The latest published version was released in July 2011.² CONTEST is divided into four principle strands: *Prevent, Pursue, Protect, Prepare*. The *Prevent* strand aims to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. *Prevent* is the focus of this paper, which examines British government efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE) since 2005. Although the causes of violent extremism are many and varied and are often dependent on country-specific factors, the paper also seeks to identify potential lessons for other Western states from British successes and failures during this period. Most Western states now perceive Islamist-inspired extremism as a security challenge, while there is also concern about violence from right-wing groups generated in part by Islamophobia. While approaches to CVE will naturally vary according to local cultural, political and legal norms, the UK's experience is noteworthy because of the scale of the threat it has faced and because Britain has attempted the most comprehensive CVE program outside a Muslim majority country.³

What is violent extremism?

Defining violent extremism is as problematic as defining terrorism. No internationally accepted definitions exist. Although the phrase "violent extremism" is often used synonymously with the word "terrorism," a distinction can and should be made between an extremist and a terrorist. Holding extreme views is not illegal in a liberal democracy,

and few people who express politically extreme views actually go on to commit *politically motivated acts of violence against civilians*, which is the core phrase in most definitions of terrorism.⁴ The phrase violent extremism arguably bridges the terms extremism and terrorism, a violent extremist being someone who supports or incites others to commit acts of terror:

This is the view taken by the British Crown Prosecution Service, which defines violent extremism as:

“The demonstration of unacceptable behavior by using any means or medium to express views which:

- foment, justify or glorify terrorist violence in furtherance of particular beliefs;
- seek to provoke others to terrorist acts;
- foment other serious criminal activity or seek to provoke others to serious criminal acts; or foster hatred which might lead to inter-community violence in the UK.⁵

Successful prosecutions for violent extremism include the radical preachers named above. Abu Hamza, for example, was convicted in 2006 of “soliciting to murder,” largely because of sermons that advocated violence against all “infidels.”⁶ He received a seven-year sentence, the maximum by law for those convicted of encouraging others to commit a terrorist act. Prosecutions for violent extremism have also included measures against right-wing extremists. Members of a group called the Aryan Strike Force were prosecuted for the possession of materials that espoused violent hatred towards Jews, Muslims and nonwhites.

Prosecutions for violent extremism were made possible by the inclusion of the encouragement of terrorism and the “dissemination of terrorist publications” in the Terrorism Act 2006.⁷ The act provoked controversy as critics claimed that measures against those who glorified or praised terrorism damaged legitimate freedom of speech. Understandably, it has proved difficult in practice to secure convictions against individuals and organizations accused of “glorifying

terrorism” because of the subjective nature of defining such behavior. An attempt to ban Hizb ut-Tahrir failed, and the violent extremist groups al-Muhajiroun and Islam4UK were only successfully banned in 2010. The government’s latest counterterrorism strategy formally recognizes a link between groups that espouse extremist views and terrorist ideologies, but in the interests of free speech, no attempt has been made to proscribe general “extremism” through the Terrorism Act.⁸

Sources of violent extremism

In May 2006, the UK Intelligence and Security Committee published a report on the July 2005 bombings. The report concluded that there was “no simple Islamist extremist profile,” because some of the individuals involved in the bombings appeared to be well integrated into British society.⁹ The government’s counterterrorism strategy paper of July 2006 offered a preliminary analysis of potential sources of Islamist extremism in Britain that included exposure to an extremist ideology, personal alienation from mainstream society and grievances due to Western policies toward Muslims.¹⁰ At the time, the latter factor appeared to be particularly significant. A national opinion poll in April 2006 noted that 31 percent of young Muslims agreed that the July 2005 bombings were justified because of British involvement in the “war on terror,” which was widely perceived as a war on Islam.¹¹ After the “liquid bomb” plot in August 2006, a group of eminent Muslims wrote to then-Prime Minister Tony Blair, stating that the “debacle of Iraq” had provided “ammunition for terrorists.”¹²

Some commentators suggested that “multiculturalism” was a factor in the alienation of young British Muslims.¹³ For 20 years, successive governments had tried to avoid imposing a single British identity and culture. This policy was blamed for the self-imposed segregation of Muslim communities, the proliferation of mosques staffed by radical clerics, and



Islam4UK spokesman Anjem Choudary, center, leaves a press conference in London in 2010, the year British authorities banned the group for promoting violence.

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the establishment of faith schools that emphasized study of the Quran at the expense of a mainstream educational curriculum. Other analysts argued that the roots of extremism were economic and social. A report by the Office of National Statistics in 2006, for example, concluded that British Muslims were more than twice as likely to be unemployed as followers of other faiths and up to five times as likely to live in overcrowded accommodations.¹⁴

Since 2005, a vast range of books, articles and official reports in Europe and the United States has addressed the subject of Islamist violent extremism.¹⁵ Understandably, given the wide range of personal and contextual factors that contribute to extremism, no one analysis has proven exhaustive, although common themes have emerged from successive studies. These include: grievances due to real or perceived abuses committed against fellow Muslims, persuasive Islamist narratives and ideologies propagated by extremist leaders, and relative deprivation in the host society. In the case of homegrown terrorists, a range of personal factors appears to have created vulnerability to the extremist message, including issues of identity, frustrated ambition and displacement. Many analysts also discussed the role of

disadvantage. In summary, the paper concluded that al-Qaida influenced extremism was driven by “an ideology that sets Muslim against non-Muslim, highlights the alleged oppression of the global Muslim community and which both obliges and legitimises violence in its defence; a network of influential propagandists for terrorism, in this country and elsewhere, making extensive use of the Internet in particular; and by specific personal vulnerabilities and local factors which make the ideology seem both attractive and compelling.”¹⁷

Current British CVE strategy is based on this assessment.

Government CVE measures

When CONTEST was launched in 2003, analytical and intelligence sources largely focused on investigative work to address the immediate terrorist threat rather than the factors driving radicalization. After the July 2005 attacks, the latter problem received much greater attention. As noted above, the Terrorism Act 2006 criminalized violent extremism, but the government also launched a series of measures to address the perceived sense of alienation in Muslim communities and to counter the spread of religious extremism. The Home Office began a major consultation

The current threat to the UK from international terrorism is severe. The most significant international terrorism threat to the UK remains violent extremism associated with and influenced by al Qaida

– *The Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, 2012*

institutional facilitators of extremism, namely the Internet, prisons, university campuses and peer groups.

In March 2010, the parliamentary Communities and Local Government Committee addressed the risk factors for violent extremism. The committee’s findings were based on a comprehensive series of written submissions and individual interviews with government officials, local community and religious leaders, academics, and nongovernmental organizations.¹⁶ Much of the evidence presented to the committee revisited themes discussed in previous studies and reports. Not surprisingly, the committee concluded that it was impossible to define a single pathway to radicalization. What the committee described as a “failure to access a shared British identity” was once again acknowledged as a factor that left individuals vulnerable to an extremist ideology, although British foreign policy was now considered a contributory rather than primary driver. Instead, the committee placed emphasis on relative socio-economic deprivation, which made vulnerable individuals more susceptible to political and religious radicalization.

A major review of the *Prevent* strategy was published in June 2011. This paper provided the most sophisticated official British analysis to date of the drivers of violent extremism. The review noted that academic research and the experience of organizations working on *Prevent* strategies had suggested that radicalization occurred as people searched for identity, meaning, and community in an environment where they faced apparent discrimination and socio-economic

exercise with Muslim communities under the title *Preventing Extremism Together*. Recommendations arising from this exercise were included in the *Prevent* strategy. Measures included “roadshows” by Muslim scholars to challenge terrorist ideology, community-led approaches to strengthen the role of local leaders, and measures to enhance mosque self-regulation through the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board.¹⁸ A government commission was established to work with communities of mixed ethnicity to examine causes of tension and barriers to integration. Its report in July 2007 stressed the importance of shared values and visible social justice, along with more practical recommendations such as citizenship education in schools and the promotion of English language training in immigrant communities.¹⁹ The Home Office *Channel* project launched in April 2007 encouraged teachers and community leaders to identify and report teenagers suspected of being attracted to extremism so that local police and community leaders could intervene before they became directly involved in terrorism. As prisons and universities were also considered to be extremism “hot spots,” *Prevent* measures included guidance to universities concerning campus extremism and initiatives to train prison imams, mentor at-risk prisoners and assist Muslim prisoners to reintegrate into society at the end of their sentences.

In March 2007, the Home Office established a cross-departmental Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) specifically to counter al-Qaida’s ideology and terrorist



A British police officer in Birmingham hands out leaflets in 2007. Britain has one of the most active and far-reaching anti-terrorism programs in the world, but officials have fine-tuned their efforts to avoid stigmatizing particular religions or ethnic groups.



Women walk past a sign in 2011 meant to reassure Muslim residents in Birmingham that the authorities had not singled them out for surveillance. Project Champion, part of a larger British program to combat violent extremism, set up cameras in Birmingham neighborhoods that police believed harbored radicals.

narratives, while the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) engaged with international partner countries to share ideas for countering violent extremism. Given the perceived role of schools in promoting extremist ideology, educational reform was a major FCO focus. This included the establishment of partnerships with madrassas in Pakistan and Bangladesh.²⁰

The government's urgent and wide-ranging efforts to counter violent extremism proved controversial. Laudable core concepts such as "shared values" and "cohesion and integration" were neither defined nor explained, and Liberal Democrat peer Lady Falkner spoke for many when she attacked the government's initiatives as "... a very hurried, let's-do-something sort of response rather than anything substantive."²¹ Much criticism was directed at the government's attempts to co-opt Muslim leaders who were often viewed as unrepresentative of majority Muslim opinion.²² Most seriously, tensions emerged between the *Prevent* and *Pursue* strands of the government's counterterrorism policy. Police surveillance and intelligence gathering caused distrust and anger in Muslim communities. The most damaging allegations were that *Prevent* measures were being used to spy on law-abiding Muslim citizens.²³

Review and reform of *Prevent*

Despite widespread criticism, significant changes to the UK's CVE policy did not take place until the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition replaced the Labour government in 2010. A series of reports provided the impetus for change. The independent think tank Policy Exchange published a major and influential review of *Prevent* in 2009.²⁴ Policy Exchange criticized the belief that self-professed nonviolent Islamist organizations could act as official partners to prevent radicalization when, in practice, these "partners" promoted illiberal, anti-Western views that stoked violent extremism. The report also highlighted the relative lack of

management, administrative and financial oversight of local *Prevent* initiatives. The House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee condemned much of the execution of the *Prevent* program.²⁵ In particular, the committee confirmed that efforts to mix community cohesion measures with the counterterrorism agenda had left many Muslims with the impression that even benign cross-cultural initiatives were subject to surveillance by the security services. The committee also concluded that *Prevent's* monocultural focus on Muslims had been unhelpful as it stigmatized one section of the community and could lead to the very alienation it was intended to halt.

In November 2010, the government launched a major official review of the *Prevent* strategy. Prime Minister David Cameron also made a keynote speech on the subject of CVE at the Munich Security Conference in February 2011. He announced the end of "state multiculturalism" and official tolerance of viewpoints antithetical to Western democracy and liberal values. He promised to create a society with a strong sense of national identity founded on the values of freedom of speech and worship, democracy, rule of law and equal rights.²⁶ The *Prevent* review and strategy, published in June 2011, claimed that previous CVE policies had confused efforts to promote integration with counterterrorism measures, had failed to confront terrorist ideologies adequately, and had even allowed funding to reach some extremist organizations that facilitated terrorism. The new strategy focused on three main areas: terrorist ideologies and those that promoted them, people vulnerable to the extremist narrative, and sectors and institutions where radicalization was liable to take place.²⁷

The revised *Prevent* strategy retained much from earlier versions, such as the legal framework and controversial measures such as *Channel* and the RICU. In particular, *Channel*, the multiagency program to identify and support

A bus passes floral tributes placed at a memorial for the victims of the London bombings. July 7, 2011, marked the sixth anniversary of the terrorist attacks that killed 52 people on buses and underground trains.



people at risk of radicalization, was to provide the basis of future efforts to protect individuals vulnerable to extremism. Nevertheless, the new strategy addressed most of the strongest criticisms of the previous government's CVE efforts. In the future, *Prevent* would tackle all forms of terrorism, including that from the right wing. The government would no longer work with so-called nonviolent extremist groups that opposed liberal democratic values. Broad initiatives to promote social integration and cohesion would finally be separated from counterterrorism activities. The revised strategy placed a major emphasis on a holistic approach that addressed so-called key sectors that included education, faith, health, criminal justice and charities. The Internet was identified as a key sector in its own right with emphasis on the need for effective online, counterterrorist narratives. The 2011 version of *Prevent* acknowledged that public money had been squandered on CVE and promised much more robust scrutiny, monitoring and evaluation of *Prevent* projects at the local and national level.

It is too early to judge the success of the revised *Prevent* strategy. It did not attract much public interest on its release, not least because effective police and intelligence operations during the past few years have successfully foiled terrorist attacks and diminished public perception of the threat.

Criticism to date has focused on *Prevent's* emphasis on "mainstream British values" and the crackdown on nonviolent extremists, which some claim stigmatizes

non-mainstream, but arguably pro-democracy, organizations such as the Muslim Council of Britain.²⁸ Because Britain is currently enduring a five-year austerity program, little can be done to redress perceived economic and social deprivation in some Muslim communities. This is a long-term problem that remains outside the scope of the *Prevent* program.

Lesson from the British approach

The UK has developed a comprehensive CVE program. No other Western state has put such a sustained effort into countering radicalization. The record since 2005 has been checkered, but British authorities have shown a willingness to learn from mistakes and reform failing programs. The following observations from the UK's CVE experience are intended to advance the sharing of ideas and the dissemination of good practice in CVE.

- CVE measures must have cross-party support. It should not be an area subject to major political arguments. Throughout the period under discussion, a broad consensus remained on counterterrorism measures in the UK. Parliamentary criticisms of *Prevent* were essentially made on practical rather than political grounds.
- CVE measures should not be introduced without consideration of their long-term efficiency and effectiveness. Much early criticism of the *Prevent* strategy stemmed from the fact that many measures were introduced hastily in reaction to an enhanced perception of

the homegrown terrorist threat in 2005-2006.

- National CVE programs should define terms such as “extremism,” “radicalization” and “Islamism.” The latest *Prevent* strategy contains a glossary of terms used in the context of UK CVE, although the authorities recognize that the definitions used “... are not always authoritative in any wider context.”²⁹
- CVE programs should not stigmatize a particular ethnic or religious group. British government efforts to counter Islamist ideology were interpreted as interference in religious practice and caused a backlash. Governments should facilitate, rather than direct, local community efforts to counter radicalization and avoid a heavy-handed involvement by police and intelligence services.
- CVE requires a whole of government approach. It is not primarily a task for the security services. In particular, education and correctional institutions play a key role in CVE. Private sector organizations, especially Internet providers, are increasingly important. *Prevent* has also illustrated the need for cooperation between government departments and civil society, including charities and faith organizations.
- Unlike specific counterterrorism measures, CVE initiatives should be transparent, communicated to all members of the community and involve widespread consultation with those directly and indirectly affected. Changes to *Prevent*, especially in recent years, have been preceded by widespread direct consultation with interested parties, as well as comprehensive data and evidence collection.

Conclusion

As noted above, there are no CVE templates that can be universally applied regardless of a country’s politics, society, history and culture. Although *Prevent* remains a work in progress, it offers a model for a whole of government approach to countering radicalization, which has evolved in response to public criticism and changing circumstances. Cooperation with allied and partner nations remains an important feature of *Prevent*. British academics and officials from the security services have shared ideas with their peers in the European Union, the U.S. and Muslim majority countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. A notable example is provided by Professor Peter Neumann, director of The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, who advised the U.S. government on its latest CVE strategy in 2011.³⁰ CVE is becoming an essential element of regional and international counterterrorism programs. For example, in July 2012, a Marshall Center–sponsored conference in Macedonia brought together counterterrorism specialists from the whole Balkan region and included discussion on comparative CVE case studies from Bosnia-Herzegovina, the UK and Germany. Such cooperation will remain critical in an era when the threat of terrorism is no longer purely a domestic matter, but rather invariably involves a range of transnational actors connected by worldwide communication and information systems and united by ideologies with a global reach. □

1. The Brixton and Finsbury Park mosques in London featured prominently. By the end of the 1990s, these mosques had been “reclaimed” by the wider Muslim community, although this did not stop the activities of radical preachers.
2. HM Government, *CONTEST: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism*, July 2011. Available from: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism/
3. The latest British security strategy lists terrorism as the most important “Tier 1” security threat to the UK. See: HM Government, “A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy,” Cm 7952, October 2010. Available from: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/national-security-strategy.pdf> For an analytical summary of deradicalization efforts in Muslim states see: Maureen Chowdhury Fink and Hamed El Said, *Transforming Terrorists: Examining International Efforts to Address Violent Extremism*, (New York: International Peace Institute, 2011).
4. Reports and studies frequently refer to the process of becoming a violent extremist as “radicalization.” Therefore, the words “extreme” and “radical” are used interchangeably in this paper.
5. The Crown Prosecution Service, *Violent Extremism and Related Criminal Offences*, Section 1. Available from: http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/prosecution/violent_extremism.html
6. *Ibid*, Section 5. The full list of charges included behavior likely to stir up racial hatred, the possession of “threatening recordings,” and a document likely to be “useful to terrorists.”
7. UK National Archives, *The Terrorism Act 2006*, Chapter 11, Part 1, Offences. Available from: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/11/contents>
8. *CONTEST*, op cit, p. 59. The right to hold extremist views is protected by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.
9. Intelligence and Security Committee, *Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, Cm. 6785, (London: The Stationery Office, May 2006) p. 29.
10. *Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom’s Strategy*, Cm. 6888 (London: The Stationery Office, July 2006) p. 10.
11. Growth from Knowledge, NOP Social Research, *Attitudes to Living in Britain – A Survey of Muslim Opinion*, 27 April 2006, p. 32. Available from: http://www.gfknop.com/imperia/md/content/gfk_nop/newsandpressinformation/muslims_in_britain_aug_06.pdf. Young Muslims were classed as those aged 18 – 24. The survey revealed that 51 % of the same group believed that the 9/11 attacks were a U.S. conspiracy.
12. BBC News, *Full Text: Muslim Groups’ Letter*, 12 August 2006. Available from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_news/4786159.stm
13. See for example: Michael Nazir-Ali, “Multiculturalism is to Blame for Perverting Young Muslims,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 August 2006 and “British Exceptionalism,” *The Economist*, 19 August 2006, pp. 10-11.
14. Office of National Statistics, *Focus on Ethnicity and Religion 2006*, October 2006. Available from: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/ethnicity/focus-on-ethnicity-and-religion/2006-edition/index.html>
15. For example: Ed Husain, *The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam, What I Saw Inside and Why I Left*, (London: Penguin Books, 2007); Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007; Mark Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the 21st Century*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2008); Daveded Gartenstein-Ross and Laura Grossman, *Homegrown Terrorists in the US and UK: An Empirical Examination of the Radicalization Process*, (Washington DC: FDD Press, 2009); Peter K. Waldmann, *Radicalization in the Diaspora: Why Muslims in the West Attack Their Host Countries*, (Madrid: Elcano Royal Institute, 2010); The Danish Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration, *Preventing Extremism: 14 Cases of Handling Radicalisation*, October 2011; and Brian Michael Jenkins, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States Since 9/11*, (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation, 2011).
16. House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, *Preventing Violent Extremism*, (London: The Stationery Office, 30 March 2010), pp. 24-43.
17. HM Government, *The Prevent Strategy*, (London: Stationery Office, June 2011), pp. 17-18. Available from: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/counter-terrorism/prevent/prevent-strategy/prevent-strategy-review?view=Binary>
18. Department for Communities and Local Government, *Preventing Violent Extremism: Winning Hearts and Minds*, April 2007. Available from: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/preventrapisassesssummary>
19. Commission on Integration and Cohesion, *Our Shared Future*, July 2007. Available from: <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Education/documents/2007/06/14/oursharedfuture.pdf>
20. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Active Diplomacy for a Changing World: The UK’s International Priorities*, (London: The Stationery Office, March 2006), p. 29. Available from: <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm67/6762/6762.pdf>
21. Quoted in Martin Bright, “When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries: The British State’s Flirtation with Radical Islam,” (London: Policy Exchange Limited, 2006) p. 26.
22. See for example: “Who Speaks for British Muslims,” *The Economist*, 17 June 2006, pp. 36-38 and “Immoderate Voices,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 August 2006, p. 12.
23. *Prevent Strategy 2011*, op cit, p. 31.
24. Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, *Choosing Our Friends Wisely: criteria for engagement with Muslim groups*, (London: Policy Exchange, 2009). Available from: www.policyexchange.org.uk
25. *Preventing Violent Extremism*, March 2010, op cit.
26. A copy of Prime Minister Cameron’s speech is available from: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference/>
27. *Prevent Strategy 2011*, op cit.
28. See for example: Mehdi Hasan, “So, Prime Minister, Are We to Call You an Extremist Now?” *Guardian*, 8 June 2011.
29. *Prevent Strategy 2011*, op cit, p. 109.
30. Katie Rothmann, “A Step in the Right Direction: Reviewing the US Government’s Counter-Radicalization Strategy,” 4 August 2011. Available from: <http://www.icjr.info/>