The 'Prevent' agenda conflates terrorism, extremism and political dissent: How to build effective resistance?

Opposition to the Home Office 'Prevent' programme has been growing among public-sector staff who are meant to monitor and report on Muslim communities. More people are criticising the programme as Islamophobic and anti-democratic, especially since it has been set in law by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015.

At the National Union of Teachers (NUT) conference in April, speakers denounced the Prevent agenda for suppressing free discussion of political issues (BBC, 2015). There the NUT General Secretary stated, 'We will work with members to ensure that the Prevent agenda is not used to criminalise young people or to close down the space for debate in schools.' At the University and College Union (UCU) conference in May, moreover, delegates voted to boycott the entire Prevent agenda (UCU, 2015).

How to build collective resistance which undermines the Prevent agenda? We need to understand better how it exerts pressures on administrators, staff and students to comply. These pressures come from a state agenda conflating terrorism, extremism and political dissent.

Persecuting all resistance as terrorism

All UK counter-terror legislation rests on the Terrorism Act 2000. According to its broad definition, terrorism encompasses simply 'the threat of action designed to influence the government' in ways involving 'serious damage to a property' anywhere in the world. This statutory definition was the UK's basis for banning several national liberation organisations as terrorist, for persecuting migrant and Muslim communities, and for criminalising speech acts and political symbols. In such ways, the 'anti-terror' agenda supports oppressive regimes allied with the UK – for example Turkey's oppression of the Kurds, Sri Lanka's oppression of Tamil minorities, Israel's attacks on the democratically elected Hamas government, etc. Muslim and migrant groups here have been turned into suspect communities, especially those protesting against the UK's support for oppressive regimes abroad.

Similar practices have a long history. To undermine struggles for national self-determination, colonial counter-insurgency campaigns persecuted entire populations as 'terrorist suspects' under 'emergency powers'. Those colonial practices were brought back home by the state terror campaign against the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, turning all Irish people into a suspect community (Hillyard, 1993). The overall strategy was formulated as 'low-intensity operations', blurring any distinction between violent resistance and civil protest as the target for state attack (Kitson, 1971).

Along similar lines, since 2001 UK Muslims have been monitored, intimidated and persecuted under suspicion of terrorist association. When the neoconservative agenda declared its 'war on terror' after the September 2001 attacks, liberalism was turned into 'an ideology of total war' against a global threat, seen as a 'fanaticism inherent to Islam' (Kundnani, 2014). Since the New Labour government adopted the neocon agenda, UK Muslims have been treated as a suspect community, warranting systematic surveillance to identify potential sympathisers of 'terrorism' under the 2000 statutory definition. Subsequent laws have established greater powers of detention and punishment, as well as new speech-crimes such as 'glorification of terrorism'.

The domestic counter-insurgency role became more explicit in Contest 2 (HM Govt, 2008). It called for greater integration of policy: namely, to abandon all distinctions between domestic and foreign policy, between soft and hard power, between civil and military resistance, etc. Schools, youth clubs and universities were meant to monitor the views of Muslim communities. These measures must target 'a large group of non-violent people who create an environment in which terrorists can operate' (Farr, 2009). In this racist imaginary, any mundane activity can disguise mortal dangers.

Extending that rationale, Contest 2 featured various means to restrict the scope for 'radicalization', even among groups not advocating violence. With the euphemism 'non-prosecution executive action', the state has imposed various punishments without trial, e.g. house arrest, asset-freezing, travel bans, long interrogations at UK ports, long detention periods without charge, etc. These measures stigmatize individuals and deter dissent among entire communities.

'Prevent' agenda serving the UK 'counter-terror' framework

As part of Contest 2, the Home Office initiated its 'Prevent Violent Extremism' programme. This identified a broad threat encompassing merely verbal support for violent resistance anywhere in the world. Such views were cast as Islamist extremism – incompatible with 'our values', as if only Muslims could support resistance against imperialist Occupation or Zionist terror. Regardless of its public statements, in practice the early Prevent programme defined the term 'extremist' by the degree to which Muslims oppose UK government policy. Numerous Muslim organizations were funded to 'counter violent extremism', especially through surveillance. The Prevent programme has violated privacy, undermined professional norms of confidentiality and degraded local democracy (Kundnani, 2009).

New Labour's counter-terror regime distinguished between 'moderate versus extremist Muslims', as if religious belief had a continuum leading to terrorism; this language put the entire Muslim community on the defensive to disavow 'extremism'. Under the ConDem government, Prime Minister David Cameron shifted the explanatory model from religion to 'extremist' beliefs, seen as a continuum: 'As evidence emerges about the backgrounds of those convicted of terrorist offences, it is clear that many of them were initially influenced by what some have called "non-violent extremists", and they then took those radical beliefs to the next level by embracing violence'. Therefore the UK needs 'an active, muscular liberalism to counter the non-violent and violent forms of extremism' (Cameron, 2011).

What does this term mean? According to the Prevent programme, 'Extremism is 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'. As shown in a critical report, however:

> The theory and operation of the Prevent policy contradicts this statement. Much of it is shrouded in secrecy, operates outside the rule of law (without due process) and violates individual liberty. It gives the state unrestricted intrusive powers into the lives of a minority community and faith; restricting their freedoms of belief, expression and association (Cage UK, 2014: 50).

The Prevent agenda has been relentlessly intruding into private lives, even investigating children's thoughts. There is a need for 'a move into the private space' of Muslims to identify views that could show the beginning of radicalization, according to the UK's most senior Muslim police chief (Dodd, 2015). To identify early signs of potential terrorists, Waltham Forest has been surveying primary school children's views under the Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism Programme (Taylor, 2015).

In all those ways, the Prevent agenda treats Muslims as a suspect community which must undergo pervasive surveillance and demonstrate its allegiance to 'British values'. Of course, such values are systematically contradicted by UK foreign policy, but any Muslim raising doubt is cast as an extremist, even a potential terrorist. More than simply rhetorical, the putative link between dissent and terrorism is deeply rooted in the latter's statutory definition. For effectively resisting the Prevent agenda, therefore, we must oppose the UK 'counter-terror' regime – its assumptions, political aims, powers and practices.

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