

'Beyond Prevent: Achieving Security and Challenging Extremism

An MCB Perspective'

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Introduction

The terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and subsequent events have profoundly impacted upon our way of life. It has left a lasting legacy in the form of major policy shifts in Europe and North America.

Shocking that these attacks were, the aftermath is yet harder to live with. Civil liberties, respect for human dignity, freedom of faith and principles of equality have taken a serious battering as a result of harsh and ill-considered policies. One may even go as far as to say that some of the policies adopted by our own government have inadvertently helped advance the objectives which the terrorists were seeking to advance.

As we know, the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks resulted in the war in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as numerous other operations in many other countries. These events continue to inflame anger and concerns in many parts of the world, including amongst a sizable number of Britons. Individual lives, families and societies have been traumatised and singled out for no logical reason; the legacy continues to haunt us and threatens to destabilise societies and nations. The Deputy Prime Minister has himself suggested that the war in Iraq was illegal. What the public is waiting for is a fulsome apology from our Government for its part in this misadventure, with its sorry tales of outsourced torture and prisoner abuses.

At home, our government enacted a barrage of legislations targeted to address the “causes” of terrorism and to counter the so called radicalisation. These and a whole range of other initiatives increased surveillance and infiltration of communities.

Prevent is a UK government initiative lead primarily by the Communities and Local Government. It seeks to bring together local councils, security establishments and third sector organisations together, to work with one aim: tackling extremism and preventing terrorism. In the words of Arun Kundnani of IRR “the Prevent programme has been used to establish one of the most elaborate systems of surveillance ever seen in Britain”.

The Fall Out

Unfortunately, the philosophy underpinning Prevent is too simplistic, rather problematic and plainly alarming. The approach adopted in Prevent –

- Singles out the British Muslim community as perpetrators
- Creates, nurtures and legitimises hatred, prejudice and anger at the Muslim community
- Threatens to undermine the British Muslim community’s ability to develop into a confident, proud and responsible community, able to engage in the affairs of the state on equal terms with others
- Creates resentment and thereby threatens community cohesion and greater integration
- Promotes division and disrespect for disadvantaged groups or communities

Philosophical Shift

Perhaps the most negative aspect of Prevent is that it blurs the line between security and community cohesion. The task of local government, and indeed government generally, is to empower communities by providing leadership, initiative and opportunities. The state’s duty is to provide mechanisms and ensure that all people regardless of their colour, race, gender, sexual orientation and faith are able to flourish equally. The state has a duty to

identify and address issues which prevent us from achieving a society where all (and I underline the word “all”) people are treated with respect and dignity.

Of course, there are times when some people fall foul of rules and the law. In every society there are fringe elements that may be prepared to break the law and commit criminal acts out of a misplaced sense of loyalty to something else. One example that comes to mind is the Cambridge spy ring of the 1940s and 50s, who out of a misplaced loyalty to Communism and Soviet Russia, betrayed Britain’s national security and led to the assassination of numerous British agents operating in the Balkans. No doubt, society and the state need to be protected against such elements. But these are essentially issues of security, law and order which must be dealt by specialist agencies with expertise and responsibilities in those areas. Their function should not be confused with social development and inter-community activities. From an MCB point of view, there are of course questions over certain tactics and strategy adopted at times by our security forces. But that is a different issue all together. I leave that for discussion at another time.

We believe that Prevent has fused together the issue of national security with that of integration of the second largest faith community in Western Europe. This is confusing and most unhelpful. By doing so, agencies and departments which were previously respected and seen as important partners in improving the lot of the Muslim community are now viewed with, at best cynicism and at worst, suspicion. Local governments and voluntary organisations which opted to be part of Prevent risk being seen as bodies collaborating in obtaining intelligence and infiltrating communities. This mistrust is a great loss for our society and a significant hindrance in creating a united country where different communities can live side by side as equal citizens.

In recent months, of course, we have had a new government taking office. We have heard great things prior to and after the election. Recently, the Home Secretary announced a review of Prevent and counter terrorism initiatives. MCB certainly welcomes this review and will do its best to support the process to identify good ideas and recommendations which can achieve the set objectives effectively.

However, what is clear is that for any new strategy or initiative to be successful, it must be significantly different from its predecessor. We argue that the issue of security, intelligence gathering and other counter terrorism measures must be the concerns of our security establishment, working within a transparent, legal and a fair framework. Community empowerment, engagement, integration, dialogue and development must not be allowed to be intertwined with the security concerns. This requires a complete paradigm shift, a different philosophical approach to that which the previous government adopted.

The Way Ahead

For long, the MCB and many other stakeholders of our society argued that there are issues which make it easy for the misguided and their “puppet masters” to secure new recruits. In this, they have been assisted by some misjudged policies of our government. Although primarily these policies relate to foreign affairs, at domestic level too, there have been failures.

The Muslim community, for its part, feels and will continue to feel strongly against injustices across the world, particularly in Muslim countries. Commitment to justice is a fundamental aspect of the Muslim faith. Standing by the side of the oppressed and vulnerable is part of the faith. It is not part of the Muslim psyche to completely isolate itself from sharing the grief and plight of the fellow Muslims. Inevitably, the sufferings and the misery of Muslim in areas such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Philippines, Kashmir and many other parts of the world is and will remain a cause for concern for Muslims in UK and beyond.

In stating this, I should remind my audience that the MCB, together with all other mainstream Muslim community organizations in the UK, have consistently and repeatedly condemned wanton acts of violence that kill or maim civilians, whether committed by co-religionists or anyone else.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and as part of Prevent, there have been attempts to reform and redefine Islam in theological terms. There were even attempts to promote certain brands of interpretation of Islam championed by obscure groups, often with little history and root in

community, intent on “toeing” the government line. Serious attempts were made to marginalise organisations like the MCB despite having an established presence and grass root following. These attempts have contributed to creating mistrust and suspicion of the authorities and sown the seeds of division within the Muslim community, making our communities more vulnerable to security risks and not less.

To move forward, we need to make a fresh start. We need to appeal to our good senses, accept mutual respect as the underpinning principle and allow all stakeholders of our society to express their views. We need to approach these problems in a manner which upholds the values of trust, dignity and freedom. We need to cherish these values more and not less. We need to empower the spirit of liberty and freedom for all, and not reduce it.

It is only good practice to reflect and identify policy areas which may feed into the anger and resentment that many in our communities, particularly young British Muslims, feel. Ironically, the terrorist attacks have provided an important and opportunity to have a health check as to the degree of cohesion in our society. The way forward is to empower all our communities by identifying and addressing the barriers to integration. It must mean that we seek to enable our citizens to become more active and better able in participating in the affairs of the state.

Since the focus is on the Muslim community, it is important to make the point that there are issues that the Muslim Community feels very strongly about. The prevailing sense of fear, existence of discrimination, biased media and disengaged politicians seeking to make cheap and quick points, do not help. The answer to the so called radicalisation or “Islamic terrorism”, as it has come to be known in some quarters – is not to put the British Muslim community under the spotlight – not to make it answer for the crimes of a few. The way forward, surely, is to look for ways to address issues of economic deprivation, social marginalisation, educational underachievement, lack of political engagement – often identified as some of the causes that underlie these symptoms. The government needs to adopt policies which promote greater collaboration between communities, voluntary and statutory bodies – in order to achieve the common good and solve common problems. But these must be done in a spirit of equality and mutual respect. It needs to send the right

signal to civic society as a whole, that the Muslims are as much part of Britain as the rest of the population.

Conclusion

The post 9/11 world presents us with numerous challenges. It requires leadership, resolve and imagination. In this era of global terrorism, we need to guard our values more fiercely than before. We need to create space for our communities to debate issues of social importance without stigmatisation, fear and prejudice. We all yearn for a society where citizens coming from diverse ethnic, religious and socio-economic background can come together to celebrate the success of one another and to collectively work for the betterment of the society.

The Muslim Council of Britain is committed to working for the common good of us all. It stands ready to respond to the call for rebuilding our society, to re-engage with all our communities and to build mutual trust and harmony. The MCB hopes that the experiences of Prevent will help us learn from our mistakes and that the review ordered by the Home Secretary will provide an opportunity to put to good use the lessons we have learnt and abandon those that have been counter-productive. It is our sincere hope that out of the review will flow a set of recommendations which will pave the way for making a new beginning in building a great British society.