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Countering Radicalisation in UK: How to “Uplift” the Prevent Scheme

By Romain Quivoij

Synopsis

The recent attacks that struck Manchester and London have called attention to the alleged shortcomings of the Prevent scheme. Does the cost of the British counter-radicalisation strategy outweigh its benefits? Which new initiatives should be launched first?

Commentary

ON 24 MAY 2017, the UK Home Secretary Amber Rudd declared that plans were in place to “uplift” the Preventing Violent Extremism or Prevent scheme after the June 8 general election. Major political parties also pledged to review or end this policy, of which the official objective is “to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism”.

Rudd’s announcement reflects a change of approach that has been in the making for months. It nonetheless comes at a time of fierce criticism against Prevent, as some perpetrators involved in the Manchester Arena and the London Bridge attacks had previously been reported to the authorities.

Moving in Three Directions

A pioneer programme designed to identify at-risk individuals at an early stage, Prevent remains a work in progress that has been undergoing several phases of development. The effectiveness of its current strand suffers from a lack of public confidence, which should prompt the recently formed government to prioritise the adoption of trust-building measures.

The Prevent strategy is commonly described as a two-stage process.

An early version was applied between 2007 and 2011. It involved financial support for a wide variety of youth and community projects such as open debates and cultural festivals. With an overall cost of nearly £150 million (SGD 269 million), Prevent's first public release came under fire for a lack of a clear direction and a misallocation of state resources.

The then Home Secretary Theresa May pointed out that "funding sometimes even reached the very extremist organisations that Prevent should have been confronting". As a result of these flaws, a more targeted round came into effect in 2011. Prevent's second step initially focused on fewer geographic areas and was restricted to violent extremism and terrorism.

The revised programme relies on an annual budget of around £40 million (SGD 72 million) and acknowledges the importance of collaborating with "key sectors and institutions" such as education, health and criminal justice. In addition to preventive work, one-to-one interventions are conducted with individuals that are deemed to be radicalising.

Government action taken since 2015 suggests the gradual emergence of a third cycle that combines organisational aspects of previous periods. This is evident in the growing number of locations estimated to require priority support and a planned increase in funding.

The role of public bodies has also been significantly expanded by the 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act that placed a legal obligation on local councils, schools, prisons and hospitals staff to report people they would have concerns about.

Success Story or Complete Failure?

The application of Prevent's 2011 strand and its 2015 update version resulted in mixed trends.

The 2011 review showed progress in project management and the definition of primary objectives such as challenging ideologies of all terrorist groups. Prevent was praised by the government as instrumental in stopping dozens of individuals from leaving for Iraq and Syria.

The authorities cited local examples of community and faith outreaches as best practices, including engagement work carried out by members of a charity in Birmingham to counter the arguments used by extremists groups.

However, the strategy is impeded by three shortcomings that undermine its impact. First, Prevent's methodology and its recently introduced mandatory implementation in places like schools and hospitals remains contested. By Home Office Minister of State Susan Williams's own admission, "much-enhanced" training of frontline professionals is still needed.

Second, Prevent has been increasingly driven by a security-focused agenda. This is notably reflected in the leading role played by the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism at the Home Office, which may erode faith in a programme officially intended to support vulnerable individuals.

Third, a highly negative image of Prevent has been festering for years among segments of the public, in particular some Muslim communities that perceive it as an intrusive surveillance and stigmatisation tool directed against them.

Old Challenges, Hard Policies

In the wake of the London Bridge attack, Prime Minister Theresa May referred to new counter-terrorist legislation. Suspects would be especially targeted by a set of measures that could range from longer detention periods without charges to extended curfews. The authorities are likely to consider tougher rules of social media governance, in line with May's request for international agreements to fight online extremism.

Prime Minister May further warned that "difficult and often embarrassing conversations" were needed to defeat extremism, adding that Britons should not live "in series of separated and segregated communities".

These projects have to pass legal review (which led to the failure of similar attempts in the past) and, if adopted, be devoted adequate resources. Most proposals are premised on the basic idea that a higher level of focused surveillance would have increased the chances of avoiding attacks, or at least reducing their kinetic impact.

Potential measures such as those dedicated to online extremism seem nonetheless to be irrelevant. There is so far no indication that social media played a major role in the radicalisation of perpetrators, nor that it was used as a key tool of planning and execution. More crucially, this action plan will not bear fruit over the long term if the forthcoming Prevent revision once again fails to develop a climate of sustainable trust.

Rethink Role of Home Office

A two-pronged effort of organisational restructuring and public outreach is required. The damaging confusion between counter-radicalisation and counter-terrorism that has long been plaguing Prevent should lead the authorities to rethink the role of the Home Office.

Improved public relations and communication would also help address Muslim communities' concerns and the lack of transparency that critics associate with the strategy. The UK government seems to favour this last course of action, as media reports indicate that Prevent would soon be renamed "Engage".

If a cosmetic change leads the programme to rely on a more refined approach to the dynamics of violent and non-violent radicalisation, it would be a promising start.

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