**Assembling and Deconstructing Radicalisation in PREVENT: A Case of Policy Based Evidence Making?**

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**Abstract**

In the last fifteen years the concept of radicalisation has come to prominence as a means of explaining the process by which ijhndividuals become attracted to extremist ideology and endorse the actions of terrorist groups. Post 9/11, radicalisation has gained traction in policy, political and media circles in Britain, being commonly connected to the threat of ‘home-grown’ terrorism. In this article, we critique the understanding of radicalisation outlined in the UK Government’s PREVENT strategy. We focus specifically on how particular understandings of radicalisation are constructed, evidenced and operationalised in PREVENT and the way in which these understandings align with party political worldviews. It is posited that an unremitting focus on the role of religious ideology in the process of radicalisation within PREVENT mutes recognition of otherwise important material grievances expressed by individuals involved in violent extremism. At a broader level, our analysis adds to growing concerns around the deleterious impacts of the securitisation of social policy.

**Key words:** radicalisation; preventing violent extremism; security policy; counter-terrorism, PREVENT

**Introduction**

Since 9/11, the threat of terrorism has assumed precedence in many Western nations. Following on from the Madrid train bombings in 2004 and the 7/7 attacks in London in 2005, the British government increased its efforts to prevent violent extremism, introducing a series of policies and measures designed to counter political and religiously motivated violence (see Schmid, 2013; Thomas, 2012). In the last decade, serious terrorist attacks have occurred across Europe in France, Belgium, the UK, Turkey and Denmark. Contemporarily, anxieties about ‘home-grown’ terrorism have risen up political and policy agendas, with attention becoming focused on European citizens travelling to Syria and Iraq to engage in conflict. After the January and November 2015 attacks in Paris, widespread concerns have been expressed that individuals fighting with Islamist militants in conflict zones in the Middle East will become ‘radicalised’ and may return to commit atrocities in Europe (see Francis, 2015). In the UK, extant anxieties about radicalisation rendered explicit after the 7/7 attacks have escalated after the emergence of violence committed by British citizens active within ISIS, most notably Mohammed Enwazi, dubbed in the media as ‘Jihadi John’. These concerns form part of the contextual backdrop in which the wide-ranging legislative powers sanctioned in Crime, Terrorism and Security Act (2015) were introduced. This Act permits the passports of British citizens returning to the UK to be seized if they are suspected of involvement of terrorism and also sanctions the implementation of exclusion orders to prevent individuals thought to have engaged in terrorism overseas from re-entering the country. Whilst the 2015 attacks in Paris caution against dismissing the risk of individuals being trained in foreign countries returning to conduct attacks in the West, the question as to what exactly it is that motivates individuals to get involved with non State organisations that systematically deploy violence remains open. It is a complex question that produces diffuse answers. In the UK, the intelligence services have sought to identify common factors in the cases of individuals that turn to organised violence, while internationally academic researchers have sought to investigate the root causes of violent extremism (see Borum, 2011; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Horgan, 2009). While necessarily broad and cross-disciplinary, these efforts have resulted in the development of common knowledge and, in particular, something of a party political consensus forming in the UK around ‘radicalisation’, understood as the process through which individuals come to accept and endorse the use of violence (see Kundnani, 2015). Pivotal in setting the agenda in debates about radicalisation, the British Government’s PREVENT strategy seeks to map out both the ‘drivers’ of radicalisation and the means of combating violent extremism (HM Government, 2011: 17).

While the literature documenting the negative consequences of various initiatives put into practice under the PREVENT umbrella is well advanced, here we wish to home in specifically on the range and quality of the evidencewhich supports the PREVENT strategy. Our discussion in this regard raises critical questions about both the rationale for policy interventions and the connections between initiatives such as PREVENT and dominant party political orientations. In a context in which the reach of the PREVENT strategy has widened and in which a web of institutional actors have become responsibilised for its implementation, a detailed analysis of the evidence which informs policy becomes all the more important (see McGarry and Mythen, 2015; Petrie, 2015). In this article we will register serious reservations about *how* the problem of radicalisation is expressed in PREVENT strategy and the *evidential basis* for such an understanding of radicalisation being articulated. Our argument is presented in four interconnected parts. First, we provide a synopsis of the emergence and development of PREVENT. Second, we deconstruct the key ‘drivers’ of radicalisation as presented in the PREVENT strategy. Third, we offer a critique of the construction of radicalisation in the PREVENT strategy, focusing on both the modelling of the process and the evidence which supports it. Fourth, we unpack the principal problems that arise when radicalisation is approached in this way, identifying notable elisions and documenting iatrogenic effects. In line with the objectives of this Special Edition of the journal, it is our intention to explicitly interrogate Government policy designed to prevent terrorism and to consider the deleterious consequences of interventions formally designed to counter violent extremism. We aim to key into and debates around the securitisation of social policy and make connections between processes of suspectification and State logics of control. Drawing attention to the negative impact of the PREVENT strategy on the communities which it renders suspect, we seek to shine a light on the role of material inequalities, injustices and flawed State interventions in nudging individuals toward violent extremism. Finally, we wish to examine the ways in which ideational concepts and categories are discursively mobilized and embedded in counter-terrorism policy and security practices. At a time at which the British State has extended the remit of its counter-radicalisation strategy, it is our contention that there is insufficient evidence to justify the continuation of PREVENT in its present form.

**PREVENT: A Potted History**

The PREVENT strategy was first introduced by the Labour government post the 2007 attacks in London. Presented as a ‘hearts and minds’ approach, the ambition for PREVENT was that it would enable engagement with Muslim communities in particular (see Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007; Martin, 2014). In developing PREVENT, the UK Government sought assistance from the Muslim community, local organizations, educational institutions, mosques and criminal justice professionals. The introduction of the PREVENT strategy undoubtedly signalled a shift in the State’s engagement with Muslim communities, focusing on the implementation of various Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) initiatives designed to engage Muslim communities, counter radical interpretations of Islam and promote moderate theological approaches (see O’Toole, 2015: 3). This shift was underpinned at inception by a sizeable tranche of funding - over 180 million pounds - distributed across three government Departments: the Home Office, the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The PREVENT strategy was originally constituted by five overarching objectives,[[1]](#endnote-1) subsequently limited to three in the current version published in 2011: to respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat we face from those who promote it; to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and to work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation which need to be addressed (HM Government, 2011: 7). As social policy scholars have noted, the implementation of the PREVENT strategy was plagued by internal contests and conflicts. The allocation of funding across different government departments with competing organizational logics and different interpretations of PREVENT produced problems from the outset, with the tension between community cohesion aspirations and preventative counter-terrorism interventions generating cleavages (see Ratcliffe, 2012; Thomas, 2010). Furthermore, research into the external effects of particular counter-terrorism initiatives housed under the PREVENT umbrella raised serious concerns about the surveillant aspects of the strategy, particularly those directed squarely at Muslim communities (see Awan, 2013; Mythen, Walklate and Khan, 2009). As Kundnani’s (2009) systematic evaluation of PREVENT demonstrates, policies pursued under the PREVENT strategy have discriminated against Muslim Minority Groups, reproduced divisions between the police and targeted communities and damaged community relations. Given the aspiration to counter radicalisation through a wide variety of policy measures, it is perhaps unsurprising that the PREVENT strategy has been party to challenges regarding its focus and implementation (see Dodd, 2009; Travis, 2011). These criticisms led to a revised version of the strategy being implemented in 2011, which was more oriented toward interventions on the basis of risk and vulnerability and divorced community cohesion activities (Heath-Kelly, 2013). Noteworthy here is the Channel programme - a flagship initiative launched in 2011 - which seeks to identify young people and adults who are ‘vulnerable to radicalisation’. A strikingly high number of referrals for risk assessment under Channel have been Muslims, with around 70% of the 3,000 plus referrals being associated with signs of ‘Islamic extremism’ (see Whitehead, 2013). Some critics have questioned the basis of judgments for referrals, while others have objected to invasions of privacy and breaches of civil liberties (see Kundnani, 2015; Petrie, 2015). As we will argue, the operation of the Channel programe is indicative of assumptions about particular groups prone to radicalisation. While PREVENT funding was initially allocated to city councils according to the size of local Muslim population, under the 2011 version funding allocations were described as ‘intelligence-led’ and ‘proportionate to threat levels’ (HM Government, 2011: 11). Nevertheless, after the 2011 revision of PREVENT the 25 priority areas were still selected on the basis of ‘Muslim demographics’ (McGhee, 2011: 1). Following on from new legislation introduced in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (2015), the PREVENT *Duty Guidance* was reissued to incorporate a statutory responsibility for public authorities and bodies to actively enact PREVENT policy. As such, there is now a legal requirement on teachers, lecturers, doctors and health workers to actively identify and report signs of extremism in individuals they come into contact with. This change in policy has been a source of much dispute and we will return to discuss this issue later. However, it is first necessary to illumine the contours of radicalisation as defined in the PREVENT strategy.

**Drivers and Pathways: Constructing and Breaking Down Radicalisation**

In the CONTEST counter terrorism strategy, radicalisation is defined as ‘the process whereby certain experiences and events in a person’s life cause them to become radicalised, to the extent of turning to violence to resolve perceived grievances’ (HM Government, 2006: 27). This general definition is somewhat tautological, with radicalisation being defined as the process through which one becomes radicalised. It is also a definition which is decidedly broad in that it is difficult to imagine any aspect of everyday life that would not be included under the umbrella of ‘experiences and events’. This point notwithstanding, there are many consistencies between this initial attempt to define radicalisation and the current meaning offered in the PREVENT strategy (HM Government, 2011: 108): ‘radicalisation refers to the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism’. While the breadth of the process remains, what is distinct is the addition of the phrase ‘forms of extremism leading to terrorism’. This is explained in relation to the propensity of individuals who are members of ‘extremist organisations’ to ‘pass through an extremist phase’ prior to becoming members of terrorist groups (HM Government 2011: 2). The rationale for this seemingly slight but important shift in emphasis relates to strong connections being made between extremism and terrorism, with the former deemed to pave the way for the latter. What is common to current definitions in PREVENT - and those proposed previously in CONTEST - is the presentation of radicalisation as an ideational process which involves different stages through which individuals may pass. The PREVENT strategy is essentially based around the assumption that the adoption of extremist beliefs is the key factor in motivating individuals to commit indiscriminate violence against fellow citizens (see Kundnani, 2015: 6). Alongside this assumption, the PREVENT strategy (2011) seeks to breakdown the temporal landscape and de-compartmentalize key moments leading up to the adoption of extremist values. To this end, the language utilized indicates linear travel, with reference being made to ‘pathways’ ‘journeys’ and ‘drivers’. As Heath-Kelly (2013) observes, this somewhat mechanistic approach corresponds with the view that risk-based decision-making can inform appropriate institutional interventions. Indeed, direct analogies are drawn in PREVENT between counter-terrorism and other forms of crime prevention (HM Government, 2011: 9). In a similar vein, parallel issues are raised about how vulnerability is mobilized as a concept. Again, a somewhat circular argument is expressed, whereby vulnerability becomes not only tributary *to*, but largely analogous *with* radicalisation: ‘Vulnerability describes the condition of being capable of being injured; difficult to defend; open to moral or ideological attack. Within PREVENT, the word describes factors and characteristics associated with being susceptible to radicalisation’ (HM Government, 2011: 108). As Martin (2014) notes, the modelling of radicalisation as a graduated process assumes that particular traits and common characteristics can be identified during distinct phases of radicalisation. In line with this way of thinking, Borum’s (2003) early ‘step model’ of radicalisation suggests that initially perceiving an event or action to be unfair, may lead on to the perception that an injustice has taken place, which can subsequently illicit demonization of the party deemed to be responsible. Cited in PREVENT, Silber and Bhatt’s (2007) four phased radicalisation journey into violence oriented around ‘jihadist ideology’ is typical in depicting radicalisation is a phased process. The PREVENT strategy also makes direct reference to Wiktorowicz’s (2005) model of ‘cognitive openings’, whereby a particular moment or event can trigger a journey toward violent extremism. Similarly, McCauley and Moskaleno (2012) have argued that ‘opinion radicalisation’ involving cognitive commitment to ‘radical’ ideas can be a precursor to ‘action radicalisation’. It is worth noting that the bulk of research conducted on radicalisation ‘steps’ has been conducted in the United States and may not, in any event, be transferable across continents. While the applicability of the ‘conveyer-belt’ model across different contexts has been widely challenged (see Kundnani, 2015; Walklate and Mythen, 2015), understanding radicalisation in this way facilitates preventative risk-based interventions to engage ‘vulnerable individuals’ travelling *en route* to violent extremism (Thomas, 2016: 6). Notwithstanding the extent to which this accurately reflects the experiences of those drawn to violence, what models that present ‘routes’ or ‘pathways’ to radicalisation theoretically enable is a semblance of control. In identifying the assorted practices that people engage in - and various ‘touch points’ along a continuum of extremism - proactive intervention is not only imagined possible, it is, moreover, rendered necessary. While models of radicalisation may well describe aspects of the experience of some individuals attracted to violence it is what happens in between - the all-important ‘why?’ question - that remains unanswered.

Alongside the idea of radicalisation as a phased process, the PREVENT strategy (2011) makes emboldened statements regarding understandings of the process on the basis of ‘academic, intelligence and other Government work’ which is said to have ‘illuminated the drivers of radicalisation, the characteristics of people who have been radicalised and who have joined terrorist groups, and the specific pathways to support for, and participation in, terrorist acts.’ (HM Government, 2011: 17). The specific ‘drivers of radicalisation’ are identified in the PREVENT strategy (2011), with the most explicit statement reading as follows:

Radicalisation is driven by an ideology which sanctions the use of violence; by propagandists for that ideology here and overseas; and by personal vulnerabilities and specific local factors which, for a range of reasons, make that ideology seem both attractive and compelling. There is evidence to indicate that support for terrorism is associated with rejection of a cohesive, integrated, multi-faith society and of parliamentary democracy (HM Government, 2011: 5).

What is suggested in this passage - and elsewhere in PREVENT - is that it is adherence to misguided ideas and values that renders individuals susceptible to violent extremism. This focus on ideology has been consistently present in the wider PVE agenda since the 7/7 attacks, regardless of party political stewardship (see Kundnani, 2015: 10). In prioritising the role of ideology in radicalisation, what is essentially at stake in countering radicalisation is the aforementioned battle ‘for hearts and minds’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007). Despite the findings of many studies into radicalisation suggesting that firm ideological commitments are not the root cause of violent extremism (see, *inter alia*, Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Gunning and Jackson, 2011; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2012; Schmid, 2013), ideology - and, in particular, religious ideology - is foregrounded in the PREVENT strategy (2011). In focussing on religious extremism as the key risk indicator through which potentially violent individuals are identified, a range of otherwise important factors which may make violent responses attractive to individuals are glossed over. In keeping with the focus on religious ideology, the PREVENT strategy suggests that radicalisation can occur when individuals are searching for a sense of identity, meaning and community (HM Government, 2011: 17). At this juncture, it is suggested that ‘some second and third generation Muslims in Europe … can find in terrorism a value system, a community and apparent just cause’. Thus, while the drivers of radicalisation are described as diffuse, order is rendered possible by breaking down the factors into interconnected component parts.

Firstly and foremostly, radicalisation is envisioned as an *ideological process* through and during which individuals are indoctrinated. This results in the adoption of a corrupted worldview rendering individuals susceptible to violent extremism. There are a series of characteristics associated with this process including, ‘supremacist ideology, which sanctions the use of extreme violence as a response to perceived social injustice and dysfunction’ and ‘rejection of a cohesive, integrated, multi-faith society and of parliamentary democracy’ (HM Government, 2011: 18). Second, PREVENT details the *vehicles of radicalisation* and *influential actors* that perpetuate this ideology of extremism, including ‘radicalising materials’ - such as DVDs, videos, and extremist literature - and ‘radicalising locations’ such as prisons, University campuses, mosques, book stores, homes, cafes, the internet and social media platforms (see HM Government, 2011: 18). Situated within these spheres and supported by radicalising materials, influential actors direct the ideology of extremism, encouraging vulnerable individuals to adopt views that align with those of terrorist organisations. Influential propagandists - often associated with terrorist networks - are said to utilize a combination of the vehicles above as facilitators of extremism during the radicalisation process, drawing on group bonding, the application of peer pressure and ideological indoctrination (HM Government, 2011: 17). Third, PREVENT details a range of *local factors* and *personal vulnerabilities* that are present in circumstances in which individuals become radicalised. In detailing these, the PREVENT strategy document draws on wider evidence from the 2010 Citizenship Survey commissioned by the DCLG.[[2]](#endnote-2) As we shall go on to argue, given its purpose and design, the centrality of this Citizenship Survey as an evidence prop for the PREVENT strategy is somewhat remarkable. Nevertheless, data drawn from the survey is used to justify the claim that that ‘support for all kinds of violent extremism is more prevalent not only among the young but among lower socio-economic and income groups’ (HM Government, 2011: 16).

**Rethinking Radicalisation: Places to Start or Reasons to Stop?**

There are several issues that critical social scientists might want to raise about the empirical evidence on which the PREVENT strategy is based and the ways in which this evidence is used to endorse interventions that aim to prevent violent extremism. Here we prioritise just three. First, we offer a critique of the evidence used to support this strategy. Second, we explore some of the implications associated with the suggestion that a search for community and identity can lead to radicalisation. Third, we reflect on what the PREVENT strategy assumes to be the root causes of terrorism, flagging up the key policy questions that this raises.

The assertion within the PREVENT strategy that violent extremism is prevalent amongst the young and those of lower socio-economic status is largely based on findings drawn from the 2010 Citizenship Survey. The survey involves a representative sample of 10,000 individuals and gathers the views of around one in every 5,700 individuals living in England and Wales. Broad ranging questions are posed about, *inter alia*, civic engagement, volunteering, community cohesion, faith and media usage. The survey is not designed to address radicalisation, and, whilst findings from the question on violent extremism may be of interest, they do not constitute a reliable evidence base for the making of general claims about young people, nor people from lower socio-economic or particular faith groups. Respondents in the survey were asked just two questions relating to violent extremism. First: ‘How right or wrong do you think it is for people to use violent extremism in Britain to protest against things they think are very unfair or unjust?’ Second: ‘Please tell me how right or wrong you think each of the following is: people in Britain using violent extremism in the name of religion, to protest or achieve a goal.’ According to the survey results, 3% of Muslims thought it was ‘always’ or ‘often right’ to use violent extremism in Britain to protest against things they judged to be very unfair or unjust compared to 1% of Christians, 1% of Hindus and 1% of those with no religion. While 6% of Christians said violent extremism in the name of religion was ‘always/often right’ or ‘sometimes right, sometimes wrong’, a larger proportion of Hindus (14%), Muslims (12%) and those with no religion (9%) chose one of these two responses. Notwithstanding the orientation of the questions, the results are far from conclusive, with just 3% difference between Muslims and those of no faith in terms of approving violent extremism in the name of religion. Similarly, while the study shows higher levels of endorsement of violent extremism in the name of religion amongst Hindus responding to the survey than Muslims, this data does not translate in the PREVENT strategy document which makes no mention of Hindus. In sharp contrast, the word ‘Muslim’ appears over a hundred times. Of course, this is not to suggest that greater surveillance should be directed toward Hindus, merely that the evidence from the Citizenship Survey is used selectively as a means of underscoring the ‘riskiness’ of Muslims. Perhaps more problematic, is the analysis of the findings to these two questions according to age and socio-economic group. Here evidence from the Citizenship survey used in the PREVENT strategy purports to show that those of lower socio-economic groups are more susceptible to radicalisation. The sheer breadth and diversity of the classification scheme used makes it impossible to make such assumptions, with those never employed and the long-term unemployed being lumped together with those studying. This constitutes something of a melangé category from which it does not seem sensible to draw inferences. Notwithstanding this, the assumption made in the survey question is that the term ‘violent extremism’ is axiomatic: that it is not only fully understood by all respondents, but understood to mean comparable things.

The weight afforded to just two questions in the Citizenship Survey (2010) is striking, particularly since there are many aspects of the survey that seem eminently reportable but go unmentioned within PREVENT. While the breadth of the category used in the survey makes it difficult to draw specific inferences, 13% of individuals from ‘ethnic minority backgrounds’ described racial or religious harassment as a ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ big problem in their local area, with 22% per cent stating that they would be treated worse than people of other races by at least one of eight public service organizations measured. Moreover, almost half of all respondents to the survey (44%) thought that there was more religious prejudice today than five years ago. Thus, it would seem that some perceptions expressed in surveys are considered as realities salient to the shaping of policy - such as those around violent extremism - while others - such as those involving racial discrimination, institutional bias and religious prejudice - are not. In the context of PREVENT, the widespread feeling within Muslim communities that the strategy has unjustly cast suspicion over the entire population simply compounds the problem (see Thomas, 2016). As Garner and Selod (2014) argue, the racialization of Muslims post 9/11 has operated through blanket negative assumptions about faith and identity and the discourse embedded in the PREVENT strategy simply compounds the problem. Aside from this unstable evidence base, the Citizenship Survey deployed in PREVENT also purportedly shows that individuals who distrust Parliament, who think that ethnic and faith groups should not mix, and/or who perceive tensions between being British and their own cultural identity are ‘likely to be more supportive of violent extremism’ (HM Government, 2011: 18). In addition, support for extremism is said to be ‘significantly associated’ with perceptions of discrimination, experiences of racial or religious harassment and ‘a negative view of policing’ (HM Government, 2011: 16). In the case of British Muslims, the ‘local factors’ are rendered more explicit and include UK foreign policy, ‘a sense that Muslim communities are being unfairly treated’ and ‘a perception of biased and Islamophobic media coverage’ (HM Government, 2011:13). Thus, there are several critical points which are muted in the PREVENT strategy, but are factors that may encourage some people to engage with extremism - for example, racial discrimination, religious harassment, over policing, reckless foreign policy and media stereotyping. These exclusions are especially curious given the extensive body of academic work focusing on the *material* problems experienced by British Muslims over the last two decades, including economic disadvantage and social exclusion (Craig, 2013), hyper surveillance (see Cheong et al, 2007; Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009; Thomas, 2016), the intensification of racism (see Abbas, 2005; Ratcliffe, 2012), erosions in civil rights (McGhee, 2008) and a deterioration in relations with the police (see Mythen, Walklate and Khan, 2009; Spalek and Lambert, 2008). Despite the availability of such concrete evidence - which is consistent across multiple studies - in the PREVENT strategy it is a negative *view* of policing which is augmented with a *sense* that Muslim communities are being unfairly treated and *perceptions* of biased and Islamophobic media coverage. This de-legitimation of material social problems dovetails with the construction of radicalisation as a condition characterised largely by ideological malaise. Yet in reality the ideological and the material are not readily separable. The ideas and values that shape and influence people’s behaviours are vitally connected to their lived experiences, habitus and institutional engagements. In the PREVENT strategy there is a tangible reluctance to give credence to the impacts of experiences of prejudice, injustices and ill treatment on individuals that affiliate with extremist groups. As such, what may well be tangible grievances not only become products of a particular mind-set but, moreover, potential risk indicators signalling vulnerability to extremism. What is pertinent in this regard - given the heightened presence of certain findings from the Citizenship Survey - is the absence of recognition of the role that, not perceived, but actual forms of discrimination might have on individuals attracted to terrorism. Not only does this sidestep some rather sticky issues concerning the role of the State in manufacturing the conditions in which radicalisation thrives, it also fixes attention on the flawed individual - whose faulty ideational preferences can be corrected - as opposed to shining a light on iniquitous institutional structures and poorly judged security policies. This mirrors the stance currently adopted by the British Government - typified by a refusal to acknowledge that material factors are an important factor in causing disaffection. In asserting that acknowledging the role of historic injustices, recent wars, poverty and exclusion in radicalisation is tantamount to ‘grievance justification’, former Prime Minister David Cameron (2015), merely underlined a steadfast unwillingness within British Government to discuss thorny problems that implicate the State in the mismanagement of both domestic security and international conflicts.

Notwithstanding reliance on the Citizenship Survey, the wider evidence cited in the PREVENT strategy for classifying age and socio-economic group as salient factors in the radicalisation process is far from persuasive. It is claimed that ‘recent open source research’ indicates that most ‘Islamist terrorism-related offences’ over the past decade in Britain have been committed by men under the age of thirty (HM Government, 2011: 19). In the first instance, given that PREVENT avowedly focuses on all types of extremism, it would seem illogical to isolate data pertaining to one group of extremists and use it as evidence to drive interventions across *all* types of extremism. Further, given the international nature of the present threat, focusing solely on British cases of Islamist inspired terrorism offences is myopic. As Kundnani (2015: 29) notes, if we look across Europe over the last three decades, the statistics show that a similar number of people have been killed in incidents of far-Right violence than al-Qaeda-inspired violence. Second, it remains a moot point whether or not people under thirty can reasonably be described as ‘young people’, with the term more commonly being used to refer to those that are under the age of twenty-five and often much younger. This brings us to a further question raised by the PREVENT strategy: the problematic status given to the search for identity. A search for ‘identity, meaning and community’ are considered to be ‘essential factors in radicalisation’ and are ‘supported by evidence from organisations working on PREVENT’(HM Government, 2011: 18). Evidence in support of this assertion is not forthcoming, so it is difficult to assess its validity. While in some instances a lack of direction in life may open up a meaning gap that can be exploited, it is questionable whether this can reasonably be connected to radicalisation. At the risk of appearing churlish, from a sociological point of view, searching for meaning and identity is precisely what most human beings do most of the time, and young people do this more than most. Many individuals may suffer from normlessness or alienation, but do not find solace by associating with terrorist networks, so this hardly seems to provide a firm basis for attempting to identify signs of extremism. Indeed, a recently reported House of Commons Home Affairs Committee Report on Counter Extremism (2016)presents empirical evidence to question the assumption that identity crisis and rootlessness are a major factor in radicalization, particularly amongst those attracted to Islamist extremism. Drawing on studies which show that British Muslims have high levels of attachment to Britain in comparison with other ethnic groups, counter-extremism policies based on the assumption of a lack of integration amongst Muslims are unsupported and can be damaging to community relations (House of Commons Report, 2016: 8). In the PREVENT strategy (2011: 17), the link between searches for identity and radicalisation are said to be supported by academic work in ‘social movement and social network theory’. This work, it is suggested, indicates that radicalisation is a process especially prevalent in small groups: ‘radicalisation is about ‘who you know’. Group bonding, peer pressure and indoctrination are necessary to encourage the view that violence is a legitimate response to perceived injustice’ (HM Government, 2011: 18). Although social movement studies and social network theory are both large areas of academic inquiry, evidence from several studies does endorse the idea that identities formed in tight knit networks are a factor in some instances in which individuals commit to use political or religiously motivated violence (see Kundnani, 2015: 21).

Despite mention being made in PREVENT of the importance of social networks, the approach adopted to radicalisation is essentially individual-centric, assuming a value neutral, rational subject who - due to possession of a series of characteristics, personal deficiencies and/or exposure to particular stimuli - becomes corrupted by what David Cameron (2014) referred to as a ‘poisonous’, ‘warped’ and ‘barbaric’ ideology - and is duly radicalised. Yet, as Fraser (2015: 14) observes, in posing the question ‘how do we stop young Muslims becoming radicalised’ we may well be setting a trajectory that ‘contains a hidden assumption that it is radical ideas, specifically radical Islamic theological ideas, that are the root causes of turning a young lad from West Yorkshire into an ISIS suicide bomber in Iraq’. While the presentation of the drivers of radicalisation in PREVENT privileges the role of extremist ideology, there are notable absent factors and one’s that have previously been foregrounded by those that have committed terrorist attacks. For example, when Mohammad Siddique Khan filmed his ‘martyrdom video’ prior to committing the 7/7 bombings, his reasoning ran as follows:

Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight.

According to the ‘official narrative’ we should interpret his - and the actions of his fellow perpetrators - as the products of a mind distorted by a warped Islamist ideology. Yet it is important to approach terrorist acts as both situated and relational. Hostility towards Muslims - vectored through Islamophobia, racial profiling and anti-Muslim acts - forms part of the context into which counter radicalisation strategies such as PREVENT are introduced. This makes non-inflammatory and measured policy-making all the more important. While Islamophobia and the racialization of Muslim communities occurs across a range of cultural, political and social contexts (see Garner and Selod, 2014), it is vital that distorted constructions of Islam and approaches that assume Muslims to be a homogenous and risky group are challenged and rebutted. Despite the evasion implicit in the political use of terms such as ‘grievance justification’, the actions of those that turn to violent extremism have to be considered both in context and in relation to the values and actions of those that they are opposing, including the political strategies of nation-States and military interventions sanctioned by government (see Baker-Beal et. al., 2015; Sedgwick, 2010). There is surely an important line that can - and indeed should - be taken in which it can be suggested that indiscriminate atrocities conducted in support of any political or religious cause are unacceptable, while simultaneously acknowledging that the grievances expressed by individuals attracted to terrorism are not mere figments of a contorted imagination. In the light of the evidence of a raft of studies that have illuminated sharply the problems and issues that arise when already marginalized groups are denied the right to express legitimate beliefs (see Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011; Lindekilde, 2012; Meer and Modood, 2009; Mythen, 2012; Mythen, Walklate and Khan, 2013), the risk of making interventions that produce iatrogenic effects is tangible. As Kundnani (2015: 29) reasons:

For young Muslims in Britain, there is little space to express strongly worded criticisms of foreign policies that have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands in the Middle East, South Asia and East Africa. Those who denounce such policies are dubbed extremists and seen to be on a pathway of radicalisation rather than as fellow citizens exercising their right to dissent. That is bad for civil liberties and bad for countering terrorism: without a legitimate outlet for political grievances, violence is more likely.

If political elites persist in closing off discussion of uncomfortable items, it is likely that the ‘drivers’ of terrorism will continue to be obscured. The weight placed in PREVENT policy on ‘ideology’ as opposed to material grievances - including ruinous military policy, inter-generational experiences of racism and over zealous policing - is telling. We would encourage wider political and policy acknowledgement of the diverse roots of terrorism and the multiplicity of factors at play when violent extremism becomes an attractive option. Clearly, the evidence of what ‘causes’ terrorism is complicated and points in several different directions. Given this, it is perhaps better to acknowledge the multi-causal and broad range of motivations than inspire individuals to commit violence, rather than lumping together competing explanations and squeezing them into a generic wrapper of ‘radicalisation’.

On the basis of the evidence considered above, it is clear that the PREVENT strategy does not seek simply to reflect but, moreover, to *construct* an understanding of radicalisation. The diversity of characteristics, processes and perspectives captured under the umbrella headings ‘local factors’ and ‘personal vulnerabilities’ introduces vagueness and renders oblique the *relative* weights that might be placed on each of these factors when considering the riskiness and/or ‘at riskness’ of individuals. In so far as searching for a magic bullet is misguided, the aggregation of explanations in PREVENT lends a false coherence to a reality which is indubitably messy. The clustering together of divergent types and strands of research on radicalisation manufactures a ‘model’ which theoretically enables knowledge based interventions on the basis of particular ‘stage’ risk indicators. Simply throwing together disparate elements into a *pot-au-feu* may give the impression of understanding, but runs the risk of legitimating interventions that may not only be misplaced, but are also counter-productive. Contra to this tidiness, different strands of inquiry within different traditions conducted within different geographical contexts generate competing findings about the nature of radicalisation. We have argued elsewhere that the existing research and literature suggests at least four interpretations of radicalisation which offer contrasting accounts of what occurs ‘before the bombs go off’ (see Walklate and Mythen, 2015). Given the paucity of reliable and independent studies, it is important not to prioritise one set of explanations over another. This is not to imply that the ‘drivers’ of radicalisation outlined in PREVENT are fictitious. On the contrary, some of the factors identified will be present in some individual cases and across different contexts. Nevertheless, as we shall go on to argue, there is a discernible reluctance to discuss and address certain ‘drivers’ - including State violence, deleterious foreign policy, racism and discrimination - and a valorisation of others, most notably those associated with religious ideology and propaganda.

**Conclusion**

Having elucidated the model of radicalisation as presented in the PREVENT strategy and subjected the specified drivers of radicalisation to scrutiny, we wish to conclude by picking out on some deeper questions that need to be asked about the ways in which radicalisation is being mobilised in policy and deployed as a lever for more specific party political agendas. As Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010) has posited, what is striking is not so much how much we know about radicalisation, but how little. While the State cannot be criticised for attempting to assemble the available evidence to understand what motivates people to commit violent acts in the name of politics or religion, the persistence of large knowledge gaps is perplexing given the high prioritisation of radicalisation in politics and policy over the course of the last two decades. Despite significant resources being ploughed into studying radicalisation and the panoply of security industries which have congregated around this work, there is a distinct lack of reliable evidence which upholds the central premise that religious ideology is the key ‘driver’ of terrorism (see Gunning and Jackson, 2012; Kundnani, 2015: 19). This observation itself raises further questions regarding the strategic coalition of interests around radicalisation forged between the State, security industries, academia and private research companies. Our specific contribution to this Special Edition on countering terrorism and radicalisation, has been to interrogate the evidence mobilised to support the UK Government’s PREVENT strategy and, in particular, its modelling of the process of radicalisation. While we are not in a position to know how important the ‘drivers’ of radicalisation presented in PREVENT are in cases of individuals that turn to political and religiously motivated violence, as critical social scientists, it is our duty to question whether the evidence that is coalesced to justify far-reaching security strategies is credible and comprehensive and to examine the efficacy of such policy making. In terms of countering extremism, the risks of State policy producing iatrogenic effects cannot be more readily apparent:

If the Government adopts a broad-brush approach, which fails to take account of the complexities, and of the gaps in existing knowledge and understanding of the factors contributing to radicalisation, that would be counter-productive and fuel the attraction of the extremist narrative rather than dampening it (House of Commons Report, 2016: 9).

On the basis of the analysis above, we would suggest that a reassessment of the root causes of violent extremism is required. This reassessment would be best served by dispensing with the idea of radicalisation as a multi-purpose, catch all concept. The corollary of this is that it may be useful for policy makers to focus more sharply on the systemic and structural factors that shape human motivations and influence (anti) social behaviours. Here we have suggested that the violence of the State and Government policy - enacted domestically and internationally - play an important part in shaping the contexts in which commitments to violence become possible. While an infinitesimally small number of Muslims become involved with extreme Islamist groups - and fewer still become actively involved in terrorism - the generalized construction of Muslims as risky in counter terrorism policies such as PREVENT serves to amplify broader social fears and anxieties around dangerous ‘others’. We have argued here that the construction in PREVENT of Muslims as vulnerable to radicalisation is aligned with broader political discourses and social practices through which Muslims are singled out and ostracised. In making strong connections between extremism and Islam, the PREVENT strategy reproduces erroneous essentialist assumptions that discriminate against Muslims (see Norris, 2016). In this way, the problem of racialization and the ascription of stereotyped racial identities to Muslims is aggravated rather than challenged by PREVENT strategy. The wider implications of this are broad and wide, contributing to a feeling of receiving differential treatment in terms of human rights, freedom of expression, policing and employment opportunities (see Abbas and Siddique, 2012; Amrani, 2016; Mythen, 2012). The present context for British Muslim Communities - and young British Muslims in particular - is one in which free speech and legitimate critical viewpoints - are often silenced by fear of being labelled an extremist (see Ahmed, 2015; Khan and Mythen, 2015). To be clear, it has not been our intention to belittle the threat of terrorism, nor to dismiss it as fanciful. On the contrary, we would argue that the ongoing and mutable nature of this threat hastens the need for an appreciation of the roots of the problem: an appreciation which is not only credible, but also adaptable to changing circumstances. As the PREVENT strategy indicates, agencies that are involved in providing support for individuals who may choose to get involved in violent extremism are in ‘a position of great influence’ (HM Government, 2011: 8). At a time in which professionals in a range of public institutions have been legally responsibilised for identifying signs of radicalisation and extremism in their interactions with students, customers and clients, it is imperative that we have an authoritative view of the factors that make organised violence seem attractive. In seeking to achieve this,the information scoping process on which policies are based has to be thorough and the data retrieved must be presented in a balanced fashion. Without this, we cannot possibly develop a firm understanding of what propels individuals to commit acts of violence. What is required is detailed and corroborated scientific evidence: not policy-based evidence making, but evidence-based policy-making.

Aside from issues regarding the paucity of evidence presented in the PREVENT strategy, the impacts and effects of policies and practices sanctioned under its banner is troubling. While we have documented some of the historical concerns which have materialised above, the problems of stereotyping communities and pathologising individuals previously associated with PREVENT have intensified rather than receded. The PREVENT Duty Guidance issued in 2015 has signalled a new phase of pre-emptive interventions, again largely focussed on Muslims and targeting young people in particular. In a context in which the Government has lowered its threshold of concern from ‘violent extremism’ to ‘extremism’, issues of social definition are far from being whims of academic debate. The working definition of ‘extremism’ - which provides the basis for reporting and intervention - includes ‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy and the rule of law’ (HM Government, 2015: 9). The sheer breadth of this definition potentially criminalises legitimate political opposition and institutional critique. Further, it is no coincidence that there has been a recent spike in the number of individuals referred to Channel, PREVENT’s de-radicalisation programme, with 3,955 people being reported in 2015, up from 1,681 in 2014 (Halliday, 2016). Beside issues regarding the efficacy of the Channel programme, we should be asking just how qualified and prepared those now legally bound to report signs of extremism actually are in schools, universities and health services. Moreover, the extent of the scrutiny of young people apparently vulnerable to radicalisation is alarming. While there are obvious implications of such interventions on children’s rights to freedom of thought and expression, the number of dubious cases of intervention is disquieting, including a sixteen year old referred to PREVENT for taking out a library book on terrorism and a four year old boy who, it was erroneously claimed, had drawn a picture of a bomb-making ‘cooker pot’ (see Bolton, 2015; Institute for Race Relations, 2016). Again, the science underpinning the Channel programme is troubling. Young people referred to Channel panels are subjected to a ‘Vulnerability Assessment’ based on an individual’s engagement with ideology, intent to harm and capability to cause harm. The assessment draws on various indicators in order to gauge risk, including changes in styles of dress or appearance, using insulting or derogatory names and developing technical information technology skills (see Rights Watch UK, 2016: 19). Such questionable methods and measures only underline the urgency with which the State needs to rethink and reform its approach to combatting violent extremism. Indeed, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee Report on Counter Extremism (2016: 7) - which drew on broad consultation with stakeholders - openly questioned the effectiveness of PREVENT, stating there is ‘no clear template for the factors that might lead to radicalisation’. In conclusion, the representation of the process of radicalisation by the State through policies such as PREVENT not only sets the agenda on what it means, but also creates a reality around it as a tangible process that produces a set of associated techniques and mechanisms of prevention. In a climate in which the policing of ideas has intensified and to be ‘radical’ is to be damned this matters greatly (Bourne, 2012). As the risk metric set for radicalisation interventions has been lowered to the implausibly ill-defined category of ‘extremism’, it is absolutely imperative that the capacity of social scientists to probe and critique social policies is defended. In short, we must continue to exercise our right to speak up and speak out.

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1. These initial five objectives were: to challenge violent extremism by utilizing moderate voices to combat destructive ideology; to disrupt extremism and to challenge any organizations or individuals who seek to promote it; to support individuals that are deemed susceptible to extremism; to increase local communities resilience to extremists and, finally, to tackle the grievances felt by local communities. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The 2010-11 Citizenship Survey was conducted by Ipsos MORI and TNS-BMRB on behalf of the Communities Analysis Division within the Department of Communities and Local Government. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)