

The anti-Prevent lobby are dominating the discourse, not all Muslims oppose Prevent

*Despite the government engaging with hundreds of mosques, community organisations and faith organisations in the last year, many Muslim organisations do not want to publicise the fact that they support Prevent. **Sara Khan** argues that this is because of a loud anti-Prevent lobby that is dominating the discourse on Prevent and vilifying those Muslim organisations that do engage with it. Khan argues that a far more complex and nuanced picture exists amongst British Muslims than is commonly presented.*



Inspire's "Making A Stand" project. Copyright: Inspire

I have lost count the number of articles, academic blogs and assumptions that are made about Prevent, in particular that the "Muslim community" opposes it. Not only is the use of the term "Muslim community" problematic – ignoring the rich diversity in thought, belief and practice of Britain's three million Muslims – but it is also simply not true that **all Muslims do oppose Prevent**.

The at time lazy and uninformed debate around Prevent is in part a result of our post-truth society, where, as Kathryn Viner, editor of the Guardian once **wrote** we should be concerned about how technology and social media now has the ability to disrupt the truth. Does the truth matter anymore, she argues, where "outlandish claims are published on the basis of flimsy evidence," and when "a fact begins to resemble whatever you feel is true it becomes very difficult for anyone to tell the difference between facts that are true and "facts" that are not."

There is no greater example of this than the EU referendum campaign which was repeatedly marked by **lies and misinformation**. But I have seen how, through a combination of technology, ideologically driven activists, fervent anti-establishment sentiment and a lack of balanced media reporting, Prevent – and indeed many Muslim groups who support Prevent – have become victims of our post-truth society.



Last month Tariq Ramadan **wrote** in the Guardian that the government's counter-terrorism strategy **Prevent** is flawed because it is based on "a process through which individuals pursue a continuing trajectory, leading from a "moderate" understanding and practice of religion, to an increasingly violent or extremist involvement." Ramadan is referring to the oft-repeated claim that Prevent is based on the so-called "conveyor belt" theory of radicalisation. In an article for the Independent last year, Rabah Kherbane **wrote** "our government's current anti-radicalisation strategy is based entirely on the premise of a so-called "conveyor belt theory". The Home Office vouches for this theory, and it forms the basis of the government's flagship counter-terrorism policy Prevent."

Yet despite these claims not being based on fact or truth they have been repeatedly stated. Nowhere in the Prevent strategy is there support for the conveyor belt theory let alone that the Home Office "vouches" for it. Instead the government has made it clear in **official documents** that there is "no single way of identifying who is likely to be vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism." Factors, the guidance goes on to say, are wide and varied and can include bullying, family tensions, personal or political grievances among others. The Security Minister, Ben Wallace MP, in response to Ramadan's claim **argued** that "the Prevent strategy has never conflated religious practice with radicalisation."

But the damage by such articles are already done; the myth, one of many, is spread widely on social media and becomes cemented in the mind of many as fact. The Independent comment piece noted above for example was shared four thousand times. Technology is used to spread myths, in an unprecedented way to an unsuspecting audience, who then end up conflating this untruth as fact.

In my book ***The Battle for British Islam: Reclaiming Muslim Identity from Extremism***, I highlight such concerns. While there are legitimate concerns about the delivery and effectiveness of Prevent, **I evidence** how British Islamist organisations have led on delivering a highly effective campaign in deliberately misinforming not only British Muslims but wider society about what Prevent is and is not. These Islamists have not only partnered with teaching unions, students, lawyers, teachers and academics in an attempt to end Prevent, they have sought to malign the many Muslim organisations who do support it creating a "toxic" climate where many Muslims do not want to openly admit their support for Prevent. As a result the loud anti-Prevent lobby end up dominating the discourse – and narrative about Prevent.

There are valid reasons why many Muslim organisations do not want to shout from the rooftops their support for Prevent, despite the fact that the government has **engaged with 372 mosques, 385 community organisations and 156 faith organisations in the last year**. Many of these Muslim groups, doing important counter-narrative and CVE work, are vilified because of the opposition by Islamist groups to this area of work. They are **labelled as "native informants" and "sell outs."** These counter-radicalisation groups, including my own, have been declared "apostates" "government spies" and "traitors" by Islamists **precisely because of our anti-extremism work**. Yet in an era of ISIS radicalisation, it is precisely this counter-narrative work and partnership which is so urgent. The Home Office **reports** that 130 community based projects were delivered in 2015 reaching over 25,000 people. Online counter-narrative products to counter ISIS propaganda produced in partnership with Muslim groups and the government **generated over 15 million views** online in 2015. This is vital work.

Alongside this, the debate around Prevent has exposed the continuing alliance between **Islamists and some on the British Left**. Together both continue to propagate myths around Prevent and equally pour scorn on counter-radicalisation Muslim groups who increasingly find themselves in a beleaguered space. What does it tell us about the state of debate today when non-Muslim socialists openly write that organisations like mine – a non-governmental organisation founded by Muslim women – are "state sponsored Islamophobes"* because one of our projects, **Making A Stand** was supported and funded by the Home Office?

Our campaign visited hundreds of Muslim women in 9 cities across the UK which taught mothers theological counter-narratives to extremist ideology and how they can safeguard their **children**

against radicalisation. **Our campaign** was well received by British Muslim women – whether Shia, Ahmadi or Sunni. We delivered this campaign because of the high demand; these same women did not feel that “representative” Muslim organisations or mosques were providing them with such support. At the same time we knew that without the government’s support through Prevent we would not have been able to deliver this campaign.



An Inspire project in Bristol. Copyright: Inspire

But such work has come at a price. The vitriol, abuse and threats we – and other counter-radicalisation Muslim groups – have received from Islamists has sadly been a blind eye for many in the world of academia – and indeed the media – who instead focus their efforts on those who shout the loudest about their opposition to Prevent rather than acknowledging the far more complex and nuanced picture that really exists amongst British Muslims. It also ignores the battle of ideas that is currently taking place amongst Britain’s Muslims.

Prevent is by no means perfect and the government’s weakness in communicating what Prevent is and is not and in reassuring the public has undoubtedly been part of the problem. Much can be said of the government’s unhelpful focus and over inflation of its security policy when engaging with British Muslims. The announcement of a counter-extremism bill, separate to Prevent, and the government’s attempt to legally define what an extremist is, is a policy I have repeatedly spoken out against and one that I oppose. Such policies will not only undermine our human rights and freedom of speech, which must be protected especially at such heightened times, but I believe will also undermine our struggle against extremism which seeks to polarise our communities.

Through my work I have seen first-hand how Prevent is playing out on the ground. We need a far more balanced and accurate discussion about Prevent for the sake of truth, intellectual rigour and academic debate.

About the author



Sara Khan is author of “The Battle for British Islam: Reclaiming Muslim Identity from Extremism” co-authored with Tony McMahon. Sara is also co-director and co-founder of Inspire, a counter-extremism and women’s rights organisation. www.sarakhan.co.uk

action

*The article mentioned appeared in the Socialist Worker paper and has since been removed, following legal

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