Prevent: The shifting parameters of UK counter-terrorism

The revised Prevent strategy of 2011 emphasised ideology itself as a cause for concern even where it is acknowledged that such doctrine is in and of itself non-violent. **Anthony Richards** *argues that as the terms 'terrorism', 'radicalisation' and 'extremism' have increasingly become merged into a single discursive framework, UK counter-terrorism has lost its focus in recent years. Not only are sections of our society now regarded as part of the 'terrorist problem' by virtue of the way they think ideologically, but it excludes from cooperation the very people who might be best placed as dissuaders of terrorism.*

It was unclear, in its early years and through the emerging discourse of 'radicalisation', whether the Prevent strategy was concerned with just those who were in danger of carrying out and/or supporting acts of 'violent extremism' or whether it was also concerned with non-violent but 'extremist' ideology. The revised and latest Prevent version of 2011, however, is unequivocal in its emphasis on ideology itself as a cause for concern even where it is acknowledged that such doctrine is in and of itself *non-violent*. It refers to 'extremist' but *non-violent* ideas that it states, rather paradoxically, as being 'conducive' to terrorism.

Most terrorism scholars, however, view terrorism as ineluctably about violence or the threat of violence. Therefore if an ideology is conducive to terrorism it cannot then be non-violent. If it *is* non-violent then it cannot be culpable for terrorism. In other words for a belief system itself to be conducive to terrorism it must have at least some element of doctrinal endorsement or justification for it.

This is not, of course, to suggest that terrorism cannot be carried out for non-violent ideologies – it certainly can and has done throughout history. Nationalist doctrines, for example, are not, in general, inherently violent although terrorism has often been carried out in pursuit of them. The same is true for single issue causes, such as anti-abortion and animal rights – again, these are not inherently violent belief systems, yet acts of terrorism have been carried out in their name. Thus ideologies of violence and terrorism (such as those of Al Qaeda and Isis) cannot take ownership of

the phenomenon. It is why terrorism is best conceptualised as a particular *method* of violence, whether this violence is *ideologically* sanctioned or not.

Hence, in relation to the notion of a non-violent ideology that is said to be 'conducive' to terrorism, if that belief system is truly non-violent, then, rather than the ideology itself, it is those who endorse the *method* of terrorism, or who 'knowingly' encourage others (surreptitiously or otherwise) to tread the path of violence, that are culpable for terrorism. The point is that, when countering terrorism, it is important to maintain the distinction between extremism *of method* and *non-violent* extremism *of thought*. Yet, in recent years it appears that 'terrorism', 'radicalization' and 'extremism' have increasingly become merged into a single discursive framework, one consequence of which has been to blur this important distinction and which has therefore arguably seen counter-terrorism lose its focus in the UK.

This blurring of extremism of method and thought is exemplified in the government's own definition of extremism which 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'. Hence a peaceful demonstration itself becomes an act of extremism if it is in support of an extremist doctrine, yet bizarrely an act of terrorism (a very extreme act) escapes this definition if it is carried out for a non-extremist doctrine (such as a nationalist cause).

What, then, are the implications of this broader counter-terrorism focus on those who hold to an 'extremist' but non-violent ideology? Firstly, and paradoxically, there may be sections of our society who are now regarded as part of the 'terrorist problem' by virtue of the way they think ideologically even if they deplore the violence and terrorism of ISIS and Al Qaeda.

When confronted with the threat of terrorism, government is duty bound to exploit every possible avenue in order to prevent it. So, secondly, it may seem perplexing that it excludes from cooperation the very people who might be best placed as dissuaders of terrorism – those who hold similar 'extremist' beliefs but who are *non-violent* and are opposed to the methods of violence and terrorism (and this is not, of course, in any way to imply endorsement for such belief systems). For example, Contest states that 'intervention providers must not have extremist beliefs' and yet 'they must have credibility' and be 'able to reach and relate to' those at risk of becoming violent. Moreover, it is generally accepted that it is far more difficult to change someone's belief system than it is to change their methods in pursuit of those beliefs.

Noone should underestimate the formidable challenge facing the British government when confronting the contemporary terrorist threat. Unlike the so-called 'traditional terrorism' of the past the threat is decentralised in nature, with increasing concern over 'lone wolf' attacks or those carried out by small groups of friends or associates. With no obvious organisational threshold where, then, do governments intervene in the trajectory from apparently peaceful citizen to one of violence? And it is true that the most serious contemporary terrorist threat arises from those who claim to be acting on behalf of Islam. But it seems that UK counter-terrorism has more broadly become counter-ideological over and above its remit of countering terrorism. From this emerges an unhelpful counter-terrorism conundrum where those who may urge peaceful methods are nevertheless considered to be part of the 'terrorist problem' and excluded as potential dissuaders of terrorism by virtue of their extremist but *non-violent* views.

This article is based on From terrorism to 'radicalization' to 'extremism': counterterrorism imperative or loss of focus? in International Affairs.

About the author

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