

## Terrorism Prevention: Lessons Learned from the United Kingdom National Experience

**Background:** *International counterterrorism efforts focus increasingly on preventing terrorism before it occurs. In its recent Resolution 1963 (2010), the UN Security Council mandated its Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate to work with Member States to develop mechanisms to address “the factors that lead to terrorist activities”. Increasingly, Member States are looking to coordinate support for efforts to build counterterrorism prevention capacities on the ground. The Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, in a variety of programs, projects and expert interviews such as this one, seeks to foster discussion of what it means to build terrorism prevention capacities – and in particular, what it means for the UN to support such activities.*

**Richard Evans** is a Strategic Communications Consultant and Visiting Fellow at the United Kingdom Defense Academy. He specializes in the use of strategic communication to counter violent extremism and in this Expert Interview offers insight into the United Kingdom’s Prevent program.

**Q: What is the focus of the UK counterterrorism strategy CONTEST and what are the goals of the Prevent work stream?**

A: The UK has identified the threat from international terrorism as the most significant threat to the homeland and has therefore designed a counterterrorism strategy called CONTEST. The CONTEST program is organized under four workstreams: (1) Pursue; (2) Prevent; (3) Protect and; (4) Prepare. Under the second component, Prevent, UK officials, across a variety of agencies coordinate and cooperate to reduce risks to the UK and its interests in several ways: by challenging violent extremist ideologies; supporting mainstream voices against those promoting violent extremism; disrupting individuals that are promoting violent radicalization; and by increasing general community resilience and attempting to address the broader social grievances on which those promoting a violent extremist agenda often thrive. This work is carried out through a variety of programs, some implemented by local community organizations that range from one-day events to ongoing programs.

**Q: Who are the actors administering programming and who is the ‘target audience’ of the Prevent strategy?**

A: Prevent relies to a considerable degree on working in partnership with communities. The Home Office, in cooperation with local government bodies, local social service agencies, law enforcement and civil society organizations, reach out to minority communities, primarily Muslim communities, to develop these local partnerships. The establishment of alliances based on trust with a variety of individuals and community groups is critical to the success of Prevent; in many cases local partners are perceived to have greater credibility with the target audience, and hence a greater ability to challenge the message of violent extremists, than would government officials and departments.

**Q: A wide range of government agencies participate in Prevent. What mechanism is used to coordinate within and between agencies?**

Until recently, the Office for Security and Counterterrorism (OSCT) at the Home Office has been the main coordinating body. It has overseen development of strategy and guided its implementation, for example by producing guidance on the selection of community partners by local government authorities, or the

implementation of community-level Prevent initiatives. One change I think we're likely to see this year is that most of the broader social cohesion projects previously funded by OSCT will be decoupled from the Prevent initiative and handed to the Department For Communities and Local Government. Some communities, particularly Muslim communities, have raised concerns that such projects may appear to stigmatize Muslims in general because they are being conducted under the general auspices of counterterrorism.

**Q: Has the Prevent program made an impact? Specifically, how is this evaluated and measured?**

A: In some areas, there's evidence it has had a significant impact. An example would be the Channel Project, a direct intervention program in which authorities and local community partners engage with particular individuals identified as being at risk of radicalization to the point of engagement in, or support for, violent extremism. I would envisage a growing emphasis from the present Government on supporting highly focused programs such as this, rather than the broader community initiatives that have received Prevent funding in the past. As is often the case with Prevent, however, the key to successful implementation is establishing credible and effective local partnerships.

Measuring the effectiveness of counter-radicalization initiatives is often a challenge. One of the greatest critiques leveled against the Prevent workstream is the lack of measurement and effective metrics for measuring the success or failure of projects under the Prevent umbrella. One method used, for example by local authorities in Leicestershire, is a measurement of community cohesion, namely by determining the degree of 'belonging' and 'grievance measurement' in a target audience to determine whether community initiatives have had any impact of programming. While of some value, this is a very broad metric. Beyond this, few metrics exist to determine what direct impact Prevent initiatives may have. Government is looking hard at this – in an age of

public sector fiscal conservatism, the Home Office will want to fund only those initiatives that deliver concrete results.

**Q: What are some key challenges to the program and how can these be addressed?**

A: Critics of the program suggest it has at times lacked focus, and unnecessarily dips into security and counterterrorism funds to address issues that could alternatively be funded by other agencies such as the Department For Communities and Local Government. The broad strategy of Prevent makes implementation a challenge and is often perceived as controversial. For example, it has been suggested that the Prevent program's primary focus on combating violent Islamist radicalization promotes a negative perception of the Muslim community in the UK. Some view the program with suspicion and cite concern that the program is a cover for state espionage in Muslim communities. There are indications that many British Muslims – and the youth in particular – are therefore reluctant to get involved in Prevent funded programs or events. The concern that Prevent is a cover for counterterrorism intelligence gathering has regularly been leveraged in the narratives used by supporters of violent extremism in the UK. Government has a strategic communication challenge here if it is to convince British Muslims that Prevent is less about spying on communities and more about *empowering* those communities to challenge the message of the extremists.

**Q: The Prevent strategy is currently under review and will shortly be overhauled. What is changing and why was there a need for these reforms?**

The present Government has assessed that Prevent is not as effective as it could be and has recently concluded a wide-ranging review of the whole strategy.

Put simply, the whole Prevent initiative is now likely to become much more focused, both in terms of the programs supported and the locations and sectors targeted. These will map more closely

to those parts of the country and those sectors being targeted by those promoting a violent extremist agenda.

Another likely outcome of the review is that there will be a clearer separation between work to counter violent radicalization, and programs that foster community integration, social cohesion, multiculturalism, and racial equality. The credibility of these broader initiatives has sometimes suffered through their association with counterterrorism.

For obvious reasons, the CONTEST strategy has been primarily focused on combating the threat of Al-Qaeda-style terrorism, and this has consequently been reflected in the focus of the Prevent agenda. Government is examining whether the strategy should be broadened to encompass other forms of violent extremism as well. The UK faces a range of other extremist and terrorist threats, including right-wing extremism and dissident Irish Republican terrorism.

**Q: Are there elements of the Prevent program that might be ‘internationalized’ and tailored to other contexts and regions?**

I think where counter-radicalization is concerned, the approach has to suit the local conditions. Even within the confines of the UK, the approach differs from one locale to the other according to what local authorities and community partners perceive as being the nature of the problem in their area – for example radicalization activities targeting certain institutions (e.g. schools) or particular communities or ethnic groups.

Therefore we should take care not to merely appropriate good practice from any one particular country and attempt to replicate it elsewhere. That said, elements such as Channel certainly show some promise, and may have wider applicability.

Some of the community programs that work with Channel may represent a model for other countries interested in targeted interventions to dissuade individuals from becoming involved in extremism or gang violence.

There are certainly broader lessons to be learned from the UK experience concerning how counter-radicalization programs are implemented, particularly in strategic communication terms. Governments need to ensure that the whole program is carefully messaged from the outset and that the aims and objectives are communicated to the public with clarity and consistency. Once suspicions about the purpose of counter radicalization initiatives take root in communities, it can take a long time to shift perceptions. If these initiatives are widely perceived as nefarious attempts at ‘spying’ or ‘thought-policing’ this merely strengthens the narrative of the violent extremists.

*Note: The views expressed in this interview are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, its staff, or advisory Council.*