

How to win friends or alienate people





Following the terror attack in Westminster last month, the government's Prevent strategy is under intense scrutiny. *Christina Patterson* joins the anti-radicalisation officers at mosques and schools to find out what effect they are really having. Photographs by *Andrew Testa*

We don't want to be the thought police," the man in the uniform tells me. We are standing in the entrance hall of Leicester Central Mosque. All around us, men are praying.

The man in the uniform is Simon Cole, chief constable for Leicestershire. Cole isn't just in charge of policing in a city where 20% of the population is Muslim. He is also the national lead on the government's Prevent strategy, which aims to stop people from becoming terrorists. It isn't a role that's likely to win him any popularity contests, either in the Muslim community or on the liberal left.

"People think that Prevent is things it actually isn't," he says. "I spoke at a public meeting the other day, and what was raised was around stops at airports. I can see why the public would see that as part of the same thing, but it's not." Cole smiles as he speaks, but with the air of someone who's having to do rather a lot of explaining.

Following the terrible events outside Westminster last month, when a 52-year-old British man, a Muslim convert, killed four people, and injured around 50 more in just 82 seconds, Prevent is in the spotlight again. Nigel Farage blamed "multiculturalism" for the attack. Jeremy Corbyn said that Prevent had been used to "target the Muslim community" and must be broadened out. Baroness Warsi, who was the Tory minister for faith and communities from 2012 to 2014, said that the strategy was "broken" and should be "paused".

A refresh is expected soon — not least to tackle the toxic reputation the programme has gained among many Muslims, who see it as form of spying. Last year, the Commons home affairs committee recommended it should be rebranded as "Engage".

With an annual budget of £40m, Prevent is part of a wider counter-terrorism strategy called Contest, whose aim is "to reduce the risk to the UK... from terrorism, so that people can go about their lives freely and with confidence". Contest is a four-pronged plan, where each prong begins with "P", because governments like alliteration. Pursue aims to disrupt plots to stop terrorist attacks. Protect aims to strengthen defences against a terrorist attack and Prepare aims to reduce the impact of a terrorist attack that can't be stopped. Prevent, according to the Home Office, tries to tackle the influences of radicalisation by "encouraging debate".

It works largely through community partnerships — local police forces have specially trained Prevent officers, and local authorities train staff such as teachers and social workers to spot signs that children or the public may be being radicalised.

In 2015/16, there were 142 community projects, reaching nearly 50,000 people. More than half of these took place in schools. Prevent works in conjunction with a programme called Channel, which assists people deemed at risk of being drawn into terrorism, offering help with education or careers advice, "theological or ideological mentoring" or emotional support, and diversionary activities such as sports.

Which all sounds reasonable enough, but Prevent has come in for an awful lot of stick. In February 2015, it turned from "guidance" into a "duty". Schools, prisons, local authorities and NHS trusts were told they had a statutory duty to make sure anyone who looks as though they might be at risk of being tempted into violent extremism is given "appropriate advice and support".

The following July, 280 academics, lawyers and public figures signed a letter arguing that the Prevent duty would divide communities, clamp down on legitimate dissent and have a "chilling effect on free speech". In April last year, one of the UN's special rapporteurs said the programme had "created unease and uncertainty around what can be legitimately discussed in public" and "could end up promoting extremism rather than countering it".

"A lot of young Muslims see Prevent as McCarthyite," says Anwar Akhtar, a cultural activist and director of a digital arts project called The Samosa. "They see it as ➤➤➤"



GUEST VISIT Above: the writer **Christina Patterson** at Leicester Central Mosque (left)

thought control.” Akhtar has worked with young Muslims around the country for many years, trying to promote dialogue and critical thinking. “Prevent is a catastrophe in terms of community relations,” he says.

I meet Akhtar at a film screening he has put on at a university hall of residence in central London. The film is a National Theatre production of *Dara*, a powerful portrayal of the battle between two radically different views of Islam, set in the imperial Mughal court in 1659. “The first thing I get asked is, ‘You’re not funded by Prevent, are you?’” he says. “What does it tell you when the producer behind *Dara* thinks Prevent is a catastrophe, someone who has spent his whole life combating religious sectarianism in the Muslim community?”

Akhtar’s views are at least partly echoed by Fiyaz Mughal, the director of Faith Matters, an organisation that aims to combat extremism and promote links between religious communities. “Prevent,” he tells me over a coffee in central London, “is being rejected by Muslim communities. The trouble is, the trust has ebbed away.”

Stories of children being hauled up by the authorities for casual comments at school don’t help. There was, for example, the “terrorist house” that turned out to be a terraced house, and the “cooker bomb” that turned out to be a cucumber. And then there’s the story of a woman who has agreed to talk to me anonymously, whom I shall call Amira.

“One day, my son said, ‘I wish this school got bombed by Isis,’” Amira says, sitting in a community hall in Yorkshire. “For that comment, the school was very quick to act. I went for a meeting. Me and my son apologised. He explained that he was very angry and frustrated.” She says her son, who was 12 at the time, had been bullied. “He was talking about killing himself all the time. One day I called the school and said, ‘If something happens to my son, the school will be responsible.’ And that is when they started their revenge, making referral after referral to anti-radicalisation groups.”

After initial meetings with people from mosques, her son was referred to a police Prevent officer. “They didn’t care how much those referrals would cost the system, as long as they were pushing their disgusting agenda, trying to label us and portray my son as something he was not,” she says. “They were asking him what kind of mosques he’s going to. I said, ‘He’s not attending any mosques! He is not into religion, he is not into any of those kind of things. He doesn’t even know how to pray!’”

Amira had another reason to be upset. She is a Kurd. Her brother is fighting Isis in northern Iraq. “When my son knows that my brother is fighting a terrorist group,” she says, “why would he be thinking of joining Isis? That is just impossible. It made me feel very angry because they were just trying to label us,” she says.



IN GOOD FAITH Simon Cole, chief constable for Leicestershire, at Leicester Central Mosque

Is she being fair? At the mosque in Leicester, the police seem to be doing a great job. Simon Cole and his colleague, Inspector Bill Knopp, the Prevent manager for Leicestershire Police, are greeted politely by the members of the mosque committee, and by the worshippers as they put on their shoes and troop out. For what seems like ages, on a cool, wet day, the policemen make small talk and shake hands with the locals on the steps. After the last worshipper has left, we are given a tour of the mosque, and offered tea and snacks. So what, I ask, as I gobble up my last samosa, about all the criticism? What about all the people who think Prevent is an attack on free speech?

Cole smiles wearily. “Freedom of speech,” he says, “is fundamentally important, but I do think there have to be some lines somewhere. For instance, homosexuality. Having a different view is fine, but if the conclusion is to harm someone as a consequence of that view, it can’t be fine.” Prevent, he insists, is about safeguarding. “It’s a non-criminal intervention. It’s a supportive intervention. You can’t have a void into which people who are very vulnerable fall.”

He says it is hard to “tell the story” of Prevent because the families who have been helped by it prefer to keep quiet. “We have testimonies from parents of young people saying, ‘If it wasn’t for your intervention, I’m really worried about where my child would now be.’”

“My son said, ‘I wish this school got bombed by Isis.’ For that comment, the school was very quick to act”

Around the corner from the mosque, at a Costa Coffee, I meet William Baldet, the Prevent co-ordinator for Leicester. Most people, he says, are positive about the work he and his colleagues do. “When I go and speak to communities, and we spell out exactly what Prevent is doing” — the community engagement, the school visits, the mentoring — “they don’t have a problem with it,” he says. However, there is “a sophisticated machine working against Prevent, wilfully misrepresenting pretty much everything we do”.

He is talking about organisations such as Mend (Muslim Engagement and Development) and Cage, the controversial advocacy group that described Jihadi John as “a beautiful young man”. These groups, he says, insist that radicalisation has “nothing to do” with Islamic ideology. “But isn’t it the difference between planting a bomb and being a bomb?” he asks. “These poor duped individuals who have been exploited think they’re going to paradise.”

Baldet is keen to point out that a third of his workload is to do with far-right extremism. Throughout the UK, about a quarter of the people referred to the Channel programme are from the far right. “But with limited resources,” Baldet says, “we have to apportion them accordingly. I don’t think the Prevent strategy should apologise for offering more support and resources to Muslim communities when right now they are being targeted for recruitment by the largest terrorist organisation the world has ever seen.”

There are communities, of course, where the potential threat comes from both the Muslim community and the far right. Blackburn, for example, has pockets where most of the population are of Asian heritage, but also pockets where there’s strong support for the English Defence League (EDL). At a rather swanky community

centre in Blackburn, I meet Lesley Hall, the youth-and-community co-ordinator for New Ground, a social enterprise that provides housing and community services across the north of England, and her colleague Tracey Marson, who has the amazing job title of community resilience manager. They have both been working on projects related to Prevent for some time.

“We started to notice that a lot of the young people we were working with were starting to talk about the EDL in quite an enthusiastic and passionate way,” says Hall. “They were targeting predominantly the park areas where people were hanging out. They were trying to claim communities back.” Hall and Marson have set up a team that works with young people seven days a week, from 9am till 9pm, offering activities and opportunities for conversations “that no one’s going to judge them on”. Marson tells me they have also started a project for parents called Play Your Part, after young people told them: “You need to do this with our parents, because that’s where we get a lot of our views from.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the young people didn’t want to take part in the same project as their parents. So how do they feel about being involved in a programme they know is meant to be countering extremism? The two women are matter of fact. “Fine,” says Hall. “Yes,” says Marson. “You have some very interesting conversations with young people and then they can take their learning back to their peer group.”

At Witton Park Academy, a few miles away, a similarly rosy picture is painted. The head teacher, Dean Logan, and Stephen Archer, a history teacher and the school’s “behaviour manager”, tell me they have both worked incredibly hard to create an environment where extremism of any kind is discussed and challenged. The school is in one of the most deprived boroughs in the country. About 65% of its pupils are Muslim, from different ethnic groups. The school was rated “good” in its recent Ofsted report, and praised for “a culture of high aspiration, harmonious relationships and mutual respect”. Pupils, said the report, “demonstrate both understanding and tolerance of other faiths and cultures in a modern British society”. And on a quick walk-through, they seem extremely well behaved. It’s chucking down outside and the entire school is stuck inside for lunch break. They chat quietly in little clusters.

“It is about creating a sense of belonging and identity,” says Archer. Logan leaps up, wanders to the book shelf and grabs a badge of a Panda. “This,” he says, “was part of a Dragons’ Den exercise for local schools, organised and funded by Prevent. Pupils were asked to pitch an idea for a way of generating community cohesion”. The group from his school won it, with a panda that’s “black, white and Asian” and a slogan that “People Aren’t Different At All”. The

pupils went to a primary school in Birmingham and “delivered that training”.

Well, that all sounds very nice, but didn’t any of his staff object to a programme that some say turns teachers into spies? Logan grimaces. “You’ve learnt over a number of years in education that you’re always going to be a political football. Sometimes the best thing to do is embrace things, because you need to start owning it yourself.”

I set off to get some Prevent training of my own at a community centre in Blackburn. It’s run by Tanya Gallagher, who was awarded an MBE in 2002 for her peace and reconciliation work in Northern Ireland, and Mohammed Ali Amla, an interfaith-relations specialist who has set up a project at Lancaster University called Christian-Muslim Encounters. The group is largely Muslim, a mix of teachers, police safeguarding officers and community volunteers. We will be looking at the process of radicalisation and what we’re meant to do if we have “concerns”.

Tanya stands by a flip chart and waves a marker pen. What groups, she asks, do we belong to? What makes us join them and what makes us leave? And when have we done things we didn’t really want to do?

Donna, a British Muslim convert, says she christened one of her children under family pressure because she “wanted to keep the peace”. The discussion that follows is open and amicable. We watch an extract from *This is England*, Shane Meadows’s film about English skinheads in 1983. Then we watch a short film about Andrew (Isa) Ibrahim, a British public-school boy who converted to Islam, and was jailed for at least 10 years for planning to plant a bomb in a Bristol shopping centre. A lively discussion ensues.

At the end of the session, we are all asked how we feel. “More peaceful,” says one woman. “It’s an eye-opener,” says another. Even Siraj, a community volunteer and IT consultant, who I’ve been told was a reluctant recruit, tells me he found it

“enlightening and surprising”. But then he says: “If it was a Prevent course, I would not wish to attend”. It *was* a Prevent course, I tell him. It was funded by Prevent. Siraj is adamant. “I know about Prevent and I know that this is not Prevent. My understanding, from what I’ve read, is that the Prevent strategy should be shelved.”

For Kalsoom Bashir, the Muslim co-director of Inspire, a Bristol-based organisation set up to combat extremism and gender inequality, it’s a familiar story. “If other people want to make Prevent into something it’s not,” she tells me, “we can’t help that. We want to stop young people from going down a path they may not be able to come back from.”

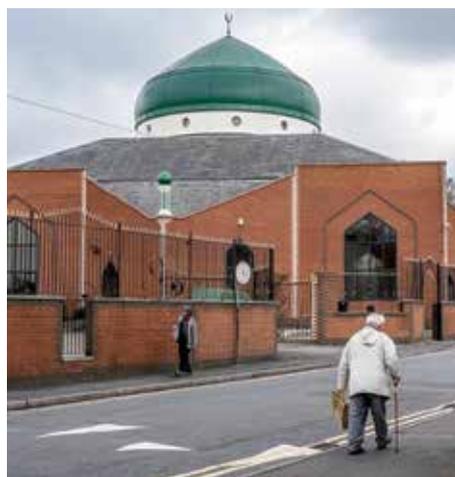
Bashir has been involved with Prevent since 2008 when she was the lead Prevent Officer for Bristol City Council. Her work has come at a price. She is often called a “house Muslim” and “native informer” —and she says the greatest hostility has come from “community leaders”. She has been horrified by things she has seen in some Muslim homes: parents beating their children, women who can’t speak a word of English stuck at home. When she moved to Huddersfield as a child from west London, she found “a closed environment”. The boys, she says, “weren’t interested in education, they were interested in grooming the girls, and a lot of the girls were pulled out of education and stayed at home”.

This, of course, lies at the heart of the problem. It’s all very well to talk about “respecting” other people’s culture, but that’s a culture I, for one, would choose to stand against. If a middle-aged British sociopath falls in love with it and wants to use a hired car as a lethal weapon as part of a jihad in its name, there may not be much anyone can do about it. What we can do is ensure all young people get a taste of rational argument at school and in the community, even if they don’t get much of it at home.

Prevent, it’s clear, is far from perfect, but an awful lot of the suspicions around it seem to be based on myths. Prevent does not just “target Muslims”. The training I saw put just as much emphasis on far-right extremism.

And Amira might be angry about her son’s school’s response to a throwaway comment, but what did she expect them to do after he talked of Isis bombing them? The Prevent officer came up with a plan to support Amira’s son, both in and out of school. She organised activities. She talked to him, over games of Minecraft, at a local youth club. She helped him “build on his confidence, resilience and self-esteem”.

So, I say to Amira, it all seems to have worked out rather well? Amira nods. “He’s happy now. He’s made friends, he’s fine.” And what would she say about Prevent now? Amira smiles and now her smile is sheepish. “For me,” she says, “it was good.” ■



DOMES TRUTHS The Central Mosque in Leicester, where one in five locals are Muslim