

To what extent will the new PREVENT duties placed on universities be futile in spotting radicalisation?

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Article Submission - REVISED

CONTROVERSY

To what extent will the new PREVENT duties placed on universities be futile in spotting radicalisation?

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June 2016

CONTROVERSY

Do the PREVENT duties placed on universities realistically help identify extremists?

Mohammed Umar Farooq was a postgraduate student at Staffordshire University. Registered on its Terrorism, Crime and Global Security MA programme, one of the recommended readings was a reader entitled, *Terrorism Studies*. While sitting in the University's main library reading that book, Farooq was falsely accused of being a terrorist. Having spotted him reading the book, a member of the University's staff decided to question Farooq about his religion and his attitudes towards homosexuality, Islamic State and al-Qaida among others. Following the conversation, Farooq was reported to University security guards who also proceeded to interview him on many of the same topics. Prompting three months of investigations, Staffordshire University eventually apologised to Farooq for the distress caused. It chose however not to extend the apology to the fact that the member of staff in question was suspicious about his motivations for reading the book; because he had been identified as being Muslim. As the University put it, while the member of staff had "misjudged" the sight of seeing Farooq reading the book had raised "too many red flags" not to act (Ramesh & Halliday, 2015).

Under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, the Government made significant changes to Prevent, its existing strategy for preventing violent extremism. Under that legislation, a new statutory duty was created. Identified as 'special authorities' because the government believed they were uniquely placed to prevent people from being drawn into violent extremism and terrorism, all British universities were duly required to provide specialist counter-terror training for staff, carry out risk assessments on students identified as being vulnerable to extremist ideologies, and provide appropriate welfare programmes for them. The rationale for this was that those working within universities would be best placed to see 'changes' in behaviour and outlook of those being radicalised or at least vulnerable to being so. One must assume that it was on this basis the member of staff at Staffordshire University sought to act.

The notion that such 'changes' are easily identifiable are however far from new. To this extent they have been in circulation for some time and can be traced back to the then New Labour Home Secretary, John Reid over a decade ago (Allen, 2010). Meeting with Muslim parents in East London, Reid told them how they needed to be vigilant in watching their children for the 'tell-tale signs' of extremism. While oft-repeated since, no politician has yet to set out exactly what those 'tell-tale signs' might be. Nor indeed have any of the subsequent iterations of the Prevent strategy.

As naïve as it is dangerous, there is evidence to suggest that those looking for the ‘tell-tale signs’ are simplistically reducing them to markers equitable with merely being ‘more Muslim’. Whether visual as in growing a beard or wearing the niqab, or vocal as in talking openly about your religion or voicing political views about British foreign policy, because universities have a duty to report ‘changes’ in behaviour and outlook so it would seem that students who look ‘Muslim’ are increasingly finding themselves being unfairly scrutinised. Consequently, the UK advocacy group *Cage* claims that since the new duty was put in place there have been more than 100 reports of similar incidents to Farooq’s across a number of Britain’s campuses.

One response to this has been the *Students not Suspects* campaign organised by the *National Union of Students* (NUS), the *NUS Black Students’ Campaign*, *Federation of Student Islamic Students*, *University and College Union*, and *Defend the Right to Protest*. Condemning the duty for effectively turning higher education staff and other public sector workers into ‘spies’, *Students not Suspects* argue that not only does this have the potential for normalising Islamophobia within the higher education sector but so too blurring the line between dissent and criminality. As evidence it cites how some university Islamic societies have been pressured into providing membership lists to police while at other universities swipe cards have been introduced outside prayer rooms to monitor who are using the spaces. Most recently, while Kings College London has publicly admitted to monitoring the emails of staff and students as part of the Prevent duty, it is widely believed that many others are currently following suit. Clearly there would appear to be some justification for the opposition currently being shown.

But there is an even more insidious side to all of this and that is the inference that being ‘more Muslim’ is an inherently bad thing. While in some ways this reflects the dichotomous ‘good’ Muslim, ‘bad’ Muslim discourses that have gained traction since 9/11, so the inference is also likely to resonate with the increased emphasis being placed on Britishness and the need to teach ‘British values’ in the wider education system (Allen, 2015). Underpinned by the view that Muslims go against what are seen to be the norms of what is conceived to be meaningful and determinative of being British, not only do Muslims become identified as a homogenous ‘Other’ but so too do they become known and understood through a series of negative stereotypical attributes and characteristics that merely seek to demarcate ‘them’ from ‘us’. Reifying historical notions that Muslims are inherently violent, manipulative, anti-Western and supportive of terrorism, so it can be concluded as ‘common sense’ the need to not only be suspicious of those who become ‘more Muslim’ but so too better monitor them.

Another potentially insidious impact of the duty on universities relates to research undertaken by Brown and Saeed (2015). As their research showed, existing counter-extremism programmes have resulted in Muslim students being increasingly suspicious about the extent to which universities are already spaces for covert policing and surveillance. Consequently, many Muslim students already feel that it is increasingly difficult for them to reconcile being publicly Muslim while also being an 'ordinary' student. The Prevent duty has very real potential for further exacerbating this situation quite irrespective of whether monitoring and scrutiny is taking place or whether it is merely suspected. The risk therefore is that Muslim students may not only feel that there is a tension between being a Muslim and an ordinary student but more worryingly, that a similar tension exists between Muslims and the 'liberal traditions' of British universities. Consequently, Muslim students may find themselves feeling even more pressured, marginalised and excluded than they already do.

The Prevent duty has another potential detrimental impact however. Not is the duty likely to reinforce the inaccurate perception that university campuses are hot-spots of radicalisation but so too is it likely to exacerbate tensions and mistrusts between Muslim and non-Muslim students and staff. It is also possible that the duty has the potential to reinforce the narratives of extremists who seek to stress the incompatibility of Islam and 'the West'. Founded on the premise that Muslims will never be accepted by or within Western societies, extremists could hijack the duty as evidence in support of their own ideological view.

Advocates of Prevent argue that to some degree, greater suspicion is a worthwhile payoff if it reduces the threat of extremism and in turn, terrorist atrocities. It is worth stressing as regards this latter point that even the most ardent critic of Prevent wants to prevent any future terrorist incident. Suggesting otherwise may therefore miscast the issue. This is because as well as bringing about greater suspicion, the Prevent duty placed on universities is capable of bringing about greater marginalisation and vilification while also curbing dissent and suppressing freedom of speech. More importantly, it does this for what can at best be described as a vague policy, at worse an indeterminable one. In part, this is because this and indeed previous Governments have been reluctant to codify and define extremism not least because of its highly problematic and political nature. Nonetheless, this begs the question that if we do not know what these are, how can we even begin to know what we are trying to stop let alone measure if we are being successful at it?

Even more concerning is the fact there still exists no empirical evidence to prove that the various iterations of the Prevent agenda have prevented any of those who were identified as being vulnerable to extremism from actually being radicalised and thereby going on to commit terrorism. Consequently, the Prevent programme and its duties continue to be fraught with possibilities and

uncertainties rather than fact and evidence. This is why Prevent is flawed and why the statutory duties placed on universities will continue to be unworkable.

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SUMMARY

This article considers the detrimental impacts the new PREVENT duties placed on universities will potentially have on Muslim students. Focusing on the need to spot the 'tell-tale signs' of radicalisation, this article argues that not only are these easily reducible to looking 'more Muslim' but so too do these have the potential to reinforce widespread stereotypes about Muslims as also extremist narratives about the incompatibility of 'Islam' and 'the West'.

BIOGRAPHY

Chris Allen is a Lecturer in the College of Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham. For the past decade and a half, he has been researching the phenomenon of Islamophobia and the problematization of Muslims in the British and European settings. He has published widely, regularly appears in the media and until recently, was an independent adviser to the Cross-Government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hate.

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