

# LET'S TALK ABOUT HATE, 26.7.17

**Smina Akhtar, PhD researcher at University of Bath**

RIC\_Edinburgh co-sponsored this meeting with Muslim Women's Association of Edinburgh

**Facilitator:-** Zahreen Taj - Muslim Women's Association of Edinburgh

Smina talked about the government's Prevent strategy, supposedly targeted at 'extremism' but in effect and attempt to criminalise the Muslim community in the UK.

Scotland Against Criminalising Communities has produced the following briefing paper

## What is the 'Prevent' Strategy?

**Prevent is a controversial and intrusive UK government strategy supposedly intended to stop people turning to terrorism. The STUC, the UCU, the EIS, the NUT and the NUS are all opposed to it. SACC believes that the best way to oppose Prevent is by boycotting it.**

The Government's Prevent strategy is supposedly intended to stop people being "radicalised" and turning to terrorism. Its application in public sector workplaces is escalating under provisions of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act that came into force in the summer of 2016.

The Government says that Prevent aims to "protect" vulnerable individuals who are at risk of being drawn into terrorism, with a particular focus on "international" terrorism. Its effects are much wider than that. Prevent is trying to change the way we think about Britain's wars in the Middle East. It works by casting suspicion on Muslims. It is turning public sector workers into spies for the government.

The Prevent strategy was introduced in 2003 as part of the UK's overall 'Contest' counter-terrorism strategy. It remained secret until 2006 and has undergone a series of changes over the years.

The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (CTSA) 2015 gave Prevent a statutory basis for the first time. Provisions that came into effect in summer 2016 require specified public bodies in England, Wales and Scotland to "have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism." Guidance issued under the Act links this requirement to the Prevent strategy.

**"the Prevent strategy and Channel programme insofar as they apply to schools must be repealed and abandoned." *Rights Watch UK, July 2016***

The Prevent strategy is part of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy and is therefore reserved to Westminster, but it is implemented in Scotland through Scottish public bodies (eg local authorities, schools, HE and FE colleges, the NHS, Police Scotland, the prison service) and so mainly involves functions that are devolved to Holyrood.

Prevent deals with views and conduct that are not criminal, but that are supposedly "extremist" and that the Government regards as being linked to terrorism.

According to guidance issued under the CTSA and approved by Parliament, Prevent deals with all kinds of “violent extremism”. But the guidance has an Islamophobic twist, because it has an additional focus on “Islamist extremism”, whether violent or not.

Thousands of Scottish public sector workers (teachers, social workers, university and college lecturers, NHS staff etc) have been trained in Prevent. The training legitimises the institutional harassment of Muslims and promotes an Islamophobic outlook in the majority community.

The training encourages workers to report service users or colleagues thought to “vulnerable to radicalisation” to the police. The police may then trigger a multi-agency case conference involving social workers, teachers etc where appropriate. This may result in the person concerned being encouraged to "voluntarily" participate in a "de- radicalisation" programme. In England and Wales this process is called "Channel". In Scotland it is called "Prevent Professional Concerns" (PPC). It is shrouded in much greater secrecy than the “Channel” process.

**"Prevent is an attempt to recruit civil society into a kind of open conspiracy against Muslims." *Richard Haley, SACC Briefing, November 2009***

There have been thousands of Channel referrals in England and Wales. But according to figures recently obtained from Police Scotland there have been just 3 PPC referrals since 2011, all of them of people described by police as “white Scottish”. Police say there have been no referrals since October 2013, even though the wider Prevent strategy has been sharply stepped up in Scotland since then.

It seems likely that police and public-sector officials in Scotland have been targeting people over Prevent concerns without triggering the PPC process. Individuals affected are apt to be unwilling to talk about their experiences. Information about these interventions and their effects is extremely sparse.

Prevent can result in counter-terrorism police gathering intelligence on innocent people (including children) and their families. Strathclyde Police said in 2010: *“The Force’s priority in respect of CONTEST Prevent is to gather actionable intelligence in relation to International Terrorism, Irish Related Terrorism, domestic extremism and public order matters.”*

Police and government officials deny that Prevent, as it currently operates, is about intelligence-gathering. But the secrecy surrounding Prevent, and official tenacity in implementing it despite the absence of visible results, suggests otherwise.

### **Prevent, the Workplace and the Law**

- Section 26(1) of the **Counter Terrorism and Security Act (CTSA)** requires public bodies specified in the legislation to "have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism". This is a very general requirement and subject to wide interpretation.
- Clarification provided by "**duty guidance**" issued under the CTSA is only to "assist" public bodies in deciding what the duty means. They are required only to give "appropriate weight" to it, and to consider all the other factors.

- Public bodies are forbidden under UK law from violating the **European Convention on Human Rights**. This takes precedence over other requirements unless domestic law allows no choice. The CTSA's Prevent-related requirements are so vague that they are unlikely to trigger this exemption. There are many areas of potential conflict between Prevent and Convention rights.
- Failure to implement, comply with or cooperate with Prevent **is not a criminal offence**.
- The Home Secretary can seek a **civil court order** against bodies ("specified authorities") listed in the CTSA, requiring them to carry out specific actions to implement Prevent.
- The Home Secretary has **no power** under the CTSA to seek a civil court order in connection with Prevent against staff members, trade unions, student organisations etc.
- Public bodies in Scotland are not under meaningful legal compulsion to impose any measures promoted by Prevent unless an order of specific implement requires them to do so.

### **Why We Must Dissent from Prevent**

- Prevent is **discriminatory**.
- Prevent promotes **Islamophobia**.
- Prevent undermines the confidence of the Muslim community and **deters** Muslims from participating in political discussion and activity.
- Prevent legitimises ideas that foster the far-right (despite claiming to tackle far-right extremism).
- Prevent is at least as likely to **drive people towards terrorism** as away from it.
- Prevent is based on a sinister concept of "**pre- crime**" that threatens all our freedoms.
- Prevent spreads a **climate of suspicion**.
- Prevent **erodes trust** between professionals (e.g. in health and education) and those they serve.
- By emphasising psychological and ideological factors and downplaying the political roots of terrorism, prevent **undermines progressive politics**.
- The Prevent guidance for Scotland mentions **Northern Ireland terrorism** and "**sectarianism**" (ie Catholic-Protestant sectarianism). Any application of Prevent to these problems is likely to exacerbate them.
- By emphasising links between "extremism" and **mental health issues** (including issues that are very widely experienced), Prevent erodes the civil liberties of people with mental health problems.

### **Resisting Prevent**

Prevent has attracted widespread criticism and is routinely said to be on the brink of being scrapped or reformed. It has nevertheless proved popular with a succession of governments. It will most likely continue to erode civic and political life unless trade unionists and the wider community act collectively to stop it.

SACC welcomes the policies against Prevent that have been adopted by the STUC and a number of trade unions. We urge trade unions to spread awareness of these policies amongst members and to help branches act on them in ways that actively counter Prevent.

We urge trade unions to support members and service users who are adversely affected by Prevent.

We strongly urge trade unions to adopt a policy of **boycotting Prevent** (including Prevent training), either nationally or on a branch-by-branch basis.

Spring, 2017

This was originally posted at- <http://www.sacc.org.uk/articles/2017/what-is-prevent>

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Zahreen Taj followed Smina's talk with the following contribution.

Growing up in South London in the 1970s I was terrified by the prospect of encountering the National Front on the street. We'd see their graffiti "Pakis go home" and the frightening images on TV but there was nothing I could do about being brown skinned as easily identifiable to racists as an immigrant. Years later, as an adult, I realised it was the concerted efforts of anti-racist and anti-fascist organisations like the Anti Nazi league and UAF that countered the street hate and successfully reduced their numbers.

In my 9years with MWAE in Edinburgh, we have worked closely with Edinburgh UAF against the hate and fearmongering by the Scottish Defence League: claiming Sharia law will take over and refugees will get all the best housing. When they attempted to establish a chapter of the Islamophobic Pegida group here, our protest saw off their 3 or 4 members that turned up and no Scottish Pegida group exists. It is important to note that the Pegida movement was started by Germans living in a predominantly white area and although they managed to get very large rallies of hundreds of people, the counter rallies in cities with diverse population were larger.

Encountering Islamophobic narratives and constant exposure of Muslim stories in the media today would make it seem like Muslims just landed here right now. But we have been around for almost 1500 years. It was the Muslim civilisation extending from Arabia to Spain and North Africa lasting 900 years that enjoyed the Golden Age of Islam. Scholars in this era enabled the transmission of ideas from the Greeks and developed the disciplines of science, medicine and philosophy in a multicultural, multi faith environment for 900 years that ultimately fed the European thinkers and led to the renaissance and enlightenment here.

Having children that are almost twenty years apart in age I find that I am bringing up my younger kids in a more heightened Islamophobic environment than that in which my elder children grew up in.

The direct cause of this is not so much the individual racists that spoil our day and can be tackled by an immediate response but rather the constant media onslaught of demonising Muslims as "backward" and "oppressed". This serves the political agenda of nationally silencing dissent and internationally justifying illegal wars and occupation of Muslim populated lands.

We are all against the arms trades deals our UK government is currently profiteering from at the cost of the misery of thousands of people in the Middle East and Afghanistan. But our criticism against the Saudi government should be against their political stance not of their following the Salafi tradition of Islam.

With the new found wealth of oil, the Saudi family- custodians of the holy sites in Arabia – have become very powerful. Their wealth is distributed around the world in the helping of building mosques for local communities. This does also help to spread their particular Salafi teachings but since there is no compulsion in Islam to follow one way or “school of thought”, Muslims can attend prayers at Salafi established mosques but keep their identity as Sunni Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi, Shia etc. In fact rather than Muslims being one homogenous group we are as diverse in our interpretations of our faith as there are communities – maybe even as individuals.

To demonise the Salafi tradition as “extremist” is wrong. At the most, Salafis are orthodox and revert back to the earliest Islamic traditions for their practices. There is no scale of adherence to the faith of Islam that takes someone from being interested in Islam to praying 5 times a day to being Salafi and then somehow becoming as ISIS member! That is an Islamophobic concept and assumes that the tenets of faith of the world's second largest religion has at its core a violent code. This is just not so. In a world of 7 billion people there are about 1.6 billion Muslims mostly living their lives struggling to just be better Muslims without a thought to organise a terrorist cell!

The Prevent strategy is affecting the lives of Muslims now that it has become mandatory and is being implemented in primary schools in Scotland but it is difficult to gather information on this. In England it is incorporated in the training on “Safeguarding of pupils” to school staff and governors. Whereas the instruction for how to identify a child that may be suffering sexual or emotional abuse is well thought out and taught, for radicalisation it merely says “Prevent concerns will be logged”. There is no indication what those “concerns” are, where they will be logged, who has access to that information and how the child and family will be treated. This lack of guidance is highly unsatisfactory for a code of practice in the public sector and a violation of the human rights of school children.

We must oppose the implementation of Prevent, its demonising of Muslims, Irish and traveller community as likely to be radicalised. Ultimately, Prevent is whipping up fear of terrorist attack to convince civilians to spy and report on civilians. This may be starting with Muslims as the fall guys but it ultimately affects us all and quashes dissent.

As Muslim women dressed with head covering, we are easily identifiable as “the other” and this unhappily leads to harrasment, abuse and attacks on individuals. My experience in Cambridge has been to organise an immediate reponse to hate crimes against Muslim women. We have had an anti-racism picnic in the park where a Muslim woman and her toddler were abused as “Isis terrorists” to show that the local community support the mum and oppose the racist attitudes of the haters.

Most recently, a Muslim mum suffered verbal and threatening abuse on her way to collect her son from school and several other women had similar abuse in the same area. I proposed a “Solidarity Walking School Bus” of school community accompanying the victim home along the route she normally walks with her son. This helped to highlight to our school community and the wider city of Cambridge that Muslim women are susceptible to such abuse from day to day. The response was disgust that racists inhabited the tolerant and welcoming city of Cambridge. The solidarity walk and press coverage has taken away people's complacency and alerted them to the reality of everyday life for Muslims.

Such immediate and positive actions are important to counter the haters' narrative and begin the dialogue with people that say “Oh but you're obviously not like ISIS, you're one of the good Muslims!”

The obvious objection to that comment is the speaker assuming I am “good” because I am more like her than someone she perceives as “the other” . This is not a compliment.

In MWAE we encounter women from all backgrounds, cultures and at different stages of their Islamic journey. Some who choose to wear a headscarf, some who do not cover their heads and some who cover entirely including their faces with a veil; “burqa”. The latter believe that they can only be out and about when accompanied by a male member of their family. If they are not then they can be out and about as long as they cover up; in effect creating a wall of separation with their attire with men outside their home. This is the choice of very few women so you may not encounter it much. But to rule that they are not allowed to do this, as in France, is a human right violation and an attack on their right to follow a way of life they choose. This choice must not be conflated with oppression of women who are forced to dress in a particular way by a patriarchal society. Women are oppressed in many ways the world over. We do no favours to the women's struggle by trying to free women of the headscarf or face veil who actually choose that attire as a projection of their spirituality.

Useful references  
[www.mwae.org.uk](http://www.mwae.org.uk)

Prevent Mythbusters

[https://cage.ngo/article/prevent-mythbusters/?utm\\_source=sendinblue&utm\\_campaign=PREVENT\\_Mythbusters%21&utm\\_medium=email](https://cage.ngo/article/prevent-mythbusters/?utm_source=sendinblue&utm_campaign=PREVENT_Mythbusters%21&utm_medium=email)

Do Not Blame The Salafis

[https://www.newislamicdirections.com/nid/articles/do\\_not\\_blame\\_the\\_salafis](https://www.newislamicdirections.com/nid/articles/do_not_blame_the_salafis)

How Not To Understand ISIS

<https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/how-not-understand-isis-alireza-doostdar>

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Their was a brief time allocated to contributions.

The point was raised that the SNP government's use of civic nationalism, whilst preferable to the UK government's use of ethnic nationalism, was also used to deny that racism, including institutional racism was a real problem in Scotland. The killing of Sheko Bayou, whilst being held by the police in Kirkcaldy, and the great difficulty in getting the authorities to deal with this injustice, highlighted the problems in Scotland.

Two teachers then talked about their encounters with Prevent in Edinburgh. This followed the recently published report Islamophobia in Edinburgh Schools

<http://www.sacc.org.uk/articles/2017/islamophobia-edinburgh-schools>

The meeting then broke up so that individuals could talk to MWA-E members personally.

