Preventing or Enabling? Counter-radicalization Policy in a Divided Britain

The multiculturalist paradigm is increasingly linked to the discourse of counterterrorism in European countries. But the rhetorical segregation of specific "communities" in the context of campaigns such as the British government's PREVENT initiative is counterproductive, as it prevents integration and inadvertently delegitimizes civil-society projects, ultimately leading to a "religionization" of British Muslims.

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State multiculturalism has "encouraged different cultures to live separates lives" with the effect of "weakening our collective identity," British Prime Minister David Cameron said in his landmark speech at the 2011 Munich Security Conference. He echoed the recent sentiments of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in declaring that "state multiculturalism" had failed. In the same breath, he identified terrorism as the biggest current threat to Britain and deplored those attacks that were "carried out by our own citizens", linking the issue of integration with terrorism.

By making this connection, Cameron showed evidence of the "muddled thinking" he accuses others of. By explaining terrorist acts as the consequence of multiculturalism and failed integration, he allied himself with the previous architects of Britain's flawed counter-radicalization strategy called PREVENT, and in doing so has raised serious doubts that the core of the problem has been properly identified. At the heart of the problem is the implicit assumption that domestic terrorism is a manifestation of failed integration.

In the security-laden context of the Munich conference, his speech was not just a commentary on social policy or the domestic requirements for molding a cohesive society from Britain's richly eclectic population. It was also a contribution to the debate occupying

security establishments across Europe over state approaches to countering violent radicalization and Islamist extremism.

Cameron made significant rhetorical strides in his Munich speech by clearly distinguishing Islam from Islamist violent extremism, and in acknowledging that many of Britain's homegrown terrorists are not the product of failed integration, but rather "have been graduates, and often middle class". These thoughtful remarks were, however, marred by his conflation of integration issues with terrorism.

Multiculturalism and the "community" label

The notion of different "communities" is prominent in British policy due to the prevalence of the multiculturalist paradigm. Applied in the context of counterterrorism, the multicultural lens can serve as a facilitator rather than preventor of violent extremism. By insisting on addressing citizens through the prism of their "community", differences are being amplified. Individuals with different backgrounds and beliefs are encouraged to develop fixed self-images that elevate their, in this case, religious identity over all others and so construct an elusive homogeneous "community" - distinct from their fellow citizens outside of that group.

The defining multiculturalist approach was not a reaction to the circumstances of the post-9/11 and -7/7 environment, but rather the application of an older idea, developed at a time when there was no such thing as a Muslim "community" in Britain. Multiculturalism arose in the 1970s as the British policy towards minorities, but referred only to ethnic groupings - the black or Pakistani "communities", for instance. The notion of a singular Muslim community only began to gain relevance in the 1990s as a result of the *fatwa* on Salman Rushdie declared by Ayatollah Khomeini, and later the politicization of younger British Muslims by the war in Bosnia. However, it was not until the securitization of Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11 and in the era of "War on Terror" legislation, images, and rhetoric that the singling out of a whole swathe of British society, based purely on their religion, became possible.

This outcome stemmed from the government's belief that if violent extremism was at least partly caused by the failures of multiculturalism and integration, then UK policy could not limit itself solely to traditional means of counterterrorism and the targeting of specific individuals. Rather, the government decided it would have to extend the focus of security policy to also address the nonviolent instances of radicalism and extremism within the Muslim community that was seen as weakening societal cohesion and integration. Both violent extremism and nonviolent radicalism are undoubtedly barriers to long-term societal cohesion; addressing them together in the context of a national security threat has, however, resulted in a lose-lose situation where the integration of minorities is hindered, and violent radicalization enabled.

Policy blowback

The conflation of counter-terrorism measures with "community cohesion" tasks has led to £140m of PREVENT funding being directed anywhere from MI5 to the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Such is the focus on the "Muslim community" - as opposed to the specific individuals that require de-radicalization - that of the 261 PREVENT projects in 2007-8, just four (1.5 percent) were aimed primarily at those "justifying or glorifying violent extremism". This means that many PREVENT-funded projects are indistinguishable from the general community and youth work that has been going on for decades.

This leads to the second major consequence - the breakdown of community-state relations and the delegitimization of important civil society projects. With many programs staffed by the more than 300 dedicated PREVENT police officers, and funding often allocated according to how many Muslims live in an area, it is perhaps no wonder that many feel the initiative treats the whole British-Muslim community as a security risk, rather than being aimed at "violent extremism in all its forms", as stated in the policy. Since its inception in 2007, it should come as no surprise that projects initiated under the PREVENT banner have a history of being 'harmless initiatives turned toxic' by the suspicion that security is their underlying

aim. The 2001 census for instance, supported by Muslim leaders as a way of improving socioeconomic data on their communities, was described by Liberty, a civil rights organization, as the "biggest spying programme [...] in modern times" and by the *Guardian* newspaper as an intelligence-gathering exercise seeking information on "innocent Muslims".

The confluence of these factors leads to the third key outcome - the "religionization" of British Muslims. Essentially, policies have encouraged a shift of emphasis from nationality to religion in the self-identity of British Muslims by constantly using the language of a "Muslim community". This has constructed a sense of a nationwide community living separate from others in society. The funding process of PREVENT activities has actually encouraged organizations and individuals to identify themselves and their issues in religious terms. Those projects that are not aimed at one segmented community have found it harder to access funding. Experts confirm that organizations had to "shape shift" and define themselves in explicitly religious terms in order to gain funding. Many organizations are reluctant to speak openly about this, lest they find themselves cut off from funding. There is, however, ample anecdotal evidence to support this contention.

Reinforcing notional identities

The starkest illustration of such "community"-focused policies, though somehow also their logical end-point, came with the announcement by the previous government of a £12 million disbursement dedicated to "white working-class communities". The decision aimed to counter the criticism that "Muslim communities" benefited disproportionately from public funding, but ended up reinforcing the notion that "whites" (or "Muslims" for that matter) have an identity and interests that are distinct from other groups.

Interestingly, it is due to Cameron's passionate advocacy for a "much more active muscular liberalism" that a failure to deal with those issues will likely lead to only cosmetic and futile changes in the policy review. He has rightly recognized that the British government can no longer support extremist groups in the name of community cohesion and at the expense of

women's rights and free speech. Nevertheless, in his attempt to improve the situation for moderate women's organizations, for instance, he must first tackle the inherent flaws in the PREVENT policy.

A female activist from a women's NGO stated in an interview with ISN Insights that in order to get access to funding for their projects, Muslim women's groups have started to define the problems of women by attributing causality to Islam, even though in their eyes the problem lies within patriarchal traditions, not religion. She argued that the group is uneasy at being forced to reproduce the "orientalist" construction of gender, which in the long run would certainly hamper integration. Furthermore, it leads to the exclusion of women of other denominations who encounter similar problems in their own communities, and who could benefit from such projects if the latter were open to different religions.

The government's support for the Women's Access to Mosques Movement, in another example, was explained as a means to "empower the voices of mainstream Islam." However, Katherine Brown, of King's College London, suggests that by instrumentalizing gender in that context, the government has again reproduced the "orientalist" imagery, which is likely to have negative consequences for women's rights by undermining certain progressive Muslim groups, as well as the integration of Muslims.

Progressive groups delegitimized

Ironically, as a result of the fog of cynicism and mistrust surrounding the PREVENT agenda, any Muslim organization receiving PREVENT funding - and especially if its aims are similar to those of Cameron's "muscular liberalism" - has its initiative of reform undermined and delegitimized.

The communitarian premise that defines the current counter-radicalization policies is in danger of escalating the very polarization it seeks to avoid. It has become increasingly difficult for British Muslims to define themselves as secular or non-practicing. This process of

"religionization" reinforces the radical Islamists' discourse - according to which, European societies are divided by religion - and so precipitates the escalation of tensions and fears wrought by the securitization of recent years. The long-term consequences of these policies are more radicalization, more polarization, and less integration.

The current coalition government is undertaking a substantial review of the policy. In all likelihood, PREVENT will not be scrapped altogether. The review will yield a certain "decoupling" of community cohesion from counter-terrorism tasks - not because the fundamental flaws of the policy have been acknowledged, but because the government has realized that the perception that the two are being conflated creates problems. In short, therefore, any changes to the PREVENT policy are likely to be largely cosmetic. The policy will be made more inclusive and consider more "communities". This is not sufficient, however. A real decoupling would be needed to repair the PREVENT policy. This would mean scrapping the "community cohesion" strand of PREVENT that focuses on Muslim communities and divert the funding into regular social work. Future policies should not address any constructed "community", but all populations - particularly the younger demographics - and their real concerns.

Multiculturalism needs reform, not dismissal

Traditional social work and policies encouraging community cohesion and integration have existed for decades. Since governments are new to the business of preventing violent radicalization, it is not surprising that the best response to this challenge has not yet been found. But the flaws apparent in the current policy need to be resolved.

Multiculturalism as a concept is certainly not "dead", as Merkel has proclaimed, but using the language and practices of multiculturalism in security policy serves to solidify and enhance distinctions between citizens. There is ample evidence to suggest that a new paradigm is in order, one that draws on more assimilationist approaches, whereby individuals are identified less by their religion and more by their shared citizenship, and so

individuals targeted by counter-radicalization policies are chosen more on the basis of their vulnerability to violent ideologues than by their religious affiliations. This means drawing a stark distinction between organizations that advocate violence, and those that are merely religiously radical, but non-violent. Integration and community cohesion measures are still needed and justified, but not under the heading of preventing terrorism.

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