

Report on Discussion on Preventing Violence and Extremism – 27th October 2009 at The House of Lords

Preamble

This report highlights the important points that were raised in a discussion held on the 27th of October 2009 at the House of Lords, hosted by Lord Nazir Ahmed and The Cordoba Foundation, to highlight the concerns raised by allegations that the Prevent program was being used to spy on communities. The report paraphrases what was raised by speakers at the event

Introduction

There is great concern about the seriousness of the allegations about the PVE program as well as its legitimacy given the fact that only a few specific organisations and individuals had been consulted during the program thereby clouding its comprehensive and all encompassing nature. For example, although since 2001, key individuals such as Lord Ahmed had been at the forefront of preventing violent extremism, expressing concern about extremists such as Omar Bakri and Abu Hamza who were challenging the national security of Britain dividing communities and generally causing problems, they were not consulted at any point during the implementation of the program. It is now these same key individuals who are voicing their loudest concerns about the current PVE program. These concerns are emanating from real life stories about people such as university lecturers being asked to spy on their students.

It is feared that this program has given rise to an 'industry' being created whereby people saw an easy access to quick funding and were 'concocting' stories and rumours about groups especially those that did not share the same ideologies and thought processes. In one instance in Bradford, a remark had been made that 'this **PVE money is dividing our community**' because there are people who are asked to spy on others.

Given the concerns that the program has generated, the Communities and Local Government Select Committee chaired by Dr Phyliss Starkey has already started an investigation (comprising of both written and oral submissions) with the findings expected to be published in the New Year. What the enquiry is seeking to find is answers to the following:

1. Questioning the rationale behind the PVE program.
2. Asking people how they could identify individuals who will convert to violent extremism.
3. Seeking evidence of the effectiveness of the program.
4. Questioning the effect on community cohesion.

5. Questioning the feeling that the program is seen as unfairly targeting Muslims and is divisive.
6. Questioning who exactly the government is talking to amongst the Muslim community?
7. Finding out the involvement of local authorities- do they know what they're doing? Or not?

It is hoped that through this enquiry that some recommendations for change will be provided and accepted by the government.

Surveillance

One of the key issues of concern highlighted by Arun Kundnani (from the Institute of Race Relations and author of the report 'Spooked: How not to prevent violent extremism'¹) is on the question of surveillance and the need to ensure human rights standards to the counter terrorism program. By highlighting this concern, this in no way diminishes the real on-going threat of terrorism and the need to take precautionary measures to address this such as putting individuals under surveillance in the UK should they be deemed a threat as well as ensuring that there were proper channels made available to youth workers and teachers to act, should they have concerns about people they work with.

However things should proceed in an evidence-based manner and in particular what is of concern is that under the current PREVENT program, professionals (teachers and youth workers) were being made to monitor political and religious opinions of young people and possibly identifying individuals for the Channel program which is termed as an intervention for possible 're-education'. There were several stories that were provided each with a different interpretation:

- 1- In London- the number of people who run their programs locally told him that there were expectations on them to act as sources of intelligence – one London manager said he was made to give systematic information about opinions of Muslim youth- their background, school, mosque.
- 2- In one northern city- one manager said police were even suggesting what kind of conversations he should have with them.– youth centre aimed at Muslims – offer religion, counter extremism, free IT centres – which can be used to monitor and gather intelligence
- 3- In one area where the PVE funding was actively managed by counter terrorism unit
- 4- PVE- schools kit where staff were told to monitor pupils for warning signs in kids and share info with police.
- 5- Department of Schools and Families took advice from Quilliam Foundation who have highlighted 'vague signs' of what the potentials signs are – support for Islamic state, scripture...literalism reading of the Muslim text? Very vague.
- 6- The QF radicalisation awareness program – trains teachers and local authority workers on how to spot the early signs of extremism.

¹ Spooked is the report that first broke the news about the allegation of information gathering from the Muslim community

- 7- In one 6th form, a number of students were identified as potential 'extremists' based on their opinions of what had taken place in Gaza earlier on in the year.

There is still uncertainty as to how many Muslims have been targeted in this manner although, according to the *Spooked* report, the number in Blackburn appears to be 80, which suggests that, across the country as a whole, there may be close to 1000 people. Whilst the Government has denied anything about spying, it has not addressed the issue that professionals are being asked to identify people and refer them to the Channel program.

The concerns that this raises is that it is going against all professional norms of confidentiality for people like youth workers and teachers. It also undermines the work being done as it works against building confidence in kids. There is a concern that there is a strong emphasis on de-politicisation and an idea that legitimate dissent was not welcome, whereas there was a need for kids to become actively involved in the political process. The ultimate concern was that this was an infringement of human rights.

Impacts on Social Cohesion

There tends to be a feeling within some local authorities that 'if you were working to monitor Muslim communities, the council would raise money for you' thereby providing clear evidence of a selective targeting of a community instilling a climate of fear. The report is clear evidence that the government has not stood by core British values of the rule of law / accountability/ transparency when dealing with the Muslim community and that the report is indicative of a greater issue of democracy and the Terrorism Act of 2000 which has given police astonishing powers leading to an erosion of civil liberties and freedoms, for example, the use of the 'secret' courts.

Despite these types of legislations being in existence before, the difference now is that previously, the police and the community were able to work together. Yet this doesn't seem to be the case, as it appears that there is a reluctance for the police and the Muslim community to work together since this might mean going against the grain. The example of Finsbury Park and how a Muslim organisation worked with the police to tackle Abu Hamza and restore the mosque to the community is one example of a success story in preventing violent extremism but is not being publicised too much because influential lobbies feel that the organisation that had effected this change were unfit and were also 'extremist'.

There needs to be a move towards more community based programs which ensure cooperation with all stakeholders without any undermining of work and trust with youth workers and other professionals.

Way Forward

For organisations such as TCF, the oxygen we breathe and what we thrive on is the fact there is possibility that the clash of civilisations is neither inevitable nor necessary and that there have been times when communities have coexisted peacefully. The findings of the IRR report regarding how the Prevent program has been conducted is that the program in its current form poses a real danger that this oxygen is sapped away and the sense of good will ceases to exist. The value of the report shows how if programs like Prevent are carried out as they have been, there will inevitably be an erosion of trust between communities and the Government. The concern that this has not been taken up by major media institutions except the Guardian needs to reinforce the statement that being critical of the PVE agenda and Prevent program was not about being against preventing violent extremism.

Following the discussions held, it is obvious that there are still a lot of issues to be discussed. Thus The Cordoba Foundation is proposing for the establishment of a discussion group at all stakeholder levels to come up with some clear recommendations addressing the IRR report to be put forward to the government as part of an amendment of PREVENT. This will be followed up by a few more consultative meetings before a final recommendation is made. Anyone interested in being part of this consultative meeting is welcome to express their interest to The Cordoba Foundation directly via email: amjad@thecordobafoundation.com.