

## **An-Nisa Society's initial Response to Contest 2's Prevent Strategy**

The government has missed another opportunity to put right the failings of its much-criticised counter-terrorism policy in its revised Contest 2 strategy launched last week. The failure to drastically overhaul the Prevent strand of the strategy in the light of widespread criticisms and concerns will have devastating long term effects on Muslim communities in the UK. Unless the Muslim community makes a speedy and concerted effort to challenge this strategy it will be 'sleepwalking' into disaster.

The 175-page document is quite dense and will require careful reading and further explanation of the details before we can begin to fully assess its implications. However, from our initial assessment it is evident that the government has confirmed the Prevent strategy currently in place, with little change from before.

For example, the strategy persists in treating the 'whole' Muslim community as potential terrorists. It has failed to de-link community cohesion from anti-terrorism. The revised strategy continues to deal with the Muslim community through the prism of anti-terrorism rather than addressing its legitimate needs through the mainstream. Muslims will be subject to surveillance mainstreamed through the core services of local councils and other agencies.

The report does not confront Islamophobia, particularly institutional Islamophobia within the mainstream, including local and central government. However, race equality is one of the three key policy areas that will co-ordinate with Prevent. If discrimination that specifically targets Muslims is not taken seriously, it negates one of the government's own intentions to address grievances that terrorists can exploit.

Since the leaking of the strategy in February much attention has been focused on Contest 2's plan to exclude those whom the government deems to have extremist views from engagement. Those considered extreme would not be targeted by criminal law, but would be 'challenged' presumably by being sidelined and denied public funds amongst other unspecified punitive measures.

The last few weeks has seen a considerable amount of media coverage about 'who the government will not talk to' and what the government means by 'shared values.'

We believe these questions, although entirely legitimate, are distractions from what we consider to be the most serious implications of Contest 2 on the socially excluded British Muslim community, and that is its Prevent strategy. These concerns are outlined in our response to the strategy launched on 17 February 2009.

With Muslim community organisations, desperate for funding and recognition, rendered 'compliant' by funding through Prevent projects, the government is having little resistance bringing in draconian measures against Muslims that are an infringement of civil liberties and human rights.

Already this week through the Channel project, a Prevent strategy initiative, the police have identified 200 Muslim children some as young as 13 years old who are 'at risk of extremism.'

Liz Lovell, policy adviser with the Children's Society, said: "All reasonable steps need to be taken to reduce the likelihood of terrorism but at the same time we need to be careful to respect children's privacy and to ensure children are not labelled as potential trouble makers from an early age."

"The emphasis here needs to be on safeguarding children at risk of being 'radicalised', rather than on criminalising them. The police's main focus needs to be on the adults who are seeking to exploit, bully or coerce young people into criminal activity," she added.

With little in the way of Muslim-run support services and safeguards and accountability many of these children are likely to be wrongly labelled for life as terrorists.

It is disappointing that the government has ignored widespread concerns and criticisms raised about the Prevent strategy by a wide variety of organisations and interested parties, both Muslim and mainstream.

Despite government claims the Prevent Strategy does not have Muslim communities 'at the centre of our response to violent extremism' and it is certainly not 'community led'

It is this sort of government intransigence that leads many in the Muslim community, especially young people, to lose faith in democratic processes and disengage with government.

We are saddened that the government has taken an inflexible and myopic approach to what it is clearly not working and in fact has become counter-intuitive to addressing terrorism, which is of concern to us all.

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