

17 October 2009

“Prevent is Pursue in sheep’s clothing.”

Around this time last year we at An-Nisa became extremely disturbed at the government’s Prevent Strategy to prevent violent extremism. The more we uncovered what it was about the more alarmed we became.

With almost 25 years of working in the voluntary sector as a faith-based group and also having experience of working in the public sector we could see the implications of this strategy. It was clear to us that all Muslims were going to be placed under surveillance in every arena of life.

We found no one prepared to listen or understand what we were saying. We also contacted the Guardian and Liberty – they did not respond. So we are delighted that the Guardian has today confirmed what we are saying in a series of articles exposing the intelligence agenda of the Prevent strategy. The Institute of Race Relations has today also published its report on the strategy.

Last year, despite going through a funding crisis with closure looming, we shelved all other work and spent the Christmas break researching and writing our report. We did not have the resources to publish the report and disseminate it widely. In February 2009 we put the report on our website and sent it out in an e-newsletter. Our overriding concern was to alert the community and all right minded people to the catastrophic consequences of this ill thought out strategy. We put our faith and trust in God that some good will come out of it.

The report immediately developed a life of its own and since then we have been inundated with responses from the community (including Muslim councillors and voluntary and public sector workers) and requests for information from academics/researchers, the media and even the government. This included a meeting with the Acting Head of Prevent to discuss our report. We have spent the last year focusing on promoting awareness of the strategy wherever we can.

There can now be little doubt that the Prevent strategy is ‘Pursue in sheep’s clothing’ as one Muslim public sector worker put it.

Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty, has called it “the biggest domestic spying programme targeting the thoughts and beliefs of the innocent in Britain in modern times,” she said. “It is information-gathering directed at the innocent and the spying is directed at people because of their religion, and not because of their behaviour.”

- We believe that the government’s Preventing Violent Extremism agenda (PVE) agenda and the Prevent Strand of its CONTEST strategy is **fundamentally flawed and discriminatory and call for it**

to be dismantled with immediate effect.

- We call upon the government to dismantle the machinery it has put in place to gather intelligence about Muslims and to be transparent and accountable as to what is being done.
- We call upon Muslims - members of the community including voluntary and public sector workers and councillors, to boycott Prevent. It is only with the co-operation of Muslims that the government can take the Strategy forward.

This summer the government announced that it would be **reframing the Prevent Strategy to take into account white far-right extremism**. We can only imagine the outcry if white working class communities were targeted as a whole community that is vulnerable to violent extremism. On 14 October 2009, Communities Secretary, John Denham announced an initial £12 million of funds to be pumped into predominantly white areas “to cut off support for the far right (Daily Mail).” There has been no clarification as yet as to whether this will also be through the Prevent Strategy. We would not wish any community to be subjected to the same treatment that has been accorded to Muslim communities.

There is no understanding that the problems we are seeing with a minority of young Muslims are part of the wider picture of youth disaffection. This is particularly affecting what can be said to be the most socially excluded communities in the country such as the Muslim, African-Caribbean and white working class young people. These groups are manifesting their anger and alienation in different ways, whether it is Islamist extremism, membership of gangs, gun and knife crime, ‘black on black’ crime or far right extremist ideologies. This is a consequence of the failure of government and society that needs to be addressed by all of us collectively.

Some of our recommendations:

- The government should **cease linking community cohesion, capacity building, community development and addressing inequalities with PVE**. This approach risks de-legitimising much needed community building of the Muslim community. Security measures should be separate and distinct so that there is no doubt as to their objectives.
- **Addressing inequalities, social and economic deprivation, social exclusion and fractured families** as a common goal for all communities will be more productive to building ‘resilience’ to social ills, including extremism of any type.
- We believe the way forward is to **engage purposefully with underprivileged communities** to ensure cutting-edge services within communities to prevent grievances based on perceived inequalities based on ethnic, religious or socio economic factors.

- **A public debate** needs to be held on the crisis in our most vulnerable communities and how we need to address this with sensible and just policies. There is general concern nationally about young people in all communities, the breakdown of families and fractured communities. Root causes must be investigated and addressed.

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