



Briefing Cycle: Strategic Global Issues 2010-04-09



National Security
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THE UNITED KINGDOM AND COUNTER-RADICALIZATION: PRE-EMPTING PREVENT?

Issue: On March 30, 2010, the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee in the United Kingdom issued a report of a comprehensive review of the PREVENT portion of the overall UK CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy. The review — which included witnesses from the police and security services, from national and local government, from ethnic and religious communities, and from public and private sector organizations identifies a number of fundamental problems with the UK's approach to counter-radicalization. Among the most serious of these are:

- Allegations, from Muslim communities in particular, that the PREVENT program is merely a stalking horse for surveillance and intelligence gathering;
- That PREVENT focuses unduly on Muslim communities, promoting Islamophobia and ignoring other communities of concern;
- That PREVENT has been preoccupied with the religious basis of radicalization, thereby promoting a government engineered “vision” of what moderate Islam should be while ignoring other, possibly more important, political, policy and socio-economic factors;
- That there are no clear definitions for terminology like “radicalization,” “extremism” and “violent extremism”;
- That there is a tendency, when engaging with communities, to avoid “radical” voices and others that do not fall within certain acceptable parameters. Any organization or program endorsed by government tends to lose credibility;
- That early / “pre-charge” intervention programs — specifically the so-called CHANNEL project — aimed at identifying and addressing potentially risky behavior are based more in enforcement than in prevention. Therefore, they are more properly within the purview of the Home Office (and, by extension, the police) and should be decoupled from more broadly-based outreach type programs run by local authorities.

Comment: The Commons Committee report is the farthest reaching critique of the PREVENT program to date. In many respects, it echoes the criticism that surrounded the overall CONTEST II strategy when it was released one year ago. The range of witnesses, and the depth of their testimony, suggests that few of these issues have gone away. More importantly, the philosophical implications of the report and its specific concerns have direct application to our own RCMP outreach and counter-radicalization efforts.



We often say that our issues related to radicalization and terrorism are different than those faced by the United Kingdom. Sometimes that difference lies more in degree, rather than in fundamental nature, however. And sometimes we lack sufficient research to know if there actually is a difference.

In the RCMP, we have been careful to separate Community Outreach activities from “hard” police work. Nevertheless we need to be extremely vigilant around how we characterize the program and its purpose. Community Outreach activities give us positive exposure in communities at risk and help us to understand the pressures and concerns that those communities and their members face. This dynamic — rooted in face-to-face encounters and (ideally) some level of mutual sympathy and understanding — is critical for us. So, even a suggestion that Community Outreach activities are a cover for intelligence-gathering, surveillance and source recruitment would, under the right circumstances, be sufficient to discredit the effort and nullify all the careful work that has been done in building it up.

PREVENT’s focus on UK Muslim communities has always been problematic. Indeed, it is one of the reasons that the RCMP has chosen to direct its efforts more broadly. Nevertheless, operational necessity dictates that if we expect results from our investment in COP and counter-radicalization, then we must concentrate on where our files lead us. Right now, that is into Muslim communities. It is certainly true that there are other communities (like Tamils), and even sub-cultures (like right-wing extremists), of concern. What distinguishes even comparatively low-level and domestically radicalized neo-Jihadists, however, is that they are linked to a global ideology with global objectives. Most other threats (whether ethno-religious or issue-based) tend to have a narrower focus with a less “universal” ideological basis (Islamophobia in Canada will be the subject of a forthcoming Briefing Cycle).

In the Canadian security and intelligence community, we have done a fairly good job of identifying the importance of geopolitical and policy-related drivers of radicalization within Muslim communities. Nevertheless, while few of the neo-jihadists that we encounter have a particularly sophisticated understanding of Islam, it is also true that they adhere to an ideology that is rooted in Islamic history and Islamic thought. It is critical that we understand that link and where it could lead. And while the socio-economic status of Muslims in Canada is in many respects different from that of their counterparts in the United Kingdom, our understanding of the role of “root causes” in Canada is another research gap.

We have also done a fairly good job in the RCMP of defining what we mean by “radicalization” and our definition has been taken up by a number of other government departments, at least informally. Terminology like “extremism” is harder to define, however, so we need to continue work on our lexicon, and to keep up with the changing dynamics of the radicalization process itself.

The problem of who speaks for communities and whom we engage within communities is universal. For example, what we refer to as a “Muslim community” is in fact made up of numerous communities, ethnicities and expressions of belief whose only linkage is that they share, to one degree or another, a faith. It can be difficult to know who, exactly, speaks for or represents communities of concern. Reaching out to the wrong people — self-styled leaders and spokesmen who have no real credibility — can exacerbate the very tensions that Community Outreach activities and counter-radicalization are trying to alleviate. And sometimes it is the radical voices that people — especially young people — really want to hear.

As in the United Kingdom, our challenge lies in identifying genuine voices within each of our many communities and in learning to differentiate what might appear to be radical messaging from terrorist ideology and incitement. And this requires nuanced understanding of community dynamics and of the pressures that at-risk members of those communities face.



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Radicalization to violence happens at the place where politics, faith and culture meet. It is a place that is largely closed to outsiders, like the police. This means that any attempt to counter radicalization that is specifically linked to law enforcement or to government will at best be dismissed by the target audience. At worst, it will be characterized as manipulation, if not outright surveillance (as above), and may ultimately serve only to exacerbate the very problems we are trying to address.

Any form of counter-radicalization programming, whatever form it takes, must be delivered, not by the police, the security services, or any other “official” agency, but rather by affected communities themselves. That means that we must be prepared to take seriously existing community efforts at counter-radicalization. Failure to engage in a constructive discussion with such initiatives sends a clear signal that we are only interested in addressing radicalization on our terms.

In its original conception, the purpose of the CHANNEL project was to identify young people at risk of radicalization to violence and to transfer them into pre-charge diversion programming. Referrals would come not only through law enforcement channels, but also from within communities and from local education and social welfare authorities. This has proved to be problematic in a number of respects. Most notably, few teachers and social workers have the training to judge accurately an individual’s likelihood to become a terrorist. Many have expressed concerns around confidentiality and privacy and the possibility of a sort of “disclosure chill” among communities and individuals who need their services most.

The controversy over the CHANNEL project illustrates some of the difficulties inherent in a “whole of government” approach to counter-radicalization. As we work towards such an approach in Canada (which is proving to be more difficult than it looks), it is critical that we assign roles and responsibilities appropriately. Put simply, we must ensure that we do not try to transform police and intelligence officers into social workers and community organizers. Nor can we expect agencies whose purview is human services to make decisions about who might, or might not, be a threat to national security.



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