Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism

Failing to Prevent

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BLOOMSBURY

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First published in 2012 by

Bloomsbury Academic
an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

CIP records for this book are available from the British Library and the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-1-84966-525-4 (hardback)
ISBN 978-1-84966-599-5 (ebook)

This book is produced using paper that is made from wood grown in managed, sustainable forests. It is natural, renewable and recyclable. The logging and manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group, Bodmin, Cornwall

Cover image: © Peter Macdiarmid/epa/Corbis

www.bloomsburyacademic.com

Acknowledgements

There are many people I would like to thank for their support, both to the book itself and to the processes of research that have informed it. I'd like to thank Kirklees Metropolitan Council, and especially Andrew Pennington and Saied Laher, for inviting me to evaluate the learning from their initial, 'Pathfinder' phase of *Prevent* funding. I'd also like to thank the Rochdale Pride Partnership for their funding, via *Prevent*, of the Rochdale Youth Identity Project, which enabled me and my colleague Pete Sanderson to investigate young people's experiences of 'identity' and 'cohesion', alongside similar work in Oldham. Many thanks are due to the officers and staff of the Youth Services of both Rochdale and Oldham local authorities, and to local voluntary youth organisations in both areas, who collaborated actively with us on the Youth Identity Project, and especially to Dave Baker and Jamshed Miah of Rochdale Youth Service. The support from Oldham Youth Service and voluntary youth organisations in the borough was built on the great support and access I received previously when researching the local implementation of community cohesion-based work with young people. I'd also like to thank my colleagues Surya Monro, Umar Razaq and Andy Mycock for their collaboration on the 'Regional Improvement and Effectiveness Partnership: Community Cohesion and *Prevent* Pilot' research in West Yorkshire, and to Local Government Yorkshire and the Humber, and their officers David Young and Amy Smith, for funding it.

I'd also like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers from *The Political Quarterly* and *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* for their very helpful comments on two earlier articles (Thomas 2009, 2010) about *Prevent* that provided much of the basis for this later book. Valuable opportunities to refine my thinking about *Prevent* were provided by the invitation from the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee to give oral evidence to their Inquiry hearings in December 2009, and by the opportunity to speak about *Prevent* at seminars organised by the youth work team and the Academy for the Study of Britishness at the University of Huddersfield. In addition, thank you to the helpful comments I received when presenting aspects of some of the material in Chapter 2 at the Political Studies Association annual conference in 2009 and the British Sociological Association annual conference in 2010. Thank you also to the anonymous reviewer selected by Bloomsbury Academic to review the book proposal, the anonymous 'readers' who made very helpful and constructive comments on the initial manuscript, and to the Bloomsbury editorial staff for all their support and guidance.

As well as the above, I'd like to thank a number of friends and colleagues for their advice, insights, suggestions and comments on draft material that have helped shape the book and its arguments: Jebar Ahmed, Jo Bishop, Kris Christmann, Bob Green, Dave Kelman, Rachael Loftus, Shamim Miah, Jim McAuley, Surya Monro, Andy Mycock, Bruce Penhale, Pete Sanderson, Dave Waddington, Andrew Walsh and Paul Wilcock. Thank you as ever to my colleagues in the School of Education and Professional Development, and to the University of Huddersfield as a whole, for continuing to support my research and writing. Above all, thanks to all my family, especially to my wife Bev and to my sons Rhys and Matthew, for putting up with me being locked away in my study for so long!

Preface

In many ways, this book is the product of my response, through research and writing, to a series of events, rather than pre-planning. My long-term research focus has been, and remains, one around multiculturalism, ethnic identity and young people. From shortly after the 2001 riots in northern England, I have been carrying out field research in Oldham, and neighbouring Rochdale, in Greater Manchester into how the apparently new race relations policy approach of 'community cohesion' has been understood and operationalised by professionals on the ground, and how the issues that it addresses are experienced and understood by young people. That research involvement informed my 2011 book *Youth, Multiculturalism and Community Cohesion* (Palgrave Macmillan), which used this grounded research evidence to suggest more nuanced and progressive understandings of what community cohesion has the potential to be than many academic critiques based solely on readings of national policy documents and accompanying political discourses largely have allowed.

However, events and governmental policy reactions to them have intervened to alter the landscape of ethnic relations and the promotion of community cohesion that I have been attempting to make sense of. The 7/7 London bombings of July 2005 occurred as I was carrying out field research with youth workers in Oldham, which had a significant impact on the tone and content of a number of those in-depth conversations. The impact grew as it became apparent that all four of the attackers were from West Yorkshire. Three attackers came from the city that I live in, Leeds, and the other came from the town, Huddersfield, that I work in. The ringleader, Mohammad Sidique Khan, had been a part-time youth worker and was known to a number of youth work professionals that I have trained, or liaised with, whilst another of the attackers was well known to friends of mine. Within a year of the 7/7 attacks, it was starting to be clear that, as a result of those events, government was determined to take the focus and content of policy relating to British Muslim communities in a significantly difficult direction. The *Prevent* agenda was announced in October 2006, and the 'Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder' initiative commenced in April 2007. From the moment it started to be implemented, experienced youth workers, community workers and other local authority officials who I knew, and whose judgement I trusted, were flagging *Prevent* up as not only highly problematic in itself but also flatly contradictory to the community cohesion agenda they were attempting to develop locally, often through highly imaginative pieces of work. To those workers, and me, *Prevent* seemed to have forgotten all the concerns that the 2001 riots had crystallised, and which the Cantle Report had identified, around both increasingly racialised community identities and relations, and policy's failure to address that, as well as the well-documented problems of previous approaches to tackling racist extremism in white communities. In both cases, monocultural policy approaches that essentialised and reified ethnic or faith identity in the absence of focus on social class and identity complexity had proved counterproductive, as the community cohesion analysis so clearly identified, but *Prevent* seemed determined to ignore those lessons of history. Research involvements in and around the local implementation of *Prevent* in both Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire confirmed those feelings and provided evidence of community cohesion thinking and practice being sidelined by *Prevent*.

Such concerns were my motivations for writing journal articles on *Prevent* and making the evidence submission to the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee Inquiry that led to the invitation to present oral evidence to the Committee in December 2009. My argument there, and the main focus of this book, is not just that the government focus on *Prevent* and the resulting local implementation of it has sidelined, possibly even stalled, the developing progressive local practice around cohesion and integration, but that the design and implementation of *Prevent* has largely failed to consider the key analysis of community cohesion.

That cohesion analysis suggested that policy approaches of essentialising and focusing on separate and distinct ethnic identities and experiences, despite the increasingly complex diversity of real British life, are both problematic and potentially counterproductive. Such an essentialising approach will inevitably create 'space' for minorities within communities to espouse and grow towards extreme versions of such identities, and doctrines of violent extremism based on those identities, whether that is extreme white supremacist racism or jihadist Islamist violent extremism. That is not to suggest that real economic and social circumstances, and domestic and foreign policy actions, are not contributory to such violent extremism, but rather to argue that the only effective way to build *real* resilience against violent extremism within and between communities is *not* more focus on separate identities but actually less; real resilience will come from the building of stronger shared identities and experiences, and processes of meaningful citizenship and real democratic engagement for all British citizens, based on mutual respect and equality.

In arguing for that cohesion-based approach to preventing attraction towards violent extremism, the book is not seeking to deny the reality of either distinct 'identifications' in society or of specific and unequal experiences for some groups, but to argue that policy can only effectively address such realities, and win popular consent to do so, within a stronger framework of commonality. Similarly, the book is not naively suggesting that any inter-ethnic contact will inevitably be positive and productive – there is clear evidence that the opposite can often be true. Rather it argues that approaches to preventing violent extremism that aim to build strong and active democratic involvement by young people of all backgrounds, in a well-planned and appropriately resourced manner, offer the best hope of building that resilience against violent extremism.

Glossary

ACPO	Association of Chief Police Officers
APA	Association of Police Authorities
BNP	British National Party
CLG	Communities and Local Government
CRE	Commission for Racial Equality
CTU	Counter-Terrorism Unit
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
EDL	English Defence League
FOSIS	Federation of Student Islamic Societies
HAC	Home Affairs Committee
HMG	Her Majesty's Government
HUT	Hizb ut-Tahrir
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRR	Institute of Race Relations
JTAC	Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre
MCB	Muslim Council of Britain
MCU	Muslim Contact Unit
NCS	National Citizen Service
NI	National Indicator
OSCT	Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism
PET	Preventing Extremism Together
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
RICU	Research, Information and Communication Unit
RIEP	Regional Improvement and Effectiveness Partnership
SEU	Social Exclusion Unit
TPA	Tax Payer's Alliance
UKYP	United Kingdom Youth Parliament
YJB	Youth Justice Board
YOI	Young Offenders Institution
YOS	Youth Offending Service
YOT	Youth Offending Team

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Introduction

A new threat of violent extremism?

Two number-based symbols seem to sum up the very different political world that Britain now inhabits: 9/11 and 7/7. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre buildings in New York on the 11th September 2001 have become both iconic in their imagery and pivotal in relation to political actions and assumptions, not only for the United States but also for key allies such as Britain. In the direct wake of the 9/11 attacks has come the long-running military involvement in Afghanistan and its substantial impacts on neighbouring Pakistan, as well as the highly controversial invasion and occupation of Iraq. The former involvement was directly linked to the threat of Islamist violent extremism, the latter less so, but both involvements have had a profound impact on the relationship Western states concerned have with other, Muslim-populated states and with their own domestic Muslim populations. The question of the relationship between military involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq and Islamist violent extremism was brought into sharp relief for Britain by four coordinated suicide bomb attacks on public transport in central London on the morning of Thursday, 7th July 2005. Two weeks later, London narrowly averted further terrorist attacks when another series of suicide bombings failed due to technical deficiencies. The attack on Glasgow Airport in June 2007,[1] by the same Islamist cell who had failed to explode a car bomb in central London just days before, refocused public attention on the level of the threat.

The shocking attacks of 7/7 were carried out by four young British Muslims, all from West Yorkshire and apparently 'integrated', leading to the deaths of 52 commuters from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as the serious injury of many others. The videoed statements left behind by two of the 7/7 bombers explicitly addressed the British military involvements outlined above, with the broad Yorkshire accents of the terrorists somehow adding to the chilling impact of the statements. These 7/7 attacks in London mirrored the even more deadly attacks carried out in the Spanish capital Madrid the previous year, when a series of bombs planted on commuter trains on Thursday, 11th March 2004, by Moroccan-origin young Islamists killed over 180 people in and around the central Atocha station and at two suburban stations. About a third of those killed in these Spanish attacks were immigrants from a variety of countries. The Spanish government's immediate and wrong attribution of the responsibility to the Basque separatist group ETA led to public outrage and a change of government in the subsequent election, a far-reaching impact for what had been a ramshackle plot.[2] In the years since 7/7, British police have foiled a number of substantial Islamist plots, with many leading to convictions.[3] These plots have overwhelmingly involved young British Muslims, including a significant number of converts, in plans to cause explosions aimed at members of the general public, often on public transport or in other public spaces. The origins of a significant number of these plots can be traced earlier than 7/7, or even before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, so questioning the simplistic cause and effect argument put forward that British military involvement has inevitably provoked radicalisation. Some of these British Islamist plotters have had contact with each other, but there has been no evidence of any formal organisational structures or command hierarchies nationally.[4] The suggestion that the Al-Qaeda leadership of Osama Bin-Laden and his associates, prior to Bin-Laden's killing by American Special Forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan in May 2011, had commissioned and directed such British bombings and plots is at least partially countered by the reality that these groups of plotters have more often already conceived and started to plan their attacks and then sought finance and support from 'Al-Qaeda central'. Some have had no documented contact with Al-Qaeda figures at all, suggesting that a significant part of this undoubted Islamist terror threat comes from 'self-starting', autonomous cells. The attempted murder of East London Labour MP Stephen Timms by Roshonara Choudhry, a Bangladeshi-origin young woman acting alone, in May 2010 showed that sometimes even a small cell of like-minded believers is not necessary. Choudhry was a highly gifted university student, close to finishing her degree and with a bright future in front of her, but whose political anger over British policy seemed to be further radicalised through viewing of Internet material, particularly sermons by radical Islamist preacher Anwar al-Awlaki.[5]

Not only is this threat of British domestic Islamist violent extremism a serious and continuing one, but it is a significantly different one from the dangers previously posed to Britain by Irish republican terrorism. The Irish republican threat between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s largely came from the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) or offshoots such as the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). These Irish republican organisations were hierarchical with military-style command and control structures, meaning that terrorist actions were planned and authorised by commanders. Whilst deadly force was often used, targets were largely military or political, with the minority of actions aimed at public spaces or places normally involving warnings to avoid civilian causalities. Incidents that did involve civilian deaths, such as the 1974 Guildford and Birmingham pub bombings, were portrayed by the Irish republicans as resulting from bungled warnings or the actions of rogue operatives who were then harshly punished. The current Islamist threat to Britain appears to be very different, both in its targets and in its organisation, and attempting to understand the nature and make-up of this Islamist threat is one of the key areas of focus for this book.

In using the term 'Islamist', itself something explored in more detail, the book is acknowledging that this current and very serious terror threat faced by Britain is primarily about a minority of young British Muslims espousing a radical political narrative of Muslim identity, grievance and oppression, the drift of some of those young Muslims towards violent extremism to promote that political narrative, and the need to combat it. This terror threat of the past few years, combined with the 2001 disturbances in a number of northern English towns and cities that all involved young Muslim men of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin,[6] has suggested to some politicians that Britain has a significant 'Muslim problem'.[7] The meaning and relevance to national cohesion and security of apparently strengthening Muslim identification in the context of globalisation and the profound associated impacts on identity and experience are highly contested issues. What is beyond dispute is that since the 2001 riots, and the global shock of the 9/11 attacks that occurred just weeks later, there has been a significant shift in the aims, language and content of British policy approaches to ethnic relations in general and to British Muslims in particular. The previous emphasis on ethnic diversity and specificity has been replaced post-2001 by an emphasis on 'community cohesion', a stated concern with commonality and shared values and experiences.[8] In itself controversial, this move towards community cohesion has been accompanied by explicit attacks on multiculturalism that have suggested previous multiculturalist policies have encouraged separation and allowed ethnic minority communities to separate themselves. Such political pronouncements by Prime Minister David Cameron[9] and others have given the impression that Britain is part of a lurch across northern Europe back towards assimilationist policies that are much less sympathetic to the needs and identities of ethnic and religious minorities or even to their presence at all.

The policy response of *Prevent*

The British political response to the Islamist terror threat has arguably encapsulated this wider reaction against ethnic diversity in general and Muslims in particular, leading to important questions as to whether the anti-terrorist policy responses, including the *Prevent* element, have been proportionate to the actual terror threat or have rather symbolised wider societal fears about the Muslim 'others' within. The *Prevent* policy approach was first introduced in October 2006 as one of the four elements of the wider government counterterrorism strategy, CONTEST. Prior to the 7/7 attacks of July 2005 outlined above, *Prevent* had been the least developed of the four CONTEST strands but, for one commentator, 'over the course of the following five years, *Prevent* became the world's most extensive counter-radicalisation policy'.[10] It has subsequently been replicated significantly in policies developed by Denmark, Australia and Canada, and influenced the development of similar initiatives in Germany, Sweden and the United States. *Prevent* was initially operationalised through targeted funding for all local authorities in England having Muslims as 5 per cent or more of their local population. Following this initial 'Pathfinder' pilot year of 2007/8, *Prevent* was developed and extended as a national policy priority. Funding was given to all local authorities first with 4,000 or more, then 2,000 or more, Muslim residents, with local authority involvement and compliance policed by the central government department concerned, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), through compulsory 'National Indicators' and monitoring of progress against them. At the same time, *Prevent* funding from the Home Office was directed at local Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) and Young Offenders Institutes (YOIs) via the Youth Justice Board (YJB), prisons, and further and higher education institutions. The element of this funding aimed directly at the Police Service nationally led to over 300 new dedicated *Prevent* police posts, whilst both the Security Service (MI5) and the Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU) opened regional offices for the first time, explicitly to address the threat of violent extremism. In total, this national government *Prevent* programme of activity involved £140 million between 2008 and 2011. Taking power in May 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government quickly scaled back the DCLG element of *Prevent* funding for that financial year and arguably echoed the recommendations of the recent House of Commons Communities and Local Government (CLG) Select Committee Inquiry[11] into *Prevent* by redirecting some of the money saved towards their new youth-focused National Citizen Service (NCS), a scheme claimed as community cohesion in action.[12] The coalition then commissioned a formal review of *Prevent* by the government's security 'watchdog' Lord Carlile, the outcome of which was serially delayed amidst allegations that the government was riven by exactly the same tensions and dilemmas over *Prevent* that had arguably marked the Labour government's approach to *Prevent*. The eventual publication of the revised *Prevent* strategy in June 2011, its content and the political discourse around it all showed that these fundamental tensions remained.[13] Those continuing tensions and dilemmas over *Prevent* relate both to its actual effectiveness in 'preventing violent extremism' and to the impact and consequences of *Prevent* for wider issues of ethnic relations and community cohesion in Britain, and are the focus of this book. In particular, the book argues that *Prevent* has been badly flawed in its failure to accept and incorporate the community cohesion analysis of the dangers of overemphasising specific and separate ethnic or faith identities, and has consequently both worked in opposition to community cohesion and significantly damaged community support for the fight against terrorism.

To many observers, this programme of *Prevent* activity by the previous Labour government appeared to explicitly target Britain's Muslim communities as a whole for a mixture of admonition, education, intervention and surveillance, all based on the belief that there needed to be '*demonstrable change*' in those communities.[14] Stuart Hall, Britain's most important sociological commentator on post-war immigration and the accompanying journey towards a more multicultural society, has characterised the response of *Prevent* as a very serious development and deepening of UK state multiculturalism, in both its explicit national government control and organisation, and in the extent of its 'internal penetration' of Muslim communities.[15] The aims, assumptions, content and implications of *Prevent* are examined in this book. Throughout its relatively short life, *Prevent* has been actually understood and operationalized under a number of titles, including 'Preventing Violent Extremism', PVE as an acronym, or even as the obscure 'Pathfinder'. These changing names and the fact that in some localities *Prevent* work has operated without any formal title or reference at all highlight the sensitivities and tensions around this policy. For consistency, this book uses *Prevent* throughout. One of the most controversial aspects of *Prevent* has been its explicit focus on Muslims and Muslim communities, something that the book argues has not only been damaging to the broader goal of community cohesion but which has actually damaged attempts to win vital community support for identifying and defeating violent extremism.

A corollary of this has been an absence of focus on right-wing violent extremism or similar activity by animal liberationists or antiglobalisation and anticapitalism protestors. This is because Islamist violent extremism is viewed as 'international' in nature, both in its organisation and personnel, and so falls under the CONTEST strategy and funding, which focuses on international terrorism,[16] whereas those other forms of potentially violent political extremism do not. For that reason, and to do justice to the complexities and ambiguities of the past and present *Prevent* work, the book primarily focuses on *Prevent*'s concerns with Muslims and Islamist violent extremism but does highlight parallels with right-wing/racist extremism and attempts to combat it when they are helpful. In particular, the book argues that the terrible events in Norway in July 2011, when a far-right activist killed 77 people, most of them young people shot at a socialist youth camp, showed the serious flaws in this UK government position. Coming just weeks after the relaunch of the UK *Prevent* strategy reiterated the lack of a domestic far-right terror threat, the Norway killings highlighted how an apparent 'lone wolf' terrorist was actually embedded within a large and growing right-wing, pan-European network that is increasingly drawn towards violent extremism. The killer, Anders Behring Breivik, had regular links with the English Defence League (EDL) and other UK right-wing groups whose members already have convictions for acts of terrorism, yet *Prevent* to date has shown no interest in this potential terror threat. This book suggests that is badly misguided, and that it demonstrates a misunderstanding of the nature of both the Islamist and far-right terror threats. Above all, therefore, the book aims to identify how *Prevent* can both be more effective in its efforts to prevent violent extremism of *all* kinds and can support wider efforts to positively build common identities and cross-ethnic cohesion and resilience.

The purpose of this book

Given that the explicit aim of *Prevent* is indeed to 'prevent violent extremism', the book draws on a range of empirical research by the author and others, and a broader range of recent academic work around *Prevent* and ethnic relations, to question how effective *Prevent* has actually been so far in relation to this stated aim. The book's position is that neither the undoubted Islamist terror threat posed by a small minority of young British Muslims nor the effectiveness of *Prevent* policies in relation to the broader mass of British 'Muslims' (itself a questionable characterisation) can be understood without debating the wider policy developments and discussions around ethnic relations, diversity and identity symbolised by community cohesion.

In this way, this book is a development of the analysis of the meaning and potential of community cohesion begun in my previous book, *Youth, Multiculturalism and Community Cohesion*.[17] Like that earlier publication, this book is concerned with social policy and with how public policy design and practice implementation can be more effective. *Youth, Multiculturalism and Community Cohesion* offered what continues to be one of the very few empirically based analyses of how post-2001 community cohesion policies in Britain have actually been understood and implemented on the ground, and what this suggests about its future potential as a policy approach. That analysis was based on significant empirical research in Oldham and Rochdale, Greater Manchester around how educational practitioners such as youth workers had understood and implemented community cohesion approaches, and what were young peoples' understandings of cohesion, segregation and 'identity' within their highly racialised local areas.[18] That research suggested that, rather than being the lurch back to assmilationism that it is often portrayed as, community cohesion actually represents a potentially positive way forward for multiculturalism. Here, community cohesion is a re-balancing of multiculturalism, an approach that still recognises, accepts and works with ethnic difference but one that puts greater emphasis than previously on augmenting those separate identities with overarching common identities and interests. In practice, community cohesion is doing this through forms of work with young people based on 'contact theory', a social psychology-based approach to reducing prejudice and fear, and building commonality.[19] Such interethnic 'contact' has no guarantee of producing positive outcomes around cohesion and commonality, and the conditions under which greater interethnic contact can and does contribute to more cohesive and tolerant communities and to greater resilience against extremism are discussed in this book. Implicit in the Oldham and Rochdale case study of community cohesion in practice, and in the national government community cohesion policy documents, is the acceptance that existing and 'hot' ethnic or religious identities need to become of necessity somewhat 'cooler', and more 'de-centred' and intersectional forms of identity encouraged, if Britain's complex and increasingly diverse multicultural society is to operate peacefully and successfully.[20]

That analysis is crucial to the way this book tries to understand what the Islamist terror threat is, how government has responded so far, and how policy aimed at 'preventing violent extremism' can be more effective in the future. As in *Youth, Multiculturalism and Community Cohesion*, the book develops this analysis through examination of a strong base of empirical evidence around how *Prevent* approaches to date have been operationalised, understood and experienced. This empirical material includes my involvement in 2007/8 in evaluating the initial 'Pathfinder' year of *Prevent* activity in Kirklees, West Yorkshire (home of two of the 7/7 bombers) for Kirklees Metropolitan Council; my design and research leadership in 2007/8 of collaborative, *Prevent*-funded research into how young people understand 'identity' and cohesion in Rochdale, Greater Manchester for the Rochdale Pride Partnership (the Local Strategic Partnership for the area including Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council and other public sector bodies); my presenting oral evidence in December 2009 at the House of Commons CLG Select Committee Inquiry witness hearings into *Prevent*;[21] my collaborative research with colleagues at the University of Huddersfield on how two West Yorkshire local authorities have to date implemented and embedded *Prevent* and community cohesion policies within their activities (2009/10);[22] and my collaborative involvement with colleagues in the University of Huddersfield's Applied Criminology Centre who have evaluated for the YJB local implementation by YOTs of *Prevent* (2009 to date). This empirical evidence, and previous academic outputs based on it, is drawn on and supported by a series of recent interviews with professionals and community members involved in education, local government and community activity who have had personal experience of *Prevent* and the issues that it addresses in practice. In addition, previous research into approaches to promote effective anti-racist education with white young people is also drawn upon.[23] Alongside this personal empirical research, the book also draws on empirical material of others, including academic analysis of *Prevent*, approaches to British Muslims, and their relationship to the wider policy context of community cohesion. In particular, it draws on the helpful data relating to *Prevent* within key sources such as Husband and Alam's *Social Cohesion and Counter-Terrorism* (2011) and Eatwell and Goodwin's *The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain* (2010), augmenting this with new empirical data and further developing the debates over *Prevent*'s content and purpose there. It uses all this material to analyse the aims, starting points and content of *Prevent* policy approaches initiated by the then Labour government from 2006 onwards as well as the new directions that the coalition government has mapped out since its election in May 2010. Within this, the book closely examines how *Prevent* has been understood and implemented in practice, how Britain's Muslim communities and those working with them have experienced and reacted to *Prevent*, and what evidence there is as to the effectiveness so far of these *Prevent* policies. This enables the book to squarely examine and discuss a number of interrelated criticisms of those *Prevent* policy approaches. These are listed below:

- *Prevent* to date has focused on and worked with Muslims only, in blatant contradiction to the analysis and approach of broader community cohesion policies, and has ignored what it suggests about the dangers of overemphasised ethnic identities and the causes of ethnic tensions and resentments in society.
- In doing so, *Prevent* has re-enforced and utilised simplistic and partial understandings of 'Muslim' identity, so arguably deepening one of the causal factors on Islamist violent extremism.
- This monocultural approach has involved clumsy and counterproductive attempts by the state to influence and engineer particular forms of leadership and religious practice within Muslim communities.
- This *Prevent* approach has also effectively ignored violent extremism in other communities, such as far-right/fascist politically motivated violence, so further stoking resentments among some British Muslims.
- More seriously still, the popular belief that *Prevent* has involved significant levels of surveillance on British Muslims has badly damaged the trust and dialogue between the state and Muslims, which will be central to effective counterterrorism in the long run.
- Profound political and operational tensions have been built into the design and implementation, both nationally and locally, of *Prevent* to date, so badly hampering efforts to prevent violent extremism.

In outlining and discussing such criticisms, the aim of the book is not to simply be negative about *Prevent* approaches to date but rather to learn from them and propose a number of ways in which future policy and practice approaches to this serious and long-term threat to British society, and its people of all backgrounds and beliefs, can be more effective, based on cohesion-based approaches that emphasise cross-community dialogue and resilience building, and genuine democratic involvement and debate. Whilst clearly focused on the