



Counter-Radicalization: A Critical Look into a Racist New Industry

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Abstract

Radicalization is the process by which individuals develop an intent to support or commit acts of political violence. The industry of counter-radicalization, or countering violent extremism as it is known in the United States, is quickly growing across the Western world. In the UK, the government's Prevent policy has made it mandatory for public bodies such as schools and hospitals to identify and report individuals suspected of being vulnerable to radicalization. The definition of radicalization however is not only vague, it is contingent on the political climate. The purpose of this article is to outline two fundamental issues with counter-radicalization practices. First, counter-radicalization practices, such as those enforced by policies such as Prevent, have dismissed the most basic tenets of scientific rigor: validity and reliability. Such practices are quintessential examples of policy-based evidence, not evidence-based policy. Second, terrorism is strongly associated with Islam and issues of Muslim integration in public consciousness and political discourse. Thus, the practice of counter-radicalization in the War on Terror inevitably results in a racist and disproportionate impact on Muslim communities, in much the same way the War on Drugs has resulted in the mass incarceration of Black youth in the United States. This paper will discuss the dangers of Muslims engaging in counter-radicalization practices and the importance of identifying institutionally racist practices in a supposedly post-racial society.

Introduction

A nurse made her scheduled visit at a Muslim family home. The parents welcomed her in, of course; she was there to see their homebound adolescent. His illness prevented him from basic chores like dressing and eating, so this was all procedure in the UK. The nurse made her way through the household and found the adolescent watching a video online—something in Arabic—and continued with her check-up. That was it—or so the family thought. Weeks later, the family discovered the nurse had referred their sick, adolescent son to a safeguarding lead (someone in charge of protecting those at risk of abuse). The reason for the

referral: the adolescent might be vulnerable to radicalization. In other words, the nurse suspected the adolescent was *maybe* susceptible to condoning terrorism or even becoming a terrorist sometime in the future. Obviously, the disabled adolescent hardly posed a threat to anyone. But *maybe* was enough for a referral, even if the *maybe* was infinitely small. The nurse's referral was also part of procedure.

In early 2018, Warwick University researchers Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Erzsébet Strausz made a shocking discovery: several mental health institutions in the UK are assessing potential for radicalization among *all* their patients.¹ This means that when a therapist writes their patient notes following a therapy session, the computer will demand, "Have you assessed for radicalization?" The answers are "Yes," "No," or "Not sure"—there is no option to disagree with the question. It then provides a list of risk factors including "exhibiting feelings of injustice and anger." The purpose of this article is to take the reader on a journey exploring how such counter-radicalization practices developed and how they stigmatize the Western Muslim population.

Radicalization refers to a presumed process by which an individual develops an intent to support or carry out acts of political violence (i.e., terrorism). Counter-radicalization (CR) therefore refers to efforts that would stop individuals from supporting terrorism or becoming a terrorist at some point in the future. Similarly, extremism relates to ideologies or narratives believed to be associated with, or supportive of, political violence. Counter-extremism, in turn, relates to efforts intended to suppress or counteract these narratives. As one might suspect, radicalization and extremism are highly elusive concepts—even those working in counter-terrorism admit as much.² Most modern texts begin by laying the parameters of what *they* mean by radicalization and extremism due to an absence of any validated, reliable definitions. Government documents (e.g., the UK's Counter-Extremism Strategy) sometimes forgo definitions altogether and use

¹ Charlotte Heath-Kelly & Strausz, E. Counter-terrorism in the NHS: Evaluating Prevent Safeguarding Duty in the NHS. (University of Warwick, 2018).

² Schmid, A. P. Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review. ICCT Research Paper 97, 22 (2013).

tautological logic, which often amounts to: *radicalization is the process by which extremists become terrorists*.

This paper is not an attempt to dissect the concept of radicalization (for this read Kundnani³ or Silva⁴), nor is it a wholesale critique of counter-terrorism. Rather, the purpose is to highlight two fundamental, observable concerns with CR efforts. The first is the lack of (or deficient) scientific evidence upon which CR practice is enacted. This paper argues that CR practices are determined first and foremost by politics, not research—policy-based evidence, not evidence-based policy. Second, this paper explains how colorblind counter-radicalization practices inevitably discriminate against those who look or sound Muslim. It ends with a discussion on how the industry of CR necessitates “good Muslims” to identify and call out “bad Muslims.” The purpose of this paper is to engage the reader critically and to inspire a reflective position (looking inwardly) towards practices that are ill-constructed, politically-driven, and inescapably racist in execution. If the contemporary political climates of the UK and US are indicative of anything, it is the need to look critically at policies viewed as ‘necessary’ and ‘commonsensical.’ Note that this paper will not make a distinction between countering violent-extremism (CVE), as it is often called in the US, and counter-radicalization (CR) in the UK. As the distinction between the two is arbitrary for the purpose of this article, they will both be referred to as CR for the sake of brevity.

Looking beneath the rhetoric

Discussions of radicalization and extremism will always begin with terrorism. As Eqbal Ahmad argued, the term terrorism necessarily evades definition.⁵ The reason for this is simple: terrorism is a political construct. This is not to say that violence, when it occurs, is any less deplorable if it is not categorized as terrorism—far from it. It just means we are privileging certain forms of ‘violence’ and ‘ideology’ over others *when* we think of ‘terrorism.’ This is a well-trodden discussion among

³ Kundnani, A. *The Muslims are coming!: Islamophobia, extremism, and the domestic war on terror* (Verso Books, 2014).

⁴ Silva, D. M. D. (2018). ‘Radicalisation: The journey of a concept,’ revisited. *Race & Class*, 59(4), 34-53. doi:10.1177/0306396817750778.

⁵ Ahmad, E. *Terrorism: Theirs & ours*. (Seven Stories Press, 2011).

terrorism researchers. Lisa Stampnitzky, in her seminal book, *Disciplining Terror*, explains how terrorism studies was never a centralized field (like the study of depression, for example).⁶ Instead, in the United States, self-described experts on terrorism from various disciplines consolidated the field as they spoke and wrote about the subject in papers and at conferences. As Stampnitzky argues, the term was thus contingent on political rhetoric—those whose voices had the most sway—to decide which violence should be considered “terrorism” and which was “legitimate.”

The implications of this reach beyond the cliché that ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.’ For example, in the 1980s, an Israeli attack on Palestinian soil was not recorded as an incident of international terrorism, while a Palestinian attack on Israeli soil was.⁷ The aggregation of data based on these politically-loaded, pre-defined parameters paints a particular picture of who terrorists are, what terrorist objectives appear to be, and where terrorists are likely to be found. One need not go so far back to unpack the nuances of terrorism. In 1999, a German man attacked me on the streets of Berlin (he was held back by a friend), spitting racial slurs and yelling “You’re dirt! Get out of this country!” The ideological determination in this man’s violent intent was clear, notwithstanding the fear he struck in my heart. Was this an act of terrorism?

Radicalization is a relatively new concept gaining exponential traction since the mid-2000s, following the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks in New York and London, respectively. The definition of radicalization, however, remains dependent on the political construction of terrorism. The elusive nature of radicalization has received a wide-range of critique (again, for an in-depth analysis, read anything by Kundnani).⁸ Not only are the parameters of terrorist acts subject to political influence; so is their importance. It is not easy to draw parallels to other social ills, but if we were to stay within the realm of murder, there have been over 400 *domestic homicides* in the UK between 2013 and 2016, while 13 terrorism-related

⁶ Stampnitzky, L. *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented 'Terrorism'*. (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kundnani, A. Radicalisation: the journey of a concept. *Race & Class* 54, 3–25 (2012).

deaths were recorded in the same time-frame.⁹ One might argue here that the number of terrorism-related deaths does not reflect incidents prevented through counter-terrorism efforts, and this may well be true—but it's not the point. Rather, one must understand how particular forms of politics prioritize certain social ills over others. With limited resources as a result of austerity measures, whereby the UK government has significantly cut public expenditure, there are political reasons why there hasn't been a nation-wide policy on "vulnerabilities towards domestic homicide"; why individuals working in public bodies like schools and hospitals are not given hour-long training sessions to 'identify' and 'report' pre-domestic homicide perpetrators; and why a similar construct to 'radicalization' has not yet been developed to describe individuals who might kill their partners or family members in the future.

I suspect the reason why 'domestic homicide pre-criminal identification' has not been developed as a nation-wide strategy—accompanied by on-screen pop-ups in mental health institutions—may be related to the fact that the majority of victims are female, most perpetrators are White males,¹⁰ and alcohol use is a major factor.¹¹ To make matters worse, services for women experiencing domestic abuse are facing budget cuts across the UK.¹² It is thus important to bear in mind that the academic and financial investments in counter-terrorism and all its sub-strands (now including hate crimes, etc.) reflect specific political interests—not just public safety. It is unsurprising, then, why many believe the War on Terror and the prioritization of Muslim-perpetrated violence, above other forms of violence, are derived from wider structures of Islamophobia.¹³

⁹ Home Office. Domestic Homicide Reviews. (2016). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575232/HO-Domestic-Homicide-Review-Analysis-161206.pdf. (Accessed: 6th November 2018)

¹⁰ Violence Policy Center. More Than 1,800 Women Murdered by Men in One Year, New Study Finds. (2018). Available at: <http://vpc.org/press/more-than-1800-women-murdered-by-men-in-one-year-new-study-finds/>. (Accessed: 8th January 2019)

¹¹ Gilchrist, L. & Godwin, J. Roles of Alcohol in Intimate Partner Abuse. 61 (2014).

¹² Jones, O. Britain is going backwards on violence against women. *The Guardian* (2014). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/30/britain-violence-against-women-domestic-abuse-funding-cuts>. (Accessed: 8th January 2019)

¹³ Sabir, R. Blurred lines and false dichotomies: Integrating counterinsurgency into the UK's domestic 'war on terror.' *Critical Social Policy* 0261018316683471 (2017).

While much of the discussion broadly relates to CR efforts in the West, this paper draws specifically on fieldwork in the British context and the PREVENT policy, a controversial strand of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy. PREVENT first developed in 2003 with the intent of winning 'the hearts and minds of British Muslims' as a means of preventing domestic attacks.¹⁴ Though the policy evolved over the years,¹⁵ its most significant development was in 2011 when the government integrated PREVENT counter-radicalization training in public bodies (schools, hospitals, etc.), requesting all staff to identify and report those they *suspected* were vulnerable to radicalization.¹⁶ The now-integrated PREVENT policy then became a *statutory duty* in 2015.¹⁷ In other words, public bodies deemed deficient in counter-radicalization may face institutional repercussions (e.g., a school may receive a bad scholastic evaluation despite its academic performance).

PREVENT distinguishes itself from other CR policies across the Western world precisely because it has become a *statutory duty* for staff in public institutions. To meet the demands of this duty, a nation-wide CR industry had to be developed. This industry, like any, involves thousands of trainers, managers, consultants and committees. In most cases, the referral process takes the following shape, using the example of a school: 1) a teacher suspects a student is vulnerable to, or is, being radicalized; 2) the teacher raises this concern with the institution's safeguarding (Prevent) lead; 3) if deemed worthy, the lead forwards the report externally to be vetted by the police; 4) if still deemed worthy, the case is discussed by a committee called Channel (an eclectic group of individuals of various professions who have been chosen or elected, often including British Muslims) to discuss potential interventions, including therapy, housing and/or ideological reprogramming. Counter-radicalization thus attempts to intervene with suspected pre-criminals well before the intent of violence is even possible. Indeed the time-frame of

¹⁴ Bail, C. A. The public life of secrets: Deception, disclosure, and discursive framing in the policy process. *Sociological Theory* 33, 97–124 (2015).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ HM Government. Prevent Strategy. (2011). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf. (Accessed: 8th October 2017)

¹⁷ HM Government. Revised Prevent Duty Guidance: for England and Wales. (2015). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance>. (Accessed: 17th August 2017)

pre-criminality can go all the way back to early childhood, nurseries included.¹⁸ As one might imagine, CR is a highly subjective and politicized enterprise.

Remember: this paper isn't about immediate threat—it's about 'pre-criminality'.¹⁹ Though the scientific enterprise of pre-criminality isn't new, CR packages it in new skin.²⁰ Thus this paper will not address actual threats of violence, irrespective of their intent. As it stands, the ethical rule-of-thumb remains: should anyone pose an immediate threat to themselves or others, contact authorities immediately. The following two sections outline how British CR developed as a nation-wide policy without a scientific evidence base, and how CR's framing of radicalization as colorblind ("anyone can become a terrorist") disguises the inherent racist structures upon which it operates.

Policy-based evidence, not evidence-based policy

The project of the scientific revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries was to (theoretically) unhinge knowledge-making from ideology. Today, a key buzzword is "evidence-based" which usually denotes that an intervention has been subjected to the scientific enterprise—otherwise it may be pseudoscience, like phrenology. But policy is not always based on evidence. Professor David Gregg gives the example of Family Intervention Projects (FIP), a national strategy to provide intensive support for 'chaotic families' in order to eliminate anti-social behavior and improve overall outcomes for children. Unsurprisingly, the strategy was almost completely directed at poor families who 'bring misery' to their communities, thereby conveniently dismissing the gamut of political decisions underlying the rise in poverty. Worse, the UK government developed FIP as a policy *first, then* sought contingent evidence for its success after the fact—policy-based evidence.²¹

¹⁸ Busby, M. Anger as Ofsted claims nursery failing to guard against radicalisation. *Education* (2018). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/aug/02/anger-ofsted-claims-nursery-failing-guard-against-radicalisation-brighton>. (Accessed: 2nd August 2018)

¹⁹ Goldberg, D., Jadhav, S. & Younis, T. Prevent: what is pre-criminal space? *BJPsych Bulletin* (2016). doi:10.1192/pb.bp.116.054585

²⁰ Sian, K. Born radicals? Prevent, positivism, and 'race-thinking'. *Palgrave Communications* 3, 6 (2017).

²¹ Gregg, D. Family intervention projects: a classic case of policy-based evidence. *London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies* (2010).

The UK government's CR training relies heavily on the Extreme Risk Guidance (ERG22+) framework, a government-funded risk assessment that lists 22 potential vulnerabilities relating to radicalization. The "+" suggests there may be more than those listed.²² The following are the first five vulnerabilities:

- Lack of emotional resilience
- Problems with relationships
- Need to feel important, valued, or special
- Need for identity, meaning, and belonging
- Feelings of threat and insecurity

Each of these vulnerabilities are remarkably commonplace, if not all too human. How have they been included in the ERG? Unfortunately, the science behind the ERG is highly suspect and has been critiqued by over 100 academics and various organizations including the National Union of Students^{23,24} (for an in-depth critique of the ERG, approved by notable scholars, read the report by Asim Qureshi and CAGE).²⁵ According to a document prepared for US Homeland Security, not only have assessment tools such as the ERG not been validated, the authors admit they have the potential to catch significant numbers of innocents in their profiling nets.²⁶ To make matters worse, the original study upon which the ERG is based is unavailable for academic or public scrutiny.²⁷ These are all serious, scientific concerns. Nonetheless, the ERG serves as the conceptual framework for the UK's

²² HM Prison & Probation Service. *A Process Evaluation of the Structured Risk Guidance for Extremist Offenders*. (2017).

²³ Armstrong, K. Anti-radicalisation strategy lacks evidence base in science. *Letters* (2016). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/sep/29/anti-radicalisation-strategy-lacks-evidence-base-in-science>. (Accessed: 6th November 2018)

²⁴ Royal College of Psychiatrists. Counter-terrorism and psychiatry. Position statement. (2016). Available at: https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/PS04_16.pdf.

²⁵ Qureshi, A. The 'Science of Pre-Crime': The Secret 'Radicalisation' Study Underpinning Prevent. *CAGE, London* (2016).

²⁶ RTI International. Countering Violent Extremism: The Application of Risk Assessment Tools in the Criminal Justice and Rehabilitation Process. (2018). Available at: https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OPSR_TP_CVE-Application-Risk-Assessment-Tools-Criminal-Rehab-Process_2018Feb-508.pdf. (Accessed: 6th November 2018)

²⁷ Scarcella, A., Page, R. & Furtado, V. Terrorism, radicalisation, extremism, authoritarianism and fundamentalism: a systematic review of the quality and psychometric properties of assessments. *PLoS One* 11, e0166947 (2016).

national Prevent counter-radicalization training, which has now been completed over one million times.²⁸

While the parameters of what constitutes “evidence” is (rightfully) open for discussion, the scientific method of evidence-production generally involves two key concepts: validity and reliability. Validity relates to the meaningfulness of a measure’s components, in that they measure what they’re supposed to measure. In an example of my own fieldwork, PREVENT’s CR training emphasizes emotional resilience as a potential vulnerability. But what is emotional resilience? And is “lack of emotional resilience” a valid component preceding political violence? As you can see, though there are many ways of assessing this component alone (e.g., even if we had a definition for emotional resilience, how do we measure it?), validity remains important because, without it, one cannot really determine whether someone is *truly* vulnerable to radicalization. Reliability relates to the extent to which a measure or intervention is repeatable. In other words, if two people were asked to determine an individual’s ‘emotional resilience,’ how likely are they to come to similar conclusions? Both validity and reliability underline why a robust evidence base is so important. Otherwise, invalid and unreliable measures—unscientific, in other words—are simply subject to personal whims and social conventions, similarly to the demonization of ‘poor families’ described above. This is antithetical to the scientific enterprise.

In the shift from evidence-based policy to policy-based evidence, the ERG’s clandestine development is only one part of the story, however. The other part is how politics has placed the non-validated, non-peer reviewed ERG as the parameters (through funding, interventions, etc.) upon which further evidence is to be collected. What often passes as evidence-based is also funding-based, leaving it to the government’s discretion which ‘direction’ research should move towards. Thus, critical perspectives that run counter to State discourse—such as those that

²⁸ Taylor, D. Hospice staff ‘trained to report dying patients as part of terror strategy’. *The Guardian* (2018).

Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/11/nhs-staff-trained-to-signs-of-radicalisation-in-terminally-ill-says-whistleblower>. (Accessed: 26th September 2018)

emphasize State violence, domestic and abroad—are generally less likely to prevail. Unfortunately, though the ERG remains a contentious framework, public officials across the UK are entrusted with the responsibility of identifying and reporting individuals they suspect are vulnerable to radicalization using the ERG as their foundation.

Another sign of politics-preceding-evidence is how counter-terrorism legislation evolves in response to events. The sociologist Christopher Bail provides a lucid account of how government leaks played a role in how the threat of radicalization developed.²⁹ In other words, our understanding of radicalization was less contingent on the scientific enterprise than on political scandals. This led to a convoluted process of framing and reframing the causes and solutions to homegrown terrorism. As an example, in the early 2000s, Tony Blair's administration still spoke of terrorism without relating to any specific group (this is significant following the UK's history with the Irish Republican Army). A leak in 2004 uncovered, however, that British Muslims had been targets of governmental surveillance as part of a secret counter-terrorism strategy. Refusing to comment on the leak, Tony Blair's government 'reframed' the issue of radicalization as an issue of civic engagement, stating Muslims were less likely to engage with the rest of society than other groups, and therefore needed the 'added attention.' Counter-terrorism was thus reframed to justify the surveillance of British Muslims while maintaining that 'anyone' could become a terrorist.

I began this article citing the discovery that several mental health institutions include radicalization in their comprehensive risk assessment for all patients. The list of 'radicalization risks' that appear on the health professional's pop-up screen are derived from the ERG. Thus, not only is the ERG a non-validated, unreliable instrument, it enjoys widespread use within mental health institutions without engaging the scientific enterprise or confronting the possibility that radicalization assessment may impact professional-patient relationships. Outside of Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Erzsébet Strausz's work, little is known about how CR has

²⁹ Bail, C. A. The public life of secrets: Deception, disclosure, and discursive framing in the policy process. *Sociological Theory* 33, 97–124 (2015)

impacted healthcare access and provision. At the same time, emerging research is recognizing the devastating impact of CR practice in education: a chilling effect on Muslim students and teachers who are increasingly fearful of speaking their minds and falling into the elusive catchment area of pre-criminality.³⁰ In one incident recorded in the Eroding Trust report,³¹ a teacher referred a 14-year-old student to a Child Protection Officer for speaking about ‘eco-terrorism’ in class. The adolescent was naturally referring to the subject at hand: deforestation and the actions of ‘eco-warriors’ to stop it. Taken aside by the Child Protection Officer, the adolescent was questioned about ISIS. This experience was devastating for the adolescent. According to his mother, “he is much more careful, much more wary in school to this day.”

Radicalization: a color-blind pathology?

It’s not just the lack of evidence that’s problematic. In a social and political vacuum, one might ask: what’s the harm in trying to prevent people from becoming *bad*, even without valid or reliable methods? But we do not live in a social or political vacuum. British and American counter-radicalization efforts operate in politically volatile, economically insecure contexts with deeply embedded racial structures inherited from violent imperial legacies.

One of the central concerns with CR (and counter-terrorism as a whole) is that it securitizes long-standing debates over the place of Muslims in Western societies—what Anne Norton calls the “the Muslim Question.”³² Countries across the Western world differ in their relationship with Muslim communities according to their national insecurities and colonial histories, but issues of integration remain constant. As political scientist Olivier Roy explains, governments across the

³⁰ Fernandez, S. The geographies of Prevent: The transformation of the Muslim home into a pre-crime space. *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 7, 167–189 (2018).

³¹ Open Society Justice Initiative. Eroding Trust, The UK’s Prevent Counter-Extremism Strategy in Health and Education. *Open Society Foundations* 16–17 (2016).

³² Norton, A. *On the Muslim question*. (Princeton University Press, 2013).

Western world are struggling to come to terms with Muslims' affiliation to the nation-state vis-a-vis the Ummah.³³

Counter-radicalization thus operates directly upon a long-standing logic in which Western Muslims are in need of constant assimilatory monitoring and interventions. What used to be 'become like us or go back to where you're from' is now 'become like us or you're potentially a threat to national security.' By employing the frame of non-violent extremism, counter-radicalization serves as a mode of regulating behaviors apparently at odds with a liberal nation-state. In this, as sociologist Nisha Kapoor explains, gender (in)equality is often employed as the measure by which one may identify potential radicals. In other words, orthodox Islamic gender roles that contradict Western liberal norms may be judged as the sort of 'extremism' from which political violence is suspected to arise. This has little to do with actual research into causes of political violence, and more to do with the securitization (and evolution) of a long-standing integration debate about Muslims in Western societies. All these concerns, which often fall under the heading of non-violent extremism, are not about terrorism per se, but are thought to constitute the sort of ideological soil from which political violence may blossom.

Compounding this history of British Muslims is the belief that social structures are no longer racist—that we now live in a post-racial society. In turn, racism and racial hierarchy are thought to exist somewhere out on the margins of society. But here they're only mentioning overt racism. In her seminal book, Michelle Alexander provides a genealogy of how the War on Drugs is part and parcel of a wider, institutionally racist framework that criminalizes Black bodies.³⁴ Alexander argues that one of the reasons it has been so difficult to address institutionally racist policies associated with drug policing is their formulation as color-blind. Color-blindness is the assertion that racial privilege is not a factor—when of course it is. When political rhetoric speaks of drug dealers and drug users as 'race-free,' policy-makers cannot be held accountable for the racist aftermath of the War on Drugs: the mass incarceration of Black men. Racist incidents in the War on Drugs

³³ Roy, O. *Globalized Islam: The search for a new ummah*. (Columbia University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Alexander, M. *The New Jim Crow*. (New Press, 2012)

and Terror, irrespective of their number, are seen as ‘bad apples’ when they occur—bad examples of an otherwise guiltless framework. It’s not the policy’s fault; supposedly only a fool (not a racist, mind you) would refer a student, who wears the *hijab* for the first time, to CR. Anyway, CR advocates argue, the ‘system’ will iron out these kinks—the strategy itself is not racist.

Here the question often arises, ‘how can one be racist towards Muslims?’ Perhaps the two Egyptian Christians who were attacked by their fellow protestors—in a rally opposing the building of a mosque—might give us an indication.³⁵ But racism is not only contingent on the color of one’s skin. It’s a social construct, as Professors Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue, ‘*a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflict and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.*’³⁶ When an erroneous counter-radicalization referral is made towards a woman wearing the *hijab*, this is a racist referral in that her physicality embodies a social conflict (the War on Terror, the non-integration of Muslims) in public consciousness, of which the *hijab* is a popular signifier. Thus, the racism in counter-radicalization policy is not only how Muslims are represented (in documents or training), but indeed that the terrorist threat is widely associated with perceived Muslimness—in appearance and expression. In other words, even if a public counter-radicalization strategy were to exclude references to Muslims altogether, *it would still be about Muslims*. Accordingly, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims in the UK recently proposed a definition of Islamophobia as: ‘*rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.*’ This short definition lacks the centrality of how Islam itself is perceived as a foreign, backwards, and dangerous ideology but it’s a positive step towards recognizing how racism targets Muslims (I would also add that any definition of Islamophobia that does not hold politicians or policies accountable is ultimately futile).

In brief: how is counter-radicalization racist? Because CR depicts the threat of

³⁵ Conor Friedersdorf. A Mosque Near Ground Zero. *The Atlantic* (2010). Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/projects/ideas-2010/archive/2010/06/a-mosque-near-ground-zero/57876/>. (Accessed: 12th January 2019)

³⁶ Omi, M. & Winant, H. *Racial Formation in the United States*. (Routledge, 2014).

radicalization as color-blind. The PREVENT policy, for example, proclaims that *anyone* may be susceptible to radicalization—just like a brown and white person is equally likely to be a drug dealer in the War on Drugs, so too can *anyone* become a terrorist. One of the ways the threat of radicalization operates as color-blind is its framing as an ideological virus, transmitted between individuals (across social networks), entering into the systems of vulnerable individuals.³⁷ This entire process emulates the biomedical model of disease: just as a race-neutral body is susceptible to sickness from a foreign or dangerous agent, so too is a race-neutral individual susceptible to dangerous ideologies. But by denying how the threat of terrorism is associated with Muslims in public consciousness, CR arguably does *more harm* than if it were to target Muslims explicitly; as Michelle Alexander explains, color-blindness serves to protect a system from the charge of racism.³⁸ Unfortunately, we are still far from acknowledging racism outside of cases of overt, racial hostility. Though the myth of a post-racial society is increasingly disrupted by Trump, Brexit and far-right movements across Europe, the focus on explicit forms of racism subverts efforts to resist implicit forms of racism which operate within structures and policies such as counter-radicalization.

None of this is new. Several decades ago, a famous study examined the impact of race and gender on mental health diagnosis.³⁹ Two-hundred and ninety psychiatrists were divided into five groups to evaluate the same case of a patient save for key differences in race and gender (white male; white female; black male; black female; race and gender undisclosed). It came to light that the race of a patient influenced evaluations: Black people were more likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia than White people. The reason for this was simple: schizophrenia was commonly associated with aggression within the logic of mental illness, and the United States has a history of associating violence and criminality with Black bodies.

³⁷ Jones, J. The color-blind racial approach: Does race really matter. *The myth of color blindness: Manifestations, dynamics, and impact* 39–52 (2016).

³⁸ Alexander, M. *The New Jim Crow*. (New Press, 2012).

³⁹ Loring, M. & Powell, B. Gender, Race, and DSM-III: A Study of the Objectivity of Psychiatric Diagnostic Behavior. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 29, 1–22 (1988).

What about PREVENT? The UK government's own statistics for 2018 show that 'Islamist extremism' referrals are 17 times more likely to pass through PREVENT than 'Far Right extremism.'⁴⁰ This number alone represents a serious discrepancy, but even here there are some factors that indicate that the disparity may be much higher. First, the UK doesn't count PREVENT referral rejections or interventions that occur *within* schools and hospitals. So if a teacher referred a student for commenting on eco-terrorism, and this referral was hypothetically rejected or dealt with *within* the institution, it would not enter official statistics. Second, the statistics are not categorized based on the *religion/ethnicity* of the one referred but on the *nature* of the referral itself. This is significant, as the UK government has recently added a new referral-type to Prevent: 'Mixed, Unstable, or Unclear Ideology.' This new category represent an enormous 27% of all 7,318 Prevent referrals in 2018. As ethnicity/religion of the referred is not mentioned, this 27% could potentially consist entirely of British Muslims exhibiting antisocial behaviors, but who have not made any explicit remarks associated with Islamist extremism. Thus, one must remain wary when the government asserts that 'Islamist extremism' referrals have gone down; it may be the case if we hold to *their* categories, but the reality of British Muslims may be significantly different.

Racial prejudice cannot be addressed with training; one cannot simply tell people "Don't be racist" and expect this to eradicate underlying prejudice. The reason for this is just as simple: Muslims are commonly associated with terrorism in public consciousness. There is sufficient research demonstrating that individuals *who think they're not racist* still make racist judgments in controlled settings.⁴¹ If the racism in a PREVENT referral is apparent and returned to sender (as in the individual is not judged as vulnerable to radicalization by someone higher up in the school, for example, or the police), this is called a false positive. There has been an abundance of documented false positive referrals through PREVENT's counter-radicalization initiatives. Non-publicized cases from my own fieldwork

⁴⁰ Home Office. *Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2017 to March 2018*. (2018). Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/763254/individuals-referred-supported-prevent-programme-apr2017-mar2018-hosb3118.pdf

⁴¹ Jones, J. The color-blind racial approach: Does race really matter. *The myth of color blindness: Manifestations, dynamics, and impact* 39–52 (2016).

involve such radical behaviors as: putting on the *hijab*; going on Hajj; and coming to the UK as a (non-Muslim) asylum seeker from the Middle East. These cases never enter official statistics, but they exist.

And it's not only about numbers. The normative response to the overrepresentation of Muslims through CR efforts has been a) to increase the emphasis on far-right ideologies; and b) to involve more Muslims within the CR process (which will be discussed below). These options, however, do not address how radicalization is framed via politically-loaded formulations of non-violent extremism or how it's associated with Islam in public consciousness—where race does matter. Instead, it aggravates circumstances further as it reproduces a system that sees radicalization as an unproblematic, color-blind concept, and frames issues of overrepresentation as problems of implementation. The consequences of such a system are truly dire: according to Fatima Ahdash, radicalization concerns have appeared in 231 British family court cases between January 2016 and March 2018—all of them Muslim.⁴² When an unregulated and racist logic can potentially separate children from their parents at the intersection of family law and counterterrorism, there is a need for a total and comprehensive deconstruction of this logic.

Muslim reproducing a securitized narrative

Muslims are increasingly sought to play central roles in security initiatives. Asim Qureshi, in his book *A Virtue of Disobedience*, calls for greater reflexivity among Muslims.⁴³ He cautions how Muslims, though well-intended, may unintentionally reproduce State narratives which ultimately cause greater harm to marginalized communities all around—not just Muslims. It is easy to presume that, as a Muslim, one would not fall so easily into the racist traps of the CR industry. But there are caveats to this logic, as I listed above. First, we should question our engagement with industries dismissive of “scientific” rigor (in quotes as “science” itself is a political field as well) and public review. Second, racism is not only a question of

⁴² Ahdash, F. The interaction between family law and counter-terrorism: a critical examination of the radicalisation cases in the family courts. *Child and Family Law Quarterly* **30**, 26 (2018).

⁴³ Qureshi, A. *A Virtue of Disobedience*. (Byline Books, 2018).

an individual's intentions. Rather, racism operates within structures which set the terms for how individuals interact with one another; it is very possible, if not the norm, to engage in a racist policy with "good intentions." Moreover, though every voice matters, "being Muslim" is not a qualification to speak with exceptional authority on the social and political conditions of Western Muslims. Muslims must be vigilant of their participation in initiatives presented 'in good faith' which produce in them a sense of 'expertise.' We are also seeing a proliferation of organizations that profess an ability to distinguish "good" Muslims from "bad." Unsurprisingly, the conception of good Muslim is often not only one who is 'integrated' or 'assimilated,' but who actively espouses State narratives on a variety of key political issues,⁴⁴ such as Israel.⁴⁵

Divisions among Western Muslims have always existed, though they are often spoken about, for brevity or from ignorance, as a monolithic community. The political categorization of Western Muslims however is inherently problematic. The term glosses over a wide range of groups, political affiliations, migration histories, and religiosities. Counter-terrorism strategies, directly and indirectly, play upon these divisions. The most glaring direct State intervention is the demonization and favoring of certain groups over others in the name of counter-terrorism, thereby endowing internal divisions (i.e., Sufi-Salafi) with political significance. Arun Kundnani reports, for example, how the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB, the overarching umbrella organization of UK mosques) fell out of the UK government's favor when it voiced disapproval of the UK's illegal invasion of Iraq, stating it might cause more violence.⁴⁶ The government then funded the Sufi Muslim Council (with £203,000) instead, in the hopes of elevating their status and 'moderation' within the British Muslim community.⁴⁷ This political siding with certain groups while demonizing others (often under the elusive rhetorical categorization of extremism) remains prevalent to this day.

⁴⁴ Kapoor, N. *Deport, Deprive, Extradite: 21st Century State Extremism*. (Verso Books, 2018).

⁴⁵ Abunimah, Ali. Islamophobia bankroller behind organizer of Israel junket for US "Muslim leaders". *The Electronic Intifada* (2015). Available at: <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/islamophobia-bankroller-behind-organizer-israel-junket-us-muslim-leaders>. (Accessed: 13th January 2019)

⁴⁶ Kundnani, A. *Spooked. How not to prevent violent extremism*. London: IRR (2009).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Preferential treatment by the State has created a lucrative industry for self-described Muslim experts such as Maajid Nawaz, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Tarek Fatah to rise in prominence; voices who represent, as David Cameron described in his infamous speech, ‘an active muscular liberalism,’ ‘made by those within Islam.’⁴⁸

The social impact of counter-radicalization goes deeper. CR has not only made the general Western Muslim population suspect through racialized structures, but has created ‘internal suspect’ communities whereby certain segments of Muslims are perceived as safer than others.⁴⁹ This has created an ominous feeling of always being on the alert—an affective surveillance.⁵⁰ As we now see, even families have seen internal divisions due to securitized concerns, with the government putting the responsibility on mothers to prevent their children’s radicalization.⁵¹ In my fieldwork, I met mothers—some shaking and crying—scared of having their children removed, simply because the line between pre-criminality and criminality is so elusive.⁵² These complaints have been raised by many, including the UN Special Rapporteur.⁵³ And yet, the CR industry has shown no interest in quelling its expansion, having continuously dismissed demands for scientific rigor and the cries of many who have demonstrated, repeatedly, how such CR practices are inevitably racist in practice.

⁴⁸ Klug, B. Faulty Logic: The Cracks in Cameron’s 2011 Munich Speech. *ReOrient* 1, 61 (2015).

⁴⁹ Abbas, M.-S. Producing ‘internal suspect bodies’: divisive effects of UK counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities in Leeds and Bradford. *The British Journal of Sociology* 0, (2018).

⁵⁰ Ellis, D., Tucker, I. & Harper, D. The affective atmospheres of surveillance. *Theory & Psychology* 23, 716–731 (2013).

⁵¹ Abbas, M.-S. “I Grew a Beard and My Dad Flipped out!” Co-Option of British Muslim Parents in Countering ‘Extremism’ within Their Families in Bradford and Leeds,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 0, no. 0 (April 27, 2018): 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1466694>.

⁵² Younis, T. British Muslims will live with an intolerable burden of uncertainty under new counter-terrorism bill. The Conversation Available at: <http://theconversation.com/british-muslims-will-live-with-an-intolerable-burden-of-uncertainty-under-new-counter-terrorism-bill-105716>. (Accessed: 11th January 2019)

⁵³ UN Special Rapporteur. End of Mission Statement of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance at the Conclusion of Her Mission to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner* (2018). Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23073&LangID=E>. (Accessed: 8th October 2018)

Finally, one should not disassociate counter-radicalization from the broader counter-terrorism strategy and the new Counter-Terrorism Act (2019) now in effect.⁵⁴ This Act is rightfully considered a worst-case evolution of the counter-terrorism strategy, expanding both the range of offenses and the severity of punishments. For example, the new Act introduces the one-click offense (appropriately called the Medusa Offense): an individual may now serve up to 15 years in prison for clicking *once* on a terrorist website. As such, while one might imagine that a *single* click on a terrorist website would be prototypical of a step in the radicalization *process*, the behavior is seen as already having crossed the line into terrorism. As the boundaries of terrorism offenses shift, their movement significantly impacts the validity of CR initiatives. The purview of CR is increasingly infringed upon by counter-terrorism legislation.

Conclusion: Beyond Bad Apples

When someone tells me we must do everything we can to stop terrorism, I understand. I too share the goal of standing up to oppression. But the platform upon which we take a stand is as important as the spirit itself. As the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. But counter-terrorism is also very difficult to discuss. There is a fear that criticism of counter-terrorism strategies is tantamount to supporting terrorism itself. Unfortunately, such a fear is not ill-founded; the British home secretary Sajid Javid said as much about counter-extremism critics.⁵⁵

I always paint the following analogy when discussing bad policy: imagine a rat-infested town. As the infestation worsens, the mayor decides to kill all the rats by poisoning the water. The rats die, but people also become sick. So, even if a

⁵⁴ Younis, T. British Muslims will live with an intolerable burden of uncertainty under new counter-terrorism bill.

The Conversation Available at:

<http://theconversation.com/british-muslims-will-live-with-an-intolerable-burden-of-uncertainty-under-new-counter-terrorism-bill-105716>. (Accessed: 11th January 2019)

⁵⁵ Hymas, C. Prevent critics 'on side of extremists,' says home secretary Sajid Javid. *The Telegraph* (2018).

Available at:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/12/01/prevent-critics-side-extremists-says-home-secretary-sajid-javid/>. (Accessed: 3rd January 2019)

policy were hypothetically successful in its objectives, its “success” is not the only measure of impact. Despite all the criticism levied towards CR efforts, there are still those who argue that “doing something is better than nothing” which, as this analogy conjures, is not only false (one can always make things worse) but is also a common logical fallacy called the politician’s syllogism: ‘We must do something. This is something. Therefore, we must do this.’ This logic immediately dismisses structural faults at the heart of any policy. I hope, as I explained with the analogy of the poisoned water, that we look beyond the narrow definitions of CR’s alleged “success” to see its devastating impact on communities. The recognition of such devastation *should* be sufficient to rebuke public CR and CVE efforts, and call towards a rethinking of how best to approach the subject of political violence.

I recently read an excellent quote by Omar Abdul-Aziz in reference to rebellion: “Extinguish their sedition with justice.” Our first instinct in combating violence should be the assurance of justice. Racism is the antithesis to justice—just look at the case of Shamima Begum. On February 19th, 2019, British Home Secretary Sajid Javid unilaterally revoked the citizenship of a British-born 19-year-old who travelled to join ISIS several years prior, rendering her stateless.⁵⁶ This act confirms a terrible suspicion many British Muslims hold: they are second-class citizens in a racist, two-tier justice system that privileges their White counterparts.

No one is better off by applying unscientific policies to other groups, pushing harder for counter-radicalization to target ‘far-right individuals.’ Rather, we should adopt the principle that what is harmful to one group is harmful to all groups and call for improvements in scientific scrutiny, public awareness, and sensitivity to institutional racism. With a better understanding of how racist structures operate, we can begin to look beyond “bad apples” towards the “bad trees” that are poisoning otherwise “good apples.” Let’s have a serious conversation about the

⁵⁶ Ahsan, S. The revoking of Shamima Begum’s citizenship sets a worrying precedent for the children of immigrants. *Media Diversified* (2019). Available at: <https://mediadiversified.org/2019/02/20/the-revoking-of-shamima-begums-citizenship-sets-a-worrying-precedent-for-the-children-of-immigrants/>. (Accessed: 21st February 2019)

sort of politics that make good people make bad decisions.