

Extremism review must take a tough stance on Islamism

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Is the government effectively addressing the challenge posed by extremist ideologies in the UK? This is the big question for William Shawcross, the former charity commissioner who is leading a review into Prevent, the counter-radicalisation programme designed to discourage individuals from supporting or becoming terrorists. Is it fit for purpose?

While Prevent's critics decry it as "racist", it looks increasingly exposed. As Islamic State was sweeping Syria and Iraq, Ali Harbi Ali was referred to Prevent but seems to have fobbed off any interest the authorities had in him. Last year Ali murdered the MP David Amess. Contact with Prevent has also been recorded in the case of the Fishmongers' Hall terrorist, Usman Khan, and the Parsons Green Tube bomber, Ahmed Hassan. This may be just the tip of the iceberg. It strongly suggests the status quo on Prevent is not an option.

One key question is whether the rising number of referrals to Prevent of supporters of far-right ideologies, and what is categorised as "mixed, unstable and unclear ideology", reflects a genuine shift in the nature of extremism. They now make up two thirds of the cases worked on by Channel, the next stage following initial engagement with Prevent. Shawcross must address the suspicion that some individuals are being passed on to Prevent to ensure speedy mental health support. Given the public sector campaigns against the programme, we also need to know if some staff in universities and schools are reluctant to refer potential Islamic extremists for fear of being accused of racism.

By numbers, the far right appears smaller than at any time since the formation of the National Front in 1967. It struggles to stage protests. Not a single far-right candidate won a seat in this month's local elections. Weaker politically, it has taken an increasingly harder edge, especially online. The 2016 murder of the MP Jo Cox was the clearest illustration that as the far right's weakness has increased, so has its anger.

Behind this, old debates rage concerning the role ideology plays in terrorism. Politicians have remained largely absent. Keir Starmer has no desire to steer Labour in the direction of campaigns, such as that against Prevent, where the far left and Islamist groups coalesce. Within government things look different. For police forces to continue to enjoy cosy chats with “community leaders”, ideology is best portrayed as pivotal to far-right terrorism but largely absent from Islamist violence. That approach may give the authorities an easy life, but Shawcross has been asked to ask hard questions, and to deliver perhaps uncomfortable answers.

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