

# Why Can't the UK Stop Terror Attacks?

Let's not make the same mistake here.

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Global Research, June 25, 2017

[The American Conservative](#) 23 June 2017

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Terrorism](#)

*The recent series of terrorist incidents in Europe has produced the inevitable finger pointing regarding the ability of the security services to respond and has also reopened the debate over what might be done to prevent the attacks in the first place.*

Similar discussions have been going on in the United States for some time, to include [consideration of](#) the *Violent Radicalism and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act of 2007* by the House of Representatives. The bill, sponsored by then congresswoman Jane Harman, was fairly toothless, seeking to establish a national commission and study center, but it was strongly criticized for many of its assumptions and definitions, with some critics noting how it might be exploited to enable the prosecution of "thought crimes." It was passed in the House by a 404 to 6 vote but, fortunately, later died in the Senate.

More recently, congressman Peter King [has held hearings](#) on radicalization of Muslim Americans that ran intermittently for nearly two years between 2010 and 2012. As terrorist incidents actually declined in number during that period, there was little desire on the part of Congress to initiate any draconian new legislation in response to the often conflicting "evidence" compiled by King's House Homeland Security Committee.

It should surprise no one that the Europeans are much more advanced in their creation of anti-terror legislation than is the United States, if only because they have been more often on the receiving end of ideologically motivated violence. Assuming that America might well be arriving tomorrow where Europe is today in counter-terror, it is instructive to look at one of the proactive frameworks currently in place to analyze both its effectiveness and legality.

Britain has experienced three terrorist attacks in three months. The government response [has been defined](#) by the British *Counter-Terrorism and Security Act of 2015*, popularly referred to by the acronym "Contest." Contest consists of four so-called "workstreams": "Pursue" to physically interdict terrorist attacks; "Protect" to establish physical barriers against terrorist tactics and weapons; "Prepare" to minimize the after-the-fact impact of a terror attack; and "Prevent," which is a highly aggressive and controversial program to prevent radicalization.

Prevent is the program that has received the most attention. It relies on the so-called conveyor belt theory which postulates that someone who is either alienated or critical of the *status quo* will inevitably graduate to even more extreme views and eventually cross the line from nonviolence to violence. Those who are identified as vulnerable by Prevent are sometimes entered into a government funded but privately managed counseling program referred to as "Channel," which has worked with 8,000 mostly young Muslim men in an effort to avoid radicalization.

The problem with evaluating Prevent's effectiveness is that it is the government [doing the assessing](#). It equates success with the numbers going through the program and it ignores the [many critics](#) who note that it has so alienated the Muslim community that it actually creates more new potential militants than it succeeds in deradicalizing. The fundamental issue is that there is no actual model or profile of a terrorist that one can focus on in an effort to prevent radicalization, so the definition of who might be a threat has been continuously broadened lest anyone escape the net. Nearly all of the recent terrorist attacks in Britain were carried out by young men born in Britain who were at least nominally Muslim, but beyond that they had very little in common in terms of education, family and social background or even religiosity. Their belief in a violent solution to what troubled them certainly sets them apart but it is unlikely that the security services would be able to discern that in any event, so their names frequently join the 23,000 others on the British "subjects of interest" potential terrorism database. From a policing point of view, those 23,000 are joined by thousands more names submitted by ordinary Britons as part of the Prevent program, each one of which has to be investigated and either cleared or added to the database.

The British security agencies have inevitably been overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of terror suspects. Surveillance of a suspect is extremely labor intensive, even when assisted by Britain's extensive CCTV system, which covers large parts of the country's cities and towns as well as the roads connecting them, so it is safe to assume that very few dangerous individuals are actually being watched at any given time. This asymmetry makes the odds very much in the terrorist's favor as he can strike anywhere with any kind of weapon while the police must try to protect everywhere.



Manchester attack (Source: TruePublica)

Due to the public outcry over the recent attacks, the British government is currently undertaking a [sweeping security review](#) on terrorism. It will likely expand the Prevent program in spite of uncertainty at all levels over whether it is actually working or not. In addition to encouraging citizens to support suspicious behavior, the legislation actually compels institutions that are in any way connected to the government to actively seek out and identify those exhibiting potential terrorist sympathies. That includes, schools, universities, libraries and any government office that deals with the public. The establishing legislation for Prevent defines early warning signs of terrorist sympathies as "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs."

A [recent article](#) in the *London Review of Books* entitled "Don't go to the doctor," explores

how Prevent sometimes works in practice in an educational environment. Universities and other schools are required to aggressively seek out radicalized students. They have to submit regular reports demonstrating that they are complying with the law to include specific information regarding individual cases and follow-up action to make sure that they are diligently seeking out radicals. In one case cited, an instructor at Oxford, in dealing with a Muslim university student who was struggling with her course work, learned that the woman had gone to see her doctor regarding depression. Due to Prevent, she felt obligated to ask the student whether she was being radicalized.

Similarly, a librarian at a major university was asked by another college to provide a professional reference for a colleague. One of the questions was “Are you completely satisfied that the applicant is not involved in extremism?” Other universities in Britain have stopped allowing Muslim students to use college rooms for gatherings out of fear that the meetings will be used for radicalization. Guest lists for many university sponsored meetings that are open to students must now be provided 48 hours prior to the event for security screening. College authorities are allowed to search the rooms of Muslim students “on suspicion.”

Some might regard Prevent as a relatively innocuous but necessary measure to combat radicalization. I do not agree as any program that focuses on a particular minority while compelling ordinary citizens to report on other ordinary citizens opens the door to many types of abuse. In any event, the U.S. Constitution would seem to make the type of legislation that established Prevent in Britain unimaginable on this side of the Atlantic, but one should not relax too soon as this is the home of the Patriot and the Military Commissions Acts.

Prevent operates on the principle that individuals who are maladjusted will eventually become pathologically so if they are not counseled and convinced to abandon their wicked ways. It neither addresses nor in any way concedes that many of the disaffected that it targets are actually angry for reasons that are at least comprehensible, including what the British government continues to do to fellow Muslims overseas, which is sometimes referred to as “blowback.” End the bombing of Syrians and Iraqis and much of the motivation to bomb in Birmingham just might disappear. Oddly enough, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn [raised that very issue](#) in the recent British electoral campaign, saying that terrorism was often a response to the policies that the government was carrying out in the Middle East. His comment was largely ignored by the British media, but the Labour Party went on to win many more votes than anticipated and Corbyn nearly became Prime Minister. Perhaps the real message on what actually causes terrorism is beginning to get through to the public. Let us hope so.

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