



MAINSTREAMED
EXTREMISM AND
THE FUTURE
OF PREVENTION

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This policy paper seeks to start a conversation around the paradigm shift in thinking required in how governments and societies should approach prevention, to reflect the dramatic shifts in extremist activity over the past two decades.

Going back to first principles around prevention, we make the case for placing human rights at the centre of countering extremism, arguing that preventing extremism – defined in terms of supremacist ideologies which run counter to universal rights – must at its heart be treated as an exercise in safeguarding human rights, rather than merely preventing violence.

This paper is part of ISD's 'Future of Extremism' series, charting the transformational shifts in the extremist threat landscape two decades on from 9/11, and outlining the policy strategies required to counter the next generation of extremist threats.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the mid-2000s, in the shadow of a wave of ‘homegrown’ Islamist terrorist attacks across Western countries, a new type of approach – prevention – was introduced, considerably widening the field of counterterrorism efforts. Rather than using hard power to counter terror threats, prevention-based approaches involved a range of non-law enforcement initiatives designed to address violent extremist ideologies and movements pre-emptively.

This included engagement with at-risk communities, increased education efforts and targeted interventions aimed at preventing individuals from progressing along pathways of violent radicalisation.

Almost 20 years on, prevention is back in the headlines. In the US the Biden administration has launched as one of its flagship policy initiatives the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships. This resets and redoubles government prevention efforts to address a new wave of domestic extremist mobilisation. It represents a major departure from the near-exclusive focus on ‘international threats’ that has characterised US efforts to date.

Meanwhile, in the UK an independent review of the government’s Prevent programme has been charged with considering how it effectively safeguards vulnerable people from being drawn into terrorism.¹ In the context of a polarised discourse around the programme, the reviewer faces the challenging task of considering how the strategy and delivery of prevention can be made fit for purpose, amid an extremism landscape that has changed dramatically since prevention approaches emerged almost two decades ago.

The post-9/11 countering violent extremism (CVE) paradigm that emerged as a response primarily to an Islamist, offline, and organisation-based terrorism challenge, is increasingly tested, as we face a more complex, hybridised threat landscape.

Today extremism and terrorism are ideologically multifaceted, hypercharged by digital platforms, and inseparably connected with the rising phenomena of disinformation, conspiracist mobilisation and

weaponised hate. Far from being an issue at the fringes, extremism is increasingly characterised by a ‘mainstreaming’ dynamic, with mobilisation taking place through political and media channels to reach wider audiences, polarise civic discourse and undermine democratic culture and process. Prevention strategies must reflect this new reality with a reboot of policy approaches that engage with communities affected by extremism as well as with sections of mainstream society.

Building a prevention policy playbook

This paper aims to inform both a domestic and international policy discussion, going back to first principles around the concept of prevention. It draws on a broad policy review around prevention approaches, an expert roundtable, and consultations with a range of civil society policymakers and frontline practitioner stakeholders involved in the prevention domain.

Laying out the core elements of a progressive prevention infrastructure, this paper makes the case for placing human rights as the central goal of prevention work. We highlight both the major damage done to prevention through violations of fundamental rights in the name of fighting terrorism and extremism, as well as the profound harms to human rights resulting from extremist mobilisation.

As such, we argue that preventing extremism – defined in terms of supremacist ideologies which run counter to universal rights – must at its heart be seen as an exercise in safeguarding human rights, rather than merely preventing violence.

While focusing on the UK policy context, this paper also takes stock of international developments, including the implications for prevention of an increasingly emboldened, mainstreamed and transnational extremism threat emanating from a broad ideological spectrum in the US, across Europe and beyond.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This report lays out a framework for future prevention policies that avoid the merry-go-round of short term, security-driven approaches and instead focuses on the hybridised threat landscape that societies currently face.

The journey of prevention

The paper begins by outlining the story of prevention to date, where we have seen the development of **a range of prevention approaches and typologies** including:

- Narrow efforts to tackle terrorism and **extremist violence in isolation**
- Approaches based on mitigating the **spread of extremist ideology**
- Prevention through **positive action**, which includes work in the space of social cohesion and democracy promotion
- Emerging **'mixed-harms' approaches** premised on a relationship between extremism and phenomena such as hate crime, conspiracy theories and disinformation.

But in many contexts these different philosophies of prevention and their implementation have become **confused and overlapping**, creating a series of **conceptual challenges** and points of contention, and leading to significant critique.

Core areas of contention and criticism around prevention approaches include:

- A **fundamental conceptual lack of clarity** around what it is that is being prevented, a category which has shifted and blurred over time.
- A failure to **properly define extremism** and its resultant harms.
- Confusion over where efforts should **focus narrowly** on violent groups and individuals or the **long tail of ideological radicalisation**.
- Questions around the **appropriate role of the state** in deciding the acceptability of thought and ideas, and relatedly, properly distinguishing between extremism and social or religious conservatism.
- Inconsistent approaches to the **ideological diversity of extremist threats**, such as far-right extremism, which is still largely unaddressed because of a

counter-extremism infrastructure geared towards an organisation-based, 'foreign' Islamist threat.

This gave rise to fundamental rights violations in the name of fighting terrorism and extremism, as we saw:

- Failures to call out and address **state actor extremism** internationally – leading in many cases to tactical alliances with autocracies in the name of countering extremism.
- An overly **broad approach** to upstream prevention work which has resulted in the securitisation of Muslim communities and entire areas of policy (e.g. social cohesion work).
- A lack of focus on **victims** and the **harms** of extremism to individuals and groups.

The radically altered threat picture

Building on this overview, this paper outlines how the **threat from extremism has radically shifted** over the past two decades, with substantial implications for prevention approaches:

- **The international Islamist extremism landscape has fundamentally transformed**, from a group-based challenge posed by al-Qaeda in the wake of 9/11, to a more disparate, fragmented and factional international threat picture. Amid the transformation of ISIS to a largely post-territorial entity in the Middle East, a new post-organisational challenge is emerging among Gen-Z extremist communities online.
- **The rise of far-right extremism is part of an increasingly hybridised extremist threat picture**, with ever more blurred lines between a broad ecosystem of extremist violence, weaponised hate and harmful conspiracies. Enabled by a permissive digital media environment, this is amplified through long-range efforts by hostile state actors and special interest groups that boost polarising narratives.
- **A long tail of extremist threats defies traditional counterterrorism categorisations**, from what the UK government has termed 'mixed, unclear and unstable' (MUU) ideologies to grey area threats such as the Incel and QAnon movements. Within this broad spectrum of threats, terrorism does not hold a

monopoly on violence, which can stem not only from hostile organisations with political objectives, but also from loose movements and networks that fuel and feed off conspiracy theories and extremism.

- **Disinformation, conspiracy, hate and extremist networks interplay online**, often skirting the boundaries of legality and the terms of service of tech platforms, gaming their systems to reach and engage ever wider audiences, and amplified by their algorithmic processes, which are designed to optimise user attention for profit.
- **A range of interconnected harms emanates from these hybridised threats**, beyond violence, which is only one means to extremist political ends. Hate and conspiracy movements offer up potential audiences for extremist mobilisation, the weaponisation of hate by state and non-state actors has a knock-on effect on hate crime and abuse, while conspiracy theories undermine trust in institutions and can quickly metastasise into political movements, as with the 6 January 2021 insurrection in the US.

A new framework for response

Considering the policy failures and dramatic shifts in the nature of extremist activity outlined above, the paper lays out **the necessary changes in thinking in how governments and societies should approach prevention** to reflect the nature of extremism and human rights challenges we face today.

This includes several steps that need to be taken and changes in policy and operational approach:

- **We must better define the problem of extremism we are seeking to address.** It is crucial to carefully define extremism and the spectrum of harms it produces, ranging from intimidation and abuse to the undermining of people's fundamental rights; societal polarisation to terrorist violence. While it is important to address extremism, not just violence, as well as the interconnected hybrid threats driving it, we need an entirely new human-rights based paradigm for the response, and to clarify and distinguish relevant policies to achieve this end.
- **The endeavour of prevention must be centred on protecting human rights.** We must move far beyond mere box-ticking around 'rights compliance'. For counter-extremism policies to succeed, they must be designed to systematically address human rights as their primary goal, both domestically and internationally, where a lack of consistency often undermines the very human rights we seek to protect from extremists. In practice, this means focusing on the harmful impact of extremist activity and providing proper support to those affected. This includes legal and victim support to those targeted not just by violence but by intimidation, dehumanisation and the undermining of rights by extremists.
- **Legal frameworks must be applied consistently and law enforcement delivered evenly across ideological contexts.** In the far-right context, we have not seen law enforcement applied evenly until recently in the UK and not at all in the US. Equal effort and attention must be focused on the proscription and disruption of far-right extremist groups as has been the case with Islamist groups. This will mean training and checks and balances to ensure even-handed law enforcement approaches across the ideological spectrum, and much better evidence on the changing threat.
- **More robust data is required to understand fast-moving threats in real time.** To guide impactful and evidence-based prevention and intervention efforts, governments will need to establish a transparent data infrastructure that integrates real time inputs across a range of related harms. This ranges from extremist mobilisation to hate crimes and foreign state disinformation campaigns. Partner governments internationally should also consider coordination mechanisms for effectively mapping the increasing transnational dimensions of extremist mobilisation.
- **Prevention approaches must respond to the fact that we are now increasingly addressing extremist ideas and ideology in the mainstream rather than at the fringes.** Tactically this means there is a challenge of addressing much broader audiences through prevention, while the rise of far-right extremism necessitates a new approach that reaches mainstream populations (not just small, targeted, often wrongly profiled, constituencies). This means moving from 'needle in a haystack' approaches towards more broad-based engagement, with a proportionate mainstreamed response that engages the whole of society.
- **Moving beyond a myopic counterterrorism focus, responses to extremism must acknowledge the overlap between currently siloed policy areas,**

from societal polarisation to disinformation, hate speech to conspiracies. This problem set is interconnected so we need a portfolio of distinct, well defined and coordinated policy responses:

- Firstly, we must **decouple counterterrorism from upstream positive interventions** and measures, which should not all be led out of a small part of the government, when other departments, institutions and sectors may be better placed to operate (including the private sector).
 - Secondly, **democracy promotion, cohesion work and investment in communities should all be done per se** – and not under a security umbrella – but must receive the levels of funding required to make a difference.
 - Thirdly, for prevention to work effectively, **much more must be done to build trust with communities** and deliver on their needs. This means delivering localised targeted support to communities regarding their safety as well as security (including protection from hate crime), further investment in local services, as well as responding to legitimate concerns regarding extremist mobilisation locally. People need to feel they are benefiting from interventions and that their problems are being addressed if governments have a hope of enlisting them in countering extremism in their communities.
- **A liberal democratic prevention architecture must be translated into the digital domain through systemic tech regulation.** Whack-a-mole removal of violent and terrorist content alone will do little to address the underlying drivers of extremism in the digital domain. Rather it is essential governments adopt systemic approaches to platform governance and regulation, which addresses the platforms' business models and the underpinning algorithmic architecture of scaled online extremism. As offline, while authoritarian responses to extremism are about hard control, a liberal democratic response must be rights-based and rooted in transparency.
 - Finally, **the spectrum of potential responses available within the prevention toolkit must be widened, many of which will need to be delivered by different stakeholders, not all governmental.** This should include a balance of broader policy initiatives and a prioritisation of this issue set across government, specific legislative initiatives and regulatory approaches, especially in the online space.

This should include an investment in legal responses including litigation for victims of extremism, civic education and empowerment, as well as sanctions for hostile states perpetuating extremism.

CHAPTER 1: THE DEVELOPMENT OF PREVENTION APPROACHES

Prevention in the UK context

In 2005, al-Qaeda inspired, perhaps even directed, a terrorist attack on the UK's capital city.² The suicide bombers were mostly British-born. The fact that these terrorists were 'homegrown' shocked the nation and led to the development of a more proactive 'Prevent' strand within the UK's broader CONTEST counterterrorism strategy.³ This was at least initially an attempt to identify other individuals who might be radicalised and on a trajectory to committing an atrocity in the UK, as well as to build resilience within communities against violent extremism. In light of so many people commenting that they knew of the London bombers' extremist views and had spotted worrying changes in their behaviour, the plan was to embrace that local knowledge and offer those individuals a way out of violence through ideological mentoring and support.

Initially, the cases were very rare. The voluntary nature of Prevent – individuals have no compulsion to engage in an intervention – and the steadfast commitment to al-Qaeda's ideology meant that many simply refused and continued their route to criminality. It was also clear that too few people were aware of what the signs of radicalisation were. To compound this, there were insufficient pathways for 'referring' concerns about someone who may be radicalised, with the police being the only tangible option.

In the late 2000s, partly responding to frustrations about the perceived unchallenged presence of Islamist extremists protesting in the streets and the inaction of the local and national government to respond to these agitators, a newly resurgent far-right movement emerged. The English Defence League pushed an anti-extremist rhetoric, but its leadership harboured a far-right narrative framed predominantly through hostility to Muslims and migrants. While there were no immediate threats of terrorism beyond the street protests, the 'mood music' of far-right extremism and the potential for violence that might ensue were significant enough to warrant a fundamental shift in the evolution of the UK government's Prevent strategy.

In 2011, the strategy expanded its remit with two significant changes in direction. It now ostensibly dealt with all forms of terrorism and identified so-called 'non-violent' extremist ideology as a significant factor in

radicalisation.⁴ In addition, it attempted to systematise how Prevent was delivered – including the introduction of multi-agency panels bringing in stakeholders from social care and other frontline services to ascertain the specific support required for vulnerable individuals. But in parallel the UK saw more fraught community relations emerge around this policy agenda, as integration and social cohesion began to be brought under the auspices of countering violent extremism, resulting in an increased perception of securitisation around prevention.

Just two years later the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) began to emerge out of the ashes of al-Qaeda in Iraq and began to reach out across the globe to doctors, engineers, homemakers and soldiers to help them establish a proto-state across the region of Syria and Iraq. If al-Qaeda attracted ideologically minded recruits to support their war against the West and far-right movements attracted disillusioned individuals who felt marginalised and voiceless in their own country, then ISIS was the inevitable evolution of the terrorism threat and drew its adherents from both recruiting pools.

ISIS not only took the threat to its current pinnacle but changed the radicalisation landscape irrevocably. Its sophisticated use of the internet turbocharged terrorist recruitment moving it out of the realms of private study circles and pre-protest get-togethers and into the virtual realm, delivering its messages of propaganda, victimhood and statehood into laptops, tablets and mobile phones at fibre-optic speed. The online environment continues to dominate the radicalisation discourse. While terrorist content can be removed with comparative – albeit Sisyphean – regularity, more esoteric and hybridised threats lurk in its darker recesses producing content that largely evades authorities. By avoiding explicitly violent rhetoric or packaging it in niche memetic subcultures the content falls below the radar of internet service providers, platforms and the state security apparatus.⁵

In the past ten years, policy responses have changed accordingly. In 2021, over 1 million public sector workers have been trained to spot the signs of radicalisation and a 'Prevent Duty' on named public bodies mandates a legal obligation to show due regard to the risks of terrorism. For local councils, that means a legal requirement to have a safeguarding board (called

Channel) for referrals to be passed so that support can be offered.⁶ For schools it necessitates an understanding of local terrorism risks and embedding consideration for tackling radicalisation not just into its safeguarding processes but into the entire ethos of schools and the curriculum.

The complexity of the current programme is reflective of the changing nature of the threat. While al-Qaeda has always persisted, we have also endured the global rise of ISIS and its industrial-scale proliferation of propaganda – some explicitly targeting society’s abundance of disillusioned young men and women – and a thriving extreme right-wing that has similarly capitalised on a disaffected and disenfranchised population. Cultural nationalism, white nationalism and white supremacy have all edged near or into the mainstream. From a handful of Prevent referrals in 2006, the UK now sees over 6,000 referrals per year.⁷

Despite the continued evolution of radicalisation, the practical prevention response has remained largely unchanged: psychosocial interventions that address underlying factors and dilute the need for reliance on harmful, extremist solutions. While relatively effective in curbing violent mobilisation – the UK Channel programme can boast a ‘success rate’ whereby over 80% of individuals leave the process with no further radicalisation concerns – it has remained within the sole purview of counter terrorism.⁸ This means that more people, many with no terrorist proclivities, are funnelled through the prism of terrorism. In a post-pandemic world where conspiracies proliferate, increased numbers of people are drawn to ‘extreme’ viewpoints and with impending government financial difficulties impacting even ring-fenced counterterrorism budgets, this is likely unsustainable.

International typologies for prevention

While the UK was among the first countries to shift focus towards attempting to address root causes (rather than just violent manifestations) of extremism, over the past 15 years, we have seen the global proliferation of prevention approaches to extremism, including through the international CVE agenda, and its shift towards addressing a broad range of factors deemed conducive to violent radicalisation.⁹

Via ISD’s Policy Planners Network (PPN), a 12-country network for sharing information and best practice in designing and implementing policies in countering extremism, we saw the spread of prevention approaches

across Europe and North America between 2008-2019. Such efforts ranged from the development of cross-governmental action plans in Norway, democracy protection approaches to prevention in Sweden, and the establishment of local multidisciplinary prevention networks in the Netherlands. Building on the PPN, the EU’s Radicalisation Awareness Network facilitates ongoing cross-European exchange around prevention practice and policy.

Echoing European developments, in the US the Biden administration has set up a new Centre for Prevention Partnerships and Programmes within the Department for Homeland Security, to reset and redouble government prevention efforts to address a wave of domestic extremist mobilisation which reached its high watermark at the assault on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021.¹⁰ This reframing of prevention in terms of community partnerships and the building out of local human infrastructure and a public health approach to prevention was a conscious overhaul of the previous Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention, which Joe Biden promised to scrap on the campaign trail. This was due to its controversy among civil liberties and American Muslim organisations.

Across the world we have also seen a shift in framing in recent years towards a holistic whole-of-society response to the challenge of extremism, and the popularisation of a ‘public health’ model for considering responses, whereby prevention approaches include a wide range of interventions aimed at reducing risks or threats. Such approaches generally distinguish between three levels of intervention: tertiary, secondary and primary, which range respectively from downstream efforts aimed at disengaging those engaged in violent extremism, to targeted interventions for those at risk, and finally upstream broad-based community-focused programming. However, particularly with such primary measures, concerns have been raised that ‘prevention’ risks become a ‘catch-all category’ that conflates “well-established fields, such as development and poverty alleviation, governance and democratisation, and education.”¹¹

In a recent article for the Atlantic, author and scholar, Dr Cynthia Miller-Idriss outlines three global examples of prevention programming undertaking this kind of public health based approach, geared towards pivoting government responses to address extremism in the mainstream, and not just at the fringes.¹² These approaches “emphasise resilience as much as risk” and also adopt a cross-harms perspective rather than focusing myopically on terrorist violence, for example,

“integrat[ing] the fight against systemic racism with efforts to combat extremist ideas”.

Dr Miller-Idriss cites the example of Norway, which has developed a national action plan to counter radicalisation and extremism that engages ministries from across government, including education, social inclusion, labour, social services and health.¹³ Specific projects include interfaith teams engaging in dialogue to promote mutual understanding and parent networking groups supporting caregivers concerned about extremist beliefs in children.

New Zealand’s response to the devastating Christchurch attack in March 2019 has also been heralded, including the establishment of a new national research centre focused on social cohesion and preventing violent extremism, as well as millions of dollars of increased investment in education and early-childhood initiatives, and efforts to improve ethnic diversity in government leadership.

The German government’s introduction of new legislation pledging more than 1 billion euros to address racism and right-wing extremism also takes this broader prevention approach. This builds on Germany’s Demokratie leben! (Live Democracy) programme, which since 2015 has been a key pillar of the German government’s national strategy for extremism prevention and democracy promotion, alongside political education, research, disengagement/deradicalisation and support centres for those targeted in far-right, racist, antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents.¹⁴

Through Demokratie leben! the German government funds civil society engagement promoting democracy, coexistence in a diverse society, and projects to prevent extremism at the local, state and federal level. In 2019, the overall budget for Demokratie leben! was 115 million Euros. A smaller fund called Zusammenhalt durch Teilhabe (Cohesion through participation) is aimed at supporting democratic participation and countering extremism in rural or economically weak regions. It has been funding locally based associations and initiatives since 2010, including sport clubs, volunteer outfits and other civil organisations that play a crucial role for social cohesion at a local level. An interactive prevention portal maps over 2,000 prevention programmes across the country.¹⁵

Such ‘public health’ style approaches which recognise the importance of contextualising extremism threats within their broader societal environment represent a growing trend within international prevention approaches.

Key challenges and policy debates

Alongside the development of these varied typologies of policy response, has been a common set of policy debates, conceptual challenges and points of contention which have arisen around both approaches and implementation of prevention policies.

First has been a fundamental lack of clarity around what it is that is being prevented, which has shifted and blurred over time. Specifically, definitional shortcomings have led to a muddling of how the specific threat of extremism is framed, leading to a broad range of conceptions about the nature of the challenge being addressed. This ranges from a narrow focus on violence (specifically that of non-state actors), to a wider focus on extremist ideology, which has often strayed into questions around whether the state should be deciding what is acceptable or not in terms of thought and ideas.

Such debates have often come unstuck in navigating the fine line between 'extremism' and social or religious conservatism, resulting in the alienation of communities and a perception that counter-extremism is an exercise in the proselytisation of certain norms, rather than safeguarding the fundamental rights of individuals.

For example, in Germany there have been major challenges to its prevention approaches through its mischaracterisation of 'Salafism' as the fundamental ideological challenge faced by German society, alienating religious conservatives and ignoring the nuance and spectrum of Salafi thought. As in neighbouring France, very loose definitions of the threat of 'Islamism' risk generalising activist Muslims as being Muslim Brotherhood supporters, with major implications for the workability of these programmes which depend on community trust and support, raising questions about what is being 'prevented' through such programmes.

Beyond this, we have seen an inconsistent approach to preventing threats across the ideological spectrum, including from the far right. As outlined above,

prevention infrastructures were established in response to the highly hierarchical organisation-based threats posed by groups like al-Qaeda. But it has not been possible to simply retrofit policy frameworks to respond to a more mainstream extremist challenge.

In several contexts where the counterterrorism agenda has long suffered from a perception that the government was targeting minority communities, the desire to balance definitions of terrorism is understandable, but an overly broad-based approach to upstream work risks securitising swathes of society, and whole areas of policy.¹⁶

Meanwhile as will be outlined later in the paper, with the development of the international CVE agenda, we have seen an inconsistent approach to domestic and international action on extremism. This has led to tactical alliances with autocracies and even enabled state actor extremism, which fundamentally compromises the very human rights principles which should be underpinning prevention.

But in parallel to these policy developments, we have also seen fundamental changes in extremist mobilisation, with considerable implications for such countermeasures. In chapter 2 we outline the shifting nature of the extremist challenge and what this means for approaches to prevention from governments and beyond.

CHAPTER 2: IMPLICATIONS OF A CHANGING THREAT LANDSCAPE

Societies face a dramatically altered extremist threat picture now compared to when prevention approaches first originated almost two decades ago. This chapter unpacks the new challenges we are facing from contemporary extremism threats, where this is going over the next decade, and what this means for effective 'upstream' prevention responses.

Islamist extremism

When the UK's Prevent strategy was first established, it was designed to specifically counter the threat posed by al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism or violent extremism. Over 15 years from the establishment of this flagship prevention programme, al-Qaeda and its successor in global jihadism – ISIS – remains resilient, despite a lack of battlefield successes diminishing its brand.

Historically, the al-Qaeda threat was limited to small networks united against Western foreign policy. Followers attended private meetings to share their animosity to the West. Foreign travel to significant conflict zones (including to Afghanistan and Iraq), usually for the experience of fighting for an ideological cause and acquiring the skills needed for military combat, represented the predominant threat. Further radicalisation took place in these environments, with many individuals attending training camps.

Ideological interventions were offered, but in a relatively broad way, and the concept of employing safeguarding principles to tackle the underlying causes of radicalisation was yet to be conceived. These came into play when the role of early intervention was deemed to be a more successful, long-term solution to radicalisation. After increased training and awareness frontline staff were able to identify views and behaviours in a younger cohort, particularly in education.

Today, ISIS and al-Qaeda both continue to persist as formal organisations and loose franchises, as does their specific form of Salafi-jihadi ideology, and while the physical degradation of ISIS' so-called 'caliphate' was successful, there are already signs of resilience and re-emergence, while travel to other ISIS-influenced conflict zones remains a possibility.

However, alongside this ideological and operational evolution, we have also seen a shift in how the threat has been conceived, most notably a much greater focus on 'Islamism', a term rarely encountered in government strategies until the Prevent strategy refresh in 2011. It is now ubiquitous for describing any form of extremism that broadly fits the global goal of enforcing a warped politicised supremacist interpretation of Islam onto societies, and re-establishing a caliphate or an exclusionary and totalitarian Islamic state.

Correspondingly, beyond the group-specific threats posed by ISIS and al-Qaeda, prevention efforts have focused increasingly on ideologically sympathetic supporters, who ostensibly eschew violence but nonetheless present major challenges to cohesion. In this broader Islamist arena, prevention approaches have struggled with extremist groups who have worked to drive a wedge between communities and government – positioning themselves as the trusted interlocutors for communities. Such groups were identified in Prevent's 2011 strategy update – which explicitly stipulated that "preventing terrorism will mean challenging extremist (and non-violent) ideas that are also part of a terrorist ideology." But in reality, addressing these groups has proven highly challenging, both tactically and conceptually.

Islamist extremists have courted contemporary zeitgeists (including anti-racism, anti-capitalism and environmentalism) to recruit allies that can legitimise them, making it harder to call out their extremist views. And they have also proactively worked to reduce trust in prevention efforts, framing CVE as a right-wing conspiracy to socially engineer Muslims and usher in an approved, state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam.

As part of this ideological project, extremists have been attempting to influence education in favour of Islamist perspectives and more 'religiously conservative values', while claiming freedom of speech is under attack, and that they are the sole voices speaking truth to power. Some have political ambitions, and sympathetic proponents on the far-left of the political establishment, allowing an opportunity for the mainstreaming of extremist narratives.

In 2020 and 2021, we have seen Islamist narratives weaponise and exploit the Covid-19 pandemic, framing

the virus as a punishment from God, for which turning to a narrow Islamist interpretation of Islam is the only solution.¹⁷ This has been compounded by conspiracies around government authoritarianism, which frames Covid as a plot to crack down on immigrants and scapegoat ethnic minority communities.

In addition, Islamist activists have exploited highly sensitive issues that resonate with broader Muslim populations: the plight of Palestinians in Gaza, depictions of the Prophet Muhammed and anxieties about the influence of LGBTIQ+ principles on religiously orthodox communities. These axes of mainstream mobilisation have developed and expanded over the past two decades.

Far-right extremism

Acknowledged as the fastest growing violent extremism threat across Europe and North America, the threat from far-right extremism has radically transformed over the past decade. Far-right attacks have been rising globally, fuelled in part by an online ecosystem of platforms, networks and alternative media outlets that disseminate violent extremist narratives, ideologies, visual styles and memes, and strategies for activism across national borders, with ever more transnational networks of influences and funding.

Meanwhile, the perception of the threat has shifted from a challenge primarily associated with a fringe core of neo-Nazi skinheads to a much more diverse broad church of submovements, including violent 'accelerationists', anti-minority street protest groups, largely online digital activists, and an increasingly mainstreamed, pseudo-intellectual community.¹⁸ The extreme right-wing threat has also increasingly defined itself as a reaction against, and therefore has co-evolved with, the changing Islamist threat outlined above. These developments have considerable implications for approaches to prevention.

Major shifts in the demographic and threat picture include a concerning younger cohort of recruits (and recruiters) than was previously associated with this ideology, including radicalisation tactics targeting those as young as 12 or 13 years old.¹⁹ From an ideological perspective, white supremacy has evolved to include accelerationist narratives, esoteric Satanism and a strategy of desensitising individuals to increase their ability to conduct violent acts (this includes child abuse, paedophilia and rape). There has been an expansion of survivalist narratives from 'preparing for a race war' to the aspirations of accelerationism to force the social,

political and economic collapse of society.

Beyond the violent tip of the spectrum, prevention efforts geared towards addressing far-right extremism are hindered by several concerning parallels with developments in Islamist extremism. The extreme right also has political ambitions and sympathisers with the far right within the political establishment, allowing for an opportunity for mainstreaming extremist narratives and influencing politics to favour their political perspectives. A broader movement of cultural nationalists – with a greater focus on the perceived 'threat' of Islam – have a much wider support base and potential recruiting pool than the ethnic lens through which white nationalists perceive the world. Here, considerable caution is needed not to cast aspersions across large populations of patriotic communities, while recognising it as a potential vehicle for mainstreaming extremist narratives.

As with Islamists, far-right extremists are seeking to drive a wedge between communities and the state, and attempting to influence education to favour white nationalist narratives and more 'traditional values'. They are successfully reducing trust in government, including areas like social care, through narratives around endemic 'grooming gangs' as well as through QAnon-adjacent mantras such as 'Save Our Children'.

As prevention has pivoted towards addressing far-right extremism, its adherents are attempting to reduce trust in prevention efforts by framing CVE as a left-wing conspiracy to restrict freedom of speech to silence its critics. Far-right groups have effectively exploited anxieties over immigration, presenting migration and migrant communities as a transnational facilitator of Covid, and proselytised conspiracies around liberal democratic government engaging in authoritarianism. This has manifested prominently in anti-lockdown and anti-government narratives.²⁰

However, there are notable differences between far-right and Islamist extremist radicalisation. Far-right extremism threats often – but not exclusively – exhibit a looser commitment to a core ideology, whereby entry to movements is through subcultures and alternative lifestyles, rather than necessarily pure ideological conviction, except for at the most extreme fringes. In the UK context, we also see high instances of underlying vulnerabilities at play, including poor mental health, isolation, fractured families and a chaotic home life. There also appear to be higher instances of autism spectrum disorder (a link which needs to be handled with great care to avoid community stigma), and many far-right extremists are almost entirely immersed in online ecosystems, with very little by way of geographically

rooted extremist influencers, although certain 'hot spots' are noticeable.²¹

A long tail of threats and an increasingly hybridised challenge

There remain small-scale violent threats from fringe extremism challenges such as 'LASIT' (left-wing and single-issue terrorism), but there are very few instances in the UK. Horizon scanning, the failure of left-wing parties to win political influence may translate into more agitated activism, or anarchist movements taking advantage of left-wing grievances to agitate within conspiratorial protests and demonstrations. Any serious violence or terrorism that springs from these will most likely be driven by an individual's actions rather than directed by any organisation they're affiliated with. But beyond violent mobilisation we have also seen attempts by hard-left groups, and related transnational disinformation networks, to mainstream societally polarising narratives and conspiratorial views.²²

However, perhaps the most notable trend in recent years has been towards what in the UK has been labelled 'mixed, unclear and unstable' (MUU) ideologies, which has seen a massive increase in the context of UK referrals.²³

This is perhaps suggestive of a broader socialisation towards violence, without a commitment to a specific extremist ideology and not necessarily looking to advance a political, ideological, religious or social cause. Within the UK classification of terrorism, the outcome of the cause does not need to be realistic or achievable, but should be relatively coherent and driven by ideological, rather than personal, beliefs. However, at least 50% of referrals for MUU are rejected for any intervention. This could represent conceptual confusion around the nature of different extremism related challenges, or a symptom of the legal obligation on institutions to address radicalisation through the prism of 'safeguarding', colliding with an established social care response to 'harm' in which safeguarding is everyone's business and an imperative to refer has been inculcated. Around a quarter of the more than a million safeguarding referrals made each year in the UK are false positives. Notably, of those considered for intervention, a large number are signposted for mental health and social care support, with extremism prevention appearing to fill major gaps in the provision of other frontline services.

Such data fits with an overall trend around an increasingly fluid ideological landscape of extremism, whereby constellations of related extremist narratives

unite under broad church movements, rather than necessarily cohesive ideologies. This phenomenon has been labelled by Bruce Hoffman as 'ideological convergence' where we see fluidity and incoherence in traditional categorisations of extremist threats, including an ever-thinner line between "previously fringe movements and online subcultures, and more orthodox variations of the extreme right."²⁴

To demonstrate this fluidity, within the broad far-right landscape, a range of different indicators may be found in different proportions across varied manifestations of white supremacy, white nationalism and cultural nationalism. While these groups are all united by a supremacist metanarrative about the degeneracy of Western culture and traditional values (including Christian identity, family and pride in the country), they might disagree for example on their stances on Israel. This pick-and-mix of extremist narratives might therefore include any combination of core ideas, including antisemitic conspiracies, anti-government mobilisation, anti-immigration narratives, anti-Muslim activism as well as white nationalism.

What is becoming evident amid such growing definitional and conceptual confusion, is the fact that existing categories for understanding extremism threats are becoming increasingly redundant. Rather than clear ideological divisions between extremist movements, we are seeing disparate threads coming together around specific political objectives.

Extremist violence is increasingly inspired by what FBI Director Christopher Wray described in September 2020 as a "salad bar" of seemingly contradictory, ideological foundations from across the spectrum. As Colin Clarke and Rasha al Aqeedi have noted, the phenomenon of 'fringe fluidity' means that it is "entirely possible, and increasingly more common, for violent extremists to reconcile aspects of two competing ideologies, like neo-Nazism and militant Islamism."²⁵

In this context prevention approaches shouldn't be focusing on broad ideological categories but rather on greater precision about the features of these different extremist threats – thinking about the challenge in terms of 'tags' rather than 'buckets', to capture the broad spectrum of ideological and tactical markers indicative of extremist mobilisation. This would mean moving away from using narrow categories in defining challenges, and rather recognising the varied potential properties of the hybridised threat we face, which increasingly elude traditional categorisations of extremism, terrorism and hate.

Gender and youth dynamics

There is nothing new about extremist movements of all types seeking to recruit women through tailored recruitment strategies. Extremists clearly understand women's strategic value within movements, not just in supportive, maternal roles.²⁶ Correspondingly, we have seen an increase in female terrorism convictions including for offences at the harder end of the spectrum, such as facilitation and attack planning. But a facile assumption has long permeated which has narrowly framed women solely as victims and not perpetrators.

But while awareness of the nuanced gendered dynamics of extremist movements across the ideological spectrum and the new forms of threat this might pose is growing, this has failed to be reflected in our prevention approaches. Historically, women were perceived to be a passive, maternal (mainly positive) influence in the family. Prevention programmes were designed to empower women and use their maternal influences to defuse radicalisation. Emerging thinking in this area attributes a greater sense of agency to women, particularly in their role as radicalisers and even terrorists.

In addition to the nuances increasingly evident regarding the role women can play in extremist movements, the ideologies themselves present a gendered dimension that hasn't previously been incorporated into prevention. After a spate of extremist threats to women, including those against a female Member of Parliament, it was noted that some of the online discussions in which she was vilified also included neo-Nazi forums dedicated to rape and the lionising of serial killers Ted Bundy and Charles Manson, notorious for their torture, sexual abuse and murder of women.

Meanwhile, the emergence of an international involuntary celibate (Incel) movement as a relatively coherent community has amplified the gendered dimension of extremism and redefined its importance. Now we have an ideology that not only diminishes the role of women, but specifically defines them as an 'out-group' to be vilified, suppressed and even attacked.

In parallel to these shifting gender dynamics, there has been a much younger cohort of individuals coming to the attention of counterterrorism. By tapping into a wider discontent and disenfranchisement of young people, right-wing extremist forums are attracting younger recruits to their causes. The underlying factors we witness in radicalisation – fractured and chaotic families, isolated individuals, prolific online pursuits –

lend themselves to both the online right-wing extremist milieu and the youthful demographic.

Recent ISD research has explored the role of gaming platforms within right-wing extremist mobilisation, with a number of platforms found to be used as key mechanisms for strengthening and building extremist communities, a correlation which should be of little surprise given the enormous popularity of gaming among young people in particular (in the UK, 39% of the population plays video games, a figure that rises to 73% within the 16 – 24-year-old age range).²⁷

Furthermore, as the UK's Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation has noted, there has been a sharp increase in the number of under 18s being arrested for terrorism offences:²⁸

Official statistics, most recently published in June, show that arrests for terrorism-related activity among the under 18s were rare in the years 2003 to 2012: never rising about 5% of the total. The rate crept up to a maximum of 6% until March 2020. But in each of the last quarters ending March 2021, it has been between 10% and 16%.

The pandemic dramatically affected the arrest rates for all age categories, but not for the under 18s: here the absolute number of arrests went up. Almost half the arrests of under 18s since March 2001 have been in the last five years.

This presents several challenges. Firstly, our understanding of the extreme right-wing terrorism threat is determined by arrest and investigations data. But if the majority of these are cases involving children who have downloaded and disseminated illegal material or who have 'joined' online extremist groups, is it appropriate to incorporate them – as we currently do – in a category that includes neo-Nazi murderers such as Thomas Mair and Pavlo Lapshyn?

Given that an increasing number of these are children and teenagers, are we identifying a threat from terrorist attacks or an increase in extremist narratives perpetuating online? And is the criminal justice system the best place to deal with such young offenders, many of whom have posed no physical threat to us, when mental health issues, isolation and fractured lives appear to be more dominant in this cohort than ideological commitment?

We shouldn't of course discount those young people who do pose a genuine threat from right-wing terrorism; Jack Reed is a good example of this – his journey ended with him drawing up plans for a series of terrorist attacks, but started online with the downloading and dissemination of extremist materials.²⁹ But we should be more considered in our understanding of the problem, how this reflects on the broader terrorism threat we face and how we might address it in the prevention space.

Implications for prevention

So what are the implications of these shifting trends for prevention? In short, the threat has evolved far beyond the capabilities of most traditional prevention programmes, which have always focused on counter-radicalisation through a very narrow lens that looks only at the violent tip of the iceberg. As we will go on to explain in greater detail, the response must not just be a 'whole of government' approach, but a 'whole of society' one too.

However, the siloed nature of working and funding in the counter-extremism domain doesn't currently lend itself to this kind of approach, while it is also important to stress that many of the issues touched on within this calculus (from hate speech to cohesion), are harmed by being approached by government purely through a securitised counterterrorism lens.

While a psychosocial model that resolves a person's underlying vulnerabilities is still considered the most effective response, the division of labour for this work – currently all aggregated under counterterrorism – needs to be applied across multiple disciplines, different statutory sectors and different government departments. Currently, the siloed structure of government action and funding does not easily lend itself to this.

There are two distinct areas of programme delivery where consideration must be given to who should be the primary agency: building resilience to conspiracy theories, extremism and radicalisation, and disengaging individuals from harmful influences. In the UK, all this work is currently either funded or delivered through a counterterrorism apparatus. Even where the work is delivered via an alternate sector (e.g. resilience in schools via the Department for Education), the impetus and the finances stem from counterterrorism.

If we consider that cohesive communities are inherently more resilient to polarisation then it follows that the UK's Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government should be engaged in activities that bring communities together, reduce the propensity for polarisation and break down barriers within society. This is work that benefits the whole of society and while it will positively impact upon efforts to build resilience to radicalisation, it should be done because a harmonious, pluralistic society built on mutual understanding and acceptance of our differences is an important goal with positive effects that go far beyond the prevention of terrorism alone.

Similarly, building resilience in schools should be the purview of the Department for Education and should form part of a broader imperative to prepare children and young people for life in a modern, digitally literate, intercultural Britain. This requires the political will to see education not just as the imparting of academic knowledge but as a holistic preparation for life that goes beyond the school gates.

From national to local

All of this operates on the assumption of a top-down approach driven by central government, but this shouldn't be the default position. Local government is best placed to understand the dynamics of its communities and draw together the necessary partners to establish a local prevention infrastructure that encompasses statutory services – including cohesion and education – multi-agency boards and civil society actors. Such local prevention networks have increased confidence and resilience in a variety of environments around the world.

Previous prevention policies were appropriate for addressing the silos of cohesion, isolation, polarisation and extremism by implementing delivery models that focused only on those explicit areas that intersected with extremist narratives. Today the hybridised threats and grievances that dominate the landscape mean that narrow prevention approaches are no longer the most effective way to address them.

A broader extremist threat gives more credence to other parts of the system to address the social fractures that can instil isolation, marginalisation and the demonisation of out-groups. However, there is still a role for central government, most notably to provide a degree of oversight between the relevant government

stakeholders to develop policy and agree on funding priorities. It is local government that can convene a cross-departmental structure, that includes civil society, and operationalise a response across different disciplines.

A Local Prevention Network (LPN) can be a blueprint for locally delivered programmes that can respond swiftly to the current threat paradigm and is less constrained by siloed working.³⁰ This local system, in partnership with civil society, will be imbued with more trust among communities and is likely to facilitate a more effective referral of instances where concerns about an individual have been identified.

Once such concerns have been raised, there should be robust safeguarding processes in place to nurture the referral to statutory support services, via a multi-agency safeguarding board, that can triage the case to the appropriate support, be it for domestic abuse, substance misuse, neglect, radicalisation, socialisation to violence or another social harm. The role of the safeguarding board is to triage the cases to the appropriate and proportionate support. Where there are instances of radicalisation then the involvement of the security apparatus is inevitable, even when the referral requires a softer social care intervention, but the triaging system should not prioritise securitised intervention over and above broader social care responsibilities. Particularly when instances of radicalisation are significantly fewer than those for other social harms.

CHAPTER 3: SHIFTING THE PARADIGM OF PREVENTION

In the last chapter we have considered some of the implications of this radically changed threat landscape for how government and civil society should approach prevention. In this chapter we consider the broader change in thinking required in how governments and societies approach prevention, reflecting the nature of today's challenges.

Human rights as the central goal of prevention

To date, policy strategies have failed to make the connection between the rise of extremism and its impact on human rights. Furthermore, because countering extremism efforts have not been seen primarily as a human rights issue, but rather a security one, government responses to extremism have failed to properly enshrine human rights at their centre.

This has led to failures at an international level, where mistakes have been made in partnering with authoritarian governments to tackle the narrow violent manifestations of extremism, while we see the silencing of dissent and the undermining of human rights in the name of CVE. Meanwhile, the language of CVE has become weaponised in certain international contexts to justify the closing of civic spaces – to 'blue wash' (the tokenistic adoption of UN human rights language), actions authoritarian governments are taking to clamp down on rights and freedoms.³¹

At a domestic level, meanwhile, human rights principles have not been consistently applied in engagement with communities, leading to failures in the framing of prevention and breeding distrust in government efforts. But while human rights organisations have rightly focused on the impact counter extremism has had on civil liberties, they have failed to recognise that the protection of human rights also means challenging

extremism, which constitutes one of the greatest threats to human rights within communities. As the UK's former Counter-Extremism Commissioner Sara Khan has said: "if we care about protecting human rights, challenging extremists is a vital area of work, as the latter threaten these rights."³²

Beyond focusing on extremism purely through the securitised implications of 'violent extremism', it is crucial that prevention also focuses on the impact of extremism on a broad range of rights. Crucially, prevention must be about protecting the rights of individuals, not just protecting society from violence.

Therefore, counter-extremism approaches must be rooted in a systematic human rights framework. Extremism is directly opposed to the universal application of human rights, and extremists across the ideological spectrum fundamentally oppose human rights and equality. ISD's definition of extremism places human rights at the core of the challenge.³³ Extremism is understood as the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based 'in-group' over all 'out-groups.' It propagates a dehumanising 'othering' mindset towards 'out-groups' that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights. Extremists pursue and advocate a systemic political and societal change that reflects their world view.

Governments must recognise the existential threat mainstreamed extremism poses to human rights as it is premised on the dehumanisation of others and a denial of fundamental freedoms, universal rights and equalities. Countering extremism is at heart a defence of human rights, which is why counter-extremism efforts at home and abroad must be rooted in a systematic human rights framework.

By definition, extremism is irreconcilable to the universal application of human rights, and when we fall short in protecting individual rights at home and fail to call out authoritarian abuses internationally, we weaken the entire rights-based order we are seeking to protect. Without the unconditional application of our values of equality, human dignity and universal rights, efforts to counter hate and extremism will be self-defeating.

Human rights and prevention in practice

The imperative to deliver prevention work through a human rights lens has become an oft-discussed but rarely implemented approach. Part of the problem lies in the way attempts are made to align existing prevention programmes to human rights principles, usually by defending their current position as compliant with – or not opposed to – fundamental human rights. What is needed is a redesign of prevention programmes that focuses not just on human rights compliance but facilitates prevention by identifying and tackling human rights abuses within society.

This means that the impact of extremist activity must be recognised and acted upon.

For example, where an extremist narrative opposes equal rights for women or freedom of religion, there should be confidence in calling this out, raising awareness of what those harms are and how they run contrary to human rights, and how such harms are aligned to extremist narratives.

But the challenge doesn't stop there. Support mechanisms must be established for those being harmed – whether that harm is physical or manifests as intimidation or harassment. That support may come through statutory services or it may equally be provided by civil society; if it is the latter then it must be underpinned by training, support and protection for the organisations providing their services. In other words, civil society cannot be left alone to deal with the problem, there must be a whole of society approach in which all relevant actors work in unison to support each part of the system. In addition, individuals impacted by such harms must have proper recourse to legal assistance and victim support.

In its 2020 paper on Challenging Hateful Extremism, the UK Commission for Countering Extremism set out six overarching categories of harm, encompassing over 150 different individual types of harm identified in its survey of counter-extremism practitioners:³⁴

- Social division and intolerance
- Crime, violence and harassment
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Censorship and restriction of freedom
- Delegitimising authority/undermining democracy
- Economic harms.

In addressing these harms, countries must lead by example. In a globalised world, countries engage with

others whose human rights record is found wanting, or in some extreme cases, where flagrant human rights abuses are evident. Championing fundamental rights while not publicly challenging those countries will rightly be seen as hypocritical. Such abuses must be called out; not doing so risks fuelling extremism by reinforcing double standards.

But while there may be broad agreement that human rights should be a fundamental lens through which prevention efforts are implemented, there is surprisingly little accord on what that might look like.

Implementation

The key to a human-rights-based approach is ensuring that the implementation of prevention programmes does not feed prejudices or stigmatise any community. Prevention programmes should take an ideologically neutral ('threat agnostic') approach to delivery whereby local activities and interventions are based on a local risk assessment or extremism profile. This should determine the extent of the threat and the specific ideological challenges posed.

In practice, this means developing a local risk profile – partnering with a range of stakeholders that should include law enforcement, local government officials, probation, youth workers and civil society actors – and tailoring a prevention programme that is applied to those risks, whether they emanate from Islamist extremism, right-wing extremism, gang recruitment, knife crime or any number of social harms. Just because Islamist terrorism still represents the largest share of global terrorist activity, simply devising a local programme to tackle Islamist extremism is neither appropriate nor proportionate if the granular threat to that geographic area is from substance misuse and gang recruitment.

A threat agnostic programme is essentially a blank canvas upon which you can paint the local risks and threats, rather than a predetermined mural of extremism that you distort to suit local needs. While most prevention programmes are currently tailored to either Islamist or extreme right-wing terrorism, consideration should be made for other risks. This includes more esoteric ideologies, such as the Incel movement – as well as protecting local communities from harms such as hate crimes, and responding to safety and security concerns that might be prevalent in a specific locale.

It is important to be transparent about what those local risks are and develop a communications plan for ensuring that communities and other relevant stakeholders are informed not only of the risks but

the activities being taken to mitigate them. Publishing action plans online and hosting community events by open invitation where anyone can come and hear about and question local delivery programmes are ways in which you can increase transparency. This, in turn, builds confidence and trust in your local policies by not only giving a face to the policymakers but allowing communities to challenge and interrogate the rationale for a particular approach being taken.

Terrorism and violent extremism may be low occurrence crimes, but they are high impact and are consistently cited as a concern among the public. A prevention policy that relies on community reporting needs to build confidence in the communities it is protecting. Placing it within a human rights framework, as well as delivering support to those who feel their safety is compromised, is critical but the wider benefits of ensuring it is also perceived as such will rely on the right communications to apprehensive communities. It is important that this isn't undertaken as a strategic communication exercise but rather through the engagement of a person who knows the community and builds local relationships.

To do this requires a central point of contact, a person who communities can meet, interact with and reach out to when they have concerns. This is not to supplement a robust referral process, but to help communities navigate the strategic aims and potential impacts of a prevention policy.

To increase transparency further, a community oversight board can be established that meets regularly to engage representatives of the communities most likely to be impacted by the local radicalisation risks and social harms (and therefore any local prevention activity). The opinions and views of this board should be shared with a statutory oversight board for consideration and, where appropriate, be reflected in the local programme.

Division of labour

Many areas of central government benefit from a siloed approach to doing business. Departmental expertise and institutional memory can ensure a more sophisticated understanding of unique areas of policy. However, in the current hybridised and post-organisational threat landscape we face, these silos become blockers to meaningful progress when applied to prevention. It is more important than ever that different areas of government – central and local – understand their individual roles in reducing the risks of social harms, extremism and radicalisation.

Previously, areas of government divorced from counterterrorism were understandably cynical (sometimes hostile) towards becoming involved in work that supported a securitised agenda. A renewed prevention agenda should remove that cynicism by moving beyond a solely counterterrorism-based response and instead recognising that the objective is not only the prevention of violence. The threat has diversified into a less cohesive 'ideological' problem – one that is more broadly impacted by wider societal fractures that fall within the remit of other areas of government.

Extremists promote a narrative that amplifies grievances and fortifies a sense of marginalisation and alienation. The more we can illustrate that universal human rights apply to all, regardless of faith, gender, sexual orientation, nationality or background, the more we can counter such narratives. However, the framing of programmes that address the long tail of potential 'push factors' driving extremism through a securitised counterterrorism lens can run directly contrary to human rights. Simply put, there are certain facets which can be represented in radicalisation (poor mental health, isolation, polarisation, fractured families) that should not be resolved by counterterrorism no matter how well-intended the endeavours of prevention frameworks.

If all social harms are forced through a security apparatus you risk undermining your efforts by stigmatising the very people who need support, potentially even contributing to radicalisation grievances, and weakening your ability to analyse where the genuine risks are coming from. Despite prevention programmes approaching radicalisation through psychosocial interventions, those who receive its support may still feel they are viewed not as having vulnerabilities and unmet needs which would benefit from support, but being viewed as 'potential terrorists', either by the state or their communities. Any degree of securitisation should be reserved for those individuals who are genuinely at risk of radicalisation to terrorism. If the predominant concerns relate to broader underlying issues, then it is wholly inappropriate and counterproductive to frame their situation through counterterrorism.

Activities associated with counterterrorism inevitably attract a securitised reputation and a certain anxiety from communities, an issue that became clear in the UK with the gradual securitisation of the integration and social cohesion discourse surrounding Muslim communities – an agenda which came to be approached exclusively through the auspices of the prevention of terrorism. This came about after the London bombings

in July 2005 due to the homegrown dimension of the perpetrators and that many who knew them had concerns which were never raised. Therefore, the spotlight fell on all Muslim communities with efforts made to encourage their reporting of people of concern, either for investigation by counterterrorism officials or for intervention by Prevent. Funding for cohesion initiatives to build resilience in communities to al-Qaeda's recruitment activities was awarded to local government based entirely on their Muslim demographic. It is unsurprising therefore that in her review of UK integration policy, Dame Louise Casey found that in some cases, the only engagement some Muslim communities felt they had with the government was through their interaction with Prevent, or as part of broader counter-extremism efforts. Inevitably, public policy interventions believed to be disproportionately targeted at a specific demographic establishes a suspect-community dynamic, which can increase polarisation and distrust.³⁵

Ultimately the risk mapping approach in the UK was changed and funding is now intelligence-led and awarded not on demography but factors such as terrorism investigations and instances of radicalisation. While the highest risk areas remained unchanged, it serves as a more evidence-based way of determining the priority and investment of efforts. The anxiety of being labelled a high-priority area, whose problems are ostensibly corrected through counterterrorism approaches, persists, however.

To appease this, it is important to engage in a mapping process that identifies the various 'touch points' for building resilience to extremism (for example addressing hate crime primarily, community investments addressing weaknesses in social service provision, education, human rights and social cohesion), based on region-specific data and research. The correct division of labour should then be established to ensure prevention initiatives are not delivered through a security lens but implemented by the most appropriate actors and agencies, including non-governmental organisations.

A focus on human rights combined with a sophisticated implementation of community cohesion, that embraces shared endeavours over softer interfaith schemes, should build a stable foundation on which to build a counter-extremism apparatus to tackle social harms. Over time, we should be in a position to measure the correlation between these factors and the efficacy of these social investments.

This approach works because the progression from social justice and cohesion to counter extremism and counterterrorism – while not a linear trajectory for the individuals concerned – follows a logical evolution and one that aligns well to the social fractures extremist and terrorist groups exploit. It is also an important step towards approaching social harms, not through a securitised prism but appropriate policy areas clearly delineated and separated from counterterrorism.

Despite the best intention of prevention practitioners, the implementation of their work has always been seen as an extension of policing and security. This has not only hampered efforts to effectively deliver prevention programmes, but it has been a gift to critics of such initiatives who revel in accusing the state of overreach and of turning 'citizens into subjects'. Only by clarifying what targeted counter-extremism work is focused on and clearly defining the threshold for when a securitised approach is applied can we give communities the confidence to know when the line is reached.

We also need to be clearer on what we mean by fundamental human rights and have the courage to call out abuses when they occur, whether that is between or within communities. This sets the boundaries for what is acceptable and what will draw the attention of the authorities. To complement this more muscular approach to human rights, there must be a greater focus on what we mean by 'extremist ideology' and how this relates to counter-extremism work. Not only will this relieve the anxieties of those who perceive extremist ideology to be a proxy for 'religion' or 'politics' but it will establish the boundaries and thresholds whereby activities that seek to polarise and divide communities, or target out-groups, will be perceived as ideologically motivated and attract the attention of counter extremism.

Ultimately, all this activity needs oversight and it is essential that an objective body is made responsible for providing a regular, independent review of this area of policy and ensuring it is not only human rights compliant but situates human rights at the heart of its purpose. Such a body's oversight may be limited to the domestic application of policy, but it should also reflect on the impact a country's overseas work on countering extremism may have on fundamental rights.

Defining the threat

Central to effective prevention responses is having a clear definition of the extremism threat being countered. It is crucial that extremism is not defined in relative terms, where it is framed as a contest between mainstream and fringe ideas. Such approaches fail to recognise that extremism can be, and has been, mainstreamed across broad populations, political movements and regimes. Rather extremism is an absolute concept; it is a supremacist system of belief that advocates the superiority and dominance of an identity based 'in-group' and seeks political and social change to enact its supremacist worldview. Such advocacy can be undertaken through both violent and non-violent means, by both state and non-state actors. By ISD's working definition, extremism is de facto antithetical to pluralism and to the universal application of fundamental rights and freedoms.³⁶

The implications of problematic definitions have been damaging, for example with the UK's considerably-maligned extremism definition, rooted in opposition to a vaguely defined notion of 'British values'.³⁷ This conception succeeded in both being unusably general, and highly internationally alienating, by framing universal values such as democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law as somehow uniquely British. Meanwhile, governmental support for depots overseas, whose authoritarian conceptions of 'counter-terrorism' and 'counter-extremism' flew fundamentally in the face of these values, lead to fair critiques about the hypocrisy of this framing and indeed the government's policies writ large in this domain. It is therefore essential that a clear, consistent and proportionate definition of extremism underpin cross-governmental prevention work, at home and abroad.

Prevention approaches for a post-organisational extremism landscape

As outlined in this report, we face an increasingly hybridised extremist threat, with ever more blurred lines between a broad ecosystem of extremist violence, weaponised hate and harmful conspiracies, enabled by a permissive digital environment. In this context, it is essential that our responses to extremism acknowledge the significant bleed across a range of harms, from societal polarisation to disinformation, and hate speech to conspiracy theories.

Adopting a solely 'organisational' frame on the threat of extremism fails to capture the contemporary dynamics of mobilisation and violence. Amid pervasive transnational online subcultures, we are seeing increasingly arbitrary distinctions between 'domestic' and 'international' extremism threats, and a need to move beyond viewing threats in terms of specific groups or organisations, but rather broader extremist ecosystems.

Recent high profile terrorist attacks in New Zealand, the US, Germany and Norway have shone a light on self-radicalising, logistically autonomous individuals with little or no relationship with proscribed terrorist groups, but rather connections to loose transnational extremist networks largely operating online. As Colin Clarke and Bruce Hoffman have noted in the US domestic violent extremism context, the organisational structure is becoming less relevant as "a confluence of ideological affinities is [becoming] more powerful in inspiring and provoking violence than the hierarchical terrorist organisational structures of the past."³⁸

This fractured and fragmented threat landscape has notable implications for the establishment of effective upstream prevention policies. As Colin Clarke points out, with neat ideological categories becoming fuzzier, it is becoming increasingly important to be "taking note of early indications and warnings of racism, sectarianism, or other forms of discrimination against specific societal groups", to head off extremist ideologies before they metastasise to violence. But despite this fracturing and franchising of extremist movements and the proliferation of decentralised online extremist spaces, responses to extremism are still hampered by rigid organisational conceptions of the challenge. Post-organisational dynamics strain prevention responses which focus solely on the proscription of specific organisations. Structurally, international counterterrorism efforts are therefore still geared towards combating an Islamist, organisational threat.

Legal frameworks must be applied consistently and law enforcement delivered evenly across ideological contexts. In the far-right context, we haven't seen law enforcement applied evenly until recently in the UK and barely at all in other countries, such as the US. Equal effort and attention must be focused on the proscription and disruption of far-right extremist groups as with Islamist groups. This will mean training and ensuring even-handed law enforcement approaches across the ideological spectrum.

And while moves should be welcomed to ban far-right extremist groups as terrorist organisations in national contexts, such as National Action in the UK and Blood & Honour in Canada, the result has been a patchy international picture. Groups are banned in some countries but not others, even if, like Combat 18, it has transnational membership. Furthermore, when groups appear they are often relatively short-lived, with new movements springing up drawing inspiration from similar core texts and ideologies. For example, in 2020 the UK proscribed the neo-Nazi group Feuerkrieg Division after it had officially disbanded.³⁹

For both far-right and Islamist extremism, the rapid evolution of groups and movements means that proscription-based approaches follow a 'whack-a-mole' dynamic, constantly re-calibrating to address the latest iteration of a movement rather than addressing its roots. Accordingly, relatively slow-moving proscription-based approaches to prevention are not effective in responding to the current dynamic nature of extremist mobilisation.

The benefits of organisation-based counter-extremism responses are that they narrow the focus of responses, making them more tangible and limited. However, this increasingly fails to capture the nature of the extremist threat. Proscription-reliant approaches don't effectively tackle the underlying ideological radicalisation that occurs outside of a group-specific context, and post-organisational mobilisation to violence and terrorism means it won't prevent a growing number of violent attacks. Therefore, prevention approaches must be agile to the rapidly changing ideological landscape of extremism, while ensuring that efforts remain robust, transparent and protective of fundamental freedoms.

Platform governance and digital regulation

Over the past two decades, the ubiquitous proliferation of digital platforms has profoundly altered the scale and nature of extremism. The threat has evolved and is more complex, with disinformation, conspiracy, hate and extremist networks interplaying online, often skirting the boundaries of legality and gaming platforms' systems to reach and engage ever wider audiences. As greater policy attention turns to the need to systemically address online harms, it is crucial that the human rights-based principles of prevention outlined above are translated into the digital domain, and in particular reflected in tech policy and regulation approaches.

While the two-decade arc of prevention has learned the hard way that kinetic measures against violent extremists will do little to address the structural causes of extremism, the focus of government and multi-lateral efforts to address online extremism to date has largely been on the removal of violent and terrorist content. This on its own however fails to address user journeys towards violent extremist and terrorist content online and the proliferation of 'grey area' or borderline content that is legal and may not transgress the platforms' Terms of Service. While this content may skirt the boundaries of legality, it may also nonetheless lead users to more violent content or inspire them in other ways to take extremist action.

Furthermore, a content moderation approach alone cannot address the underlying factors driving the exponential proliferation of conspiratorial and hateful content online; the attention-based business model of major social media platforms has resulted in a related algorithmic amplification of harmful content. Facebook itself has admitted that content that comes closest to its own red lines receives the high levels of engagement.⁴⁰ In addition to this, bad actors utilise deceptive online behaviours (covert coordination, fake accounts, deceptive automation, etc.) to amplify and target their content. While the platforms prohibit such behaviours, they nonetheless consistently fail to identify and remove major coordinated inauthentic account networks that result in the inorganic spread of harmful content to millions of people every year.⁴¹

As part of a comprehensive suite of prevention approaches, it is essential for governments to adopt a systemic approach to platform governance and regulation, one which advances meaningful transparency in platform decision making, algorithms and governance.

A duty of care approach has rightly been proposed to sit at the heart of the UK's regulation of online platforms, balancing protections for free speech with a proportionate, risk-based approach to safeguarding against extremism and harassment, while ensuring better enforcement of existing laws online including those protecting victims. The draft Online Safety Bill seeks to tread a line between a requirement for the removal of illegal content and promotion of a culture of safety by design in the technology sector, through enforcing risk assessment and mitigation processes in large online platforms.

While the authoritarian response to online harms is one of total control and censorship, the liberal democratic response must be rooted in the principles of transparency and accountability, delivered through effective democratic oversight. This will require a more robust approach to accessing tech platform data, currently unavailable to both government and the research community. Workable approaches to algorithmic auditing and to data access that protect user privacy and trade secrets have been advanced by the expert community.⁴² Such measures will promote an open, democratic and safe internet, significantly mitigating the scaled impact of online hate, conspiracy and extremism and helping level the playing field of online speech to allow good ideas to out-compete bad ones.⁴³

A whole of society prevention infrastructure

As outlined above, our current policy infrastructure for prevention is perilously out of date. Securitised law enforcement-based approaches have largely focused on prosecution over prevention, addressing only the symptoms and not the wider social and cultural phenomena driving this violence. There is an urgent need to move beyond the traditional kinetic counterterrorism toolkit, towards a more comprehensive whole-of-society approach, defined in terms of highly localised threats.

Furthermore, prevention approaches must respond to the fact that we are now increasingly addressing extremist ideas and ideology in the mainstream rather than at the fringes. Tactically this means there is a challenge of addressing much broader audiences, while the rise of far-right extremism necessitates a new approach that reaches mainstream populations (not just targeted, often wrongly profiled, constituencies). This means going from 'needle in a haystack' approaches towards more broad-based engagement, with a proportionate mainstreamed response that engages the whole of society.

Moving beyond a myopic counterterrorism focus, it's essential that responses to extremism acknowledge significant bleed across currently siloed policy areas, from societal polarisation to disinformation, hate speech to conspiracies. While this problem set is interconnected, we need a portfolio of distinct, well-defined and coordinated policy responses.

Firstly, we must decouple counterterrorism from upstream positive interventions and measures, which should not all be led by the government, where other sectors and institutions are better placed to operate. Secondly, democracy promotion, cohesion work and investment in communities should all be done per se – and not under a security umbrella – but must receive the levels of funding required to really make a difference.

Thirdly, from a tactical perspective it is crucial that much more is done to build trust with communities and deliver on their needs. This means delivering localised targeted support to communities regarding their safety and security (including protection from hate crime), further investment in local services, as well as responding to legitimate concerns regarding extremist mobilisation locally. Communities need to feel they're getting something and their problems are being met if governments have a hope of enlisting them in countering extremism in their local area.

Beyond the usual suspects

The increasing mainstreaming of hate and extremism cannot be addressed by government and a small bubble of civil society organisations alone. We require a whole-of-society approach that fully involves mainstream institutions, from culture to sports. In particular, prevention efforts must better engage the private sector to build practices within the scope of their corporate social responsibility that will benefit both their workforces and the communities they serve. Businesses have enormous untapped potential for developing innovative approaches to addressing social and political challenges. Employers are central to providing people with life-long education, digital capabilities and building inclusive and integrated workplaces, all key to building resilience to extremism across societies.

But while national political leadership is essential, the problems of hate and extremism are deeply rooted in communities and our responses need to be highly localised. A coordinated data and support infrastructure is required to tackle extremism and hate crime in real time, and ensure efforts are geared towards supporting – rather than exposing or undermining – communities and victims. By interweaving attitudinal and structural data, cities can better understand community dynamics and guide impactful interventions and more directed prevention initiatives.

One example of this kind of localised approach has been the LPN model developed by ISD's Strong Cities Network, which provides a framework for local government, local public services and civil society stakeholders to co-design and coordinate community-level prevention and resilience activities. These are developed against a local action plan, informed by a risk assessment, which each of the relevant partners helps compile.

This approach – piloted across global regions as diverse as the Middle East, East Africa and South-East Europe – sees the establishment of coordination structures incorporating dozens of key stakeholders. Depending on the local context this might typically include representatives from local education committees, youth engagement services, children and family services, social workers, public information/campaigns teams, religious institutions, local businesses, community policing teams, housing officers, and local councils.

Regular coordination, planning and training build capacity within relevant sectors and allow these networks to mobilise in the aftermath of key incidents or violent attacks, delivering community outreach and engagement activities. In addition to generating a strong pool of grassroots understanding of community-level risk, such localised responses can also incorporate key online trends essential to prevention, mapping the salient narratives and risks relevant to their local context so that online and offline risk is understood in parallel.

Building national-local government coordination around prevention strategies is key to ensuring they can be scaled comprehensively country by country. Models like the Danish 'schools, social services, police (SSP) system' and the UK's Channel Panel offer a rubric for assessing and triaging individual cases of potential extremism risks. However, they can also be versatile across a range of different harms. Such localised responses offer a means of coordination that can be effective for wider community-level prevention and resilience-building priorities, and which can apply to a range of issues from political polarisation and breakdowns in social cohesion to ethnic or gender-based hate and violence. Moreover, they are premised on the coordination and cooperation of existing services, providing a mainstream approach rather than creating new and separate services for prevention, something which has led to the development of parallel structures in the past. Such efforts can provide instructive practical examples of how to enshrine a locally-rooted whole-of-society approach to prevention.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have unpacked the landscape of prevention-based approaches to counter extremism and terrorism, explaining how these efforts are no longer fit for purpose for addressing the challenges we face today, and outlining some of the key steps that need to be taken by governments to change the prevention paradigm.

Prevention frameworks are still rooted in a primarily Islamist, organisational and terrorist violence-based perception of the challenge. But today extremism is increasingly ideologically multifaceted, transnational, hypercharged by digital platforms, and inseparably connected to other societal harms such as conspiracies, disinformation and weaponised hate.

Meanwhile, narrow counterterrorism-based approaches have failed to keep pace with a tactical evolution which has seen extremists increasingly seeking to mainstream their supremacist ideologies through politics, activism and media, to polarise civic discourse.

We discuss how prevention needs to reflect this new reality with whole-of-society solutions and a reboot of policy approaches, by going back to first principles and reorienting prevention around a robust human rights framework.

This paper outlines the ways in which the threat from extremism has radically shifted over the past two decades, and the implications of this for our outdated approaches to prevention. We show how the Islamist extremism landscape has transformed beyond recognition since 9/11, and chart the growth of far-right extremism, which forms part of an increasingly hybridised extremist threat picture, with evermore blurred lines between a broad ecosystem of extremist violence, weaponised hate and harmful conspiracies, enabled by a permissive digital environment. We also outline the increasingly long tail of extremist threats which defy traditional categorisations, requiring us to radically rethink ideology-focused extremism prevention approaches, and move towards a more agnostic framework.

The report concludes by outlining the prevention change in thinking required to address this radically altered threat landscape. Firstly, we make the case for prevention efforts to be reformulated as being primarily an exercise in protecting human rights, reflecting the fact extremism represents one of the greatest threats to human rights globally. Secondly, prevention must respond to an increasingly post-organisational extremism challenge, moving beyond targeting specific groups to establishing a proportionate prevention infrastructure that engages the whole of society.

Finally, prevention needs to be de-siloed from its narrow counterterrorism focus. It needs to reflect the fact that extremism represents a much greater societal problem than just violent radicalisation, and requires a holistic whole of government response that acknowledges its profound impacts on a range of policy areas, from societal polarisation to disinformation, to hate speech and digital regulation.

ENDNOTES

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