



Deradicalisation by Default: The 'Dialogue' Approach to Rooting out Violent Extremism



1999

DIALOGUE SOCIETY

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Foreword

The UK government has had a strategy in place for countering international terrorism since early 2003. This strategy is known as CONTEST and it consists of four strands: Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare. The first strand, Prevent, aims to stop people becoming or supporting violent extremists. The first objective of the Prevent strategy is to “[c]hallenge the violent extremist ideology and support mainstream voices.”¹ While this paper is relevant to at least three of the five main objectives and to the issue of tackling violent extremism generally, it is most closely tied in with this first objective of the Prevent strategy.

The government faces two challenges in achieving this objective. Firstly, it is not clear how best to support mainstream Muslim voices so that extremist ideology can be stifled. Secondly, any government attempt at supporting mainstream Muslims and challenging extremist interpretations faces the risk of being perceived as reactive, thereby undermining its effectiveness.

¹ The objectives of the 2008 Prevent Strategy were first set out in May 2008 in the Home Office report, ‘Preventing Violent Extremism: A strategy for Delivery’, Ref: 288113. The original wording sought to “Undermine extremist ideology”, but as recent publications and reports have preferred the verb “Challenge” (see for example ‘PVE Pathfinder Fund, December 2008, ISBN: 978-1-4098-0888-6, p.12), we have used this updated vocabulary.

Through the 'dialogue' approach, this paper explains how best to achieve this first objective of Prevent while avoiding the risk of being perceived as reactive. While setting out the definition and general characteristics of this approach, the paper also offers eight specific recommendations towards its implementation.

The approach advocated in this paper is born out of experience and practice. I offer it in the hope that it will contribute to the ongoing efforts to tackle violent extremism and thank all our Advisors, staff and members who contributed to the paper through their valuable feedback and comments.

Ozcan Keles

Executive Director

Executive Summary

The aim of this paper is to stimulate thinking about alternative approaches to preventing violent extremism. The argument offered here does not claim to be definitive but rather to provide reflections and recommendations that, through dialogue with others, can be further developed and refined.

The approach suggested in this paper was first put forward by the Dialogue Society at the conference on ‘Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue in Preventing Another 7/7’, which it organised at the House of Lords and London School of Economics on 6th and 7th July 2006, respectively.

The paper examines practical ways in which the government can fulfil its pledge to “[c]hallenge the violent extremist ideology and support mainstream [Muslim] voices”² in a positive and pro-active way: supporting Muslim communities to re-emphasise and re-assert authentic dialogue values and teachings in Islam. Values associated with dialogue and those associated with violent extremism are mutually exclusive: the stronger one grows the weaker the other becomes. By concentrating efforts on reviving ‘dialogue’ values and teachings in Islam, violent extremist ideology can be weakened, undermined and negated.

The advantage of this approach is that it does not take ‘defeating violent extremist ideology’ as its objective but achieves this result nonetheless as a natural and default outcome. Thus, the approach remains positive and proactive and escapes the disadvantages of being perceived as reactive. In essence, this is what is meant by ‘Deradicalisation by Default’.

2 Ibid

This argument is based on the practical achievement of overcoming radicalisation (or the narrow political instrumentalisation) of Islam in Turkey by precisely this approach. The paper suggests eight specific recommendations for the practical implementation of this approach and the efforts of the Dialogue Society in this vein.



Introduction

Radicalisation is the process whereby disaffected individuals or communities despair of achieving social change through the lawful means (such as peaceful protest) envisaged within the system. Among such disaffected people a minority go on to contemplate violence against their fellow-citizens as a way of expressing their indignation and rallying others to their cause and their methods. The principal attributes of violent extremism as the term is used here are: (1) it regards the social system as the enemy; (2) it adopts an all-or-nothing stance, rejecting adjustment to (even the very right to exist of) those who disagree with its values and policies; (3) in excluding itself from society it specifically excludes itself from legal or normal restraints and justifies resort to random acts of violence (terrorism).

While there are violent fringe elements in many groups or sub-groups within society, at the present time the greatest problem of radicalisation and extremism affect the Muslim communities especially. The violent fringe claim to act on behalf of the Muslims as a whole and, often, in the name of Islam itself. Given the publicity that their violence attracts, Muslims and Islam generally come to be associated, however unfairly, with violent extremism. A further consequence is that it becomes difficult for non-Muslims as well as Muslims to dissociate any active commitment to Islam from the rhetoric and the actions of the 'radicalised' and 'extremist' fringe.

Policies aimed at deradicalisation and preventing violent extremism among the Muslim communities in this country have tended to be reactive. This very fact can undermine the effectiveness of those policies. This paper suggests an alternative approach which can – at the very least – complement and reinforce existing efforts and policies, and make their effects deeper and more long-lasting.

What is the ‘Dialogue’ Approach?

The goal of defeating violent extremist ideology and belief cannot be achieved effectively if stakeholders directly *pursue* it. Rather, it is an outcome that can be helped to *ensue* by adopting a comprehensive and proactive approach which while not making deradicalisation its primary objective, achieves the same result nonetheless.

More specifically, this paper argues in favour of an approach which emphasises that Islam necessitates interfaith and intercultural dialogue, mutual respect and understanding, social interrelation and cohesion, proactive citizenship and loyalty to the *lex loci*, and human rights and justice for all. (Hereafter, to avoid repetition, these values and teachings will be referred to as simply ‘dialogue values’.) The values associated with dialogue and those associated with violent extremism are mutually exclusive: the stronger one grows the weaker the other becomes. If Muslims can re-discover, re-emphasise and re-assert these authentic Islamic values, as a by-product they can diminish the influence of violent extremist outlook, ideology and rhetoric. Put differently, they can deradicalise by default.

The advantage of this approach is that while the project does not appear to take ‘defeating violent extremist ideology’ as its objective it achieves this result by way of outcome. Thus, the project remains positive and proactive and escapes being perceived as reactive.

Its Key Characteristics

Authentic: Adherents of violent extremist groups within Muslim communities will not take anything other than their 'Islam' as their point of reference. Appealing to them on the basis of any other value system will not be persuasive. The work of mainstream Islamic scholars provides ample resources from within Islam to demonstrate that Islam is itself the most effective argument against radicalism, violent extremism and terrorism. To have any hope of sustained success, any project aiming to tackle the underlying causes of radicalisation and violent extremism among the Muslim communities must draw on these mainstream scholarly resources.

Positive & Proactive: Where possible, projects should be based on positive and proactive foundations and motivated by what they seek to achieve as opposed to what they seek to avert, negate or counteract.

As noted above, making prevention or deradicalisation the primary objective of any initiative renders it reactive and – inadvertently – dependent on the 'other'. The project is then seen as an extension of the very system or state that the extremists seek to undermine. This in turn tarnishes the project's legitimacy. What's more, without intending to do so, such a reactive approach glorifies the violent extremists. The scale of the machinery put in play to defeat them feeds their self-importance and self-righteousness and can even channel sympathy towards them as 'underdogs battling the system'.

Independent: Where possible, projects which seek to tackle this sensitive issue should remain independent of government for the reasons just explained. However, the Trustees of the Dialogue Society are only too well aware of the challenges of delivering good services on a wide scale with insufficient funding. That is why, where organisations do access central funding, they should counter any perceived dependence on government with greater authentication of their work by credible Islamic scholars in the West and the Muslim world.

Altruistic: The passion and dedication of volunteers is crucial to inspire and motivate others in any charitable project, particularly those that aim to tackle violent extremist ideology. For this reason in particular, volunteers should be valued and active at all levels of a dialogue project, including at the heart of the decision-making process, while attracting funding and professional support.



Its Implementation

This approach can be implemented by the following strategies/projects:

1. Provide funding not solely for 'preventive projects' which are formulated in reaction to violent extremism, but also projects that achieve the same result, as an outcome of doing something positive. **Recognise and support projects that promote dialogue**, understanding, tolerance and social cohesion from an Islamic perspective and motivation.
2. Encourage **Muslim dialogue groups to become more active** in contributing to the local and national debate surrounding issues of preventing violent extremism, identity and integration and social cohesion. Assisting governmental bodies and the press to consult with such groups.
3. Commission the writing and/or translation of **publications that expound the scriptural justification for dialogue** values in Islam and refute interpretations that are politically instrumentalised and/or violently extremist. A growing body of well-targeted literature, presented in the right format and idiom for key workers and the young, will have considerable effect.
4. **Encourage and equip Muslim organisations and workers in the theology and practice of dialogue.** This will be achieved by first re-asserting the importance of dialogue values in Islam through scriptural justification and reasoning. The next stage is to provide the ideas, tools and materials for community organisations to engage in dialogue. The third stage is to complement and enhance their skills in this respect.

5. Encourage and support mosques in Britain to operate as community centres open to and **welcoming non-Muslims as well as Muslims** –as was the practice of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in his first place of worship in *Madina*. Mosques should be encouraged to engage in intercultural dialogue.
6. **Provide weekly topical Friday-prayer sermons** for use by, and designed specifically for, British Muslims, complete with the mandatory Arabic text in transliterated form and made available through a resource-based website. Given the growing size of congregations attending Friday prayers, this is one way of reaching the wider Muslim population. Currently, there is no such service that meets this need.
7. Offer British Muslim communities alternative models for social engagement and interaction such as the **pattern of Islam well established in Turkey which is pro-dialogue, diversity and democracy** and born out of a multicultural and pluralistic experience and history. This pattern is simultaneously authentic and more relevant to the British Muslim context. This can be achieved through a number of means, including (i) sponsoring regular delegations to Turkey for key British Muslim leaders, new converts and journalists; and (ii) recognising (as other European countries have done) the modern skill- and knowledge- based training courses provided by the Turkish Religious Affairs Directorate to complement any future government-supported Imam training course in Britain; and (iii) recruiting more Turkish imams to serve in British mosques until home-grown British imams can be trained and ready in sufficient numbers.
8. Support all faith/ethnic communities to establish **faith-inspired but strictly non-denominational and proactively inclusive schools** where the values at the heart of all religions are instilled in students' minds and sensitivity for all religious requirements is demonstrated in practice. This sounds idealistic, but is indeed achievable: two such schools founded and operating on these principles are the Wisdom Primary and Secondary school in London and Coral College (Secondary school) in Bradford.

What the Dialogue Society is Doing to Support the 'Dialogue' Approach

The Dialogue Society was founded in 1999 as a charitable organisation by second generation British Muslims. Its objectives are to promote intercultural dialogue, greater understanding and community cohesion in the United Kingdom.

The original and continuing motivation for the Dialogue Society comes from Islam itself. The founding and existing members of the Society maintain that Islam necessitates dialogue, diversity, community cohesion, human rights and freedom of belief for all, proactive citizenship, loyalty to the law of the land and democratic engagement.

All the work of the Society, by its very example, and to whomever it is directed, contributes to the notion that Islam necessitates dialogue and therefore supports the 'dialogue' approach. More specifically, current projects include:

Intercultural Events

- Mobilising first and second generation Muslim communities to facilitate exposure to, exchange with, and understanding of, different cultures and faiths.
- Supporting regional organisations engaged in dialogue in the UK through providing good practice and project consultancy.

Seminars & Publications

- Organising seminars on a wide range of issues targeting community leaders, practitioners, academics and opinion makers.
- Producing literature and multimedia which educate Muslims and non-Muslims regarding dialogue values in Islam. These materials are available on the Dialogue Society website.

Courses & Training

- Delivering a range of courses to trainers and end-users that develop leadership, project management and dialogue skills. One forthcoming course will concentrate on training Muslims in the theology and practice of interfaith and intercultural dialogue.
- Training speakers to address a variety of topics and audiences on Islam in the modern age.

Collaboration & Partnership

- Facilitating the meeting and partnership of like-minded organisations, schools and bodies managed by individuals of different culture and background.
- Developing partnerships with a wider range of organisations, reaching further than traditional dialogue partners and creating more sustainable long-term relationships.

Delegations to Turkey

- Projecting peaceful, positive and pro-active Muslim communities, examples of which can be found in countries such as Turkey.



- The Dialogue Society continues to organise delegations to Turkey for groups including Muslim key workers, new Muslims, academics and journalists. Since 2005, the Dialogue Society has organised no less than 20 delegations to Turkey.

Mevlana Rumi Mosque & Dialogue Centre

- The Dialogue Society is working in partnership with the Anatolian Muslim Society to found the Mevlana Rumi Mosque & Dialogue Centre at a recently acquired property in Edmonton, North London. The Centre will operate as a community hub for Muslims and non-Muslims as described above.

In addition, the Dialogue Society has applied for funding to undertake the following projects for 2009/2010:

Muslim Motivation for Dialogue Books

To commission and edit the translation of a series of books that appraise the theological justification for dialogue values in Islam. These books would target Muslim key workers and Muslim youth.

DIY Dialogue Manuals

To prepare and publish DIY Dialogue Manuals for use by Muslim organisations which provide the know-how and all related material and supporting documents for the application of various community dialogue projects already carried out by the Dialogue Society over a number of years.

Friday-Prayer Sermon Texts

To prepare and publish weekly topical Friday-prayer sermons for use by, and designed specifically for, British Muslims, complete with the mandatory Arabic text in transliterated form on the same document and made available through a resource-based website.

Conclusion

In general terms, the aim of this paper has been to stimulate thinking on alternative approaches to preventing violent extremism. The paper sketches not only the reasoning behind a new – or at the very least complementary – approach, but details some of its essential characteristics; eight specific recommendations for putting it into practice; and existing efforts by the Dialogue Society in this vein.

More specifically, this paper has sought to provide reflections and recommendations on how best to “[c]hallenge the violent extremist ideology and support mainstream voices”³ (the first objective of Prevent) while, as far as possible, avoiding the risk of being perceived as reactive. In doing so, the paper has sought to address the two challenges facing the achievement of this first objective, namely, clarity about how best to support mainstream voices and secondly, avoiding the disadvantages entailed with being perceived as reactive.

The ‘dialogue’ approach offered in this paper to policy-makers and community leaders is born out of practice and experience. While it is important to acknowledge that the government and community are doing a great deal to counter violent extremist ideology, clearly more needs to be done. Through this paper, we offer our thoughts on this most important issue and look forward to continuing the dialogue.

3 Ibid

About Dialogue Society

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