

INTERVIEW: Terrorism, Muslimness and Islamophobia - Counterterrorism's impact on Muslim communities

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After the 9/11 attacks on the USA, nations around the world significantly expanded their counterterrorism measures. This securitisation and its impacts on Muslim communities has continued since.

In the UK, a key part of the government's counterterrorism strategy is known as *Prevent*. It focuses on the identification of individuals who may turn to extremism in the future. Though all types of extremism are targeted through the policy, the focus has been on Islamist extremism and the institutions where this type of extremism is claimed to be disseminated, including public bodies such as universities, schools, and the health sector.

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In 2008, as he was as student conducting postgraduate research for his Masters and upcoming PhD on Al-Qaeda, he downloaded a publicly-available document from the US Department of Justice website known as the al-Qaeda Training Manual. He found himself arrested and detained under the *Terrorism Act 2000 UK*.

Dr Sabir spoke with Melbourne Asia Review's managing editor, Cathy Harper.

It's very difficult to understand how someone could be arrested and accused of terrorism for downloading a document that was made publicly available by the US Government. Can you tell the story of what you were doing and how it came to the attention of the university and the authorities?

I was conducting postgraduate research initially for my Masters dissertation and my upcoming PhD which was on armed Muslim groups, in particular al-Qaeda in Iraq. The fact that the Al-Qaeda Training Manual was on the United States Department of Justice website made me understand that it was open access and was therefore completely legal and legitimate to access and possess. Later, I would discover that the same document was available for purchase in bookshops as well as libraries across England and indeed other countries as well.

Helping me with my application for a scholarship was my friend and mentor Hicham Yezza, who was the editor of a political and cultural magazine called *Ceasefire* and who was also working as the Principal Administrator in the School of Modern Languages at the University of Nottingham. I would constantly send Hicham drafts of my writing as well as other things I felt he may find interesting given his role with *Ceasefire*. One day, Hicham was off sick from work and his line manager at the University of Nottingham accessed his computer with his consent since she needed access to a work-related document. Saved on his desktop, she saw the Al Qaeda Training Manual and two journal articles. The presence of these documents on Hicham's computer aroused her suspicion. I strongly suspect Hicham's Algerian and Muslim identity both played a role in arousing her suspicion.

The matter was escalated up the hierarchy to the University's management who subsequently felt that the presence of the manual and the two journal articles warranted police intervention. The university contacted Nottinghamshire Police Special Branch, who subsequently alerted the newly created and larger West

Midlands Counterterrorism Unit who launched a joint operation to arrest Hicham and I. Interestingly, the university did not conduct a formal risk assessment and assess matters before they called the police onto campus. It was hysteria and Islamophobia on their behalf which led the university hierarchy to by-pass all appropriate processes and safeguards and to call the police on campus simply due to the presence of this document on Hicham's computer.

At this point did the university and the police properly understand that it was just the presence of this publicly available document that had caused concern? Had there been a miscommunication?

The only physical evidence in the view of the police that showed a connection to terrorism was the possession of this one document. Everything else at this moment in time was connected to the profile that the university, and eventually the police, were creating of Hicham. I'm sure if it was someone called David Smith, for example, it would not have evoked the same response from the university. Universities are under a professional obligation based on governmental guidelines, including at the time the manual was discovered, to make sure that before they reported a possible terrorist conspiracy to the authorities, because they had discovered potential terrorist literature, they followed a set of processes including carrying out an internal investigation with input by the relevant experts from the university itself. But none of this was done. It seems that after seven years of moral panics in the news media around the threat of Islamist terrorism, there was a 'better to be safe than sorry' attitude that permeated the university. The police, who also had a duty to do some detailed pre-inquiries before initiating a very serious and complex counterterrorism investigation, took the university's word at face value.

The West Midlands Counter Terrorism Unit and Nottinghamshire Police launched and executed a joint operation codenamed Minerva, ironically named after the Roman goddess of wisdom, and arrived on campus and arrested Hicham. When I asked why they were searching Hicham's office, they also arrested me. It was during the police interview later that day that I told the police I was the person who

downloaded and sent the manual to Hicham, and what the purpose of doing this was.

On what specific grounds were you arrested?

The official arrest power for all terrorism cases, including mine, is Section 41 of the *Terrorism Act 2000*. This power allows the arrest of anybody on 'suspicion of being involved in the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism'. It's an intentionally very broad power that allows the police to arrest anybody for a whole host of reasons and to then apply a more focused charge, if needed, later. Initially, the police claimed that the grounds for arresting me was because I was impeding the police investigation when I was asking questions around Hicham on the morning of our arrests. Interestingly, a white academic, who alerted me of the activity outside of Hicham's university office, was also asking questions of security officers that morning but was not arrested. For some reason, it was only the brown Muslim man who was taken into custody on suspicion of terrorism. If the police did not arrest me on the same morning they arrested Hicham, it was almost certain that they would be coming for me later in the day when they would discover that I had sent the Al-Qaeda Training Manual to him via the MSN chat messenger service. I suppose what is interesting is that they had no idea at the time of my arrest that I had sent Hicham the manual. This is something they discovered later when I told them in the first interview. Some people may think this was very perceptive and intelligent of the police but as somebody who interacted with the counterterrorism officers directly, witnessed the way the operation was handled, and subsequently studied the documentation around the operation, I assure you it was anything but perceptive or intelligence-led action that led to my arrest. It was a simple and vulgar act of racial profiling.

Once I was in custody the more specific charge of Section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which relates to the possession or collection of information useful to terrorists, was being primarily considered. another offence around 'dissemination of terrorist publications' under Section 2 of the Terrorism Act 2006 was also considered, but was dropped.

In total, I was held for seven days during which I was interrogated daily. My family home was searched by the police and personal property belonging to me and my family members was seized and then used to put together a case that would show I was a terrorist. A high-tech forensic unit examined all devices such as laptops and mobile telephones to see if either contained evidence of terrorism. Interestingly, the thing that formed an important part of the investigation was academic documents such as journal articles, reports and other texts such as books that any postgraduate student of political science and international relations would have in their possession. Based on classified police documents that I eventually saw, the police were looking for written texts that could help prove either ideological commitment to al-Qaeda or some sort of potential involvement in planning acts of terrorism.

During my detention the police I think accepted what I told them but they had to investigate and verify and corroborate this. In fact, I think within 48 to 72 hours of being in detention, a picture started to emerge that quite clearly revealed to the police that I was a postgraduate student of international relations who was studying al-Qaeda and that Hicham was simply helping me with my research proposal and PhD scholarship application. But they quickly started misleading senior officers and manipulating witness statements, as I document in more detail in my book, to justify the whole police operation and what they had done. At that moment in time, I also learned that counterterrorism operations trigger a whole host of processes that cannot simply be stopped because somebody's innocence is revealed. Once an investigation has been triggered and the ball is rolling, the entire thing takes on a life and meaning of its own and becomes very difficult to nip in the bud. You have to try and stay strong and patient in the face of a process that sees only your racialised and political identity; not your humanity. It's a truly terrifying feeling.

How did you feel at this point?

I felt deeply upset and angered when I discovered that the reason for the arrest and the entire operation was the possession of the manual. I felt deeply hurt in my psyche because I had always been a very engaged, proud, British citizen; somebody

who believed in the institutions, the meritocracy in Britain, somebody who believed that if you were a good person everybody, including society and its institutions, would be good to you and that if you were educated that would somehow give you a right to not be troubled by the authorities—all very naive and romantic with hindsight. The moment I was taken into custody and accused of being a terrorist, my identity as a Muslim took dominance and precedence over everything else. It no longer mattered what sort of a person I was, what sort of mentality I had, what my attitude to life and Britain was—it all became about my Muslimness. In that respect, I felt deeply disappointed and hurt at the way the authorities behaved towards me, but I also felt angry and even more clearer in my mind that if you're a Muslim, you're never too far away from being viewed and treated as a terrorist.

I also felt a sense of dread and fear. I was afraid that since I was in a system in which your humanity is seemingly sidelined and your 'Muslimness' takes precedence because it's connected to the label of 'terrorism', it's very easy to be disappeared into the matrix of counterterrorism which operates without any real accountability or checks since it relies on terror laws that the vast majority of people think automatically makes them fair, accountable, and appropriate. The fear I felt increased the longer I spent in custody and the more I understood what powers the law granted the authorities. For example, I was being considered for charges under Section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which criminalises the possession of information that is useful to terrorists regardless of the intention for possessing the information. The Crown does not have to prove that a person's intent for possessing the information is related to terrorism—simply having the information in your possession is a crime. When I discovered this simple fact, I understood that my defence that I was a postgraduate student conducting academic research was probably too little and too late. At that point, it dawned on me that I may be going very quickly from being a hard-working and engaged student of international relations who was working towards his goal of becoming an academic to somebody who was soon going to be disappeared into the prison system on a terrorism charge for having a document I got from an American government website. The more I

thought about this, the more upset and angry I felt.

How was the situation resolved?

After seven days, I was released without charge because the police felt that there was not enough evidence to prove beyond reasonable doubt in court that I was a terrorist because they found nothing except the manual in my possession that indicated anything around terrorism. My entire life had been turned upside down and nothing except this manual had been found to indicate anything even remotely connected to terrorism. But, just because the police couldn't charge and prosecute me didn't mean they thought I was innocent. They continued their investigation once I was released and their surveillance continued at the roadside and at the border for several years. Once you become a person of interest, it's difficult to become uninteresting, so even though I was released without charge, I was still under investigation and active surveillance.

This was quickly confirmed by a police officer who detained me at the Channel Tunnel shortly after my release when I was travelling to Europe when he said that my name was flagged when he scanned my passport. Subsequently, I was stopped under Schedule 7 of the *Terrorism Act* four times, and I was detained for questioning on two separate occasions under this power that operates at the UK border. On one of those occasions in 2010, I was returning from Spain when advanced passenger information had been shared by the UK Border Agency via a 'Port Circulation' instructing counterterrorism officers to intercept and detain me on arrival. I found myself in custody for nearly two hours on that occasion and was cross-examined on a range of topics and areas, including whether I thought terrorists had human rights: something I remember clearly because I thought it was an excellent question and eventually began using it to assess my students on an undergraduate human rights module I teach at my university. In addition to this, there were endless stops at the roadside for a whole host of reasons that were being triggered by the 'interest' flag that had been placed on the police computer next to my name for 'terrorism related offences'. This all continued until late 2011, when eventually I won a legal case with

the help of a legal team at Bhatt Murphy Solicitors and was awarded £20,00 in damages in an out-of-court settlement. One of the outcomes of this settlement was that the police agreed to remove incorrect intelligence from their computers, including the flag that was causing me to be stopped and searched repeatedly at the roadside.

How has it impacted on you long-term as an individual and as an academic?

The effect of the arrest and detention and the subsequent surveillance has led to trauma or what some people would call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I have become hyper-vigilant, very conscious of my surroundings and hypersensitive to risk and perceived risk. There are random times when something will trigger a particular thought or bring back a memory but there's really nothing that I can do other than try to manage the feeling and have a conversation with myself about why I am feeling it. The fact that I was researching counterterrorism for my doctorate and have continued focusing on this area as an academic has meant that I was, in some respects, always keeping the wound fresh and would inevitably experience psychiatric problems. As I detail in my book, at one stage I was convinced that I was being followed, that my home was bugged by the security agencies and that someone was coming into my home and moving items around as a way of gaslighting and manipulating my behaviour by making me feel like I was living my life in an open-air prison. During the height of my psychiatric problems, I would think about suicide and self-harm. It's only through the love and affection of family and close friends that I was able to find some degree of stability and calmness to move forward with my life.

The one thing that has really helped me find a sense of healing was writing my book, even though it was always, especially during the early stages of the writing process, very triggering. Writing about the experiences I went through coupled with having a much more detailed understanding of the processes and government policies at play that led to me being treated the way I was frightened and harmed me even more in

some respects. But, despite suffering more mental health challenges during the writing of the book, which I addressed in the book itself, I continued to chip away and wrote a little every day about what happened and why it happened. This was my way to reclaim the story and tell it on my own terms and after four years of writing, I was able to complete the book and largely close a chapter that's been incessantly running in my life for the past 15-years. I was able to proactively find some healing. What's also really helped me in this process of healing is the continued reaction to the book. When people read it, they understand the story, they relate to it and offer words of support and solidarity and that really gives me a sense of strength and empowerment. Despite all the odds, despite the suspicion, the surveillance, the mistreatment, the mental health breakdowns, the suicidal thoughts, the fact that people are inspired and moved by the book gives me a sense of empowerment and helps me to continue to heal in many ways.

In a broad sense, what are the impacts of securitisation on Muslim communities?

My research has found that the impact of counterterrorism policy on Muslim communities in the UK is that it's creating anxiety and fear across the board. This fear relates to the vulnerability Muslims feel in terms of being investigated, surveilled, monitored or picked up and detained by the authorities. Though there has been talk over the last few years around expanding the web of counterterrorism powers to target white working-class communities in the name of fighting far-right terrorism, the current government is once again refocusing its energy and efforts back to Muslims communities. The result is a sense of fear, anxiety and dread that permeates the Muslim community. Whether you are traveling through an airport, see a police car in a queue of traffic, speak to the doctor about a mental health problem that you or a loved one is experiencing, Muslims feel a sense of exposure and vulnerability in the face of police powers enacted through programmes such as the *Prevent* de-radicalisation program; perhaps the one police area which state Islamophobia is perhaps most operational.

In fact, this policy in particular has led to a whole series of anxieties and fears, especially amongst Muslim parents who are afraid of talking about the war and suffering taking place in so many Muslims countries in the privacy of their own homes in case their child repeats something at school and finds themselves reported to the police by a teacher as a potential future terrorist under *Prevent*, as has happened in so many cases in the UK, and subsequently taken away from parents and placed into foster care. The *Prevent* policy in this respect has penetrated and pierced even the private domain and is causing people to self-police, self-regulate, and self-discipline their behaviour, publicly and privately, out of fear of being reported to the authorities and losing their children. Debate, discussion, and dissent—central practices in democratic and free societies—is being closed and eroded for Muslim communities.

As an academic, I have some resources at my disposal that I can employ to reveal how outrageous and draconian counterterrorism policies and practices are but most of the people who are targeted by counterterrorism powers or those who fear intervention by the state are some of the most vulnerable in our society because they overwhelmingly come from racialised working-class and immigrant communities. They do not have the sorts of social and cultural capital that are needed to contest and challenge government policy and power. As a result, communities struggle to articulate the violence and abuse they face on individual and systemic levels. This silencing gets even worse when we look at the way government policies like *Prevent* deny them the ability to express themselves, even privately in their own home, for fear of some sort of coercive intervention against them and their loved ones, especially their children.

How does the *Prevent* policy try to stop individuals becoming radicalised?

The *Prevent* policy, at a fundamental level, believes that the root driver of political violence or ‘terrorism’ is an Islamic ideology known by different names depending on the political mood-music at the time, whether it be fundamentalism, Islamism,

Salafism, jihadism, extremism and so on. The *Prevent* policy believes that if it can clamp down on this ideology, if it can disrupt and stop the spread of this ideology by individuals and institutions, it can stop terrorism from happening. *Prevent*, in this regard, was introduced to not only attack the ideology of Islamism but to target any person sharing an ideology and penetrating any institution that was involved in either sharing or allowing itself to be used to share such an ideology. So, in addition to community-level organisations such as mosques and religious centres, entire sections of civil society such as schools, colleges, universities, and the health sector have been penetrated by the security state in the name of stopping the spread of any ideas or perspectives that are claimed to ‘radicalise’ people. *Prevent*, in simple words, is the counterideological side of the counterterrorism coin.

Universities under *Prevent* have therefore become of particular concern to the authorities because they are involved in the business of ideas, including ideas which are perceived to be unfavourable to democracy, or anti-democratic even. The idea that democracy is not the best way of governing society is not an unlawful idea—it is a completely legitimate idea to express. But the *Prevent* policy uses such an idea as something that indicates someone may be a potential terrorist in the future. *Prevent* therefore creates an entire discourse that criminalises a whole host of very ordinary, legitimate, and even legal views and actions that have really nothing to do with political violence, criminality, or terrorism. Counterterrorism that is meant to be about using evidence to prove criminality seems to be more about using behavioural indicators that are lawful and legitimate to predict who is more likely to become a terrorist in the future. We’re now in the terrain of predictive policing based on racial profiling, religious stereotyping, and racist and Islamophobic moral panics.

Has *Prevent* resulted in the opposite of what it intends, i.e., has it radicalised individuals and communities?

Terrorism is shown to be far easier to execute in democratic societies because they’re generally freer for people to move around, organise, and acquire relevant materials for explosive devices and so forth. But terrorism is generally far less likely

to happen in democratic societies because people are able to articulate what they feel and therefore feel less need to engage in violence to express their point or make a difference. The freedom to speak and express oneself in some ways serves as a sort of safety-valve, reducing the likelihood that somebody will engage in political violence, but by disallowing speech from being articulated in an open manner, people are more likely to be drawn into spaces where they cannot and will not be scrutinised or challenged if they believe something and their ideas will fester and gain strength. By stifling expression, debate and speech, *Prevent*, I would say, contributes to creating a sense of exclusion and marginalisation and reduces the chances that people can engage in democratic activism, speech, and dissent, which increases the risk that they may resort to more extreme measures such as political violence. If *Prevent* truly wanted to reduce the chance of political violence from happening, it would stop trying to police, regulate, and stifle conversations and speech that impact racialised communities in the UK, stop trying to outlaw those who advocate for a non-Eurocentric world order as potential terrorists, address political drivers of conflict and war in multiple locations around the world, especially in reference to Israel and Palestine, and provide the social-welfare, education, and employment opportunities needed to empower people and make them feel safe. But *Prevent* does none of this because it lays the blame for terrorism at the doors of ideology.

How do you think it's playing out in the academic community in universities? The recent review into *Prevent* I believe stated that anti-*Prevent* narratives predominate in British universities and that some academics feel silenced.

I think universities are seen as spaces that are used for dissent and political organisation and have historically therefore held a central position in national security thinking, doctrine, and practice. So, for instance, it was left wing activists during the Cold War who held the interest of the security state and from the late 1980s and 1990s onwards, it was Muslims who were claimed to be hijacking university spaces to spread an Islamist ideology who caught the interest of the

security state. Coupled with the fact that several individuals involved in post 9/11 terrorist attacks attended university at some point has also prompted some right-wing and neo-conservative interest-groups and policymakers to begin claiming that their attendance at university was a key factor in their radicalisation and eventual engagement with terrorism. This, once again, led the security state to re-focus its energies on universities. Universities have resisted such claims and independent reviews and inquiries have determined that they are unfounded, but criticism of universities have remained constant. Perhaps it's something to do with the fact that academics have led the charge against counterterrorism laws and policies such as *Prevent* in many respects because they believe that universities are spaces that should be protected from the overreach of the security state if people are to learn and engage in thinking and ideas that will help human society develop. And since academics can articulate their thinking in a coherent and cogent way, sometimes with the curiosity of the media locked into place, they are seen as a more organised problem and can sometimes cause them to face sustained criticism and attack, in this case, for not doing enough to tackle radicalisation and extremism. I would say over the last two decades, right-wing think-tanks, politicians, and securocrats have led the charge against universities in this respect.

Do you think the UK's counterterrorism strategy has been successful at all?

Measuring success of a policy is connected to the goal of a policy and what it seeks to achieve. The stated objective of counterterrorism is to stop terrorism so people can go about their lives without disruption and anxiety. However, this goal of stopping terrorism or reducing the chances of it happening quite significantly is never going to be achieved until the government addresses the actual long-term political drivers of terrorism, which are almost always the driving force behind this form of political violence. The government claims that religious extremist ideology is the fundamental driver of political violence and terrorism but by doing this, it depoliticises the threat and compels itself to target and attack the spaces and institutions in which ideas and thinking is shared rather than the physical and real-

life conditions—the socio-political realities—that nearly always drive terrorist violence. By over-focusing on ideology, the government is able to absolve itself of bearing any responsibility for creating the contemporary political environment, circumstances, and climate within which terrorism thrives and prospers. For instance, by not addressing their colonial histories and the role such histories have played in the emergence of countless problems, the government is able to lay the blame at the hands of the enemy and absolve itself of any responsibility. If they did accept their own fault in creating the circumstances, it would require some sort of systemic change as well as create pressure on Western governments to apologise and account for their violent histories, which exposes them to all sorts of legal and political dangers that would hasten their decline and deny them the prospect of governing the world in the way the West is so used to. So, the government instead focuses on responding with the ideology of terrorism and the symptoms of the problem which is a lot easier to do because it allows them to lay the blame for terrorism at the doors of violent individuals rather than the systems, processes, and structures which have played a key contributing role in creating these individuals and motivating them to commit violence in the first place.

Counterterrorism especially since the 1970s and 1980s has blamed terrorism on individual groups and offenders and depoliticised political violence and its political causes, so in one respect what we see today around how the government views and responds to terrorism is no different, but in recent history, there was an acceptance that to deal with terrorism, there needed to be a political resolution of some sort when responding to political violence or terrorism. So, for example, in South Africa, Apartheid was ended and the ANC's military wing known as MK, which was once led by Nelson Mandela, ceased its campaign of terrorism because of political negotiations and political settlements being found. The same in Northern Ireland and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, and then more recently with the Taliban in Afghanistan. All of these examples, as well as numerous others from different conflicts around the globe, have witnessed an end to fighting because political solutions have been found to political problems; not because military

violence was used to address a political problem. Though governments often adopt rhetoric that depoliticises their enemies as a way of delegitimising them, it's ultimately political action that helps find solutions to on-going conflicts, not the violence of counterterrorism. Until Western governments begin to accept and address the political drivers of political violence and terrorism, they will never be able to stop terrorism and counterterrorism will therefore continue to fail in doing what it claims that it wants to do.

Dr Rizwaan Sabir, The Suspect: Counterterrorism, Islam and the Security State, 2022.

Image: Eid in Trafalgar Square, London 2009. Credit: Farrukh/Flickr