

Prevent: Silencing Palestine on Campus

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Introduction

I recently had a conversation that I'll never forget with some university student activists in London. The students had gathered to talk about their role in building the movement for solidarity with Palestinians on their campuses. As the National Coordinator for War on Want's Student Palestine Solidarity Project, I am used to working on different issues with students organising on campus and I came ready to help them brainstorm creative actions and tactics to get out their message about equality, justice, and human rights. But before we could get to that exciting work, the students had something else they wanted to strategise about. 'We're not even allowed to have a stall on campus without it being a fight', said one student. Others mentioned a disturbing series of restrictions and 'checks' they had been subjected to, without any clear reason as to how or why they were being scrutinised. I asked them if the university had cited some specific code or reason? One student shrugged: 'That's how Prevent works. It literally prevents you from doing anything, no matter what it is, and without any reason why.'

As students learn about the systematic human rights abuses Palestinians are subjected to, it's only natural for those with progressive politics to want to get involved in the inspiring activism that is calling out university complicity in Israel's oppressive regime. But time and time again, students are faced with a brick wall from their university administrations, and left with a strong feeling that using words like 'justice' and 'human rights' will get them put on a watch list. This is the devastating effect of



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the Prevent agenda and how it is being used on campus to silence progressive voices and debate.

Preventing critiques of Israel

The UK government originally developed the Prevent programme in 2003. It is one of the Contest counter-terrorism strategy's four workstreams, the others being Pursue (to stop terrorist attacks), Protect (to strengthen protection against a terrorist attack) and Prepare (to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack). While the three other workstreams focus on tangible events and quantifiable outcomes, Prevent places a legal duty on public bodies such as universities to identify the early warning signs of terrorist sympathies in individuals and to report them.

The guidance relies on a Vulnerability Assessment Framework that is based on a single study of a small number of people imprisoned for terrorism offences. As such, it lacks a thorough list of possible indicators. The partial list in the official guidance includes feelings and experiences that many people will identify with: Identity crisis (distance from cultural/religious heritage and uncomfortable with their place in the society around them), Personal crisis (family tensions, sense of isolation, adolescence), Personal circumstances (migration, local community tensions, events affecting country or region of origin, alienation from UK values, having a sense of grievance that is triggered by personal experience of racism, discrimination, or aspects of government policy), Unmet aspirations (perceptions of injustice, feeling of failure, rejection of civic life) and Criminality (experiences of imprisonment, poor resettlement/reintegration, previous involvement with criminal groups). The guidance makes clear that this list is not to be considered exhaustive.

The 'Personal Circumstances' section of the guidance considers individuals with grievances triggered by aspects of government policy as being vulnerable to extremism. This is where much of the application of Prevent applies to Palestine solidarity activists. Critiques of the Israeli state are considered one such grievance within this framework, even though this ignores the fact that Israel, with the complicity of the British government, systematically violates the human rights of Palestinians on a daily basis. Even the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) admits that Israel regularly breaches international law in its violations of Palestinian rights (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2017, p.40). Yet, when student activists organise events analysing or even just describing these violations, Prevent may be triggered.

The logic linking support for Palestinian rights to extremism is deeply flawed: within this framework, Baroness Warsi, a former cabinet minister and co-Chair of the Conservative Party who resigned in 2014 in protest over the government's failure to condemn Israel's attack on Gaza, is vulnerable to extremism and a potential terrorist. And the over 100 MPs that have spoken out against Israel's practice of taking Palestinian children as political prisoners may be 'at risk of radicalisation'.

Silencing debate in higher education

The Prevent agenda has increasingly alienated university students, particularly those engaged with Friends of Palestine societies. Prevent encourages institutional surveillance of these groups; in a HEFCE-backed Prevent training presentation, there is a slide entitled 'Palestine: Extreme, but Legal?' (see Nabulsi, 2017). This approach has resulted in the profiling of students and academic staff of a certain background as

people who are more likely to have ‘grievances’ on the issue of Palestine and Britain’s complicity in the continuation of the illegal occupation. An example of this profiling took place at Cambridge University in November 2017, when university officials contacted the Palestine Society hours before a planned public meeting titled ‘BDS and the globalised struggle for Palestinian rights’. They demanded that the Director of Communications, Paul Mylrea, be installed as Chair of the event, replacing SOAS academic Ruba Salih. University officials claimed that the change was necessary ‘to ensure open, robust and lawful debate’. This was a way for the University hierarchy to take control and restrict the autonomy of academics and left, anti-racist organisations to hold speaker events. It is not coincidental that the proposed Chair representing the University’s senior management was a white man, and the usurped academic was a woman of colour, a highly respected postcolonial academic with research focusing on Palestinian refugees. Following a review of this procedure, Cambridge University released a statement on 6th March 2018, stating that the wrong decision was taken and publicly apologising to Salih (see Bradbury, 2018). Nevertheless, this incident is an example of how the logic of Prevent is often used without the formal process being triggered – it simply creates an opening for events and people to be considered ‘risky’.

The vague nature of Prevent guidance accompanied by the insinuation that Palestine solidarity activism is a precursor to violent extremist activities has allowed the Prevent Duty to be invoked by right-wing groups hostile to the politics of Palestine solidarity. This can most clearly be seen in the events of 27th October 2016, when University College London Union (UCLU) Friends of Israel hosted Hen Mazzig, a former Israeli military soldier and professional propagandist for the Israeli state, to speak on campus. The UCLU Friends of Palestine Society arranged a demonstration to counter the event. Pro-Israel groups and individuals

came to oppose the students, resulting in a confrontation. There is video footageⁱ of a pro-Israel protestor verbally attacking a Black student wearing a Palestine T-shirt, shouting 'The Home Office should follow you up. You are at risk of radicalisation'. University College London (UCL) took disciplinary action against five students associated with the Friends of Palestine Society – all of whom were students of colour and some of whom were Muslim. In the aftermath, the university administration made a recommendation that the Prevent Duty be fully integrated into the Students Union's speaker approval system. The Student Union sabbatical officers voted down the recommendation.

There have been more calculated attempts by pro-Israel organisations to use the Prevent Duty to suppress Palestine solidarity activism in universities. The group UK Lawyers for Israel has a section on its website outlining how the Prevent Duty can be used to launch complaints in order to oppose the Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions movement (BDS)ⁱⁱ or what it refers to as 'anti-Israel events' on campus. The advice includes using Prevent to demand the university administration heavily scrutinise speakers to unearth any 'extreme' views they may hold and to insist that opposing views be presented at the same event. In my experience, universities are all too willing to impose these restrictions on Palestine Society events in the name of 'balance' and 'debate' – however, this enthusiasm for neutrality dissipates when representatives of the Israeli state are given a platform on campus.

Conclusion

Despite a lack of comprehensive indicators that an individual is vulnerable to extremism, the Prevent agenda is rooted in the belief that 'non-violent extremism' leads to 'violent extremism', which means that individuals are targeted for what are essentially thought crimes. This

thought policing has, unsurprisingly, created a climate of fear around political organising in society. After a visit to the UK, Maina Kiai, the former UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, commented that he was concerned about ‘the lack of definitional clarity [in Prevent guidelines], combined with the encouragement of people to report suspicious activity have created an unease and uncertainty around what can be discussed in public’ⁱⁱⁱ. The natural result of this unease and uncertainty is the shrinking of spaces in which politics can be openly discussed – particularly on university campuses, traditionally hotbeds of political organising. Many students (particularly those identifying as Muslim or BME) feel uncomfortable discussing their politics publicly and engage in self-censorship, policing themselves so that the university doesn’t have to.

In 2009, when Prevent was in its infancy, the Institute of Race Relations published a study on the strategy (Kudnani, 2009). It found that Prevent decision-making lacks transparency and accountability, and that the atmosphere promoted by Prevent is one in which to make radical criticisms of the government and its policies is to risk losing funding and facing isolation as an ‘extremist’, whilst institutions which support the government are rewarded. These observations remain just as pertinent today, almost ten years after the study was published and seven years since the Prevent agenda’s remit was expanded by David Cameron’s Conservative government.

University administrations have used the stifling atmosphere created by Prevent to not only justify targeting Palestine solidarity and other forms of progressive activism on campuses, but also to avoid being held accountable by their student body. When SOAS and Manchester University hosted Israeli Ambassador Mark Regev (in April 2017 and

November 2017, respectively), the administrations were actively ignoring democratic votes from the student body endorsing BDS, which included boycotting representatives of the Israeli state. Prevent offers the neoliberal university a convenient way to become less democratic and less culpable for its actions – an erosion of institutional transparency which should concern people both inside and outside of academia.

Staff and student alliances are key to challenging the repressive nature of Prevent within universities: at both SOAS and Manchester, staff and students came together to organise sizeable demonstrations against Regev's presence. Cambridge University's move to force a 'neutral chair' onto a Palestine Society event received a huge public pushback from staff. These partnerships within a university environment bolster resistance and campus communities should be striving to create them where they do not already exist. Forging these relationships, as well as continuing to campaign for Palestine and other progressive causes on campus, are the best challenge to the depoliticising nature of Prevent, and a reassertion that universities will remain the space of political organising which they have always been.

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ⁱ Video footage can be viewed here:

<https://www.facebook.com/UCLPiMedia/videos/1107862479332204/>

ⁱⁱ For further information see the website of Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement:

<https://bdsmovement.net/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The statement by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association at the conclusion of his visit to the United Kingdom can be read here:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=19854&LangID=E>