Veiled Threats
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By the time this book goes to print, five years will have passed since the original research concluded. This is not perhaps unusual in academia and the temporality of my subject was something I was always conscious of. As I made clear throughout the book, the purpose of the research was to capture the discursive formations of ‘the Muslim woman’ emerging through UK public policy discourse at a particular historical moment. This research was therefore historically and geographically located; it was never conceived of as the definitive analysis of the way the idea of the Muslim woman is constructed in policy discourses in the UK. Rather, the analysis, grounded in postcolonial, intersectional feminist approaches, offered a way to understand and critique the discursive formation of gendered anti-Muslim racist rhetoric during New Labour’s final term in office and in its responses to the 7/7 London bombings through the Preventing Violent Extremism agenda. In fact, as I finalised the draft of my PhD in early 2013 it appeared that Prevent had, despite a review in 2011, fallen off the policy agenda.

Yet, as increasing numbers of young British Muslims travel to Syria and Iraq, many to join ISIS, the counter terrorism agenda has again emerged as a key political issue which David Cameron described as ‘the struggle of our generation’ (Dearden 2015). In February 2015 the Counter Terrorism and Security Bill received Royal Assent. The provisions of this Act have placed a statutory duty on a very wide range of public sector institutions, including Local Authorities, to monitor Muslims for signs of radicalisation. This means, for example, that local authority teachers are now required to officially monitor and report signs of radicalisation and extremism amongst pupils (Rao-Middleton 2015) and council officials and university staff are being similarly enlisted in an ‘increasingly expansive, pre-emptive, centralised, top-down and punitive approach’ (O’Toole 2015). In July 2015 Cameron made a speech setting out a five year plan which was followed by the publication of a new Counter Extremism Strategy in October 2015 (HM Government 2015).

This renewed interest in Prevent comes at a time when the political landscape across Europe is dominated by the issue of migration, in particular the refugee crisis arising from civil wars in Syria and Iraq. It is against this backdrop that we see the rise of anti-Muslim
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political movements such as Pegida in Germany in response to the so called Islamification of Europe.¹ There have also been very public pronouncements by elected leaders in Hungary and Poland regarding Muslim immigrants which the UN Human Rights Commission has labelled ‘xenophobic and anti-Muslim’ and in the US the Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, has called for a ban on Muslims (Miles 2015; Pilkington 2015). There has also been an increasing level of anti-Muslim racist attacks in the UK, across Europe, and in the US. And it is those women who appear as visibly Muslim who are most at risk of these attacks (Press Association 2015).

The targets of the Prevent agenda have arguably changed and its primary focus is now on young people leaving the UK to join ISIS rather than committing acts of terrorism on UK soil. At heart, however, the Prevent agenda continues to be founded on the ‘radicalisation thesis’, the idea that there is a ‘conveyor belt’ of radicalisation on which socially conservative, fundamentalist or ‘extreme’ views amongst Muslims are considered to be the precursors to ‘violent extremism’ and a willingness to perpetrate acts of terrorism. This is despite the fact that there is no clear evidence of a causal relationship between religious fundamentalism and perpetrating acts of terrorism (Kundnani 2014); there is scant evidence even of any correlation. In relation to counter extremism there appears to be little of the evidence-based policy making which characterises a variety of other policy arenas in government.

Extremism continues to be couched in ‘culturalist’ terms and adherence to the ‘wrong type of Islam’ is regarded as the principal explanation for radicalisation. Consequently, yet again, despite the government’s vociferous denunciation of ‘Islamophobia’ and frequent assertions that far-right extremism is also being targeted by the Prevent agenda, the focus remains on Muslims who continue to be regarded as collectively responsible for terrorism; and if Muslims are not directly engaged in perpetrating acts of terrorism, they are at the very least accused of ‘quietly condoning’ such acts, as David Cameron suggested in June 2015 (Morris 2015).² There have, however, been some important developments in the way Muslim women are represented in the policy discourse which signify an important departure from the Prevent agenda under New Labour.

Representing Muslim women

In the General Election of 2015 the local Labour Party in Bradford West fielded a local woman, Naz Shah, as their candidate. Her victory
brought the total number of Muslim women MPs in the British Parliament to eight. Whilst the number of Muslim women elected as MPs is encouraging, the issue of ‘representation’ remains key, both in terms of how they are portrayed and the terms with which they are engaged. For example, media coverage of Naz Shah’s campaign was dominated by her status as a ‘forced marriage survivor’ (or the ‘daughter of a murderer’ in the case of The Telegraph) whereas only cursory attention was paid to what she stood for politically. As a result, the incumbent Respect Party MP George Galloway’s defamatory counter-campaign focused on undermining her credibility through questioning whether in fact her marriage had been forced. Through this emphasis on her past experiences she was reduced to what are regarded as the ‘cultural practices’ of her ‘community’. As such it fits with one respondent’s assertion (in Chapter 4) that Muslim women were only given a voice ‘as victims or survivors, who were prepared to disclose their personal stories’.

Nor does being represented in politics necessarily equate to having political power as the vicissitudes of Baroness Warsi’s career testifies. Warsi was briefly the most senior Muslim in government. Her background is no less atypical than Naz Shah’s in terms of mainstream politicians. Lauded for being one of the most senior Tory politicians, albeit unelected, her career has been beset with controversy. Starting with the expenses scandal and a high profile divorce, she subsequently attracted the ire of her fellow Conservative party members for speaking out on controversial issues. In 2011 she spoke publicly about anti-Muslim bigotry passing the ‘dinner table test’, alluding to its casual acceptability. Cameron and other prominent Tories distanced themselves from her and Norman Tebbit wryly commented that ‘a period of silence from the Baroness might not come amiss’. It was, however, her party’s position on Palestine which led in August 2014 to her eventual resignation as a senior Minister in the Foreign Office and which Chancellor George Osborne described as a ‘disappointing and a frankly unnecessary decision’.

These instances exemplify the way that Muslim women are used in politics to achieve particular ends but are ultimately expendable (or silenced when they voice unpalatable opinions). As I discussed in Chapter 4, the terms of engagement continue to be set by predominantly white male classed agents who are quick to capitalise on having women or minorities to prove their egalitarian credentials.
Representing ‘the Muslim woman’

What has changed most profoundly since the research was conducted, however, is the explicit recognition that Muslim women and girls can be drawn into terrorism or terrorist organisations and this has altered the representation of Muslim women and girls in UK policy discourse.

In early 2015 reports of three 15-year-old British Muslim girls from the east end of London who had gone to join ISIS in Syria dominated the national and international news. These girls form part of an increasing number of British Muslims travelling to join ISIS. The original Prevent strategy and the EMW (Empowering Muslim Women) initiatives were not premised on the idea that girls and women were at risk of being drawn into terrorism; the threat was seen to emanate principally from young men. Instead, the role of women was seen as auxiliary and it was only as mothers, sisters and wives that women and girls were engaged with in the EMW initiatives, as people who might ‘prevent’ male family members from becoming involved in terrorism.

The incidence of Muslim school girls traveling to Syria sits in stark contrast to the way in which Muslim girls were presented in the EMW initiatives. The role models road show was premised on the idea that Muslim girls needed to raise their aspirations in order to achieve both academically and in the labour market. By extension this would mean that they were ‘empowered’ and in a position to combat terrorism. The three girls in East London were, however, straight-A students and their alleged contact in Syria was a privately educated Muslim girl from Scotland. If nothing else, it shows that academic potential or achievement is not necessarily a safeguard against susceptibility to radicalisation or terrorism. They exemplify the way in which Muslim girls are increasingly being characterised as both ‘dangerous’ and ‘in danger’ and are being ‘simultaneously constructed as both highly “visible” raced subjects and yet also “invisible” gendered subjects’ (Mirza 2015: 40).

The ghosts of Prevent agendas past continue to haunt the latest iteration of the Prevent strategy. Whilst the phenomenon of Muslim girls’ ‘radicalisation’ is clearly something new, policy interpretations and responses remain very gendered. Cameron makes specific references to the different ways in which Muslim youth are at risk of ISIS. He warns that, ‘If you are a girl, they will enslave and abuse you’ whereas ‘if you are a boy, they will brainwash you, strap bombs to your body and blow you up’ (Dearden 2015). As with the Prevent agenda under New Labour, the current approach relies on problematically conflating concerns about radicalisation and terrorism with those about FGM,
forced marriage, honour related violence and sharia courts. In his July 2015 speech, Cameron provides more information about the number of cases of FGM and honour based violence than he does about the number of young people that have been ‘radicalised’. In fact there are no references to the numbers involved in the latter in either his speech or the Counter Extremism Strategy published in October 2015.

Throughout this book I have pointed to the importance of intersectionality and taking into account the wider environment which ‘the Muslim woman’ inhabits. The austerity measures introduced by the Coalition government following the financial crisis have had a profound impact on the British economy and society; inequality is increasing and already marginalised groups in society are becoming ever more marginalised, with women and ethnic minorities being hit particularly hard (O’Hara 2014). Muslim women will necessarily be amongst those women and ethnic minorities affected by austerity. Arguably these cuts directly undermine some of the policy measures announced as part of the Conservatives’ counter terrorism strategy. Whilst violence against Muslim women is regularly invoked and instrumentalised in order to show the ‘backwardness’ of Muslim communities, this is not matched with a corresponding commitment to funding organisations which deal with these issues. Likewise when Cameron discusses integration in his July 2015 speech he talks about parts of the UK ‘where language remains a real barrier’ and that ‘specific action’ is required to ‘ensure people learn English’. This is, however, at the same time as deep cuts are being made in the provision of English as a Second Language services (Williams 2015).

**Preventing Prevent?**

While this book is not directly about the *causes* of ‘radicalisation’ (in as much as the phenomenon of ‘radicalisation’ exists in the simplistic manner in which it is frequently represented), having researched the role of women in the Prevent agenda between 2008 and 2010 I would nonetheless like to offer some explicit reflections on the current Counter Extremism agenda.

The Prevent agenda is based on a number of common-sense justifications for which there is little evidence. That is of course not to say that the phenomenon of young people joining ISIS does not need addressing. But in recognising this, there should be greater perspective regarding both the numbers of people who may be susceptible, as well as a clearer focus on the risk that they may or may not pose on their return to the UK. More broadly, in terms of identifying young people
who may want to go to Syria to join ISIS, the possible causes need to be established more clearly. There are a range of factors which act as pull or push factors. Determining these and acknowledging which ones can in fact be addressed is a step closer to a better, more targeted policy. Here there is a case for detailed research which tries to capture the complexity and heterogeneity of the issues involved rather than collapse together a diverse range of experiences and circumstances in the interests of political expediency. Alternative interpretations of their behaviour may well facilitate different policy responses. Such an evaluation would be able to assess whether the Prevent agenda is the best way of addressing this and whether the more strategic, tactical use of intelligence services would be more judicious.

It is worth bearing in mind that the recent phenomenon of British Muslims going to fight for ISIS has developed in spite of the existence of Prevent, suggesting that it is based on broader socio- and geo-political changes. To acknowledge this and to consider the wider political context as part of a policy response does not amount to ‘justification’ or legitimisation. But discounting such factors in this way leads to a rather crude expression of the ‘either with us or against us’ logic exemplified by both George Bush and ISIS recruiters. By perpetuating this logic, the Prevent agenda and its uncritical supporters encourage and entrench this type of binary thinking which posits unequivocal support of the government and its ‘war on terror’ on the one hand and ISIS on the other. Seeking to take into account the wider (socio-) political context is merely an admission of the complexities involved.

One plausible basis for policy making is the recognition of the need to provide a counter narrative to ISIS recruitment propaganda. In order for such a narrative to effectively compete with the Islamic utopia proffered in ISIS propaganda, however, it needs to be credible. The current focus on teaching Fundamental British Values in school is problematic. Attempts to particularise such values to Britishness could in fact be alienating. Furthermore, the various asymmetries and contradictions of the way in which concepts such as ‘freedom of expression’ and ‘universal human rights’ are invoked reduces the credibility of potentially powerful counternarratives. For example, as Europe was rocked by the terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen in 2015, the issue of freedom of speech once again took centre stage as another fault line between the West and the rest, between them and us. Freedom of expression is framed as a Western ideal threatened by ISIS. Yet there are a myriad ways in which UK’s counterterrorism policies themselves curb freedom of expression.
Shortly before the Counter Terrorism and Security Act became law a concession was made in response to protests by universities that some of the provisions of the legislation conflicted with academic freedom. The former director of public prosecutions, Lord Macdonald, said the Home Office concession was an important acknowledgement by the government that the new powers could conflict with their freedom of expression duties and might mitigate its impact. He also warned that ‘the current official ‘working definition’ of non-violent extremism, which talks of opposition to fundamental British values, would be hopeless when it came to be applied’ (Travis 2015).

Whilst this represents a victory of sorts, it comes in the context of the widespread silencing of alternative perspectives on radicalisation and the question of what draws young British Muslims to perpetrate acts of terrorism, both here in the UK and abroad. Such voices are seen as apologists for terrorism or as condoning such activities. The debate regarding radicalisation therefore remains stilted and effectively censored and there is a reluctance to consider even the remote possibility that any of the young people who have been drawn to ISIS could be politically motivated and that this is a form, however dangerous or misguided, of political agency or youthful rebellion.

There has been a considerable amount of lurid and sensationalist speculation as to the reasons for young girls in particular joining ISIS. The reasons proffered have ranged from: the use of attractive jihadis to lure girls; Nutella and kittens according to CNN; and the perennial appeal of the ‘bad boy’ (Itkowitz 2015; Alibhai-Brown 2015). What such explanations share, however, is the failure to take into account any agency on the part of the girls, which once again builds on the way in which Muslim women and girls are superficially drawn as only ever being victims or survivors.

Many commentators have been perplexed that girls brought up in the ‘West’, with all the alleged freedoms that this affords them, would choose to live in a state where they would only ever be seen in an auxiliary role as brides, wives and mothers. These girls’ experiences of growing up in the UK, however, will have been affected by the fact that they are Muslim and in many cases visibly so. The negative experiences of girls and women wearing the veil has been well documented (Allen et al 2013) in terms of discrimination and racial violence, but less is known about the longer term impact of these experiences on aspirations and life chances. They are not able to participate in ‘the new sexual contract’ (McRobbie 2009) which I discussed in Chapter 5. As otherwise intelligent and academically successful girls, perhaps they know that, despite their ‘A’ grades, there will be a shortfall between
what such academic credentials might entitle them to and what their ethnicity and religious identity is more than likely to deny them. It would of course be too simplistic and deterministic to suggest that such marginalisation on its own is sufficient to drive someone to engage in terrorist activities or seek to join ISIS. It may be one of a number of contributory factors none of which are sufficient on their own to be decisive. Beyond this debate, however, more important is surely the fact that any such marginalisation arising from anti-Muslim racism and discrimination is an issue of concern in itself in terms of social justice and wasted opportunities.

And while integration is frequently talked about in relation to whether minority communities make enough of an effort to integrate, there is very little public discussion about the environment into which they are being asked to do so. When Muslim girls are being ‘criminalised and demonised as the new female folk devils’ (Mirza 2015: 42) both in the media and in social policy discourses and when Muslim women who wear the veil are being seen as targets for racial abuse and violence, then the ‘lack of integration’ must be framed to take into account this hostile environment.

This book argues that not only are the measures implemented as part of Prevent likely to be ineffective, there are also adverse consequences to the underlying narrative in the form of legitimating anti-Muslim rhetoric and anti-Muslim racism. This can be seen in the suspicion with which young Muslims who are politically active are treated in schools (Khan 2015). But more broadly, the association of Prevent with every other social problem or criminal activity which involves Muslims contributes to and legitimates anti-Muslim rhetoric. A policy agenda as nebulous as Prevent, which legitimates anti-Muslim rhetoric and thus makes potentially vulnerable people feel more excluded, is not conducive to addressing the issue.

The aim of the research on which this book is based was to look at the discursive production of ‘the Muslim woman’ at a particular historical conjuncture. Despite changes in the policy landscape I maintain that the analytical approach remains pertinent beyond the scope of the historical and geopolitical specificities of the Prevent agenda. I am, however, more pessimistic than I was when I initially completed the research.

As the Prevent agenda has become ever more insidious and problematic, and its remit broader and increasingly tenacious, it continues to discursively produce and legitimate anti-Muslim racism partially through recourse to instrumentalising feminism. There is clear evidence of this, not only as part of the growth of far right
movements but also in society more generally. In a piece published in 2011 I wrote that:

The consequences of framing social problems with reference to religion alone and perpetuating dehumanizing stereotypes of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ will have negative effects on the very women that such initiatives purport to assist. This may be through increasing incidents of racial violence, as evidenced in Europe with incidents of ‘burka rage’ or through increasing discrimination in employment. (Rashid 2011)

If Muslim women were the focus of anti-Muslim racist attacks before, when their primary representation was as victims within their communities oppressed by the uniquely patriarchal nature of Islam, the current situation with (visibly) Muslim women and girls joining ISIS will unfortunately make Muslim women more of a target than ever before.

Notes
1 Attempts are currently being made to establish a branch of Pegida in the UK.
2 David Cameron was speaking at a security conference in Slovakia. The timing of his comments, just as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan was about to begin, was seen as particularly insensitive.
3 Speech in Birmingham 20 July 2015, full transcript available (Dearden 2015)
4 This can be seen in the high profile campaigns against closure by organisations such as Apna Haq (Dugan 2015).
5 Yasmin Alibhai-Brown suggests that “messianic fervour, millenarianism and magnetism can whip up female hormones alarmingly.”
6 More measured analysis can be found in the work of Katherine Brown (Brown 2014).