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The suspect citizen: Institutional Islamophobia, prevent, and the British Muslim experience

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Abstract

This article examines British Muslim experiences of the UK's Prevent counter-terrorism strategy, drawing on 18 qualitative interviews in London and Birmingham. It argues that Prevent contributes to the racialisation and securitisation of Muslims, reinforcing their image as a 'suspect community', which aligns with existing critiques of counter-terrorism policies being discriminatory and Islamophobic. However, the study emphasises the diversity within Muslim responses, identifying reactions of *rejection, justification*, and *ambivalence*, thus moving beyond monolithic portrayals. It highlights how intersectional factors such as race, gender (particularly for Muslims of colour and veiled women), and socio-political context shape these interactions. Furthermore, the research challenges simplistic state-versus-community views by acknowledging variations in how Prevent is implemented locally and recognising the agency of Muslims in negotiating and resisting the policy. This study advocates for refining the 'suspect community' concept through an intersectional, context-sensitive lens that captures internal diversity and lived complexity.

Keywords

gender, Islamophobia, Muslims, prevent, racialisation, securitisation

Introduction

In response to the events of 9/11 and, notably, the Madrid and London bombings, Western governments shifted their focus to the perceived threat of 'home-grown' terrorism and implemented counter-terrorism policies that adapt to the changed security climate and risk perception. In the case of the United Kingdom, British authorities revisited and adapted existing legal provisions, drawing on the experience of Irish terrorism in the late

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twentieth century and previous political measures, for example, the Prevention of Terrorism Act 1974 and the Prevention of Terrorism Act 1989 (Home Office, 1974, 1989). CONTEST integrated these powers into an overarching counter-terrorism strategy based on four pillars: Prevent, Pursue, Protect, and Prepare (HM Government, 2023b). Within the CONTEST framework, Prevent holds special importance for both policymakers and public discourses, particularly due to its engagement with Muslim communities and its focus on individual processes of radicalisation. However, the close association of security and British values often blurs the lines between conservative Muslim practices and violent extremism, framing Islam as radical and dangerous (Martin, 2021). In particular, the Prevent duty has become highly contested because of the constraints it places on freedom of speech (Abbas et al., 2023; Whiting et al., 2024; Zempi and Tripli, 2023).

The disproportionate impact these measures have on British Muslim citizens has been explored under the umbrella of the 'suspect community' paradigm. Critical scholarship within this framework reflects how counter-terrorism measures, such as racial profiling, CCTV surveillance, stop and search measures, and increased security screenings at airports and borders, target not only radicalised individuals but the broader Muslim community (Beaman, 2023; Choudhury, 2021). This study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on suspect communities and counter-terrorism by questioning how British Muslims experience Prevent and how they make sense of their encounters. In doing so, it undertakes to explore mechanisms through which Prevent racialises and securitises Muslim identities. Crucially, however, it also hopes to challenge generalising accounts of a homogeneous Muslim suspect community that overlook the diverse ways in which British Muslims choose to engage with Prevent. This article therefore aims not to discard the 'suspect community' paradigm, but to refine it. By applying an intersectional lens to the empirical data, it seeks to provide a more nuanced framework that can account for the heterogeneity of experience and agency within the community. The article is based on 18 interviews that were conducted with British Muslims in Birmingham and London between July 2023 and March 2024.

The construction of suspect citizens

British Muslims' perceptions of Prevent take place within a broader context of minority-majority relations in a postcolonial space. The following section seeks to better contextualise the research question within this framework by (1) summarising important trends in the ever-evolving landscape of British counter-terrorism and (2) situating Muslim experiences of Prevent within the existing literature on the 'suspect community' paradigm.

Preventing violent extremism in the British approach to counter-terrorism

Between 2001 and 2020, the United Kingdom recorded 1279 terrorist incidents, with 27 attributed to 'jihadi-inspired extremists', causing 107 deaths and 1097 injuries. The 7/7 London attacks alone accounted for 56 deaths and 784 injuries (Global Terrorism Database, 2024). Responding particularly to 9/11 and 7/7, authorities adapted existing laws, drawing on experience with Irish terrorism and acts like the Prevention of Terrorism Acts 1974/1989 (Home Office, 1974, 1989, 2004). Historically, these policies used emergency language, speeding adoption with less scrutiny (Neal, 2012). The Terrorism Act 2000 institutionalised exceptional powers, normalising emergency conditions (Neal, 2012). Its key powers include warrantless arrest on suspicion, property searches,

stop-and-search authority, port/airport controls, and mandatory data retention (Home Office, 2000). Criticised as disproportionate and targeting South Asians (Walker, 2008), it is constrained by the Human Rights Act 1998 (Gearty, 2005). Similarly, the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 enabled indeterminate detention of foreign nationals without trial (Fenwick, 2002; Home Office, 2004) and extended police powers beyond specific terror threats (Fenwick, 2002).

Post-9/11, the CONTEST strategy integrated these powers under four pillars: Prevent, Pursue, Protect, Prepare (HM Government, 2023b). Prevent gained prominence, especially concerning Muslim communities. The 2011 Prevent strategy focused on ideology, radicalisation prevention, and institutional collaboration (HM Government, 2011). Its community engagement focus shifted cohesion efforts into a counter-terrorism framework (Home Affairs Committee, 2005), leading to the securitisation of these policies and minorities (Abbas, 2019b; O'Toole et al., 2016). Initially focusing only on Islamist extremism, this stigmatised Muslim communities, fostering social exclusion (Thomas, 2020). While the 2011 Prevent Review included other extremisms and separated cohesion projects, its shift from communities to individuals and emphasis on 'British values' constructed Muslim beliefs as 'un-British', securitising Muslim identity (Thomas, 2020: 17). Linking security and British values blurs lines between conservative Islam and extremism (Martin, 2021). This risk management logic (Mythen, 2020) uses '(un)safe' identities to govern uncertain futures, aiming to transform Muslim subjects into governable ones (Martin, 2021). Prevent acts as biopolitics, managing minorities and preserving white privilege (Abbas, 2020; Ali, 2020), seen in framing minorities as threats or labelling white terrorists like Thomas Mair 'lone wolves' (Ali, 2020). Despite criticism, Prevent has seen policy shifts and internal contestation and allows local implementation freedom (Heath-Kelly, 2024; Thomas, 2017, 2020).

Within Prevent, Channel (piloted 2007, national 2012) is key (HM Government, 2023a; Pettinger, 2020). It aims to halt radicalisation via referrals to a panel and tailored interventions based on risk assessments (engagement, intent, capability) (HM Government, 2012, 2023a). However, the referral threshold is low, with many cases posing no actual risk (Pettinger, 2020). Furthermore, risk indicators lack sufficient empirical backing and often include markers of Muslim identity/practice (Mythen, 2020). Beyond Prevent, the United Kingdom used citizenship deprivation as a counter-terrorism tool, notably via the 2014 Immigration Bill (Arnell, 2020; Paulussen and van Waas, 2014). The Shamima Begum case highlighted the racialised nature of this practice, enabled by her background (Masters and Regilme, 2020). Revoking citizenship for foreign fighters creates a two-tier system where minority citizenship is conditional. Such an arrangement acts as biopolitics, managing minorities and preserving white privilege by limiting full citizenship rights (Masters and Regilme, 2020). The 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, responding to ISIS and foreign fighters (Blackbourn and Walker, 2016), introduced temporary exclusion orders and legally mandated the Prevent duty (UK Government Legislation, 2015). This duty requires agencies like schools to refer individuals susceptible to terrorism (HM Government, 2023d), thereby securitising welfare/education, creating surveillance, impacting free speech, and outsourcing counter-terrorism to civil servants (Jerome et al., 2020; Zempi and Tripli, 2023).

Research shows the Prevent duty creates fear and silences Muslim students through self-censorship (Abbas et al., 2023). It increases scrutiny, securitises Muslim identity markers (e.g. clothing), discourages activism, and causes anxiety, negatively impacting mental health and academic freedom by encouraging universities to police critical thought

(Abbas et al., 2023; Whiting et al., 2024; Zempi and Tripli, 2023). Critics argue it institutionalises minority surveillance and constrains free speech (Whiting et al., 2021). The 2015 Act's Prevent duty reflects a broader UK counter-terrorism shift from prosecution towards pre-emption. This strategy increases risks like false positives, wrongful arrests, and potentially lethal force (e.g. Jean Charles de Menezes) (Heath-Kelly, 2012). This pre-emptive approach and minority securitisation stem from colonial counter-insurgency roots (Sabir, 2017). Its legacy includes securitising civil sectors, warrantless arrests, indeterminate detention, and criminalising thought (Miller and Sabir, 2012). Consequently, British Muslims experience counter-terrorism in a political environment associating their identity with terrorism and securitising public sectors via the Prevent duty. This context, shaped by colonial legacies, involves measures seeking to control and regulate minority bodies, including through surveillance (Miller and Sabir, 2012; Sabir, 2017).

The suspect community paradigm

The 'suspect community' paradigm can be traced back to the work of Pantazis and Pemberton, who apply Hillyard's research on Irish communities to the post-9/11 context (Hillyard, 1993; Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009, 2011). It is a critique of government strategies that cast the entire Muslim community as potential suspects, securitising Muslim identity and subsequently isolating and marginalising Muslim individuals (Abbas, 2019b, 2021; Awan, 2012; Cherney and Hartley, 2017; Heath-Kelly, 2013; Mythen et al., 2013). This conceptualisation has been theorised by Marie Breen-Smyth (2014) as a community created by the 'securitised imagination' and enacted through a process of 'othering' in security practices, where boundaries are permeable and shifting. One example of this approach is the implementation of community policing as a counter-terrorism strategy and the engagement of Muslims in the fight against terrorism (Spalek, 2013; Spalek and Lambert, 2008; Yazdiha, 2023). While these policies seek to encourage active citizenship and combat the indiscriminate treatment of Muslims as the 'enemy within', they inadvertently perpetuate Islamophobic biases, framing mosques as hotbeds of radicalisation (Bonino, 2013). Developed in the United Kingdom, community policing seeks to establish collaborative police-community partnerships to proactively address public safety issues, increase trust in police institutions, and empower local communities (Bullock and Leeney, 2013). Drawing on a long tradition of community engagement, the United Kingdom early on integrated community policing into its counter-terrorism strategy (Klausen, 2009). While community policing for counter-terrorism purposes seeks to empower local actors and encourage the self-policing of Muslim communities, it is problematic in that it contributes to the increasing securitisation of civil life and associates Islam with radicalisation.

Other aspects of counter-terrorism that are highlighted by the 'subject community' paradigm as disproportionately affecting Muslims include police stops and searches, airport screenings, heightened police presence in and around Muslim neighbourhoods and meeting points, and increased surveillance, which, in turn, erode trust in law enforcement and state institutions (Awan, 2016; Medina Ariza, 2014; Qurashi, 2018; Spalek, 2011). They are part of a broader strategy aimed at controlling Muslim subjects, rooted in colonial practices designed to restrict the political agency of the non-white other (Qurashi, 2018). An example of this racialised practice was the hidden, indiscriminate surveillance of a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood in Birmingham under Project Champion

(Awan, 2011; Isakjee and Allen, 2013). Empirical research further shows that the experience of being stopped by police officers contributes to feelings of being stigmatised and treated as a suspect, increasing levels of distrust in police institutions (Murphy and McPherson, 2022). Racial profiling is not only problematic because it reinforces the stereotyping of Muslims as potential terrorists but also because it prevents the establishment of police-community partnerships which rely on trust and perceived procedural justice (Murphy and McPherson, 2022).

These measures, along with the discourses that attempt to legitimise them, are not only internalised by the non-Muslim majority, resulting in increased Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crimes (Balazard and Peace, 2023; Kallis, 2023), but also by British Muslims themselves, eroding intracommunal trust and stigmatising certain expressions of Muslim identity (Abbas, 2019a). This stigmatisation is not only problematic because government policies alienate Muslim citizens but also because they reinforce religion as a primary identity marker, potentially reifying religious identities and serving as a push factor into radicalisation (Appleby, 2010). Qualitative and quantitative research seem to support these existing findings. As a non-exhaustive overview of past empirical research studies shows, Muslim participants report a perceived need to self-censor their speech to align with what is constructed as acceptable (Abbas et al., 2023; Whiting and et al, 2021, 2024) and a constant feeling of surveillance and stigmatisation by politicians, the media, and the public (Mythen et al., 2013; Choudhury, 2021). Stop-and-search policies, in particular, are mentioned as negatively affecting their everyday lives, well-being, and perceived safety (Mythen et al., 2013).

On the other hand, the 'suspect community' paradigm has not gone without criticism. One of its most prominent critics, Greer, argues in his response to Pantazis and Pemberton that while Islamophobia is a problem in the United Kingdom, it is not clear whether anti-Muslim racism is a consequence of counter-terrorism policies, nor is there sufficient evidence that these measures are, in fact, anti-Muslim (Greer, 2010). Among the flaws he identifies in Pantazis and Pemberton's work are a lack of empirical evidence, an oversimplification of Muslims as a homogeneous community, a blurring of lines between racism and Islamophobia, and a downplaying of the threat posed by jihadist terrorism (Greer, 2010). With his criticism, Greer situates himself within a broader tradition of orthodox terrorism studies which emphasises the reality of the terrorist threat, which is traced back to Islamism as the primary pull factor leading to radicalisation (Hoffman, 2017; Richardson, 2006; Sageman, 2017; Wilkinson, 2001). Policing Muslim communities then transforms from a discriminatory practice into a political necessity to safeguard national security. Greer is not alone in his criticism. Drawing on fieldwork with young Muslim men, Mac an Ghaill and Haywood challenge the binary opposition of potential terrorist vs victim of anti-Muslim biases, which is imposed on their research subjects and robs them of the chance to define for themselves who they are (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2021). Another common critique is the treatment of Muslims as one homogeneous community, which ignores the diverse ways in which Muslims choose to engage with counter-terrorism measures (Ragazzi, 2016). Moreover, it has been noted that an overgeneralised understanding of counter-terrorism as inherently Islamophobic ignores internal contestations within government agencies and important policy shifts which have been adopted over the years in response to prominent critiques (Thomas, 2017, 2020). These critiques highlight a crucial gap: the need for a framework that acknowledges the discriminatory

Table 1. List of participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Citizenship
Bilal	19	Pakistani	Male	Dual
Karim	27	Syrian	Male	Foreign resident
Zara	27	Pakistani	Female	Foreign resident
Hina	26	Pakistani	Female	Foreign resident
Sana	19	Pakistani	Female	Triple
Rachid	29	Moroccan	Male	Foreign resident
Farhana	36	Bangladeshi	Female	Single
Imran	43	Indian	Male	Single
Nizam	20	Sri Lankan	Male	Dual
Tamer	33	Iraqi	Male	Single
Farhan	21	Pakistani	Male	Single
Nimra	21	Pakistani	Female	Single
Hamza	31	Pakistani	Male	Dual
Usman	18	Pakistani	Male	Single
Aylin	28	Turkish Cypriot, American	Female	Triple
Amr	28	Egyptian	Male	Foreign resident
Saira	39	Indian	Female	Dual
Zubair	32	Pakistani	Male	Single

power of counter-terrorism while accounting for the heterogeneity of experience and agency within the targeted community. This study aims to address that gap.

Methods

This article draws on 18 semi-structured interviews conducted online via Zoom between 31 July 2023 and 13 March 2024. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Research participants were based in the broader metropolitan areas of London and Birmingham. They were recruited through personal contacts, student societies, interreligious platforms, and social media channels. Based on the initial contacts established through these channels, snowballing was employed as a technique to recruit additional participants. The resulting sample exhibited diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, social class, and citizenship status (see Table 1 for a detailed overview).

During the interviews, a flexible semi-structured interview guide consisting of 12 core questions was used, allowing participants to shape the conversation and highlight themes they found most relevant. These questions were designed to probe perceptions of discrimination, personal encounters with surveillance, views on law enforcement, and feelings of inclusion or exclusion. All interviews were recorded (with consent), transcribed, and subsequently pseudonymised to ensure confidentiality. Recordings were deleted post-transcription, and any identifying information was stored securely in non-digital form.

The project received ethical approval by the University Ethics Committee and strictly adhered to the guidelines in place, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Special attention was given to the role of the researcher, ensuring transparency about the researcher's positionality and intersectional power dynamics. Data saturation was achieved after 18 interviews when no new relevant information emerged. The low number of participants is consistent with qualitative research

principles, which prioritise the in-depth understanding of individual experiences and the narratives through which participants make sense of their lives, rather than statistical generalisability. Internal validity was strengthened through triangulation, involving a diverse sample, iterative coding, critical self-reflection, and the use of policy documents and NGO reports to contextualise participants' accounts.

The transcripts were analysed through a three-step process: first, key thematic categories were inductively developed from the data; second, these were coded and then analysed in relation to participants' intersectional identities; and third, typologies were constructed to classify patterns of response and structure the findings.

Results

Across gender and ethnic differences, research participants were outspoken in their criticism of Prevent as reinforcing the stigmatisation and securitisation of British Muslim identity and constructing British Muslims as a suspect community. Eight issues were brought up as particularly problematic.

First, a significant number of participants perceived the existing counter-terrorism framework as unbalanced and one-sided, disproportionately targeting Muslims (Mythen, 2020). This perception became particularly pronounced when comparing the resources dedicated to fighting Islamist terrorism with those allocated to other religious groups and forms of political and religious extremism, such as the rise of the far right. It is not the measures themselves but the impression that other groups are not subjected to the same scrutiny that creates a deep-seated feeling of injustice and erodes trust in and support for counter-terrorism legislation (Whiting et al., 2024):

> It feels that the British Muslim communities are marginalised, that they're picked on, but other communities that push out forms of extremes and, recently, the Hindu community as well, with recent events in India, have not had that same scrutiny in the sense that we've had it. And I feel that you can't have a hierarchy of extremism. It needs to be dealt with properly for all forms of extremism. (Imran)

Second, participants complained about a lack of genuine randomness in stop and search procedures, selection bias at security checks, and racial profiling, regardless of whether they had personally experienced these controls or only heard about them (Elsheikh et al., 2023). Again, the criticism was not directed at the controls themselves, which were considered legitimate ways to apprehend suspicious individuals, but at the fact that they primarily target Muslim and brown individuals. While numerous women reported being singled out during airport controls because their hijab is a visible symbol of their religious identity, men attributed the disproportionate number of stop-and-search controls they had experienced on the streets to their skin colour rather than their religion, highlighting the overlap of racism and anti-Muslim stereotypes and the gendered nature of the experience of counter-terrorism measures. As Sana shared,

> One time, I and my family were going to America on holiday . . . And the people in Dublin Airport said, We want to stop and search 10 % of the flight, and it's a random check. And that 10 % of the flight was me, my older sister, and my mom, who all wear hijab and are all from the same family. So obviously, that's not random. (Sana)

Third, research participants criticised the indicators of radicalisation as presented in the Prevent duty guidelines, which often establish a direct link between Islam and terrorism and reproduce stereotypes (Elsheikh et al., 2023; Martin, 2021; Whiting et al., 2024; Zempi and Tripli, 2023). For example, regular prayer, growing a beard, or starting to wear a hijab rank among the top criteria that justify a referral to Prevent officers, securitising Muslim identity and creating the impression that the Muslim community as a whole is being treated as potential suspects. These discourses are then proliferated through news coverage, highlighting the profound link between government policies and the media. Elaborating on the Prevent training she had to participate in while still at secondary school, Nimra remembered,

> 'One of the videos they showed us was about recognising if you think your friends are falling into extremism. And it would give examples like If your friend does this' or If your friend does this, maybe you should report. And it was like literally directly reporting to Prevent, but everything that was mentioned was like if they start growing a beard, if they start reading the Qur'an more, so I was like, 'Okay, yeah, so it's definitely very biased'. (Nimra)

A similar experience was shared by Saira, an NHS worker who had to do Prevent training as part of her job:

> So, for example, one of the criteria was a sudden change in appearance; you know, if somebody starts wearing a headscarf, for example, that could be an indicator of radicalisation, which, you know, is Islamophobic. It's racist. It's stereotyping people, you know. Whether it's the headscarf – I don't wear it anymore – but to think that, actually, that would be a marker for me being radicalised is absolutely absurd. (Saira)

Fourth, some testimonies have remarked on a lack of clarity, guidance, and training for those involved in the implementation of Prevent (Mythen, 2020; Whiting et al., 2021). This vagueness affects not only those responsible for implementing the Prevent duty but also students, patients, and others at the recipient end, who are unsure what they are allowed to say and what not to say, contributing to a general climate of fear. Existing criteria were considered arbitrary and highly subjective and not sufficiently backed by empirical and scientific evidence. As Imran, a Prevent practitioner, remarked,

> I've been doing Prevent training, and it just, it just feels very woolly . . . It's pseudoscience, isn't it? You know, if I hypothetically say something to you now, you could go, Oh, I might need to report Imran. Now the question is, What I say may not be extreme, but in your eyes it could be. (Imran)

In addition, this lack of empirical backing translates into general uncertainty about the actual effects of Prevent and the related Channel programme. Saira went on to ask:

> What impact has it actually made? So, you know, that isn't widely, widely shared either – to see what the benefits of just this programme are, you know, is it actually achieving what it sets out to achieve, which is de-radicalisation? I don't know the answer. (Saira)

Fifth, while Prevent emphasises involving the broader Muslim community and its stakeholders in an attempt to treat them as partners rather than suspects, the policies were perceived as being implemented in a top-down approach that fails to consider the concerns and perspectives of community members (Ahmed et al., 2021):

> The fact is that for the last 20 years, Muslims have not been brought into it [Prevent]. It's like in any organisation. If there's change, you have to bring people along with you. If you haven't brought people along with you for 20 years, then obviously they're going to be very suspicious . . . [T]he government takes a very parent-child relationship . . . and that needs to transition into a more mature adult-to-adult relationship. (Tamer).

Where engagement does occur, it singles out organisations perceived as moderate and on the 'good Muslim' end of the spectrum, sidelining large segments of the population and resulting in a lack of buy-in:

> Yes, there are initiatives with the government engaging with certain community organisations, but then we see that it is a selective engagement. So, for example, the government has a policy of non-engagement with the Muslim Council of Britain, which is one of the largest umbrella bodies of mosques in the UK, you know, and if you're going to disengage with the largest body or organisation, that really sets the tone for how seriously you want to engage with the Muslim community. (Saira)

Sixth, participants criticised the focus on Islamism as a push factor into radicalisation, dismissing structural and socio-economic root causes (Abbas, 2021). These include not only poverty and lack of education but also Western foreign policy engagement in the Middle East and experiences of discrimination:

> And a lot of these issues are linked, if you think about it, from, you know, COVID to Brexit to the cost-of-living prices to Prevent to Islamophobia to 9/11. I mean, the list just goes on . . . But if you tie the issues together from, you know, a lack of adequate housing, lack of social justice, education, social care, you know, medical care, all of these things tie in together. 'You can't have one without the other'. (Farhana)

Seventh, counter-terrorism policies were blamed for increasing the polarisation of British society, pitting parts of the population against one another and creating division (Abbas, 2020):

> And we just feel that the way Prevent kind of has been created is just that it doesn't serve the needs of the community but creates a them vs. us situation. (Imran)

Finally, some participants understood Prevent as a politicised tool that serves to redirect attention away from structural and socio-economic issues, feeding into the perception that government policies are motivated by hidden political agendas:

> I think in some way, I think, Prevent, it kind of lost its way. I think it's used as a political tool. (Imran)

At the same time, however, many research participants also defended existing counter-terrorism frameworks or at least expressed a certain degree of understanding. For example, participants pointed out that while counter-terrorism measures might disproportionately target Muslims, this imbalance stems from the unfortunate fact that, statistically speaking, this group is more likely than other religious or cultural minorities to radicalise and thus presents a very real threat that needs to be countered, even at the expense of non-radicalised co-believers:

> I do think that there are issues within the community . . . that need to be addressed, and sometimes it frustrates me that the Muslim community doesn't always address these things . . . And so I think there are kind of valid concerns in trying to maybe police communities. I think there is an issue. (Aylin)

The need for severe and strict measures to combat terrorism was often justified by highlighting that Muslims were frequently the primary victims of terrorist attacks due to the way such attacks fuel Islamophobic hate crimes and sentiments. In addition, it was repeatedly pointed out that the use of violence was diametrically opposed to Islam, making the fight against terrorism a primary concern for all 'true' believers:

> You need to fight terrorism. Because the majority of Muslims would say it's against our beliefs. (Nizam)

The British approach, with its heavy reliance on community engagement, has been praised in this context. The direct cooperation with mosques and Islamic associations was seen not only as the most effective way to combat terrorism but also as a means of promoting better government-community relationships and encouraging dialogue across society as a whole:

> That is necessary, and that's important because discussion is the start of all this coexistence. (Nimra)

Moreover, there was an acknowledgement that counter-terrorism measures do not only label Muslims as suspects but also protect them from the growing threat of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim far-right extremism. Referring to a prevented attack on a pro-Palestine demonstration, Usman shared,

> And they were stopped. So, yes, they're doing some good work and maybe better relatively than in other countries. (Usman)

While weaknesses were acknowledged, participants also expressed the view that out of all possible scenarios, Prevent has proved to be the best and least discriminatory option available:

> I don't think it's a strategy that's perfect, but I don't see, without having studied the topic, what other possibilities there would be. I mean, sure, it's not great, but I think it's better than nothing. (Aylin)

However, despite a substantial number of participants expressing some support for counter-terrorism measures as such, it was their implementation that often became the subject of criticism:

> I think, in theory, it's something that I understand. I think it could work; it could be a good idea. I think the impact of this, however, is that it likely tends to discriminate against one group more than another. (Farhan)

General tendencies identified in the testimonies concur with criticism commonly expressed in the 'suspect community' literature, especially as it relates to the

securitisation and stigmatisation of Muslim identity through the indiscriminate treatment of Muslims as subjects vulnerable to radicalisation. However, the paradigm fails to fully capture the range of views and nuances introduced by the participants. In particular, it fails to account for Muslim voices who partially or fully support Prevent. It appears that British Muslims do not only have markedly different experiences of counter-terrorism, but even where they were subject to the same practices, they interpret these encounters in strikingly varied ways through a complex process of meaning-making. This observed diversity of life stories and narrative accounts emphasises the necessity to move beyond the 'suspect community' paradigm and introduce an intersectional lens of analysis that challenges the often implicitly assumed homogeneity of British Muslim suspect experiences underpinning much of the 'suspect community' literature.

Discussion

The dominant literature on the effects of counter-terrorism on British Muslims highlights discriminatory and Islamophobic biases, such as indiscriminate mass surveillance, the stigmatisation of Muslim communities through community engagement, and the association of religious markers with radicalisation through the Prevent duty (Abbas et al., 2023; Ali, 2020; Mythen, 2020 Jackson, 2024). The latter, in particular, has been accused of perpetuating anti-Muslim stereotypes and undermining academic freedom and freedom of speech, with Muslim students reporting pressure to self-censor their contributions to debates in classrooms and appear 'less Muslim' (Abbas et al., 2023; Whiting and et al, 2021, 2024; Zempi and Tripli, 2023). As existing research on Prevent has repeatedly highlighted, the indiscriminate securitisation of Muslim identity through existing counter-terrorism frameworks contributes to the construction of Muslims as a suspect community which is disproportionately targeted by security measures because of their religious affiliation (Awan, 2012; Hickman et al., 2012; Mythen, 2012; Yazdiha, 2023). The stigmatisation of Muslim communities within the logic of Prevent is often attributed to counter-terrorism being rooted in colonial counter-insurgency practices and systemic forms of racism that seek to reproduce white hegemonic privilege; Prevent then becomes a form of biopolitics in an attempt to control and govern the religious and ethnic other (Abbas, 2020; Ali, 2020; Miller and Sabir, 2012). It is a way of managing and regulating brown bodies in a postcolonial space which continues to be marked by asymmetric power relations.

An interpretative analysis of the testimonies established three different response categories (see Figure 1):

Category 1 (rejection): The data gathered for this research project revealed a strong perception among British Muslims that Prevent disproportionately targets their communities, reinforcing stigmatisation and suspicion. The Prevent duty was seen as particularly problematic because of its framing of religious identity as indicative of radicalisation and its vague guidelines which contribute to uncertainty about what is considered acceptable speech and behaviour. Participants further criticised related measures for focusing overwhelmingly on Islamist extremism while neglecting other forms of extremism such as far-right violence. This selective emphasis, they argued, constructs Islam as a primary push factor into radicalisation while ignoring structural drivers like discrimination, socio-economic marginalisation, and Western foreign

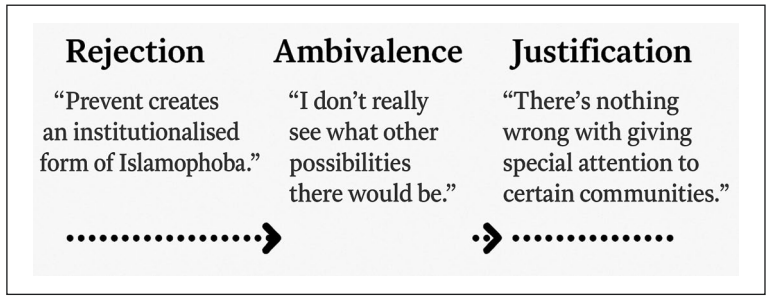

Figure 1. British Muslim responses to prevent.

policy. Prevent's approach to community engagement was also a point of contention. Many interviewees saw it as a top-down imposition rather than a genuine partnership, with key Muslim organisations – such as the Muslim Council of Britain – excluded from meaningful participation. Some believed Prevent served a political function, diverting attention from broader social issues and silencing critical voices.

Category 2 (ambivalence): A second group occupied a middle ground: while critical of Prevent's Islamophobic underpinnings, they acknowledged efforts by local practitioners to implement it fairly. They also expressed uncertainty over viable alternatives. The underlying argument was that Prevent disproportionately impacted and stigmatised British Muslims, but that this was a necessary price to pay in order to ensure public safety for lack of alternative approaches.

Category 3 (justification): While these points of criticism align with dominant scholarship on the 'suspect community' paradigm, perspectives on Prevent were not uniform. Some participants were unfamiliar with the programme and had – to their own knowledge – not personally been exposed to it. Others defended Prevent, arguing that radicalisation is a genuine problem within certain Muslim communities and requires intervention. In both cases, research participants supported measures installed under Prevent as proportionate and necessary.

These divergent experiences suggest that while Prevent has reinforced the securitisation of Muslim identity, it is neither monolithic and static nor is its impact universally experienced as discriminatory and reinforcing anti-Muslim biases. The remainder of this article will further explore this diversity of experiences and views.

Counter-terrorism as intersectional experience

The participants' testimonies grouped within category 1 (rejection) illustrate how Prevent contributes to the construction of British Muslims as a suspect community. By disproportionately focusing on Muslims, the programme securitises Muslim identity, presenting religious affiliation as a potential security threat. As participants' stories reflect, this process is highly racialised and gendered, reinforcing broader structures of exclusion. Racialisation operates through the association of specific racial markers with Muslim identity, particularly for South Asian communities, resulting in the over-policing of ethnic minorities (Ali, 2020; Choudhury, 2021). This disproportionate targeting is reflected in

official statistics. As the Home Office quarterly update to March 2023 details, of the stops and searches carried out under Section 43 of the Terrorism Act 2000, 32% of the individuals were white, 33% were Asian, and 17% were Black (Home Office Statistical Bulletin, 2023). These statistics correspond with testimonies coded within category 1 that problematise experiences of racial profiling and the disproportionate targeting by security personnel at airports and border checks. As these personal encounters demonstrate, counter-terrorism measures make racialised bodies hypervisible within security frameworks and present them as inherently risky.

The gendered dimension reflects the particular suspect experience of Muslim women, in particular those who choose to veil, who find themselves caught in a dual bind, as they are simultaneously portrayed as vulnerable subjects in need of protection and as potential extremists (Rashid, 2024). This stigmatisation becomes particularly evident in the discourse framing of female foreign fighters as 'jihadi brides' who are either infantilised as passive victims of male manipulation or vilified as monsters who failed as mothers and daughters (Martini, 2018; Rashid, 2024). The securitisation of the hijab as a symbol of subversive and dangerous feminine identity renders female bodies hypervisible (Curinier et al., 2024; Khokhar, 2022). As a consequence, Muslim women are not only more susceptible to counter-terrorism measures – all female participants who chose to veil reported being singled out more often at airport and border controls than peers who did not wear a hijab – but also to Islamophobic assaults and hate crimes. For example, it was exclusively female participants who expressed fear of anti-Muslim revenge violence in the direct aftermath of terrorist attacks, impacting how they move in public spaces, esp. public transport. The testimonies thus demonstrate the way gendered and racialised identities intersect to construct hyphenated suspect subjectivities, underlining the intersectional nature of Muslim experiences of counter-terrorism.

Participants' responses grouped within category 1 (rejection) reflect the paradox of hypervisibility and silencing. On one hand, Prevent ensures Muslim bodies are constantly scrutinised under a security lens. On the other hand, it suppresses their voices, as many reported self-censoring in educational and professional settings to avoid suspicion. Others, again, engaged in 'ambassadorship' (Khan and Mythen, 2021: 457); that is, they became more publicly outspoken about their personal beliefs in an attempt to cast an alternative image in opposition to the public vilification of Islam as violent, extremist, and oppressive. This governing of thought and speech through Prevent forces Muslims to navigate restrictive discursive spaces by modifying their expression of identity to align with state-approved forms of Muslimness.

Yet, the heterogeneity of Muslim experiences complicates any generalising narrative of victimhood. The significant variations in how different Muslim sub-groups experience counter-terrorism measures challenge the notion of Muslims as a singular, monolithic, and homogeneous suspect community. For instance, men reported racial profiling in the street more frequently than women, while women were more likely to report anti-Muslim physical or verbal abuse. Similarly, first-generation Muslim immigrants to the United Kingdom were more likely to 'brush off' and minimise or justify Prevent, prioritising integration over racial justice, whereas British Muslims utilised their citizenship rights as a tool in their political struggle to make a claim for equal treatment in a performance of active citizenship. As a consequence, first-generation Muslim immigrants are over-represented among the testimonies grouped within category 2 (partial support). Likewise, participants within category 2 (uncertainty) acknowledged the potentially discriminatory impact of Prevent but were more cautious about outright condemning the programme as

inherently Islamophobic in lack of a better alternative. Different local contexts add an additional layer, emphasising the significant agency held by local stakeholders; for example, some research participants had never even heard of Prevent, while others had to undergo regular Prevent trainings as part of their secondary school education. These findings highlight that while Prevent stigmatises Muslim identity, it does so in uneven ways, shaped by factors such as gender, ethnicity, visibility, and socio-political context.

Islamophobia as a systemic challenge

The racialisation, stigmatisation, and securitisation of Muslim identity through Prevent as outlined must be understood within broader structures of institutional racism and postcolonial governance. The following section seeks to deepen the theoretical analysis of the research findings by situating Prevent within its systemic context, asking how the testimonies are not only an expression of isolated, individual experiences but rather reflect structural forms of discrimination. Prevent is not an isolated policy but is rooted in a long-standing tradition of state surveillance and control over racialised populations (Ali, 2020). Its logic is deeply embedded in historical counter-insurgency practices, originally used to control colonial subjects and now repurposed in the domestic sphere. Prevent is thus an extension of the postcolonial security state, where mechanisms of control are deployed to manage the presence of racial and religious minorities within a societal context which is marked by persisting postcolonial power asymmetries.

In other words, Prevent can be understood as a form of biopolitics which seeks to regulate Muslim identities and behaviours (Abbas, 2020). By outsourcing counter-terrorism responsibilities to teachers, doctors, and social workers, the state extends its surveillance into everyday spaces, transforming ordinary interactions into security concerns. The policing of thought and speech aims to produce 'acceptable' Muslim subjects who conform to state-defined norms of moderation and civility. The securitisation of education is particularly illustrative of this dynamic: Muslim students, fearing scrutiny, alter their classroom engagement, self-censoring their contributions to discussions on contentious topics such as Palestine or Western foreign policy (Abbas et al., 2023; Whiting and et al, 2021; Whiting et al., 2024; Zempi and Tripli, 2023). This self-censoring illustrates how Prevent operates not only through coercion but through self-discipline as a form of 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1994).

Mass surveillance plays a crucial role in this governance. Initiatives like Project Champion demonstrate how Muslim communities are positioned as sites of permanent observation and Muslim citizens become hypervisible and transparent. This indiscriminate surveillance echoes Foucault's panopticon, where constant surveillance compels individuals to internalise state control (Foucault, 2020). Translated into the context of counter-terrorism, Prevent fosters a culture of suspicion, encouraging citizens to monitor and report each other, eroding intracommunal trust and cohesion (Abbas, 2019a). The embedding of surveillance structures into everyday life does not merely target criminal behaviour; it polices identity itself, reinforcing the perception of Muslims as inherently suspect. The goal is not the exclusion of British Muslims from the national body but the transformation of risky and subversive Muslim identities into manageable and acceptable Muslim subjects.

However, the diversity of testimonies which have been broadly categorised above as rejection, partial support, and uncertainty are an important reminder to avoid an oversimplified view that reduces Prevent to a tool of oppression. First, state policies are not static

but constantly evolving, also in response to criticism and resistance; for example, an initial narrow focus of Prevent on Islamist terrorism was broadened to include other forms of extremism to counter the stigmatisation of Muslim communities (Thomas, 2017, 2020). Second, there is internal contestation within government institutions, and some local authorities implement Prevent in ways that mitigate its more harmful aspects. The participants' testimonies reflect this complexity; for example, Farhana, a 36-year-old teacher, expressed her reluctance to report students to Prevent. The variability in Prevent's enforcement underscores that while the programme is inherently problematic, its impact is shaped by local contexts and individual actors with a significant degree of agency.

Furthermore, Muslim responses to Prevent are not uniform. While some reject it outright as a tool of oppression (category 1), others view it as a necessary, albeit flawed, counter-terrorism measure (categories 2 and 3). This variation complicates the idea of a singular state-Muslim binary, where the state is always the oppressor and Muslims are always the victims. Instead, it is key to recognise (1) the internal diversity within Muslim communities and (2) Muslim agency in both resisting and negotiating the constraints imposed by counter-terrorism policies. It is at the nexus of state power, security governance, and community that suspect experiences are constructed and individual Muslims negotiate their responses to Prevent in a way which is shaped by intersectional variables and the social environment.

A Muslim suspect community?

The findings presented in this study have significant implications for research within the 'suspect community' paradigm. In their groundbreaking work on Irish and Muslim experiences of counter-terrorism measures in the United Kingdom, Pantazis and Pemberton (2009) argue that the suspect experience is shaped by five key elements: (1) disproportionate policing, including stops and searches, surveillance, and raids; (2) extensive community surveillance, particularly targeting Salafist and Islamist groups; (3) biased media and political discourse framing Muslims as an internal enemy linked to global extremism; (4) the erosion of police-community relations due to counter-terrorism measures; and (5) broader social and cultural repercussions, including increased Islamophobia, hate crimes, and discrimination.

Applying this framework to the interview data collected for this study reveals both convergence and divergence. The strongest alignment is found in relation to media and political discourse, as participants overwhelmingly complained about the association commonly established between terrorism and Islam, reproducing anti-Muslim stereotypes. However, views diverged on other central aspects. For example, participants disagreed on whether there was institutional Islamophobia present in law enforcement or whether Muslims are subject to disproportionate mass surveillance. This divergence is reflected in the broad categories of rejection, partial support, and uncertainty and suggests that while Prevent contributes to the securitisation of Muslim identity, its impact is neither uniform nor universally perceived as discriminatory. At the same time, it is crucial to treat the three response categories established above as ideal types. In reality, testimonies are often coded within more than one category, and rejection, partial support, and uncertainty overlap to constitute complex suspect experiences. For example, Aylin simultaneously accuses counter-terrorism of fostering anti-Muslim stereotypes that make her feel unsafe in public spaces (category 1), acknowledges that British Muslims are more vulnerable to extremist messages, requiring early intervention to counter radicalisation (category 2), and expresses uncertainty about a more viable alternative to Prevent (category 3).

These findings contribute to the literature within the 'suspect community' paradigm in two key ways. First, they provide further evidence that Prevent operates on the basis of anti-Muslim biases, disproportionately affecting British Muslims due to their religious identity rather than their actual susceptibility to radicalisation into violent extremism. The securitisation of Muslim identity through Prevent has led to heightened scrutiny in educational institutions, professional settings, and public spaces, reinforcing the perception of Muslims as inherently suspect. Moreover, the focus on Islamist extremism over against structural push factors into radicalisation and other forms of violence, for example from the far right, perpetuates the idea that Islam itself is a primary driver of extremism. Second, these findings challenge the notion of a homogeneous Muslim suspect community. The 'suspect community' paradigm is based on the problematic assumption of a collectively shared, uniform experience of state-led securitisation, overlooking internal diversity within Muslim communities. On the one hand, experiences of counter-terrorism policies are shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, gender, class, and citizenship status, reflecting the intersectional nature of securitisation, where both racial and gendered markers contribute to the suspect experience. However, British Muslims do not only experience counter-terrorism to different degrees, but they also interpret these experiences in diverging ways. For example, while one individual may see a police stop as an act of racial profiling, another one, though subjected to the same security practice, may justify it as a necessary security measure. These complexities highlight the limitations of a binary state-community framework, in which the state is always the oppressor and Muslims are always the victims. Instead, counter-terrorism governance operates within a complex landscape of negotiation, contestation, and agency, where different individuals respond in diverse ways to securitisation.

In sum, the 'suspect community' paradigm remains a useful framework for analysing the discriminatory effects of counter-terrorism measures. However, it requires refinement to account for the internal diversity of Muslim experiences, the intersectional nature of securitisation, and the varied ways in which individuals interpret and respond to Prevent.

Concluding remarks

Existing scholarship on counter-terrorism's effects on British Muslims emphasises the discriminatory and Islamophobic biases embedded within the Prevent strategy and the broader security frameworks. The evidence presented in this study confirms that Prevent is perceived by British Muslims as disproportionately targeting Muslim communities through mass surveillance, the stigmatisation of religious identity, and the association of Islamic practices with radicalisation. By securitising Muslim identity, counter-terrorism policies construct Muslims as a suspect community, reinforcing racialised and gendered structures of exclusion and surveillance. This process reflects broader postcolonial and structural forms of systemic racism, where counter-terrorism governance functions as a tool of biopolitical control, managing and regulating religious and ethnic minorities within a state-defined framework of acceptable identity and behaviour. However, this study introduces further nuance into the debate in several important ways. Drawing upon a wealth of scholarship on vernacular security, this study introduces further nuance into the debate in several important ways, foregrounding how citizens talk about and experience security in their own vocabularies (Jarvis, 2019).

First, the testimonies analysed capture a variety of responses to Prevent and coping mechanisms that challenge oversimplified accounts of a homogeneous Muslim suspect community. A first group of participants firmly rejected Prevent as an institutionalised form of Islamophobia that unfairly targets Muslim communities and silences critical voices. A second group justifies existing counter-terrorism measures as proportionate and necessary to combat radicalisation within certain Muslim communities. A third group occupied an ambivalent position, recognising Prevent's flaws while struggling to identify viable alternatives. These diverse responses demonstrate that while Prevent has reinforced the securitisation of Muslim identity, its impact is neither monolithic nor universally perceived as oppressive. Furthermore, this study highlights the intersectional nature of counter-terrorism's impact, illustrating how race, gender, and socio-political context shape the suspect experience. The racialisation of Muslim identity through counter-terrorism disproportionately affects Muslims of colour who are overpoliced and subject to racial profiling. The gendered nature of Islamophobia is experienced by women who veil and are constructed by public discourses as simultaneously oppressed and a security risk. British Muslims more generally – and Muslim women or Muslims of colour, in particular – find themselves caught between hypervisibility and silencing, as they self-censor in response to the Prevent duty to avoid suspicion. These findings underscore the need to examine counter-terrorism policies through an intersectional lens, moving beyond a singular, homogeneous understanding of the Muslim suspect community which ignores internal diversity.

Moreover, this study problematises simplified state-community binaries that position the state as an all-powerful oppressor and Muslims as passive victims. While Prevent operates within a broader structure of racialised governance, its implementation varies across local contexts, and Muslim individuals and communities actively negotiate, contest, and resist its effects. For example, some practitioners attempt to mitigate its harms, for example, by refusing to flag students to Prevent. Other research participants challenged the victimisation of Muslims by performing active citizenship and political agency, for example, through political activism that seeks to challenge Islamophobic biases. This complexity highlights the need for a more nuanced analysis of Prevent that considers the agency of affected communities rather than reducing them to passive subjects of state control and appreciates internal contestation within state agencies. This position aligns with recent scholarship that reconceptualises citizens not as passive 'actors of the state' but as active 'enactors of the state', who coproduce security through their nuanced interactions with government policy (Holland and Higham-James, 2024). This study makes an important contribution to the debate on the effects of Prevent on British Muslims. While it recognises the importance of the 'suspect community' paradigm as a valuable framework for understanding the discriminatory impact of counter-terrorism policies, it also emphasises the need for refinement. In particular, this study suggests that a more intersectional and context-sensitive approach is necessary, one that accounts for the internal diversity of Muslim experiences, the fluid and contested nature of securitisation, and the role of agency in shaping responses to state surveillance.

Despite the original contribution this study makes in challenging homogenising tendencies within the 'suspect community' paradigm, limitations remain. First, interviews were conducted in the urban centres of London and Birmingham. It is to be expected that experiences of counter-terrorism would be markedly different in rural and predominantly white locales. However, the importance of space as a crucial variable could not be adequately acknowledged in this analysis – beyond inner-city urban divides between

marginalised and privileged neighbourhoods. Second, this study adopted a qualitative approach to understand the narratives Muslims employ to make sense of their everyday lived experiences. However, to better explore how intersectional identities impact Muslim interactions with Prevent and make generalisable statements, it would be helpful to conduct broader-scale surveys as part of a mixed-method study. Further research is needed to address both challenges.

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