

16Nov-Terrorism

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Community policing methods - based on dialogue, support and trust - are significantly helping counter-terrorism efforts in post 7/7 Britain, new research at the University of Birmingham has revealed.

Researchers looked at the effective use of partnership work with Muslim groups, including those deemed as 'radicals', in so called 'soft' policing methods, and found that the increased trust and access to community-based expertise is helping to prevent extremist propaganda and acts of violence.

Dr Basia Spalek co-author of the report, says the findings are positive: "This study highlights the importance of creating space for ongoing dialogue, support and partnership between police and communities within a counter-terrorism context for preventing violent extremism."

Dr Spalek's team interviewed and participated in meetings between police officers and Muslim community members who are involved in partnership work for the purposes of counter terrorism, and documented the experiences and perceptions of both parties.

Contrary to traditional policing and academic perspectives, the research has highlighted the importance of religious knowledge for counter terrorism, not only in understanding communities within which extremists may operate, but also in motivating the work of police and community members who wish to prevent violence.

Dr Salwa el-Awa, who co-led the investigation, said the study showed that religion could play a positive role in counter terrorism. The team found strong evidence that an effective counter message to Al-Qaeda's propaganda must offer a convincing and reliable alternative for religious people to turn to, and that the knowledge and expertise of religious community leaders was essential.

"Many counter terrorism strategies around the world today are based, partly or primarily, on understanding of the religious texts from which the violent extremists derive a justification for their acts. Some of these programmes target vulnerable groups to protect them against Al-Qaeda's propaganda which uses religious text and settings excessively to attract impressionable and disillusioned young Muslims.

"Despite a good deal of opposition, some such programmes have been applied here in the UK mostly by community members' efforts. Some have achieved reasonable success and as a result are now being developed further in order to achieve more outreach and higher levels of efficacy."

The research revealed that certain misunderstandings about the nature and aim of counter-terrorism work exist and that by removing those misconceptions, through communication and openness, some community members are likely to be more willing to support the police in the prevention of violent extremism.

Dr El-Awa says: "Likewise, the police forces working in the communities need to possess a level of understanding of these communities' religious commitments and customs in order to form better relations with their members as well as be able to understand the religious side of their simple daily encounters with them."

The report also highlights the key role that Muslim women provide in counter-terrorism work. Many Muslim women have the knowledge and skills to communicate and work with the most marginalised members of communities. They have the ability to connect with women who are already supporters or potential perpetrators of extremist violence.

Dr Laura Macdonald, a Research Fellow who worked on the report said: "The engagement of Muslim women and young people is often referred to by politicians as key to helping prevent violence, yet they are often marginalised by the very policies that seek to include them. This research highlights the importance of listening to grassroots expertise, and making space for those on the periphery."

Robert Lambert, MBE, Lecturer in the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), University of St. Andrews and Research Fellow, Department of Politics, University of Exeter also worked with the team.

He said: "The research highlights one important issue that is often overlooked: certain British Muslim groups have played a key role in tackling violent propaganda for the last fifteen years - long before funding was made available by government. In doing so they have consistently displayed bravery and fortitude, both in coping with threats from Muslim extremists on the one hand and Islamophobes on the other."

The research, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council Religion and Society Programme, not only contributes to academic debate on the subject of policing and counter terrorism, but the report findings will now be presented to Government and will have direct implications for government and international policy.

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Further Media Information

Dr Basia Spalek and Dr Laura Macdonald are available for interview. Please contact Anna Mitchell, Press Officer, on 0121 414 6029 / 07920 593 946 / a.i.mitchell@bham.ac.uk

Notes to Editors

The full report will be launched at an event at the University of Birmingham on Tuesday 18th November. For more information on the launch event, please contact Dr Laura Macdonald on 07939 241437.

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