

The Extremist Reaction to the UK's Prevent Strategy

By Jack Barclay

THE EFFORTS OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT IN SUMMER 2011 TO RE-launch a controversial strategy to combat violent radicalization has prompted a furious response from the country's Islamist activists and groups. The updated strategy, known as "Prevent," promises a comprehensive approach to contesting extremist ideologies, supporting vulnerable individuals and communities susceptible to extremist messages, and working closely with a range of institutions such as schools, prisons, and charities to help them play an active part in addressing radicalization.

Prevent was first launched in 2007 as a component of the government's national counterterrorism strategy known as "CONTEST." Prevent's focus on violent Islamist radicalization was a reflection of the fact that al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism was—and still is—seen by government as the pre-eminent terrorist threat to the UK and its interests. Nevertheless, this focus quickly raised concerns among some of the UK's Muslim populations that they were going to be unfairly stigmatized as communities under suspicion. Some accused the government of using Prevent to spy on Muslim communities (which the government denies) while others criticized it for funding a range of broader, social cohesion projects that appeared to have little to do with counter-radicalization. The latest iteration of Prevent, government claims, addresses these shortcomings.

The re-launch of Prevent was met with open hostility by a variety of Muslim and Islamist groups in the UK, but especially from extremists who support the contemporary violent jihadist movement. These extremists see the Prevent strategy as a direct challenge to their declared mission of promoting a militant Islamist awakening, or *sahwah*, among British Muslim youth.

In some cases, the extremists have attempted to leverage pre-existing concerns about

Prevent among parts of the broader UK Muslim population. For instance, they have attempted to exploit suspicions that Prevent is a cover for domestic intelligence collection, despite repeated assertions to the contrary by government officials. They have also tried to stoke fears that the government is attempting to interfere in Muslims' free practice and propagation of their religion, and they promote the narrative that Prevent is an attempt to corrupt the Islamic identity of Muslim youth by actively spreading liberal and secular principles contrary to those of Islam.

Some of the individuals involved in protesting Prevent today are led by an activist movement that formerly belonged to the now disbanded group known as "Al-Muhajiroun," or "The Emigres." Although these activists see themselves as practicing and propagating their ideology in accordance with the tenets of the Salafi movement, other Salafi communities in the UK appear to regard them as too extreme, and often pejoratively refer to them as "*Takfiris*" or "*Khawarij*."¹ The leaders of this extreme movement see Prevent as the key plank of an ideological offensive against British Muslims and Islam more generally, and they refer to this offensive as *al-ghazwat al-fikri*, or the "ideological raid." They view this offensive as a fundamental attack on the Islamic *Aqidah*—in other words, as an attempt by the government to spread a watered-down, pacifist "UK Islam" that would effectively divert Muslim youth from a correct understanding of their religion, including the obligation to implement Islam at societal and state levels and to defend by both word and deed the threats to their religion and their fellow Muslims.

The extremists clearly take the challenges posed by Prevent seriously. Their response to the government's strategy has been unprecedented in its focus and duration, and they have used innovative new tactics to frustrate the implementation of the strategy at the local level. This reaction has raised a number of questions about the current outlook of these Islamist extremists in the UK and their purpose. Why has Prevent generated such a furious backlash? Why do the extremists consider Prevent such a significant threat to Islam, and specifically to the identity of Muslim youth in Britain? Moreover, what do they believe is an appropriate response to what they describe as an infidel government's attempts to attack the religion of Muslims that reside in the UK? And what measures do these Islamists ultimately deem acceptable in this battle for the hearts and minds of their co-religionists?

The Ideological Raid

UK ISLAMISTS VIEW THE PREVENT STRATEGY AS A DIRECT THREAT TO WHAT THEY understand as their obligation to re-Islamize and mobilize British Muslim youth in defense of Islam, whether by non-violent activism or through violent jihad. The extremists have long been wary of Prevent and other perceived governmental attempts to interfere

in their propagation of Islam. In 2010, a prominent Islamist known most commonly by his *kunya* (nickname), Abu Walid, delivered a lecture in which he characterized Prevent as part of an “ideological war” being waged against Islam by the British government.² In this lecture Abu Walid warned that many Muslims were oblivious to the government’s agenda and its tactics, stating further that,

Nowadays we see that there is an ongoing Crusade against Islam and Muslims. That battle is being fought on two fronts—the physical battle and the ideological battle.

On the physical front we can see what is going on...but from the ideological side people are unaware...they are unaware of the ideological crusade against Islam and the Muslims whereby the *kuffar* want to try and change the *deen* [religion] from within. They talk about this reformation of Islam, a battle for hearts and minds. There is a battle for hearts and minds going on—his is not something which is being taken lightly by the *kuffar*.

Abu Walid then appeared to single out the Prevent strategy as an example of how the ideological offensive was being waged in the UK. He highlighted the hundreds of millions of dollars being spent by the government on counter-radicalization programs in Muslim communities, and said,

They the *kuffar* will never stop fighting you until—what? Until they get Afghanistan? Until they get Iraq? Allah said they will never stop fighting you until they make you become *kaffir*. Until they make you turn back from your *deen* [religion].³

In another lecture this year entitled “Prevent Strategy” (and which was possibly recorded sometime between May and June), Abu Walid warned that unlike high-profile conflicts in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where the enemy’s intentions toward Muslims were obvious, Muslims in the UK were unaware of the government’s attempts to spread secularism and divert the youth from developing a complete understanding of their religion:

When someone comes into your house through the front door you know he’s there. When he comes in through the back door you’ve no idea he’s there...until he’s stolen your TV... This attack through the back door is called *al-Ghazwat al-Fikri*—the ideological war. Most people do

not know this is going on. Nowadays they come with these initiatives like Prevent, counterterrorism schemes and scams...Peace TV, the Islam Channel, the GPU [Global Peace and Unity Conference]...they will seek to turn your back from your *deen* if they can.

Such narratives are UK-centric variations on a theme originally propagated by other English-speaking extremist ideologues such as Anwar al-Awlaki, the U.S.-Yemeni preacher killed in a U.S. air strike in Yemen in September 2011. Al-Awlaki warned Western Muslims against the threat presented by what he referred to as “RAND-Islam”⁴—a pacifist version of the religion that promotes secularism and Muslim integration into Western societies at the expense of fundamental Islamic obligations including belief and implementation of *tawhid* (monotheism), *al-Wala wal-Bara* (enjoining good and forbidding evil), and violent *jihad*.

This theme was subsequently explored by another leading Islamist activist, Anjem Choudhary (a.k.a. Abu Luqman), in a lecture entitled “The Role Of The Muslims” that appeared on an extremist web site in June 2011. Choudhary, who sometimes refers to himself as “the former UK Emir of Al-Muhajiroun,” attacked fellow Muslims who compromised their religious practice in order to integrate into non-Muslim society. He complained that many Muslims living in the UK had become “stripped of their Islamic personality:”

[They are] part-time Muslims. Muslim when it comes to the prayer; Muslim when it comes to the fasting; Muslim when it comes to the wife, the *halal* food, the circumcision, the burial site, the *masjid*.

But when it comes to the struggle, to liberate our lands, when it comes to raise the banner of *Tawhid*, when it comes to shake the *Firaun* [Pharaoh] of our time, then we are just like the *kaafir*. Our ambition to be like the *kaafir*, to behave like the *kaafir*, to speak like the *kaafir*, dress like the *kaafir*, to die like the *kaafir*.

Indeed the *nabi* [Prophet] *sallallahu walahi wa'salam* said I am worried for my own *al-Sahabah*...because there will come a time when there will be those, with the tongue of a Muslim but the heart of a *kaafir*.

Abdul Muhid, another prominent Islamist activist who is known as Abu Wala'a, delivered a Paltalk lecture in June 2011 entitled “Obstacles in the Dawah” in which he claimed that Prevent was not a counter-extremism program but instead an attempt to stop sincere young Muslims “from practicing Islam...from having any inclination towards

Sharia...[and from] preventing you from achieving what Allah wants.” Muhid and his associates believe that Western societies are characterized by the values of selfish materialism and a quest for social status. They believe these values are corrupting young Muslims, and leading them astray from the desire to live for the sake of their religion. Should the youth become preoccupied with integration into secular UK society, these Islamists believe they will then lose their desire to know Allah and all that his religion commands—including the obligations to defend Islam through jihad and to work to install the supremacy of Allah’s law. In short, these Islamists believe that the secular and liberal values that are actively promoted by the government are designed to defeat the very Islamic awakening they are trying to provoke.

The Masjid Dirar

AN IMPORTANT WEAPON, ACCORDING TO ISLAMISTS, IN THE GOVERNMENT’S “IDEOLOGICAL war” on Muslims in the West is the promotion of interfaith dialogue—or what the extremists refer to as “joining of the religions” (*al-ittihad ad-diyan*). In this view, interfaith programs in local communities are encouraging young Muslims to embrace the principle that, as Abrahamic faiths, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are equal—and to reject the idea that Islam is the superior ideology and way of life. The result, extremists fear, is that Muslim youth will fail to understand the imperatives upon them to work toward establishing Islam as the dominant power in society.

This issue was addressed in a lecture in May 2011 by the extremist activist Omar Brooks, a.k.a. Abu Izzudeen. A convert to Islam, Brooks was formerly known as Trevor Brooks. He was formerly affiliated with extremist Islamist groups “Al-Ghuraba” (The Strangers) and “al-Firqat un-Najiyah” (The Saved Sect), both of which have now disbanded. In 2008, Abu Izzudeen was sentenced to four-and-a-half years in prison for terrorist fundraising and inciting terrorism overseas, though he was released early on parole.

In a lecture entitled “The Misconceptions,” which appeared on extremist web sites in May 2011, Abu Izzudeen criticized mosques in London that promote interfaith dialogue, and accused them of “selling out” by cooperating with authorities against the true interests of the Muslim community. In what appeared to be a specific reference to one mosque in East London, he said,

This morning we were in the local *masjid*, in the gym underneath the *masjid*. And we heard the Imam give the call to *salat* [prayer]. And so sad for us—because that *masjid*, Masjid Dirar, is the *masjid* of what? Of interfaith, and police, and spying on the Muslim community!”

These [leaders of the mosque] are the ones who call for *al-ittihad ad-diyān*, the joining of the religions, between Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Christians. Shame on their face!...This will occur on the 27 May, when one of the top Rabbis will come down to discuss to the Muslims how we can join and unite with the *Juhud* [Jews]

One noteworthy aspect of this speech is Abu Izzudeen's reference to the story of Masjid Dirar, a mosque built in Medina during the life of the Prophet Mohammed. According to some accounts, the mosque was burnt down by the Prophet in 630AD after he learned that it was built by insincere Muslims who, unwilling to pray at a nearby mosque, sought to sow unbelief and dissent among the Muslim community by building their own mosque nearby. By invoking this story, it appears that Abu Izzudeen is attempting to show that there is historical precedent established by the Prophet himself that warrants violence against "insincere" Muslims who "sell out" to Western societies by participating in interfaith dialogue and other initiatives meant to divide the Muslim community.

Countering Prevent

THE ISLAMISTS APPEAR DETERMINED TO UNDERMINE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UK government's Prevent strategy with a combination of strategic communication online and grassroots agitation among Muslim populations. In late May 2011, several days before the government published its revised Prevent strategy, Choudhary produced a booklet entitled *Islamic Prevent*.⁵ This full-color, twenty-nine page document was distributed via Choudhary's website and designed to portray the government's counter-radicalization strategy as an attempt to replace Muslims' Islamic identity "with ideas which are not based upon the teachings of Islam." The document stated that it was "intended to open the eyes of Muslims and non-Muslims to the responsibility of Muslims living in the UK and to warn them of the dangers to their *Deen* [religion] from this UK Government-led campaign."

The report presents an eighteen-point plan to defend UK Muslim populations against what it calls "secular fundamentalism." It advocates that all Muslims should withdraw from engagement with non-Muslim society, and reject the British political and legal systems (voting in democratic elections and joining the police service are expressly prohibited.) The document further called on Muslims to remove CCTV camera networks from around mosques, which it claimed were part of Prevent-funded attempts to "spy on Muslims on behalf of the police and local authorities." It also calls for the creation throughout the UK of "mini-Emirates"—or self-policing, Muslim-majority enclaves where Sharia-based justice would be enforced.

Elsewhere, extremists have used the Internet to raise awareness of the perceived

dangers of Prevent, and to dissuade UK Muslim youth from engaging with Prevent-funded community projects. The programs these extremists have singled out for criticism and rejection on Islamic grounds include youth outreach schemes, management training for mosque committees and Imams, British citizenship classes in local schools, and interfaith dialogue initiatives designed to encourage stronger community links between different faith groups.

Islamist ideologues and activists have moreover delivered Paltalk lectures and conducted online question-and-answer sessions with supporters to discuss Prevent and how Muslims should react to the implementation of government-funded programs in their communities. Guidance has been provided for young Muslims on how to identify the supposedly tell-tale signs of Prevent community engagement projects. One activist, Anthony Small (aka Abdul-Haqq Small), provided advice on his YouTube channel *Anthony Small Destroys Britain* for Muslims concerned that their local mosque may have “sold out” its community by accepting government sponsorship. Small, a former professional boxer and revert to Islam, called on Muslim youth to question their mosque’s management committee about its outside sources of funding and support. If, Small claimed, the mosque had undertaken Home Office-funded mosque management training, then this would be evidence that the mosque had in effect become a local beach-head for the Prevent strategy.

In some Muslim communities, extremist groups such as Muslims Against Crusades have held marches and gatherings they call “Islamic Emirates roadshows.” These are public proselytizing (*dawa*) events that are designed to raise an audience’s general awareness of the imperative to implement Sharia and to promote Islamic self-governance in Muslim-majority areas. These roadshows have been accompanied by leaflet and sticker campaigns declaring certain neighborhoods as “Sharia-controlled zones” in which drugs, alcohol, music, and prostitution are forbidden. (There is generally little tolerance for open agitation by these types of extremists at many of the local mosques in the UK. Instead, these extremists operate on the fringes of the mosque in Islamic community centers, bookshops, sports facilities, and other places where young Muslims congregate.)

While much of this activism has been focused on London and the southeast of England, these Islamists are now also attempting to increase the scale of their *dawa* activities in other major UK towns and cities, including Liverpool, Birmingham, Cardiff, and Leicester.

Implications for the Extremists

THE RELATIVE STRENGTH OF THE ISLAMIST REACTION TO THE GOVERNMENT’S RE-LAUNCH of Prevent reflects the concern that it is more than simply a counterterrorism or counter-radicalization strategy. Rather, they argue that the government’s new policies represent

an existential-ideological challenge to British Muslims' fundamental understanding of Islam, as well to their own *raison-d'être*—namely, the promotion of an Islamic awakening among the Muslim youth of the UK and Europe.

This raises a number of important questions, not only for Western governments and the national security community, but also for the extremists themselves. Given the severity of the threat that Islamists claim the Prevent strategy and the spread of “secular fundamentalism” poses to the “Islamic community,” is the current Islamist response adequate? Or is the threat of “infidel society” to Islam now so existentially serious that it justifies a reaction that goes well beyond the normal Islamist response of missionary struggle (*dawa*) and non-violent activism? Viewed through the lens of Islamist ideology and the extremist understandings of Islamic jurisprudence, to what extent can a non-Muslim host government interfere with and constrict the propagation of Islam by its Muslim minority without obligating Muslims to employ new defensive measures—including violence?

Islamists regularly express frustration with what they perceive as the British government's double standards in their approach to policing Islamist activism. They often claim the government promotes freedom of speech and a right to protest, and yet labels as “extremist” anyone who exercises those rights by promoting Islamic issues or supporting their co-religionists defending Islam and Muslims around the world. They often claim that Muslims are being unfairly targeted by the government, and describe what they see as the government's attempts to and muzzle their missionary work.

This view was articulated by a British Islamist activist named Mizanur Rahman in an undated audio lecture entitled “Covenant of Security” that appeared on the Internet (references to security events occurring in the UK suggest it was recorded sometime 2006-2009):⁶

Most of the people who are in prison are there not because they were trying to do something [i.e. terrorism] but because they read the wrong books. Or maybe they were camping in the Lake District—a bunch of homosexuals go camping and people say they're just having fun. Muslims go there, and they [authorities] are saying 'let's have a look on their computer—*Millat Ibrahim*,⁷ very nice;' or they have another book about Jihad—'oh, what are they reading about Jihad for?'; or *The Forgotten Obligation*⁸—what are they reading these for? They must be in the Lake District training for Jihad.' They make these [books] illegal or censored to make sure they never come out...

You aren't allowed to hear the opposite argument. That's their [the government's] idea of debate. They argue and 'say come and refute us—

but it's illegal to refute us. It's terrorism if you refute us. You go to prison. We will call the Mujahideen terrorists, murderers, barbaric. But if you say they're not, you're glorifying them.

Such frustrations have led Islamist activists to ask what their movement's response should be to what they perceive as government harassment and obstruction of their *dawa*.

In recent months, two closely connected themes have been especially prominent within extremist discussions. The first theme concerns the Islamic concept of the Covenant of Security (*Aqd Aman*), or the mutual non-aggression pact that many Islamists today believe exists between Muslims in the West and their non-Muslim hosts. Specifically, Islamists have begun to question whether the "ideological war" which, they allege, the UK government is waging against British Muslims, represents a breach of this covenant. The second theme concerns whether the UK should now be considered *dar al-harb*, an "abode of war" wherein Muslims and non-Muslims are in conflict.

In light of repeated terrorist attacks in the West by Al-Qaeda and its affiliates over the last decade, it might reasonably be assumed that the jihadist movement agreed to abrogate the covenant years ago. However, the issue in fact remains a source of significant disagreement among the broader jihadist movement's most respected shaykhs and scholars.⁹

The covenant most applicable to Muslims in the West is known as *Aman ul-Muslim*, which is a category of security covenant that applies to Muslims living as a minority among a non-Muslim majority or under a non-Muslim government. Such a covenant has a precedent in Islam's earliest years. In 615 AD, the Prophet Mohammed himself ruled that some of his Companions (*Sahabah*) who were suffering persecution by the pagan Quraish should seek temporary refuge within the domains of King Negus of Abyssinia, a Christian.

In their lectures and discussions, Islamist ideologues and *daees* (those engaged in *dawa*) in the UK routinely acknowledge the complexities and other sensitivities involved in any discussion of security covenants. Indeed, they often take care to set their inflammatory pronouncements on current affairs within the larger context of Islamic jurisprudence, which stresses the importance ascribed by Allah in the Quran to all covenants and acts of trust as well as the consequences in the afterlife for Muslims who betray them.¹⁰ UK Islamists also consistently state their conviction that the Covenant of Security remains intact and that in general it is impermissible for Muslims living in the UK to breach that agreement. In principle, these Islamist rulings forbid all acts of terrorism on British soil by Muslims living in the UK.

Despite these assurances, a closer examination of UK Islamist discourse on covenants reveals a potentially more ambiguous position that may leave room for activists to reach

their own conclusions about whether a covenant remains in place or not. The fact of such loopholes in Islamist jurisprudence may be of unique concern when viewed against the backdrop of the growing and concerted extremist opposition to the Prevent strategy, which, depending on its eventual impact, may be judged by some extremists as too much of an intrusion into their religious life and obligations to conduct *dawa*.

In study circles (*halaqas*) and lectures posted online or broadcast live via Paltalk, extremist preachers have reiterated their belief that a covenant between Muslims and British society remains in place in the UK. However, they also add that they respect the right of other Muslims to disagree with their position, and that no particular group's view on these matters is necessarily incorrect. Moreover, they refuse to reject the arguments of jihadist ideologues or leaders such as Anwar al-Awlaki and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who claim a Covenant of Security with the West no longer exists. Indeed, in such discussions, these preachers are often at pains to insist that their own views on Covenants of Security should not be interpreted as slandering or criticizing “the Mujahideen”—though they typically leave their audience to guess which groups or individuals they are referring to.

Anjem Choudhary offered an interesting perspective on Covenants of Security during a lecture entitled “Prevent Strategy” that appeared on the Internet in May 2011. At the end of a lengthy discussion on the government's counter-violent extremism policies, Choudhary was asked for his opinion on the Covenant. Like many other extremists, Choudhary responded by stressing that covenants had many conditions and were not to be made or broken with abandon. He spoke as well in broad terms about the importance of honoring a covenant, and the consequences for a Muslim in the afterlife of betraying such an agreement. He then explained the different types of covenants that applied to Muslims entering or living the UK:

If you have an agreement with someone you have to honor it. Indeed it is a sign of *nifaaq* [hypocrisy] to make an agreement with someone and then to break it. If someone comes into the country and the *kafir* says we will protect your life, wealth, etc. it is not allowed to kill them and take their wealth because that is an explicit covenant of security.¹¹

The implicit one is where if you apply for a driving license, a TV license, income support, housing benefit, the reason you apply for these is because you want some sort of protection. That's an implicit covenant of security.

Choudhary acknowledged that the issue of security covenants was complex and open to a range of interpretations, and he furthermore stressed that his own perspective should

not be construed as a criticism of those Muslims who believed their co-religionists had no covenant of security with the West. He thus adopted the same ambiguous stance as many other fellow extremist preachers, stating that he both believes in the Covenant of Security in the UK while respecting the right of other Muslims to disagree and reject these terms:

Imagine you didn't believe that there is no sanctity for the *kuffar* and his own life and wealth—someone like Anwar al-Awlaki and Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri who believe that there is no covenant anywhere in the West. That's why they say 'go to your mother's kitchen and make a cake.'¹² Not to eat, but to deliver to someone. [But] for us we say that's not allowed but we understand they have their opinion.

To underscore his position, Choudhary then invited his audience to consider the practicalities of living in the UK if they considered a Covenant of Security to be void:

If you believe that the *kuffar* has no sanctity for his life and wealth and that this is a battlefield—*dar al-harb*—what is the *hukm* [ruling] to live among them and how should you live your life?

He [Hadhrat Abu Basir] didn't live among the *kuffar*...he would raid and that's how he would make his living...he would live separately from them. You don't live next door to someone, brother, and in the morning say 'good morning Mr. Smith'; 'good morning brother Mohammed'; 'good evening Mr. Smith'; then the next morning it's 'goodbye Mr. Smith', and you kill him and take his wife [as your property]. This is called betrayal.

Choudhary's reference in his speech to the precedent of Hadhrat Abu Basir, a Companion of the Prophet Mohammed, is noteworthy. Abu Basir, who had been deeply angered by the early Muslims' agreement to the Treaty of Hudaibiyah in 628CE, relocated from Medina to the desert where he was not bound by any Covenant of Security and could therefore raid the supply trains of the pagan Quraysh with impunity.

Decoding the Extremists' Position

THE POSITION TAKEN BY CHOUDHARY ON THE COVENANT OF SECURITY IN THE UK has now been articulated by at least five other leading extremist *daees* and activists in re-

cent months. But to what extent is this genuinely a reflection of their outlook? One interpretation of their rhetoric is that it has a basis in Islamic jurisprudence and may indeed reflect what these extremist leaders say to their supporters in private. Another interpretation is that their public stance is both expedient and intentionally deceptive. By stating support for the covenant they seek to avoid further interference by the authorities, while leaving a degree of ambiguity that could be interpreted by some of their followers as tacit endorsement for acts of domestic terrorism. Needless to say, neither of these interpretations is reassuring from the perspective of UK security.

The extremists' ambiguity on the covenant is clearly reflected in their rhetoric. In previous years, Islamist preachers such as Choudhary have refused to condemn the September 11, 2001 attacks in the U.S. and the July 7, 2005 attacks on the London transport system. Speaking to the BBC in August 2005, Abu Izzudeen called the 7/7 bombings "completely praiseworthy," though he claimed he was not personally calling for terrorist attacks on British soil.¹³ Another long-standing activist, known as Abu Mounisa, delivered a speech at an Islamic conference in the UK in 2004 in which he appeared to glorify the 9/11 attacks, saying,

When they talk about 9/11, when those two planes magnificently went through those buildings, and then people turn around and 'say hang on, that is barbaric'!

Clearly, the extremists' stance on the issue of the covenant remains opaque, and perhaps intentionally so. They state their support for a security covenant presumably to avoid further government interference in religious affairs, but they will nevertheless applaud—or at least not condemn—terrorist attacks on British soil when these do occur. By stressing that their opinion of the covenant is merely one of many Islamic opinions and that those disagreeing have made a potentially valid judgment, they allow their young supporters to draw their own, potentially dangerous conclusions from Islamic law. Their popular speeches, meanwhile, glorify terrorism.

Moreover, in his May 2011 lecture "Prevent Strategy," Choudhary explicitly stated that the extremists' stance on the covenant could change at any moment depending on the UK Government's domestic policy and the degree to which it constricts the Islamist movement's assorted efforts to spread its religious and political message:

I believe in a Covenant of Security. But that could change. Shaykh Omar Abdelrahman of Egypt...he was in charge of *tanzim-ul-jihad*...he said we used to carry *Dawa* in Egypt but when they fought us we declared *Jihad feesabilillah*. In other words, brother, we continue to carry *dawa*, [and] if they fight against us, if they become a group fighting against us here,

they don't allow us to carry *Dawa*, to carry Islam at all, it will be different brothers. We will fight back in that scenario. But if they leave us and allow us to practice and propagate Islam, we will continue [*dawa* and activism].

This raises a crucial question: To what extent will the further implementation of Prevent and the perception of increased government interference in the extremists' *dawa* be tolerated by the extremists before it forces them to abandon the covenant and non-violent activism altogether and embrace violent jihad?

It is difficult to determine where Choudhary and his associates may stand on this issue from their pronouncements alone. In one of his May 2011 lectures on UK counter-extremism, Choudhary explained to his audience that Muslims living under a non-Muslim government were obligated to practice their religion fully and without compromise. This included engaging in *dawa* to call people to Islam, and publicly condemning evil and corruption (*munkar*) in society:

The purpose of having these covenants is so they can hear the word of Allah—if you are living among the *kuffar* then you carry *dawa* to them ...you command good and forbid evil.

In effect, Choudhary argued that Muslims are permitted to enter into a security covenant with a majority non-Muslim government for the purposes of conducting *dawa*. Should the host government interfere with Muslims carrying out their fundamental religious obligations, then depending on the nature and severity of the infraction the potential implication from an Islamic viewpoint is that the government is violating the covenant. The further implication is that such interference, if it were deemed severe enough because it constricted the *dawa*, could justify in Islamic terms the abrogation of the Covenant of Security entirely.

Importantly, Islamist rhetoric today already portrays the UK government as clamping down on public *dawa* activities. This has especially been the case in recent years following the introduction of new anti-terrorism legislation that restricts public speech judged to incite or offer support for terrorism. Extremist political demonstrations display their aggressive interpretation of the Islamic principle of *al-wala wal-bara*, loyalty toward Muslims and enmity toward non-Muslims,¹⁴ and this often places them at odds with British law on public order, “hate speech,” and glorification of terrorism. This in turn provokes claims from the extremists that they have been unfairly victimized by the government merely for exercising a right to propagate Islam and challenge government policy through non-violent means.

Interestingly, Choudhary's comments on the conditions under which security

covenants may be broken echo similar remarks made in 2005 by Shaykh Omar Bakri Mohammed, the former spiritual leader of Al-Muhajiroun who is still regarded as an Emir by many extremists in the UK. According to reports in the *Times* newspaper in July 2005, Bakri claimed in lectures delivered to students over the Internet that there was no longer a Covenant of Security in the UK and that Britain should be considered *dar al-harb*.¹⁵ According to a *Times* report, Bakri did not specifically call for violent jihad in the UK, though he claimed that jihad was an obligation on all Muslims regardless of whether they lived in a Muslim country or not.

When challenged on his remarks by the *Times*, Bakri emphasized that he was speaking in “theoretical” terms. When asked by the *Times* to elaborate, he reportedly said:

It means that Muslims can no longer be considered to have sanctity and security here [in the UK], therefore they should consider leaving this country and going back to their homelands. Otherwise they are under siege and obviously we do not want to see that we are living under siege.

As previously stated, one obvious interpretation of these statements is that Bakri and his associates are tacitly, if not explicitly, endorsing violence in the UK by declaring that Great Britain is *dar al-harb*. However, even under these conditions, an examination of the pronouncements of other extremists suggests that violent jihad is not necessarily an obligation.

In a lengthy lecture series offering an Islamic perspective on the subject of modern warfare, Mizanur Rahman addressed the subject of how countries are determined to be *dar al-harb* or *dar al-Islam* (an abode of Islam). He claimed that because there is no legitimate Islamic state anywhere in the world ruling solely through the complete application of Sharia, then the entire world is *de-facto dar al-harb* anyway:

There is always going to be fighting...The Prophet Mohammed (s.a.w.) said ‘I have been ordered to fight people until they testify *la illaha ilallah* [‘there is no God but Allah’].

There is always going to be two camps and two types of land and states and nations. Some nations will be *dar al-harb*—the land of war, where the Muslims will fight them until they say *La illahah ilallah* or until they agree to pay the *jizyah*. And there will be *dar al-Islam*. There are only two types—there is no third type. Some people get confused. They say ‘how do you live in *dar al-harb*’—as if Saudi Arabia is *dar-al-Islam!*?

Saudi Arabia is *dar al-harb* as well. The whole world is *dar al-harb*. Because everywhere that Islam is not over the people is called *dar al-harb*. *Dar al-kufr* [disbelief], *dar al-shirk* [idolatry], *dar al-ridda* [apostasy]. These are all names of *dar al-harb*. The land of disbelief. The nation that's ruled by man-made law. In these nations there will always be fighting unless there's some kind of covenant or treaty to prevent them fighting.¹⁶

Crucially, however, Rahman then appeared to try to convince his audience that living in *dar al-harb* did not necessarily demand that a Muslim wage jihad through armed conflict. He went to considerable lengths to explain that other forms of jihad, such as the so-called “jihad of the tongue,” represent critical contributions to the overall Islamic war effort. Within an Islamic context, Rahman introduced his students to important aspects of modern conflict such as psychological warfare:

War is more comprehensive than the glamorous....the thing we all dream about. To be that one in the foreign lands...Like Abu Dujanah¹⁷ ...like Khalid bin Walid¹⁸...everyone wishes and dreams about this kind of reality. They want to be the next Khattab,¹⁹ the next Abdel-Aziz al-Muqrin²⁰—Abu Hajr. They want to be the next Saleh al-Awfi.²¹ They don't understand everything that's involved. There is a need to understand the different types of war that are taking place. Sometimes the war is fought outside of the battlefield. And sometimes that is more fierce than the war itself.

In an effort to further clarify his position, he then suggested that “jihad of the tongue” should be the primary means of warfare for extremists in the UK:

How many times have our web sites been closed down? Even though we are not Mujahideen. We speak out—our Jihad is the Jihad of the tongue. Our role on the battlefield is that of the tongue. It's the debating, to challenge their [non-Muslims'] whole way of life. To challenge secularism. To challenge freedom. Still they won't even allow this to go on. That's their idea of debate.

This argument made by Rahman is, in fact, frequently deployed by extremists in the UK when discussing the relative benefits of activism and fighting. Naturally, this could be seen as a position of expediency and deception. However, the “jihad of the tongue” is widely seen by Salafist scholars and jurists as having a sound basis in Sharia and as a valid contribution to the overall Islamic jihad effort.

Conclusions

PRESENTLY, AL-MUHAJIROUN AND ITS SUCCESSORS SHOULD NOT BE VIEWED AS VIOLENT jihadist groups *per se*. Although many are proscribed in the UK, they are activist organizations, or more specifically *advocacy groups* focused on promoting an ideology close to that of the Al-Qaeda movement and mobilizing Muslim youth in support of the contemporary global jihadist agenda. The re-launch of the Prevent strategy by the UK Government is therefore seen by the extremists as a serious challenge to what they consider to be their duty as catalysts of a militant Islamist awakening. This concern is reflected in the strength of their response to Prevent both online and on the street. But how far will they go? What measures do they regard as permissible in order to defend against the feared secularization of their co-religionists? If today they genuinely consider their jihad to be a “jihad of tongue,” under what circumstances might this change?

The public statements of Islamist activists and leaders offer some clues to how to think about these questions, but no definitive answers. Currently their strongest consistent message is that a Covenant of Security exists in the UK, that terrorist attacks on British soil by those Muslims living there are in most circumstances impermissible, and that their most important contribution to jihad is one of rhetorical support and awareness-raising. This may well represent the view of most extremists at present—at least if one regards their public rhetoric as a fair reflection of their genuine juristic and ideological position.

An alternative analysis understands the extremists’ public pronouncements as expedient and intentionally deceptive. In what is currently a restrictive legal and security environment, the extremists must continue to propagate their message in the UK while remaining under the threshold of prosecution under terrorism and hate crimes legislation. Therefore it is unlikely that these Islamists would ever call explicitly for violence in response to government efforts to clamp-down on their activities, even if they wanted to.

In any case, while these Islamists insist that they believe in a Covenant of Security in the UK, their jurisprudence and rhetoric reflect a much more ambiguous position on the matter. Activists like Anjem Choudhary and Mizanur Rahman have concluded that there are multiple legitimate Islamic understandings of security covenants, and they have simultaneously failed to refute the views of ideologues such as Anwar al-Awlaki and Al-Qaeda leaders. In effect, this provides a loophole for potential jihadists to draw their own understanding about covenants—and, by extension, their own conclusions about whether violence is permissible in the West today. Therefore, this ambiguous juristic and rhetorical position may be seen as a *de-facto* endorsement of the jihadist position on the validity of terrorist attacks in the West. Moreover, Choudhary has said that while he

accepts the sanctity of the current Covenant of Security in the UK, this position could always change and the covenant could be abrogated if it is judged that British Government pressure has become so excessive that it constricts the ability of Islamists to conduct *dawa* and “jihad of the tongue.”

The ambiguity of these Islamist figureheads already has been leveraged by their followers to add religious justification for acts of domestic terrorism. Movements such as Al-Muhajiroun have a proven track record of radicalizing young men to the point that they are willing to engage in jihadist violence both at home and abroad. According to Home Office figures, around fifteen percent of individuals convicted of offenses under the Terrorism Act between 1999 and 2009 had connections to Al-Muhajiroun. As one UK law enforcement official has said: “They [Al-Muhajiroun] might not be orchestrating terrorism, but they wind these young men up and then off they go on their own. Some of them end up doing stupid things.”²²

At the present time, it appears that many Islamist extremists in the UK are unwilling to carry out a terrorist attack on home soil, citing a Covenant of Security. For these extremists, the “jihad of the tongue” is and may well remain their primary focus. But given the ambiguous stance of extremist leaders on the covenant and matters of jihad, they have provided loopholes for their followers to draw their own conclusions about whether violent jihad is permissible for Muslims living in the West. These followers, in turn, may choose to act upon what jihadist ideologues such as Anwar al-Awlaki have claimed is the Islamic obligation to fight on all fronts.

What must also be acknowledged is the potential for the current positions and outlook of Islamist ideologues to change (and possibly rapidly) in reaction to new governmental and other external pressures. The UK Government’s Prevent strategy has already been described by Islamists as an “ideological raid” and as part of a broader offensive against Islam. Insofar as these government efforts are understood by Islamists as constricting their *dawa* and jeopardizing their efforts to radicalize British youth, Islamist ideologues and their followers may be compelled to re-examine and possibly even abandon their present positions on the Covenant of Security as well as the impermissibility of violent jihad in the UK.

NOTES

1. Al-Muhajiroun is an Islamist extremist group in the UK founded by the Syrian ideologue Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed. The group has been officially disbanded, having been proscribed under UK terrorism legislation, but it continues to operate under a range of identities. The UK Government

- has already proscribed several of these, including Islam4UK and the London School of Shariah.
2. The lecture formed part of a series that appeared on an extremist web site in 2010 addressing the fundamentals of Tawhid, including challenges to its implementation in a contemporary setting.
 3. This statement was preceded by reference to several evidences including Surah 2 of the Quran (al-Baqarah), verse 219: "They ask thee concerning fighting in the Prohibited Month. Say: 'Fighting therein is a grave (offence); but graver is it in the sight of God to prevent access to the path of God, to deny Him, to prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and drive out its members.' Tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter. Nor will they cease fighting you until they turn you back from your faith if they can [emphasis added]. And if any of you turn back from their faith and die in unbelief, their works will bear no fruit in this life and in the Hereafter; they will be companions of the Fire and will abide therein."
 4. A reference to a 2004 report by the RAND Corporation that recommended supporting moderate Muslim groups as a bulwark against the propagation of radical Islamist ideologies, "Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, Strategies," RAND Corporation, 2004
http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1716/.
 5. Copies of Islamic Prevent can be downloaded in PDF form from Choudhary's official web site:
<http://www.anjemchoudary.com/news/islamic-prevent>.
 6. Mizanur Rahman is a British national who was convicted in 2006 of inciting racial hatred, and in a 2007 retrial of solicitation to murder, after taking part in an Islamist extremist protest outside the Danish Embassy in London during which he is alleged to have called for the deaths of American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq. He completed four years of a six-year jail sentence. Following his release in 2010, he returned to Dawah activities and his lectures are widely promoted on the web site <http://salafimedia.com>.
 7. *Millat Ibrahim* is a book by the influential Jordanian Jihadist ideologue Mohammed Taqir al-Barqawi, a.k.a. Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi. An English-language copy can be found at http://www.e-prism.org/images/Millat_Ibrahim_-_English.pdf.
 8. Possibly a reference to the book *The Absent Obligation (al-Farida al-Gha'iba)* by Mohammed Abdul-Saleem al-Faraj. A copy can be found at <http://www.afghanvoice.com/Books/TheAbsentObligation.pdf>.
 9. For an examination of current perspectives on application of Covenants of Security in the West, see James Barclay, "Can Al-Qaeda Use Islam To Justify Jihad Against The United States? A debate In Progress," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 8, No. 25 (July 2010)
http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36562&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=381&cHash=1f9181c394 and "Jihadists Divided On Covenants Of Security," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, May 2011.
 10. Frequently-cited ayah and hadith underscoring the importance of covenants in Islam include:
 - "Oh you who believe! Fulfil your contracts." Al-Quran, Surah al-Maidah, verse 1.
 - "And purchase not a small gain at the cost of Allah's Covenant." Al-Quran, Surah an-Nahl, verse 95.
 - "There is no Eeman for the one who does not keep his covenant and no deen for the one who does not keep his trusts." (Ahmad).
 - "It is not allowed to take a small piece of wealth from the one you are in covenant with except if he is satisfied with that." (Abu Dawud).
 - "When Allah (swt) will gather the first and the last on the day of judgment, every betrayer will be raised with a banner. It will be said, This man is a betrayer...so and so, son of so and so." (Sahih Muslim).

11. This is an *explicit* Covenant of Security, a specific type of covenant in which security in a non-Muslim country is sought and granted, for example through seeking asylum.
12. This is likely a reference to *Inspire*, an English-language magazine produced by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Issue 1 of the magazine featured an article entitled *How to Make A Bomb In The Kitchen Of Your Mom*, <http://publicintelligence.net/complete-inspire-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-aqap-magazine/>.
13. For the BBC interview with Abu Izzudeen, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uv704B93EzU&feature=player_embedded#!.
14. A particularly well-publicized example of this public agitation occurred in 2010 when members of an extremist group calling itself Muslims Against Crusades set fire to a pile of Remembrance poppies at an Armistice Day protest in Westminster, supposedly to draw attention to the killing of Muslim civilians by the British military in Afghanistan. At least one protestor was later convicted of offences under the Public Order Act. Extremists viewed these actions not as a publicity stunt, as some observers claimed, but as the practical application of Commanding Good and Forbidding Evil. See “Man Guilty Of Burning Poppies At Armistice Day Protest,” *BBC News Online*, March 7, 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-12664346>.
15. For example, see *Omar Bakri Mohammed—A message Of Hate*, *The Times* newspaper, July 20, 2005.
16. Covenants of Security, Parts 1 and 2, by Abu Bara’a, can be found at: <http://www.izharudeen.com/abu-bara-covenant-series.html>.
17. Likely a reference to Abu Dujanah Simak bin Kharasha, a famous swordsman and Companion of the Prophet Mohammed who was killed in the Battle of Yamama in 632AD.
18. Famous Muslim general and Companion of the Prophet Mohammed, who led Muslim forces in successful military expeditions against the Roman and Persian Empires. Born in 592AD in Mecca, he died in 643AD in Homs, Syria.
19. Probably a reference to the Saudi guerrilla leader in Chechnya, Ibn al-Khattab, who led foreign fighters in the Caucasus until his death by poisoning in 2002.
20. Abdel-Aziz al-Muqrin (a.k.a. Abu Hajr) was a Saudi Jihadist who briefly led Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula during the group’s most intensive period of activity in the Kingdom between 2003-2005. He assumed leadership of the group in 2003 but was killed in a shootout with Saudi security forces in 2004.
21. Saleh al-Awfi was a leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. He assumed command of the group in Saudi Arabia following the death in 2004 of Abdel-Aziz al-Muqrin. Al-Awfi was killed in a raid by Saudi security forces in Medina in 2005.
22. Author interview. Anonymity requested due to the sensitivity of the official’s counterterrorism role.