Introduction to Preventism in Security

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Security, in many countries, has become the focal point of policy making. Returning foreign fighters, diseases like Ebola, problems with childcare and education, issues in cyberspace—all such issues, which might or might not originally be related to security, are now being dragged into the realm of national security, and security measures are being implemented on a much larger scale than previously. The determining argument in this debate is the idea that we live in a constant state of emergency in which exceptional measures must be taken to control the threats and dangers we face.¹

This shift has taken many different shapes in many domains of security. In the field of security policy, there is a general tendency to create a split between approaches that focus on responding to threats and policies that aim to prevent threats. One prominent example is the field of terrorism, where the old “counter-terrorism” paradigm was first replaced with countering violent extremism (CVE), which in turn was replaced with the label, “preventing countering extremism”. All such concepts have spurred debate in the academic world while often remaining un-explained in policy documents as if their meaning is self-evident. As a result, any research that attempts to understand the process of radicalization or vulnerabilities to extremism falls under the banner of “prevention”, whereas any research that is focused on responding to terrorist attacks—such as investigating, capturing and prosecuting terrorists or military responses to terrorism—falls under the banner of “repression”. Though many security agencies have traditionally been focused on “everything that

happens after the bomb goes off”, to paraphrase Peter Neumann,\(^2\) in recent years we have witnessed a shift towards a more prevention-oriented security policy in Western countries.

Another example can be found in the field of crime fighting, where a temporal shift has taken place from what Zedner coins post-crime to pre-crime,\(^3\) thereby resulting in, “a society in which the possibility of forestalling risks competes with and even takes precedence over responding to wrongs done”. As a result, security has become a much more “time-laden” concept. Rather than just the “absence of threats”, it has become directed much more towards the projected future and the perceived threats in that future. The question for policymakers in the field of security used to be how to map, categorize and assess the potential risks and then to control them: i.e., how to prevent threats from materializing. With the rise of “preventism”—the desire to prevent threats from materializing as the underlying ordering principle driving security policies and practices—the focus has shifted more and more to mapping potential risks and scenarios, distinguishing between different types of “risky groups” and “risky citizens”, with an emphasis on permanent monitoring and surveillance to prevent and mitigate risks. Data mining has thus become a spearhead in the preventative approach—where surveillance (monitoring citizens on the basis of a presumption or allegation of misconduct) has turned into datavalliance (gathering as much data as possible to predict future behaviour).

Preventism currently seems firmly integrated in the academic literature on conceptual shifts around the concept of security: the changing attitudes among politicians, policy makers and security professionals about the prevention of crime or terrorism; and modern police strategies such as “preventive policing”. Over the past decade, the literature on security, pre-emption, risk society and the culture of fear and control has grown exponentially. Most of the ongoing debate, however, is limited to discourse analysis and to what exactly is meant by concepts such as threats, risks or prevention. Rather than add to this debate, we would like to focus in this special issue on the more concrete question of what consequences this shift towards preventism has in the field of security—especially from the perspective of human rights.

The assumption in much of the literature is that there are indeed consequences. Here, grand statements are not always shunned. Preventism is perceived as detracting from the presumption of innocence, leading to criminal law based on intent, discrimination and racial profiling, serious violations of

\(^2\) Neumann > radicalization.