



Community Policy  
Forum



BRIEFING

# THE MUSLIM TARGET: WEAPONISING EXTREMISM, ERODING HUMAN RIGHTS, AND SILENCING DISSENT

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)
- The Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA)
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)



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The Community Policy Forum is an independent think-tank seeking to promote evidence-based and community-centred approaches to issues concerning Islamophobia and structural inequalities facing British Muslim communities. We attempt this through connecting policymakers with academic research and experts and through providing platforms for engagement with diverse Muslim voices on areas of contemporary importance.

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## Introduction

Earlier this week, Community Policy Forum published an interim [briefing](#) in light of [reports](#) indicating plans for Michael Gove to unveil a new government definition of 'extremism'. The official update to the [definition](#) has now been [announced](#), alongside [guidance](#) for 'principles of engagement' directed at ensuring that government departments and officials "are not inadvertently providing a platform, funding or legitimacy to groups or individuals who attempt to advance extremist ideologies".

With the plans now formally announced, the following is an updated briefing reflecting on the implications of these announcements. It remains our view that these changes represent an attack on civil liberties, human rights, and political freedoms. We conclude that:

- There has been an absence of public consultation or parliamentary scrutiny surrounding these changes, which can only result in damage for groups whose experiences have not been taken into account during the policy's development and raises questions about unchecked executive power.
- These changes must be understood as part of a long-standing pattern of government attempts to circumvent judicial scrutiny, avoid accountability, undermine protest, and silence its critics, with the impetus for these changes appearing to be a desire to enforce the recommendations of the Shawcross inquiry and dismantle Muslim and pro-Palestinian activism in particular.
- The nebulous concept of 'extremism' has been misunderstood and misused across the decades leading to untold harms and a misdirection of counter-terror focus.
- The influence of the Shawcross recommendations and the securitisation of Muslim organisations will have significant consequences for democracy, as well as exacerbating structural Islamophobia across society.
- While there remains little information about the establishment of a 'counter-extremism centre of excellence' there are questions to be asked about its intended remit, functioning, and transparency.
- As this is not a legal definition, it is concerning that this new definition and accompanying engagement principles can seemingly be applied without judicial oversight to bar lawful organisations from public life.

The new policy directly infringes upon rights that are enshrined within the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA), as well as the UK's international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

## Understanding the changes.

The UK definition of terrorism to this point includes not only actions, but threats of action. As such, the risk of violence has become central in a shift towards increasingly proactive policing, the creation of pre-criminal spaces, and ultimately a heavy focus upon the supposed links between 'radicalisation', 'non-violent extremism', and 'violent extremism'.

Since 2011, the definition of extremism includes "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect [for] and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs".

According to the new [definition](#), "*Extremism is the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to:*

1. *negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or*
2. *undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or*
3. *intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2)."*

This is accompanied by a list of core behaviours, many of which are exceptionally broad and subjective. As but two examples:

- ***"Subverting the way public or state institutions exercise their powers, in order to further ideological goals, for example through entryism, or by misusing powers or encouraging others to do so"***: entryism is a particularly nebulous concept in this context and prone to misapplication. It is an accusation frequently levied against Muslims when they seek to exercise their democratic rights and participate on an equal footing in political life. Thus, as will be discussed further below, when combined with existing structural Islamophobia embedded across the political sphere and within the UK's counter-terror apparatus, this definition is likely to unduly impact Muslim organisations and individuals (such as [MEND](#)) that seek to encourage communities to become politically active and empower them to advocate for themselves through the democratic process.
- ***"Consistent association with individuals or representatives of groups or organisations that have demonstrated behaviour in either aim 1 or aim 2 without providing critical challenge to their ideology or behaviour"***: this is an association fallacy. Firstly, there is no indication of how robust this 'critical challenge' must be to absolve someone of

responsibility of guilt by association. Secondly, as will be discussed, there are concerns about the process in which groups and individuals will be categorised as 'extremist'. Guilt by association will ostracise organisations from civil society support who may have been erroneously branded as extremist.

Based on this definition, Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is due to publish a list of organisations which, in his opinion, meet this threshold. Furthermore, according to the government [guidance](#) on principles for external engagement, organisations and individuals who are captured in Gove's [list](#) are to be [blocked](#) from:

- Engagement with government ministers,
- Engagement with the Civil Service,
- Government funding,
- and being appointed to government advisory bodies and groups.

While the list is yet to be published, Gove used [parliamentary privilege](#) this week to name several groups being targeted, including the Muslim Association of Britain, Cage, and MEND, as well as Patriotic Alternative and the British National Socialist Movement. A draft version of the statement is reported to also include Friends of al-Aqsa and 5Pillars.

Concerningly, there has been a distinct lack of public consultation and no parliamentary debate on these proposals. Counter-terrorism is a vastly complicated and nuanced issue and the correct calibration of definitions is vital as it underpins and shapes the approach of the entire UK counter-terrorism apparatus. Therefore, without proper engagement with civil society, faith groups, and academic experts, any policy is in danger of striking an uneven balance between security and protecting the rights and freedoms of the public. As a result of the lack of consultation, the government has [reportedly](#) already internally acknowledged the likelihood of legal challenges when it is announced, and groups named by Gove have already [invited](#) him to repeat the claims outside of parliamentary privilege where he can be legally challenged.

## **Understanding the Political Context of the Proposals.**

These changes follow a pattern over the last several years of government-backed legislation and policies designed to circumvent judicial scrutiny, avoid accountability, undermine protest, and curtail the free speech of those that oppose its policy agendas. As but a handful of examples, the now shelved '[Bill of Rights](#)' emerged from attempts to limit the courts' abilities to act as a check on executive power in human rights cases. More recently, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the Public Order Act 2023 [restrict](#) the right to peaceful

protest. Meanwhile, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill is designed to **hinder** public advocacy for international human rights causes, with a heavy focus on restricting pro-Palestinian activism.

Indeed, in recent months, the use of these powers and their damage has been particularly felt in relation to pro-Palestinian advocacy. Activists have been caught up in the counter-terror apparatus, arrested, and demonised by government officials as 'extremists' and 'Islamists' participating in "**hate marches**". Gove himself has **warned** people that by participating in pro-Palestine marches, they could be "lending credence" to 'extremists' in an attempt to discourage support for the cause. Whilst Home Secretary, Suella Braverman wrote a letter to senior police officers in which she said that waving a Palestinian flag may be **criminalised** as a public order offence, highlighting attempts to crack down on non-violent political activism. Similarly, a group of pro-Palestinian protestors were **arrested** last November for "locking on" after they chained themselves together and blocked the entrance to the Bristol headquarters of Israeli arms company, Elbit - the first arrest of its kind since the Public Order Act became law last May.

There has also been a considerable **increase** in PREVENT referrals since 7 October, with Muslims that express solidarity with Palestine, including **schoolchildren**, at particular risk of being referred for suspected radicalisation. Amnesty International's recent **report**, *'This is the Thought Police'*, highlights that PREVENT has a discriminatory impact, especially on Muslim communities, and that referring people to PREVENT for non-violent political beliefs "interferes with the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion". As such, utilising PREVENT as a tool to suppress expressions of pro-Palestinian activism undermines our civil liberties and jeopardises the UK's compliance with its international human rights obligations.

According to both the introduction of the **definition** and the government's **press release**, the changes have been made in response to "the pervasiveness of extremist ideologies in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Israel on 7 October" and a rise in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic hate crimes in the intervening months. While this superficially appears a balanced concern, it is difficult not to take into account the government's long standing **hostility** to addressing Islamophobia both within its ranks and across society. With this in mind, one might be forgiven for being cynical of the government's motives, and in light of the aforementioned demonisation of pro-Palestinian activists, question the extent to which the new definition is in reality being pursued as a mechanism for introducing the recommendations of the Shawcross inquiry and curtailing Muslim and pro-Palestinian political activism.

Consequently, there has been legitimate **concern** across the political spectrum that this definition will be used to silence lawful non-majority opinions and activists that do not support the government agenda. Recent years have already witnessed instances of non-violent groups being erroneously subsumed within counter-terror concerns, for example in 2020 Extinction Rebellion were **included** in a counter-terror policing guide entitled *'Safeguarding young people*

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*and adults from ideological extremism’.*

Further questions of a political motivation underpinning these changes have emerged due to their coinciding with the run up to a general election. A joint [letter](#) signed by senior politicians and counter-terrorism experts, including three former Conservative Home Secretaries, has warned against the politicisation of the concept of extremism. It states, “in the run up to a general election it’s particularly important that that consensus is maintained and that no political party uses the issue to seek short term tactical advantage.”

Moreover, ‘extremism’ has always been a nebulous concept within political discourse. As a subjective term, it is always for those who hold dominant political power to dictate what is outside of the political norm and therefore ‘extreme’. Consequently, this is not the first time that accusations of extremism have been levied at those opposed to the government of the day. Causes previously decried as ‘extremist’ have later been highlighted as positive radical movements that have resulted in the betterment of society (women’s suffrage being one such example). We would argue that the focus should be shifted to the means by which groups advocate achieving their ends; specifically whether they advance violence in achieving their goals. What is at issue in the current debate is the closing down of public space for law abiding non-violent groups because they differ from the dominant political norm. A healthy functioning democracy should be robust enough to challenge dangerous ideas through debate. Consequently, there is a problem not only with the updated definition of extremism, but the fact that such a subjective concept is capable of driving counter-terror policies, especially considering that such an approach is inherently focussed on people’s thoughts, rather than their actions.

Ultimately, by expanding the already subjective understanding of ‘extremism’, there are legitimate concerns that these proposals follow a pattern of government attempts to undermine political opposition through curtailing the free speech and political participation of those who oppose their political agenda.

## **The Impact on Muslim Communities.**

The existing counter-terror apparatus, including the PREVENT Strategy (which this definition seeks to underpin), has been [criticised](#) across civil society, academia, and the international community for its discriminatory application against Muslim communities. By securitising Muslim faith and practice, PREVENT has mobilised structural Islamophobia and created a hostile environment wherein normative Islamic practice is often seen as suspect and Muslims are forced to adjust, negotiate, or withdraw from political participation for fear of being caught in its net. This new definition and accompanying engagement principles are, therefore, of particular concern for Muslim communities, especially in light of the government’s existing commitment to the recommendations of the Shawcross Report that has been widely [criticised](#) for its conclusions that Muslim-led civil society organisations should be viewed as ‘extremist’

and 'Islamist' for political activism in opposition to government policy and its subsequent recommendation of a similar approach to dissolving organisations as has been seen in [France](#). Such an approach will create a political environment that effectively excludes Muslims from participating on an equal footing.

It is noteworthy that of the organisations highlighted by Gove, five out of seven are Muslim. This hyper-focus on Muslim organisations belies the trends in the European picture of terrorism. According to the latest EUROPOL TE-SAT [report](#), of the 28 completed, failed and foiled terrorist attacks reported by member states in 2022, most were categorised as left-wing and anarchist (18), while the number of jihadist attacks (6) has fallen compared to previous years. Meanwhile, according to the Home Office's own [data](#), of the 645 PREVENT referrals that went on to be adopted as a Channel case between 2022-2023, "296 (46%) were for Extreme Right-Wing concerns, 115 (18%) were for Islamist concerns, and 103 (16%) were for those with a Conflicted ideology." Consequently, the preoccupation with Muslim organisations does not reflect the national picture.

Moreover, the involvement of Michael Gove in the development of these policies has been met with alarm amongst Muslim communities. Certainly, Gove has been [criticised](#) for a reputation of supporting anti-Muslim policies and associations and has even been [labelled](#) as 'extremist' himself. He is a founding member of the Henry Jackson Society, which has been [described](#) as a "threat to British democracy" and is renowned for its political attempts to exclude Muslims from public life. Gove was the government driving force behind the 'Trojan Horse' affair, that has been since [understood](#) to be an "anti-Muslim ideological concoction" and "a figment of neo-Conservative imagination." Concerningly, evidence of Gove's attitude towards and understanding of Muslim communities can be found in his book entitled *Celsius 7/7*, wherein he highlights the threat of "Islamism" in Britain. In a review of his book the renowned historian William Dalrymple [wrote](#), "Gove's book is a confused epic of simplistic incomprehension, riddled with more factual errors and misconceptions than any other text I have come across in some two decades of reviewing books on this subject. Many are mistakes of the most basic sort that even a little experience on the ground could have disabused him of."

Consequently, the seemingly anti-Muslim and neoconservative attitudes that appear to be driving these changes capitalises upon the securitised scrutiny that is already placed upon Muslims and will ultimately serve to exacerbate structural and institutional Islamophobia across society.

## **Processes and Executive Power.**

According to the government [press release](#), the definition will be supported by the creation of a new "counter-extremism centre of excellence" in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing



and Communities. The aim of this new unit will be to “provide leadership for the cross-government counter-extremism community, ensure consistent application of the definition and engagement standards, and take the lead on producing strategic assessments of extremism.” Little other information is available about the intended construction, remit, reporting mechanisms, and functioning of this new project, beyond the fact that it will take expertise from the Commission for Countering Extremism. However, what can be observed at this stage is:

- While the unit is said to consist of ‘independent’ advisors, the government’s recent history of such appointments is of considerable concern. The **withdrawal** of Lord Carlisle as the independent reviewer of PREVENT after a legal challenge, the **appointment** of Robin Simcox to the Commission for Countering Extremism, and the current **controversy** surrounding the appointment of an anti-Muslim hatred advisor are but a handful of examples of a reputation for presenting highly politicised appointments as independent, especially on issues that pertain to Muslim communities.
- Taking expertise from the Commission for Countering Extremism is also problematic. Indeed, the commission has been **exposed** as having intimate ties to far-right networks of racist and anti-Muslim hate groups, as well as **consulting** academics advocating far-right ‘Great Replacement’ theories.

It is also important to note that the Muslim organisations already highlighted by Gove have not been contacted to discuss the concerns against them, nor defend against the accusations. There is great danger in a potential process that includes organisations on such an incendiary list, intimately damaging their reputations, livelihoods, and relationships across society, without providing an opportunity to respond. Additionally, as this is not a legal definition, it is concerning that this new definition and accompanying engagement principles can seemingly be applied without judicial oversight to bar lawful organisations from public life. Meanwhile, any avenues for appeal remain unclear. This raises questions about the appropriate use of unchecked executive powers.

## **The Impact on Human Rights and Civil Liberties.**

The UK is obliged under the **HRA** and numerous international treaties, such as the **ICCPR**, to protect and respect human rights. There are a number of concerns regarding how the new definition and accompanying engagement guidance may breach the UK’s domestic and international human rights obligations:

- **Freedom of expression:** The freedom of expression is protected by Article 10 of the HRA and Article 19 of the ICCPR. As previously noted, Muslim and non-violent minority views will be particularly vulnerable to restriction under the reported proposals.

**Freedom of association:** Article 11 of the HRA and Article 21 of the ICCPR protect the

right to peacefully protest, hold meetings, and to form or be part of a trade union, a political party, or any other association or voluntary group. The principles of engagement combined with a definition that embeds a fallacy of association effectively squeezes lawful organisations out of political life and, with the government providing an example for the rest of society, encourages local authorities, funders, and public organisations to follow suit, thereby blocking impacted organisations from participation in all areas of public life.

- **Freedom of thought, conscience and religion:** The right to practise one's religion is protected by Article 18 of the ICCPR and Article 9 of the HRA. As previously mentioned, normative Islamic practices are already frequently considered suspect under the application of current counter-terror policies – a situation that these changes can only exacerbate. However, there is also potential for other minority religious views to also be at risk of censorship.
- **Protection from discrimination:** Both the HRA and the ICCPR contain explicit protections against discrimination on “any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” As discussed above, counter-terror strategies such as PREVENT have already been noted as promoting and embedding structural Islamophobia across society. With the enforcement of these changes and their primary target being Muslim and pro-Palestinian organisations, discrimination and structural inequalities can only deepen.

## Conclusion.

As discussed throughout this briefing, there are already considerable concerns surrounding the current application of notions of ‘extremism’. This new definition and accompanying guidance, developed without parliamentary oversight and public consultation, raises new fears of government attempts to circumvent judicial scrutiny, avoid accountability, undermine protest, and silence its political opponents through the enactment of the highly contested Shawcross recommendations. While Muslims continue to be the primary targets of these securitised political manoeuvrings, all minority opinions that contradict government agendas are at risk. Ultimately, these changes have significant consequences for a healthy and functioning democracy and will only exacerbate structural Islamophobia across society.

Moreover, far from “**striking** a proportionate balance between protecting our democratic right to freedom of expression and belief, and not curtailing the civil liberties and rights of people in the UK, whilst safeguarding them and our democratic institutions against the wide-ranging harms of extremism”, this new policy directly infringes upon rights that are enshrined within the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA), as well as the UK's international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). If anything, removing democratic avenues for expressing grievances and engaging with minority concerns will be counter-productive as it has the potential for violence


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to become perceived as the exclusive way of having these grievances recognised. Instead, democracy and robust debate should be protected, strengthened, and celebrated. This cannot happen through divisive rhetoric and the politicisation of 'extremism'.

Consequently, we urge the government to:

- Withdraw the new definition of extremism and accompanying principles of engagement.
- Reverse its commitment to the Shawcross recommendations and instead implement the **recommendation** of the People's Review of PREVENT to withdraw the PREVENT strategy on the grounds that it is ineffective, disproportionate, and discriminatory.



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