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Counter-terrorism

Major new drive to delegitimise Palestine solidarity as 'threat to democracy', to paper over government's untenable position

- There has been a major drive by the British government to delegitimise Palestine solidarity and deem it as 'extremist' and a 'threat to democracy', dovetailing with the unveiling of a new definition of 'extremism' by Michael Gove (see below).
- This began after the Speaker of the House of Commons, former Labour MP Lindsay Hoyle, broke Parliamentary convention [to allow a watered-down Labour motion to be discussed](#) in place of a more substantive motion for ceasefire submitted by the Scottish National Party (SNP).

The move was widely seen as a favour by Hoyle to Labour leader Keir Starmer, to stave off an expected rebellion by his party against his anti-ceasefire line. It incurred major backlash as a breach of impartiality, including [calls for Hoyle to resign](#).

- This outcry intensified after it was revealed that Starmer had met privately with Hoyle prior to the vote and lobbied him, supposedly [threatening his job](#) under a future Labour government if he didn't accede to his demands.

Importantly, in his justification for his move, Hoyle cited protests and lobbying of MPs by the public for a ceasefire, [framing these as 'threats to MPs'](#) that he was trying to prevent.

- The week after, independent candidate George Galloway was elected in the former Labour seat of Rochdale in a by-election on a pro-Palestine platform, in what [some outlets described as](#) the 'ugliest by-election in memory' and an example of 'populism'.

It was notable that in the run up to his victory, Galloway's support was attributed

largely to the Pakistani-Muslim population of Rochdale, which served to pre-emptively delegitimise the outcome as inherently unrepresentative.

- It was in this context, where Palestine solidarity was being cast as extremist and actively dangerous, that Prime Minister [Rishi Sunak hastily issued a speech](#) the day after Galloway's victory.

In it he claimed that: *"Now our democracy itself is a target. Council meetings and local events have been stormed. MPs do not feel safe in their homes...On too many occasions recently, our streets have been hijacked by small groups who are hostile to our values and have no respect for our democratic traditions."*

- He also affirmed the government's open hostility to pro-Palestine demonstrations and its intent to criminalise them, stating that he had met senior police officers and *"made clear it is the public's expectation that they will not merely manage these protests, but police them. And I say this to the police, we will back you when you take action"* (emphasis added).

Emboldened by this speech, the police [blocked a protest outside a Barclays Bank](#) branch in central London the day after.

- This renewed offensive is yet another means through which the government has sought to recast Palestine solidarity as illegitimate since, and well before, October 7th.

It came shortly after moves to expand police powers to demand individuals remove face coverings in public, which was promoted erroneously [as an outright 'facemask ban'](#) for Palestine protests.

But this latest move represents a particularly opportunist effort to displace and deflect attention from the government - and opposition's - complete failure to heed mass popular opinion on the matter, and to buttress their indefensible position.

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New government definition of extremism and 'blacklist' published by Michael Gove

- The government unveiled their new definition of 'extremism', first revealed [back in November](#), developed by arch-securocrat Michael Gove, the minister for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.
- For the purposes of internal government operations, [the new definition](#) replaces the definition outlined in the Prevent 2011 strategy, of extremism as 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British Values', to define it as such:

'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 freedom 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).'*

- At this point, the definition is **not** statutory and serves as an in-house definition for government departments, rather than other public bodies - though it should be expected that this will change in time.

As the government press release states '*Non-central government institutions, such as arms-length bodies, higher education institutions and independent organisations including the police and CPS, will not be obliged to adopt the definition or apply the engagement principles initially.*' (emphasis added).

- The new definition was also [published alongside a set](#) of 'principles of engagement' for government officials and departments.

The principles are intended to outline reasons for excluding certain groups from ministerial engagements, government grant funding, and appointments to advisory bodies and groups - amounting to a form of 'soft proscription' or a blacklist on groups that the relevant minister deems as 'extremist'.

The principles are reminiscent of a [blacklist produced by the now-defunct Quilliam Foundation](#) for the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism back in 2010, which listed a number of Muslim organisations that government representatives should refuse to engage.

- Alongside the publication of the principles of engagement, Michael Gove also directly mentioned five initial groups that would be considered under the new definition for the purposes of the blacklist.

Three were Muslim advocacy organisations - CAGE, MEND, Muslim Association of Britain. The latter two - the British National Socialist Movement and Patriotic Alternative - are fascist organisations, who had very little scope of securing ministerial engagements or government grants in any case.

- The new definition was directly influenced by the 2021 report by the Commission for Countering Extremism 'Operating with Impunity', co-authored by Sara Khan - who now serves as Gove's advisor. This represents a return to fortunes for Khan, who had long complained of being excluded by the Home Office since the 2019 general election.
- More broadly, the definition is also the culmination of long-term debates and contention within the government over the 2011 definition of extremism, and difficulties in developing [an alternative which is legally robust](#) enough to place on a legal footing.

This definition does not appear to have reached that threshold of robustness - given its non-statutory nature - but its publication reflects the premium that the government is now placing on political prerogatives, over strategic or long-term ones.

Government update on Shawcross review a year on cements ties between programme and Commission for Countering Extremism

- In February the government issued a [progress report on the 'Independent Review of Prevent'](#) conducted and issued by William Shawcross in February 2023, after numerous delays.

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Indicating the level of priority afforded to the review, the update pointed out that 30 out of the review's 34 recommendations had been completed in full already, with 115 out of the recommended 120 sub-actions also being delivered.

- Among the updates, the progress review indicated that the 'Vulnerability Assessment Framework' (VAF) - the radicalisation 'checklist' used in Prevent, and based off the ERG22+ framework - was being replaced by a new 'Prevent assessment framework' (PAF) which *'has been developed by the expert Counter Terrorism Assessment and Rehabilitation Centre, that is based on the most up to date evidence and learning'*.
- The update also indicated how closely entwined the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE), now under the leadership of securitisation advocate and Henry Jackson Society alumnus Robin Simcox, had become with the delivery of Prevent.

This includes through the launch of a Prevent Standards and Compliance Unit within the CCE to provide 'oversight' to the programme.

Additionally, the progress review indicated the CCE's role in supporting the 'development of a bespoke ideology training package' for Prevent, and in 'rolling out expert ideology training to Prevent practitioners in the police, local authorities and education'.

- In sum, it is clear the CCE's role under Robin Simcox is providing ideological stewardship to Prevent, and ensuring that the more staunchly pro-Prevent wing of the security industry like the Henry Jackson Society, continues to shape government policy.

This is also notable in light of the fact that, upon its launching in 2018, the CCE initially tried to put distance between itself and Prevent.

National Security

