

Many Voices: understanding the debate about preventing violent extremism

A lecture at the London School of Economics (LSE)

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Thank you. It is a great pleasure to be here at the London School of Economics (LSE), founded by the Fabian Society in the century before last as a centre for rational analysis and policy evaluation, and today enjoying an international reputation for educational excellence.

This is a difficult conversation.

Talking about violent extremism does not come easily to any of us. It is laden with potential traps, clouded with emotion, confused by contested terminology, ignorance and prejudice.

But George Orwell in *Politics and the English Language* warned us against using confusion over words and their meanings as the excuse for what he called 'political quietism'.

It may be tough, but it is a conversation we have to have.

The attacks in the USA on 9/11, the bombings in London on 7/7, the Madrid bombings, and the failed attacks on Glasgow airport, at the Giraffe restaurant in Exeter, on the Tiger Tiger nightclub in London. These events are real. Many families have lost their loved ones. Many people have sustained terrible injuries, or live with traumatic memories.

These episodes of terror are not unconnected or stand-alone. They are part of a pattern of violence against civilians in many countries by a network of organisations and small groups which share a basic interpretation of the world, and are prepared to kill, and to die, for what they see as their cause.

And they will continue.

Barack Obama used his Inaugural Address in February to tell the world:

'Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred.'

So what is this 'far-reaching network of violence and hatred'?

It is rooted in a shifting mosaic of international groupings, with their origins in the struggle of the *mujahedeen* against the Soviets in Afghanistan, in the refugee camps and some *madrassas* on the Afghan-Pakistan border, in Algeria's political unrest of the 1980s and 1990s, and in the war in Iraq.

Some seek to define this mosaic of organisations and philosophies as 'Islamism' or sometimes 'Political Islam'. But here we run into real dangers.

There is the obvious danger that we say '*Islamism*' but people hear '*Islam*' or '*Islamic*', especially as the word translates poorly into other languages such as Arabic. Even in English, where the two words are distinct, many people lack the political literacy to distinguish between a political ideology dubbed by some as *Islamism* and *Islam* itself. There are plenty of people, for example the BNP in this country, or Geert Wilders' outfit in Holland, who would wish to conflate the two in order to stir up race hate.

A second trap is that to talk of 'Islamism' suggests there is a unified, single movement. But there is no more a unified Islamism than there is a single socialism, or a single conservatism, or a single liberalism. As with every single political creed, from Marxism to fascism, there are internal factions, theoretical

disputes, acrimonious splits, personality clashes, revisionism and evolution of thought and organisation. For example, Al-Qaeda is in conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood over fundamental questions such as the nature of the state, and the duty of the individual to fight the perceived enemies of Islam.

A third trap is to assume that all Islamists are terrorists. Some groups specifically oppose violence but have religious views which are very conservative and can conflict with other values we share in society. Hizb ut-Tahrir, for example, is a party which overtly anti-democratic, is against the existence of Israel, wants an end to the British state and its replacement by a theocracy, but which nonetheless falls short of openly advocating violence or terrorism. To lump Hizb ut-Tahrir in with Al-Qaeda is to fail to understand the differences between the two, just as it would be intellectually lazy to lump the BNP with Combat 18, or the Socialist Workers' Party with the Red Army Faction.

But the question is the extent to which politically-extreme groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir contribute to an environment which makes violence more acceptable or justifiable, makes individuals more susceptible to committing acts of violence, and whether there is a symbiotic relationship between groups whose hate is expressed in words, or whose support for terrorism or suicide bombing is confined to the Middle East but not Britain, and those whose hate is expressed in violent actions. For example the Muslim Brotherhood is not a terrorist organisation, but it supports terrorist organisations such as Hamas in Gaza.

Notwithstanding my plea for an enhanced literacy when it comes to discourse about the nature of what we might call political *Islamisms* in the plural, it is also clear that we can discern some common threads in that “*far-reaching network of violence and hatred.*”

A belief in the supremacy of the Muslim people, in a divine duty to bring the world under the control of hegemonic Islam, in the establishment of a theocratic Caliphate, and in the undemocratic imposition of theocratic law on

whole societies: these are the defining and common characteristics of the disparate strands of this ideology here and around the world.

You can't ignore the facts that this ideology is rooted in a twisted reading of Islam. The academics, scholars and imams I meet to discuss these issues tell me that the message of Islam is one of peace; and the followers of Islam I meet oppose the single narrative promulgated by Al-Qaeda, and certainly oppose violence. Indeed, the vast majority are proud of their faith and their nationality, see no conflict or contradiction between being British and being Muslim, and are an integral part of the economic, cultural and social life of their neighbourhood and the country, giving the lie to the ideas of division and difference that lie at the heart of extremist ideology.

Research into British mosques that the Charity Commission released earlier this week gave a further insight. Almost all the mosques they interviewed educate young people. Four in five raise money to help the poor and vulnerable. Most have women's groups. Many more get involved in sport, health, or services for older people. This is what Islam truly means in practice for the vast majority: a personal and spiritual faith matched by a sense of social responsibility, motivating people to do good for their neighbourhood and community.

However, a report from the Quilliam Foundation into British mosques - also released this week - highlights the challenges. The majority of imams are born or educated abroad. Some speak little English, making it harder to forge a connection with young people. Government is alive to these challenges - and that is why, in response to calls from Muslim communities, we are looking to enable more faith leaders to be trained in this country, to improve qualification standards, and to help existing faith leaders improve their language, pastoral and other skills.

And the fact is that violent extremists will try and step in where young people in search of guidance can't get it elsewhere. They will use religious language, religious texts and passages, seek to get a foothold in mosques and

madrassas in order to spread their messages, and exploit international events such as the war in Iraq or the conflicts on Israel's borders to inflame opinion and forge a sense of grievance.

When I am asked: why does the Labour Government spend money as part of the Prevent strand of the CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy on mainstream and moderate Muslim groups the answer is not *'because we think Muslims are violent extremists'* but instead it is *'because we know the violent extremists prey upon Muslims and especially young people and so Muslim communities are a vital part of the solution.'* To ignore this fact is to blunt or neuter our ability to tackle it.

Take the evidence from the Operation Crevice trial, which revealed the truly international nature of the terrorists' network, and offered some illumination on the way radicalisation can lead to terror.

A plot to detonate a massive fertiliser bomb was successful foiled by the police and security services, and the perpetrators convicted in court.

The ring-leader Omar Khyam, whose grandfather had served in the British Army, was radicalised by preachers of hate such as Omar Bakri, watched propaganda videos which cast Chechnyan rebels as Muslim freedom fighters, and travelled to Pakistan to undergo training with Kashmiri terrorists, and to Afghanistan to support the Taliban. He trained with Mohammad Sidique Khan who went on to commit mass murder on 7/7.

Omar Khyam's radicalisation took place *before 9/11*, and *before* the subsequent invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, which proves that violent extremism is *not* simply the product of British or American foreign policy in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Everyone who has planted bombs in the UK has been on a similar journey of radicalisation. It is not a transmission belt. Radicalisation does not lead automatically to terrorism. But no-one would strap explosives to their own

bodies, in order to kill themselves and others, without first being radicalised. And the essence of terrorism is that a tiny number of individuals can wreak a disproportionate level of violence and fatality.

To dismiss violent extremism as simply 'criminal' is to fail to conceive properly its political and societal roots.

This leads me to CONTEST, the Government's counter-terrorism strategy, and what is called the Prevent strand of it, a shared responsibility between my department, the Home Office and the Foreign Office.

Prevent is the part of our strategy that goes beyond arrest and surveillance, beyond the work of the police and security services.

I do not for a minute downplay the significance of that work: a great deal of hard work has helped foil and forestall planned attacks.

But security measures are not the whole solution.

Prevent is about stopping people wanting to commit violence in the first place.

Prevent is built on the idea that, just as violent extremists seek to attack us all - the victims of 7/7 were young and old, different races and faiths, straight and gay - we all of us have a role to play in stopping them.

It's not a job for any one group of people or specialists. It's about the stay-at-home mum, the taxi driver, the dinner lady, the neighbour, the student - all of whose decisions and actions contribute towards making an environment where violent extremism can flourish - or falter.

We all have a responsibility to have an open and honest debate about these issues, and to stand up against hatred and intolerance. And nowhere is this more important than in an institution like the LSE which has a proud history of passionate debate and inspiring thinking. You as students and lecturers have

a key role to play in debating these major issues of our time - in challenging prejudices, tackling ignorance and in helping to shape the kind of world we want to live in.

Prevent is designed to empower communities, so that they can spot when people may be at risk of being groomed by terrorists. To give support and encouragement to the men and women who want to stand up for the values of tolerance and respect. And to equip them with the skills and confidence to take on the ideology promoted by the violent extremists.

I have witnessed myself the passion and commitment in our communities. One young woman - a member of the Muslim Women's Advisory Group - told me "I am ready to go anywhere, to any audience, at any time, in this country or abroad and say that I believe suicide bombing is wrong - as a mother and a Muslim."

National government sets the strategy for this policy. And it is part of national government's job to tell the story that undermines the extremists' simple narrative of division and difference: by explaining how the UK's foreign policy protects the safety and rights of Muslims elsewhere in the world, from our calls for a ceasefire and the speedy allocation of aid in Gaza, to our support for Turkey's entry to the EU; how new legislation is protecting all faith groups from those inciting religious hatred; and how over the past eleven years investment in everything from housing to health has made a particular difference to those communities living in more deprived areas. But it is local government, working closely with local communities, who deliver the Prevent programme on the ground.

Backed up by £45m of funding from my department over three years, Prevent is already supporting projects across the country such as language classes for imams, leadership training for young men and women, and forums which give a legitimate and democratic place to discuss difficult issues.

This means that the Government is engaged in an unprecedented level of dialogue direct with communities and the organisations which represent them.

You can see the potential dangers inherent in this approach. Every minister is well aware of them. It involves engaging with organisations and individuals with whose views we disagree vehemently, who, for example, have unacceptable attitudes towards women, Jews, or gay and lesbian people. As a Labour Government, anchored in the European social democratic tradition, we place great store in equality, women's rights, anti-racism, and so on.

So there is a need for moral clarity, for a clear dividing line between what we consider acceptable, and what we consider beyond the pale.

We are clear that engagement is not the same as endorsement. I know our political opponents will seek to make hay with this: they will say that somehow engaging with groups with extremist views shows a lack of proper understanding of them, that we're being hoodwinked, used, or exploited by extremists, or that we don't care enough about anti-Semitism, sexism or homophobia. This is at the core of the argument of, for example, Melanie Phillips.

But if we leave the field clear to extremists, without any engagement at all, we embolden them and undermine our own objectives. And if we genuinely want to change minds, then we will never make progress merely by talking to people who already agree with us. We must be prepared to challenge, and be challenged in return.

What is needed is a framework for engagement, based on clear principles.

The objectives of an engagement strategy are twofold. There can be no place at the table for groups involved in terrorist activity. So for example, the Government will not debate or discuss with overtly terrorist organisations.

If offered the chance for a public debate with a representative of Al-Qaeda, via satellite link-up, no Minister would accept. You cannot win political arguments with groups who tell lies as part of their strategy, who change the goal-posts, who spread misinformation and seek to undermine the very process of debate. Agreeing to meet and engage in discussion with such groups would lend a veneer of legitimacy that they have done nothing to warrant. Indeed, to consider Al-Qaeda as in any way the legitimate representative of public opinion, Muslim or non-Muslim, would be a huge insult to Muslims anywhere, particularly those who have suffered from Al-Qaeda violence.

Meanwhile, if offered a public platform with a group dedicated to fighting violent extremism, matching that commitment with practical action, then there is an argument for the Government taking part, or funding specific projects - even if Government does not share all of the social views of the group.

And at the other end of the spectrum, meeting, talking to and funding groups who stand up to violent extremism and celebrate core values such as respect for others strengthens their arm: helps embolden moderate voices; and gives encouragement to the men and women who question harmful ideology.

Put simply, effective engagement can help encourage or reinforce a change in opinion and behaviour.

Defining this approach is not, however, as straightforward as ticking a few names off a list.

There is no single 'Muslim community' in the UK. There are many Muslim communities - different religious traditions, different geographic roots. About 50% of the UK's Muslims are women, 50% under 25. In recent years, Government has made a conscious effort to get better at listening to this range of voices, perhaps best exemplified by the formation of the Muslim women's and young Muslims' advisory groups.

And in practice, the Government - both nationally, and locally - is contending with a wide range of groups who cover a broad spectrum of attitudes towards violent extremism. Indeed, you will often find a range of attitudes inside groups themselves.

Just as we deal with a spectrum of groups, we need a spectrum of engagement, carefully calibrated to deal with individual circumstances: from isolation and rejection, to discussion through challenge and debate, to working with and funding organisations who want to be part of the solution.

With groups which call for or support terrorist acts there is no room whatsoever for debate, only vociferous opposition.

With groups which do not call for terrorism, but which have an equivocal attitude on core values such as democracy, freedom of speech or respect towards women, there is some scope for limited engagement. An important part of any engagement will be to challenge those views that the Government considers unacceptable.

With other groups or coalitions, which on the whole accept core values and reject extremism, but which have some internal dissent about these principles, there is scope for broader debate in public - especially where this would encourage men and women standing up for core values, and help them carry the day inside the organisation.

And with those groups taking a genuine lead, Ministers can make visits, share platforms, debate in public. The stronger the group's example, the stronger the case for Ministerial involvement at a high level, all the way up to the Prime Minister.

These principles hold for engagement at a local, as well as at a national level. The Prevent Delivery Strategy - published in June 2008 - gave clear advice to local authorities and their partners on what factors they should take into account when deciding which organisations to engage with, and how.

We have to have a clear analysis of the methodology of violent extremist groups. One aspect of this clarity is an understanding that violent extremists, as well as non-violent extremists operate in a clandestine way. They conceal their true aims and objects. They use labyrinthine channels of fundraising. For example, five organisers of the Holy Land Foundation, a Dallas-based charity, were convicted in American courts last November for channeling over \$12 million to Hamas.

They use front organisations, with innocuous-sounding names. This is a political tactic that is well-understood and has precedents from across the political spectrum. For example the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL) established a front called 'Militant', which in turn established the 'Youth Trade Union Rights Campaign', and the 'All- Britain Anti-Poll Tax Union', amongst others. The British National Party has a 'front' trade union 'Solidarity'.

The Soviet Communist Party established the World Peace Council, and so on. In the USA the Global Relief Foundation was closed down in 2001 for raising funds for Al-Qaeda, and the Benevolence International Foundation has been banned by the United Nations for being a front for Al-Qaeda.

Those extremist groups which engage in democracy, for example by standing candidates in elections, are doing so as a political tactic.

So we must be vigilant at all times, because our opponents will use a variety of tactics to stay one step ahead, and some groups will seek to hoodwink mainstream politicians into their tacit support, for example by invitations to seminars and conferences. The technique was known to Lenin, who talked about 'useful idiots.'

The left, in particular, must be vigilant. The liberal-left is historically concerned for the underdog, for oppressed peoples, for taking a stand against racism and imperialism. It is part of our political DNA. The problem today is that these valid concerns can be mutated into support for causes and organisations

which are fiercely anti-liberal and populated by people whose hearts are filled with misogyny, homophobia and Jew-hatred.

It leads to British democrats who are sickened by the sight of the suffering of the Palestinian people allying themselves with people who advocate the violent destruction of an entire nation-state, a member of the United Nations, who believe that Jews were behind 9/11 and fled the twin towers before the attacks, and who believe there is a global conspiracy guiding the world's economy. Strange bedfellows indeed.

Liberals' pathological fear of being branded '*racist*' or '*Islamophobic*' can lead to ideological contortions: condoning or even forming alliances with groups which are socially conservative, homophobic, Anti-Semitic, and violent towards women.

There are some who say that it is a form of racism or imperialism to disagree with what they see as cultural attitudes and practices. I say: the values which put all humans on an equal footing, with equal rights for all, are not western values, they are human values. Therefore it is right that we stand up against violence towards women, for example, whether it is sanctioned or encouraged by religious and cultural leaders or not. There is a line when respect for other cultures is crossed, and a universal morality should kick in.

Let me put it another way. This country is proud of its tradition of fair play and good manners, welcoming of diversity, tolerant of others. This is a great strength.

But the pendulum has swung too far. The quality of debate about religion in contemporary life - and by religion, I mean all faiths - is being sapped by a creeping oversensitivity. Three quarters of the UK population describe ourselves as belonging to one of the major world religions. A survey for the BBC this week found that nearly more than three in five people believed that national laws should be influenced by traditional religious values; and that

faith should have a bigger role in the public sphere. Yet there is an astonishing amount of squeamishness about the subject.

It seems that every week we hear a new story - the nurse suspended because she offered to pray for a patient, or the school banning Christmas decorations - about people getting into a panic because someone, somewhere, might get offended.

Worse, at times leaders have been reluctant to challenge absolutely unacceptable behaviour - forced marriage, female genital mutilation, or homophobia - because they are concerned about upsetting people's cultural sensitivities.

This flies in the face of another of our traditions - open debate, rational inquiry, and plain old common sense.

We would do well to be a little less anxious and a little more robust. And just as we are confident about speaking up against the race hatred of the BNP, we should be confident about condemning the intolerance of Christian extremists such as Fred Phelps, and we should be confident about saying "no" to unacceptable practices that have their roots in different cultural traditions.

Take female genital mutilation, a wholly medically unnecessary procedure performed on young girls, which creates the danger of serious infection or death. It is practised throughout Africa, including Senegal, Tanzania, Egypt, Ethiopia and Somalia, and Middle East including Yemen, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In this country, it has been illegal since 1985. But in 2003 Labour passed a new law making it illegal to travel abroad with a girl for the purposes of undergoing female genital mutilation, with a maximum sentence of 14 years. The evidence is that this has deterred several people from doing so.

Some believe that female genital mutilation is part of being a Muslim. Yet the Qu'ran says nothing about the practice, and many Muslims argue that it is un-

Islamic. So my point is that it is right for the UK Government to take a stand on this issue, and right that we backed our stance with legislation. There may be those who consider it cultural imperialism for us to ban female genital mutilation, because it imposes our cultural values on other people. In fact it is about protecting the rights of young girls to grow up without the trauma and injury forced upon them by people with reactionary and ill-informed views about female sexuality.

It might be that this is at the extreme end of the argument. But what about those who argue that suicide bombing a civilian bus or bar is a justifiable act of war, as long as it takes place in Afghanistan, Iraq or Israel? Is suicide bombing acceptable in Baghdad but not in Birmingham? I would argue that again such cultural relativism is abhorrent, because it paves the way to extremist political positions which condone the murder of women and children.

To conclude. This strain of violent extremism is a relatively new phenomenon. As our understanding of it continues to grow more sophisticated, we will continue to adapt and update our approach.

But that approach must always be rooted in our sense of what is right and wrong.

And if we are to change minds and win this debate, it will not be through restricting our engagement to a select few, but through bringing in new voices: not through concealing what we believe in, but through making our arguments confidently: and not through acquiescing with those with whom we disagree, but through being robust in our challenge to them.

Thank you for listening - I welcome your questions and comments.