



## **Quilliam Policy Document**

### *The Need for a Clear and Consistent Counter-Extremism Strategy Headed by an Expert to Steer the Prime Minister's Task Force*

Although the UK is considered to be a world leader in countering extremism and terrorism, the recent murder in Woolwich and more recent attack at Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Full Sutton have brought to light some inconsistencies and failings. These weaknesses lie not only in British government policy, but also in the ability of wider society to effectively challenge and counter extremist narratives and ideologies which are increasingly infiltrating public debate in the UK.

#### **Identifying the Issues**

Before we can begin to tackle the phenomena of extremism and terrorism, we need to be absolutely clear about the distinction between the two. An intrinsic relationship between the two phenomena exists, and though not all extremism leads to terrorism, all terrorist acts are inspired by extremist narratives. Even where extremism may not lead to terrorism, there is no dispute that a society in which extremism thrives is deemed an unhealthy one.

Her Majesty's government has an understanding of and response to terrorism that is clear – it is a crime and anyone committing a terrorist act is punishable by law. On the other hand, however, the understanding of and response to extremism is somewhat hazier and needs to be much bolder. This is no straightforward task; extremism is not easy to define or legislate against, with the lines of distinction between freedom of speech and extremist expression often blurred. It is unsurprising then that the topic of extremism only seems to gain prominence in the wake of specific incidents, such as those that took place last week.

With no clear understanding of and the lack of an effective and ongoing strategy to counter extremism, the unrepresentative and unacceptable narratives used by Islamist and other extremist groups, such as the English Defence League (EDL), are given undeserved attention and are therefore able to unduly influence public debate. A policy that only responds reactively to specific events once extremist narratives have matured into terrorist attacks, instead of consistently working to outflank extremism, allows extremists to publicise their intolerant viewpoints, sparking fury and counter-attacks from opposing groups and individuals.

For five years now Quilliam has been warning of the dangers of Islamist extremism and the symbiotic relationship it has with far-right extremism, in which each party's actions serve to provoke and fuel the actions of the other. To mitigate this cycle of hatred and intolerance, the UK requires a comprehensive and consistent strategy, which does not focus on merely reacting to terrorist incidents but is able to keep the rising threat of extremism at bay across the country.

The UK prides itself on its ability to uphold civil liberties and the values of tolerance, respect and democracy. These should not be compromised, and a doctrine of 'legal tolerance' should be adhered to when dealing with extremist views. There is naturally a reluctance to intervene in the rights of others with regards to the associations they make. Despite this hesitation however, the fact that extremism in any form poses a threat to our civil liberties and to the British values we cherish so much cannot be ignored. Ideas and ideologies that sow division, bigotry and hatred such as those that may eventually lead to terrorism should not and cannot be left unchallenged in our society. Here, a doctrine of 'civil intolerance' is encouraged.

The fact that extremism creates its own victims must not be overlooked - whether they are part of families torn apart by radicalisation or neighbourhoods experiencing tension and polarisation because of extremism. Sadly and more often than not, these victims are among the most socially and economically disadvantaged and often go unheard.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

Having recognised that countering extremism needs to be debated more robustly and that a clear agenda is needed to challenge it, a specific strategy to reduce its threat in the UK is now urgently needed. Such a strategy does not exist at present.

After this government's much needed 2011 reform of its Preventing Violent Extremism Strategy (Prevent), the counter-terrorism brief was rightly split from the work on integration and social cohesion. Whereas the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) at the Home Office maintained its counter-terrorism portfolio, the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) took on board the integration and challenging extremism remit. Eight months after this 'Prevent' reform, CLG finally published its 'integration' strategy, indicating that a separate plan to 'outflank extremism' would be forthcoming. Eighteen months went by – till the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby - and no plan to 'outflank extremism' had yet been issued.

In light of recent events therefore, it is imperative that the British Government urgently revisits and reclaims responsibility for developing a counter-extremism strategy to challenge the rising threat of extremisms in the UK.

Quilliam believes that the urgency of the challenge ahead necessitates that any such strategy now devised should be directly coordinated by Downing Street itself, and led by an appointed expert on a non-partisan basis. The UK possesses a number of such experts who have previously served in official senior government capacities, and who would be well suited to filling this role, having the maturity and experience to coordinate issues arising from the Prime Minister's Task Force. Quilliam remains cautious as to whether, without this coordination position, the Prime Minister's Task Force - a Whitehall committee - will be able to muster the necessary political consensus and momentum to deliver on such a crucial task ahead.

Additionally, Parliament and civil society organisations which are free from the influence of any particular political agenda, such as universities, research institutions, think-tanks, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), must also play their part in working to a strategy and taking action to prevent the rise of extremisms in the UK. Since such organisations are well placed to conduct research and lead on groundwork within communities, they should be utilised by government to develop genuine grassroots support, producing a real and lasting impact on society. The role of the media is also critical in keeping society informed and helping to shape counter-narratives and the debate on extremism in a responsible way, without giving prominence to unrepresentative views.

## **Looking Ahead – The Need for an Urgent Response**

With the critical role of all these stakeholders in mind it is important to understand that we cannot continue to view the solution to extremism through an exclusively government-led, military or legally-heavy lens. Instead, a focus on dealing with the problem at the grassroots level is needed. This is in fact the level at which extremism thrives to act as a catalyst in the transition from non-violent to violent. Heavy-handed military or legal reactions, which could serve to perpetuate a rise in extremism and extremist narratives, should be avoided. Instead, a counter extremism strategy which is underpinned by British notions of civil liberties and is able to uphold the British values of freedom of speech, human rights and democracy will be far more powerful.

Quilliam believes that democracy will defeat extremism only by killing it softly, not by mimicking it. However, it is also important to recognise that there is no single response appropriate to all forms of extremism, and that working with ideologies requires a much more subtle and varied approach than working with questions of law and order.

A robust and concerted effort is needed now before more incidents occur that will further polarise British public opinion. The situation is more critical today than it has ever been - with up to five hundred European and two hundred British citizens currently fighting for jihadist groups in Syria in an environment of extreme political violence. The ideologies and narratives that have led these fighters to Syria in the first place, and which they are likely to promote upon their return to the UK, must not remain unchallenged in British society. Quilliam has warned that the return home of these jihadists will pose significant challenges for countering extremism in the UK. A potential Afghanistan-style blowback is of grave concern. The precedent of British Jihadists attacking their fellow Britons in Syria has already been broken with the kidnapping and shooting of John Cantlie by militants “with South London accents.”

Consequently, and because of all these factors, Quilliam believes that the UK has sadly not seen the last of such extremist inspired violence on our streets. A robust, bold, centrally appointed counter-extremism coordinator, working to a consistent national strategy, is now the need of the hour.

4 June 2013