

Champion secular, human rights approach in struggle against extremism, says Quilliam

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The counter-extremism think tank Quilliam has urged the Government to base counter-extremism efforts around human rights, rather than "contentious" British values.

The phrase "British values" has faced significant criticism, not least for its ambiguity and apparent lack of a clear definition.

In a new report, [*Counter-Extremism: A Decade On From 7/7*](#), the Quilliam Foundation suggests that the Government define extremism as "opposition to universal human rights" and says that this definition should be applied consistently to different types of extremist ideology.

The report argues that the Government must "present a positive alternative to extremism" and that this should be done through "proposing a democratic, liberal and secular narrative in place of extremist narratives".

NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans commented on the report, saying that the National Secular Society "would certainly welcome an emphasis on human rights and secularism in tackling extremism."

"'British values' has been a problematic phrase," he added, "because it seems poorly defined and because human rights should be universal, not just tied to one country."

The report also encourages the Foreign Office to "build bridges" with "secularist and pro-democratic" groups abroad, in another recommendation welcomed by the NSS.

The Foundation suggests that the Government bases counter-extremism efforts on tackling ideology and undermining the "extremist narrative", and calls for a new focus on reducing individuals' vulnerability to radicalisation.

Describing extremism as a "social ill", Quilliam urges the Government to "engage civil society" in the struggle against radicalisation and says that "Muslim communities are an important element of a wider civil society response to extremism."

Religious leaders should be trained to "carry out primary prevention work" which should be "predicated on promoting human rights" and "raising awareness of radicalisation", the report says.

Quilliam calls for more "transparency" in counter-extremism efforts to "ensure that Muslim communities do not feel targeted, and non-Muslims do not feel that Muslims are receiving preferential treatment by the state."

The report also urges the Government to "build relationships with a broad spectrum of community partners" and to prioritise reaching "underrepresented demographics" and marginalised minorities.

Given the new duty on public bodies to prevent extremism and report signs of radicalisation, Quilliam calls for "comprehensive" training for all "relevant public sector staff" to make sure that counter-extremism efforts are actually effective.

Schools, universities, prisons and charities are all described as "vulnerable institutions" and the report warns of "entryism". The report argues that Islamist entryism "is as much of a threat as jihadist violence, not to national security, but to social cohesion."

The Foundation also warns of extremist speakers being given "unchallenged platforms" at university campuses and of having "access to potentially vulnerable students."

The report notes important distinctions in various strands of extremist thought and tactics, comparing entryist strategies from "political Islamists" who "engage with and use the current political system in order to weaken it from within" with overt militant Islamists who use violence.

These distinctions are important, the Foundation argues, "because whilst the ideological goals behind all Islamist groups are broadly the same, the most appropriate response to them is predominantly defined by the tactics they use."

The authors of the report write that "some individuals and groups that no longer fully subscribe to Islamism may require time and support to shift to supporting a citizenship based engagement with British politics and its secular, democratic institutions."

However, the report warns, government engagement should only come after groups and individuals adopt "the view that Muslims should integrate as British citizens (with a multi-faceted personality and identity), into British society and British politics."

The report argues that Islamism is rejected "repeatedly" by Muslims, and says "Islamist-leaning and Islamist-backed candidates such as George Galloway, Salma Yaqoob and Osama Saeed have all recently been roundly defeated at the polls in areas with large Muslim populations – including by other Muslim candidates."

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