

# Countering the threat to religious freedom and of religious extremism

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*Countering extremism requires a whole-society response to uphold and promote democratic norms and principles and encourage debate and dialogue, says the lead commissioner for countering extremism Sara Khan.*

A healthy democracy requires a healthy and diverse civil society. The National Secular Society's work in standing up for religious freedom but also in exposing and tackling religious extremism, through the prism of human rights, is much needed. And the NSS's focus on the theme of 'reclaiming religious freedom' is both welcome and timely.

It can often feel that there is no other option but to accept the view that there exists a deep tension between religious freedom and equality and human rights.

Take the ongoing and live situation where we've seen clashes between schools seeking to teach equality including LGBTQ rights and parents who believe homosexuality is a sin.

While there are those who seek to convince us there exists an inevitable clash between religious freedom and human rights, my message today is we must refuse to accept this binary discourse. Instead we must build common ground and alliances.

In this speech I will set out why I believe the onus is on us – on those of us who want to protect our fundamental freedoms, our rich diversity and democratic way of life – to challenge extremism whenever it raises its ugly head, including when it manifests within religious communities.

We must do so without fear of upsetting religious sensibilities.

But we must do so through respectful and meaningful dialogue, and by celebrating our equality and pluralism. That means we have to celebrate religious freedom too, and the positive contribution it makes to our society.

## **A global challenge**

Freedom of religion is under threat.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights' demand for freedom of religion to be protected – including the right for people to observe and manifest their religion and to change or leave their religion – is being denigrated and undermined every day.

We have seen horrific killings and brutal attacks on people from across the world because of who they are, what they believe or don't believe and how they choose to live.

The murder of Jews in San Diego and Pittsburgh. The killing of Muslims and Christians in Christchurch and Sri Lanka respectively.

In China, the ruling party have incarcerated up to 1.5m Muslims in what can only be described as concentration camps.

In Saudi Arabia, a ban on non-Muslim public religious observance continues.

Our own country is by no means immune to either the threat to religious freedom or the threat of religious extremism.

And we see how religious believers are not only victims of extremism, but can often be guilty of perpetuating extremism themselves.

### **The Commission for Countering Extremism**

My commission is seeking to better understand the threat of extremism and find better ways to challenge it.

We are doing this in what I think are challenging times for our country, both socially and politically.

We were formally launched as an independent body a little over a year ago.

Prior to my role as lead commissioner, I co-founded and ran a leading counter-extremism organisation called Inspire.

I've had 10 years' experience of running an NGO which brought me face-to face with extremist groups, their relentless propaganda and disinformation and active attempts to shut down debate.

I spoke to countless victims of extremism and experienced how extremists target those who stand up to them.

My experience taught me where the gaps exist in our counter-extremism response but also gave me an insight into how extremist groups operate, who they target and why, the multiple harms extremists cause to individuals and our society and the urgent need to develop a meaningful multi-pronged and whole society response.

I also know what it feels like to be targeted by extremists; where my identity and beliefs have resulted in abuse and threats from Islamist, far right and hard left extremists.

Puritanical in their monolithic worldview, Islamists do not accept my brand of Islam and see me as a threat to the type of society they would like to create.

Being a Muslim woman who subscribes to democratic ideals, human rights norms – and who refuses to conform to the demands of preachers so frequently placed on women – has often placed me in the out-group, worthy of abuse and denigration.

And perhaps, just perhaps, there is just something about a gobby, opinionated and stubborn Yorkshire lass that particularly irks Islamists.

At the other spectrum, the far right throw hate at me by virtue of being Muslim.

They assume I must secretly hold Islamist tendencies, that I am sympathetic to jihadis and that I aspire to bring down all of Western civilisation overnight. No matter what I say or do, in their eyes I will always be one of "them" – Muslim; and who should therefore be opposed at all costs.

And then there's the far left. They don't believe I'm the right kind of Muslim, either religiously or politically.

If I'm not screaming anti-American tropes, or anti-Western narratives, then my identity as a Muslim is meaningless, despite my equality and human rights work.

In fact, I now can be a legitimate target for abuse and racism; even from so-called anti-racists. I've lost count the number of times I as a Muslim woman have been labelled an Islamophobe, not only from Islamists, but from far left non-Muslim activists: peak Muslim-splaining if I ever saw it.

I've experienced first-hand how religious expression and freedom is denigrated, despised and trampled on.

### **A little bit about our work**

Over the course of a year, I've visited 15 towns and cities across England and Wales to see for myself how extremism is presenting at a local level.

In each area, I've spoken to practitioners working for councils, in education and for NGOs.

I've spoken to local politicians, to the police, to the media and to faith leaders, activists and residents.

We've also held a series of expert workshops and roundtables and engaged with those who are not only concerned about extremism but are worried about the impact of counter-extremism policy.

This includes religious groups and free speech advocates including the Defend Free Speech Alliance, which the NSS is a part of.

We also launched the first ever public consultation on extremism in this country and received nearly 3000 responses. Thank you to those who, like the NSS, contributed. We will be publishing the outcomes shortly.

We are pulling together significant government data on extremism and have also commissioned 30 academics to write research papers on topics including far right, Islamist and far left extremism, online extremism, a critique of current counter-extremism responses and possible alternatives.

We are bringing all of this evidence together for a study into all forms of extremism which will be presented to the home secretary in the next few months.

### **Public understanding**

It is worth discussing at this point what we mean by extremism.

In our terms of reference for the study we outline several different definitions, including the government's.

It is no surprise that some are cautious of the term: historically and in the present day it has been abused and exploited. Suffragettes campaigning for the right to vote were declared extremists by the state 100 years ago.

Today we see how authoritarian rulers seek to silence their critics and opposition by labelling them as extremists.

Some even use the argument of counter-extremism to justify human rights violations.

I mentioned China and Saudi Arabia earlier. The former justifies the incarceration of Muslims in order to stem the alleged, so-called threat of Islamist extremism. The latter declared all atheists as terrorists under anti-terror laws.

This is utterly unacceptable. These are grave human rights violations.

More commonly in our own society, extremism is abused and misused as a lazy insult or used to deliberately smear legitimate opponents and their views.

This is harmful and counter-productive, not least to vital counter-extremism work.

I believe it is important that we use this word with great care.

This is why one of the issues we are examining in depth as part of our study is the public's perception of extremism and where they consider the boundaries to be.

We are also looking at the impact of extremism.

Experts, practitioners and the public see extremism as manifesting in different ways.

Many see it in radicalisation, violence and terror.

This is understandable. The appalling attacks in Pittsburgh, Sri Lanka, Christchurch and San Diego, for example, were carried out by killers who all subscribed to extremist ideologies and beliefs.

Extremism however is a spectrum, and it manifests both violently and non-violently. We see a patchwork of dangerous individuals and groups who, though they may not support terrorism, do spread hatred and hostility at a defined out-group, and are all too ready to intimidate, ostracise and threaten in the name of their cause.

We are also witnessing a worrying mainstreaming of intolerance and prejudice.

These different phenomena are all linked by ideas, networks and the harm they cause to individuals, communities and wider society.

## **Mainstreaming**

I would like to pick up on three important themes – mainstreaming, the harms of extremism and how we respond.

Having travelled across the country and gathered a significant amount of evidence and data, I am concerned we are seeing rising intolerance, polarisation and extremism.

The centre ground is under threat; and the boundaries that kept extremist behaviour and beliefs at bay are being eroded.

I am worried that the mainstream is becoming a more hospitable place for extremist attitudes and behaviour. This is borne out by different statistics.

Take hate crime figures which show a rise in racially and religiously motivated attacks and the many conversations I've had with academics, experts and activists up and down the country.

Hope Not Hate polling shows 32% of the British public think there are no-go areas in Britain where sharia law dominates, and non-Muslims cannot enter.

2018 was the third year in a row that the CST has recorded a record high in anti-Semitic incidents.

One poll by YouGov and the University of Cambridge suggests that 60% of the public believe at least one conspiracy theory about how the country is run or the veracity of information they have been given. Research also suggests that conspiracy theories are cumulative; where someone subscribes to one, they are likely to subscribe to others. Conspiracy theories are a staple diet of extremist activity; not least on social media – which has helped propagate extremist propaganda in a way never seen before. Combine this with the overwhelming scale of disinformation online and it is quite frightening.

Experts argue that traditional extremist rhetoric usually remains outside of the so-called cordon sanitaire, but a shift has occurred in our society where racism, anti-Muslim bigotry and antisemitism have found their way to the boundaries. Where death threats and harassment of politicians is becoming a regular occurrence. And where journalists are intimidated and abused, and when political parties themselves lack the leadership to enforce the cordon sanitaire. This poses a threat to our country and our democracy.

This raises important and difficult questions about how and why we are seeing these shifts in public attitudes.

### **The harms of extremists**

We've received evidence of how hate and bigotry occur within a community, because individual identity is not respected.

In parts of Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities we heard the same depressing story of threats, intimidation and ostracising of people within the same faith community, simply because they choose to exercise their own agency: of what to believe, who they love or how they dress.

At a societal level, the Local Government Association, in its submission to our call for evidence for example, described how extremism can disrupt the life of entire local communities, affecting businesses and deterring residents and visitors from going into their town centres.

Many organisations, including the NSS, were clear that when extremism takes hold all of society suffers – it undermines our democracy, community cohesion, our fundamental freedoms and rich diversity.

I want to develop a new way of looking at the harm of extremism that is not currently reflected in current counter-extremism policy and which will help shine a light on the victims.

### **So how do we respond?**

I believe we need a whole society response and a better, more nuanced counter-extremism toolkit.

The government's 2015 counter extremism strategy has driven work at a national and local level – including creating the network of excellent local coordinators and funding some vital community

work.

But we have to ask, has the strategy itself kept pace with the changing threat of extremism, does it acknowledge the complexity of the harms and does it give us the toolkit of responses we need?

And how can we make sure we do this in a way that does not undermine the human rights principles that are vital for the wellbeing of a democratic society?

But challenging extremism isn't just a job for government.

It's crucial that we all stand up and speak out.

I have been inspired by the brave stories of individuals and groups – many of them just ordinary members of the public – who have stood up to hatred and extremism.

I met many unsung heroes who are the backbone of our country demonstrating unrelenting courage – often receiving more abuse than support.

I have seen the power of community-based, collaborative and innovative interventions – whether it was using music to draw young people away from the far right or an imam combining his knowledge of the Quran and social media to challenge Islamist narratives.

As many counter-extremists have told me and through my own experience of running a civil society organisation, I know we need a strong network of support, including emotional support and long-term and sustainable funding.

### **Celebrate the positive contribution of religious freedom and secularism**

Countering extremism isn't just about countering negative beliefs and attitudes. It's also about upholding and promoting our democratic norms and principles, which extremism threatens.

It is about championing and embedding in our society our values of individual liberty, pluralism, inclusion and human rights.

It is these principles that extremists oppose, attack and seek to denigrate, which is why we must live by these principles and hold onto them ever more fervently in the face of extremism.

Some of the most active counter-extremists I've met have been secularists. These people have shown persistence and commitment in standing up for these values, including for religious believers who are being targeted by religious extremists.

It is not easy work; and I know as a result many secularists have suffered abuse and threats. This is even more the case if you are of faith and a secularist. It's amazing how so many people erroneously believe that you can't be both.

The commission stands with you in your commitment to countering extremism.

And like secularists, I've also met many faith organisations who are inspired by their faith to contribute positively to our country. These faith leaders and activists are on the frontline in countering religious extremist propaganda. They promote how faith is compatible with human rights and equality norms, using religious arguments why such principles should be upheld.

They do this through the prism of their religious teachings. They play an important role in countering extremism and reforming those who hold religious extremist beliefs – and can provide solutions and interventions in a way where governments and other institutions are unable.

I believe both secularism and faith can play an important role in building resilience and challenging extremism; promoting respect and dignity for each other. But this requires dialogue.

## **Dialogue**

As a strong advocate of freedom of expression, I believe countering extremism – and especially the mainstreaming of intolerance – requires more not less debate.

I've met academics and practitioners testing out innovative ways to challenge ideas and change attitudes.

Only recently I was shown a powerful example of how to bring together young people in far right and Islamist circles for mediated dialogue.

I've spoken to youth workers who stress the need for safe spaces to discuss difficult subjects including racist views.

Too often these important discussions slip into personal attacks or non-negotiable positions. Or worse we shut them down.

This brings me back to the wider issue of reclaiming religious freedom.

Often the discourse between religious believers and secularists is a hostile one, with each suspicious of each other's motives and work.

There will be lots of issues the two sides won't agree on; but there will be other issues that can be agreed on.

And I would like to see a positive spirit of dialogue on both sides.

Dialogue I believe has to be the first step in any counter-extremism effort.

It is easy to find yourself trapped in an echo chamber – both online and offline – but the simple act of meaningful and respectful dialogue and debate is an essential tool in building understanding and finding a common ground.

This is by no means the easy option: but I believe it results in some of the most positive and fruitful outcomes. This is essential if we want to break the silo of echo chambers, so I'd like to see more debate, more dialogue, more speech, not less.

So, in a time of polarisation, anger and hate how do we push back against those that create intolerance?

We do so by guarding the cordon sanitaire. By standing firm and upholding our fundamental freedoms, our democratic way of life, our diversity and pluralism which extremists despise. By taking a consistent and proactive approach to all forms of extremism. By re-discovering and engaging in dialogue.

To avoid rising to the bait that extremists like to wave in front of us, we must do more to challenge and counter all forms of extremism. It is a responsibility on all of us, as individuals, families, teachers, activists, local authorities, faith leaders and governments. It requires a whole society response. It requires building alliances. And it is down to us all to rise to this ever-growing challenge.

*This is a lightly edited transcript of Sara Khan's speech to the NSS's [Secularism 2019 conference](#) on 'reclaiming religious freedom'. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the Commission for Countering Extremism.*

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## Sara Khan

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