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Counter-terrorism

Bloom review of faith engagement revives efforts to police 'extremism' in faith schools, marriage and prisons

- In late April the government published the [independent review into faith engagement](#) conducted by Colin Bloom, Faith Engagement Adviser at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)/Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), and former head of the Conservative Christian Fellowship.

The review was initially announced in October 2019, and sought to investigate how the government can support faith organisations, promote acceptance of groups, improve faith literacy and 'tackle cultures and practices that are harmful'.

- Despite the broad remit, the report took an extensive detour into the question of religious 'extremism', including among Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindu nationalists and Black nationalist groups like the Nation of Islam.

For the purposes of the report Bloom uses a bespoke, and highly subjective, definition of 'hateful extremism', which he defines as:

'behaviour that seeks to subvert democratic order (such as by denying pluralism or shutting down debate), that glorifies or condones violence or harm towards others, or that seeks to divide and undermine communities through aggressive intimidatory, racist or misogynistic tactics as harmful extremism.'

It also stated that:

'It is a violation of the basic human rights of others and a threat to the freedoms of our democratic society to

disparage people, make them or encourage others to make them outcasts, brand them as 'apostates', 'unbelievers' or 'heretics', or otherwise shun them because of different opinions (or lack of opinion)'

- Among the report's recommendations included:
 - Registration and regulation of out-of-school education settings such as madrassas;
 - Carrying out a review of forced conversion and radicalisation in prison;
 - Setting up a Forced Marriage Unit, and amending the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to criminalise those who officiate religious or civil weddings without ensuring both participants are doing so willingly.
- The report points on a number of recent counter-extremism touchstones, including the issue of pro-'Khalistan'/Sikh separatist groups, which have been brought to the counter-terror agenda by the [British government alongside the Indian government](#), the question of 'extremism' in prisons, the question of regulating faith schools which formed part of the scrapped Schools Bill from 2022, and the issue of so-called '[blasphemy violence](#)' which Bloom addresses by deeming those who label others as apostates as having violated their rights.
- The focus on 'extremism' in social and cultural practices, such as marriage and faith schooling, echoes the approach taken by previous counter-extremism figureheads such as Louise Casey and ex-Commissioner for Countering Extremism (CCE) chair Sara Khan.

The influence of Sara Khan's CCE permeates the report elsewhere, including in the sweeping approach to 'extremism' across faith and social groups taken by Bloom, which Khan also tried to mainstream during her tenure - and which has since fallen from the agenda, with the likes of William Shawcross advancing a more tightly defined

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approach focussed on Muslims.

It is possible that Bloom was influenced directly by Khan while serving in the MHCLG/DLUHC, during which time [she was serving as](#) Independent advisor for social cohesion and resilience for the department.

- As of the time of writing the government has not formally responded to the review or its recommendations.

The broad focus on faith extremisms has [riled up faith organisations](#) across the board, and is now also out of step with the current administration's emphasis on Muslim 'extremism' - as evidenced by the Shawcross review of Prevent.

- But its calls for greater regulation of faith schools, 'blasphemy violence' and its attention on 'extremism' in prisons will likely find support among the government - not least from Michael Gove, current minister of the DLUHC.

'Protect Bill', placing obligation on public venues to defend against terror threats, finally published

- The 'Protect Bill', also known as 'Martyn's Law' and officially titled [the Terrorism \(Protection of Premises\) Bill](#) was finally published at the beginning of May, following campaigning by families of those killed in the Manchester Arena bombing.
- The Bill places an obligation on public venues to undertake steps to protect themselves from terrorist attacks, including developing internal security preparedness plans and training staff.

It operates a two-tier system of compliance: a standard tier for venues with a maximum capacity of around

100 people, and an enhanced tier, subject to greater obligations, for venues and events with capacity of 800+ people.

- The obligation covers places of worship, education institutions, hospitals, hotels, libraries and museums, shops, sportsgrounds, nightclubs and more.

In the case of places of worship, primary, secondary and further education institutions, they are broadly exempt from the enhanced tier obligations and will be expected to comply with the standard tier. This does not extend to universities, however.

- The Bill also introduces an investigation and sanctions regime for enforcement, and venue proprietors can be issued with
 - Contravention Notices, where it is believed they are failing to comply with their obligations under the Bill, and
 - Restriction Notices, which prevents or restricts the activities that an enhanced tier venue can carry out for a period of up to 6 months, which can be extended a further 3 months, as well as imposing restrictions on who can access the venue.

These can be issued by a regulator specified by the Home Secretary, or the Home Secretary themselves.

Failure to comply with a Restriction Notice is made an offence in the Bill.

- The Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation Jonathan Hall [described the Bill as](#) 'Possibly the most impactful terrorism legislation ever proposed' for its wide-ranging scope and application.

While obligations for standard tier venues may be ostensibly quite mundane, they will still contribute further to the collective culture around counter-terrorism and securitisation in Britain.

The sanctions regime included in the Bill, however, hands a trouble level of power to the Home Secretary to intervene in the activities of institutions that are ripe for abuse.

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Ongoing attempts to crack down on terror convicts in prison continues with new restrictions

- Under new rules, prisoners convicted of terror offences will be [subject to a new set of restrictions](#), including by preventing the 'most dangerous prisoners' from delivering sermons or leading Jumu'ah prayers.

In addition to that, terror prisoners will for the first time have limits imposed on the quantity of books they can hold, to prevent them hiding or spreading 'extremist' texts.

- These new rules supplement a suite of powers and policies that have been introduced to crack down on terrorist/'extremist' prisoners in recent years, and to securitise the prison estate further - including through the expansion of [segregation units](#), new policies around [prosecuting offences within prison](#) for terror offenders, powers for the [Justice Secretary to overrule Parole Board](#) recommendations and others.
- The latest measures stand out as particularly cruel, by extending control over prisoners' reading material for the first time. But these 'exceptional' measures will likely be exported to the general prison population in due time, securitising the prison system ever further and normalising the harsher treatment of prisoners.

Alleged Hezbollah financier subject to assert freeze under first use of new sanction power

- In April the government [issued an asset freeze](#) sanction against Nazem Said Ahmad, an art collector and diamond dealer, for allegedly financing the Lebanese party Hezbollah which has been proscribed as a terror group since 2019.

The sanction, [coordinated alongside the US Treasury](#), was notable for being the first usage of such powers under the *Counter Terrorism (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019*.

- Under the sanction, Lebanon-based Ahmad and companies associated with him will not be able to trade in the UK.

National Security

Revised edition of national security and foreign policy strategy re-commits to Britain's increasingly aggressive military posture

- This March saw the [publication of the 2023 'Refresh'](#) update of the 2021 *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (henceforth, Integrated Review) which outlines Britain's national security priorities and international posture.
- Plans for the update were announced in November last year by Security Minister Tom Tugendhat, and were informed by major geopolitical developments that have taken place since the initial Integrated Review was released in March 2021 under Boris Johnson - including the outbreak of the Russo-Ukraine war, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the emergence of increasingly fragmented geopolitical alliances centering in particular around China.
- As an update, rather than a major revision, the Refresh offers continuity with much of the initial strategy, including a shift towards targeting state-based threats and actors - namely from Russia and China, but also Iran and North Korea - as well as an emphasis on extending Britain's military footprint across Africa, the Gulf and the Indo-Pacific region and a cross-cutting approach to developing national security technologies.
- Some significant announcements in the Refresh included:
 - Strengthening Britain's military posture and role in NATO by intending to increase defence spending from the NATO-mandated 2% of GDP towards 2.5%;
 - Britain taking further steps towards reconciling with Europe post-Brexit, including through engaging the EU and hosting the next meeting of the Emmanuel Macron-devised *European Political Community* initiative in 2024;
 - Establishing a 'disinformation' directorate in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and funding BBC World Service as a means of countering 'disinformation', and reasserting the British state's line abroad;
 - Creating a £1 billion *Integrated Security Fund* for financing domestic and international programmes relating to counter-terrorism, cyber security and economic security;
 - Mentioning that the latest edition of the CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy due later this year will address *'the shift in threat towards self-initiated terrorists, drawing lessons from beyond law enforcement on how best to mitigate and manage this risk'*.

National Security

Ex-MI6 spy kills own child upon return from deployment, raising questions of security services recruiting vulnerable people

- In April *The Times* [broke an investigation](#) on the story of an undercover intelligence asset for MI6 who killed his own child after returning from a deployment in Waziristan to monitor on Al Qaeda and Taliban activity.
- The asset, who was initially recruited by MI5 as an informant to collect intelligence on mosques 'suspected of promoting jihad after 9/11', was known to be extremely vulnerable, having been sexually abused as a child and suffering a mental breakdown in later life.

His deployment in Waziristan was also noted as being harrowing, including having to handle the head of a beheaded child, and upon return MI6 assessed him as being in 'a state of extreme stress' and experiencing flashbacks and violent outbursts.

- In a suspicious turn of events, after the asset was found guilty of murder in a trial held in secret, the court claims to have lost papers relating to the case and is apparently unable to explain how. Meanwhile the government has refused to publish an extensive internal report that looked into how the child was allowed to die.
- This story, while deeply distressing on its own terms, also adds to

mounting questions about the conduct of British security services, especially regarding their deployment of undercover assets - known as Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHIS).

Last year the [BBC broke a story](#), which then-Attorney General Suella Braverman tried to block via injunction, of a CHIS with a background in the far-right who violently abused his partner and used his connection with MI5 to maintain control over her. The partner later [launched a formal complaint](#) against MI5 for breaching her rights.

- MI5 also came in for heavy criticism of families of those killed in the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing following the publication of the final inquiry report into their handling of that event this year, with some families [stating their intention to sue](#) the agency.

Messaging app companies come out in opposition to parts of censorious Online Safety Bill, and threaten to leave UK

- A number of major messaging app companies, including *Whatsapp* and *Signal*, have [come out in strong opposition](#) to parts of the UK's *Online Safety Bill* in recent months, and threatened to leave the UK market over clauses in the Bill that weaken end-to-end encryption.

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- In a joint letter signed by the heads of 7 app companies argued that the provisions in the Bill '*[open] the door to "routine, general and indiscriminate surveillance" of personal messages*'.
- Meanwhile [Wikipedia has warned](#) that other provisions in the Bill relating to age verification threaten to undermine the use of the site in the UK, and pledged their non-compliance with such provisions - which could theoretically see Wikipedia blocked under the Bill.

The *Online Safety Bill* is currently progressing through the House of Lords, and since its publication in March 2022 has evolved into a sweeping piece of legislation that would hand unprecedented control to the government to regulate and police the online space and communications.

It corresponds to similar laws being passed in European states as part of a wide scale offensive against online communications.

Resignation of Dominic Raab from government buries British Bill of Rights

- In April, Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Secretary Dominic Raab [resigned from his Cabinet positions](#) following an investigation into bullying claims by civil servants.

- His departure from the Cabinet also [saw the end of his attempts to revive the British Bill of Rights](#), which was introduced last year before being shelved amidst heavy opposition.
- The proposed Bill, known by opponents as the 'Rights Removal Bill', was intended to replace the Human Rights Act 1998 in favour of a deeply politicised judicial framework that subordinated the judiciary to Parliament and the government. It would have eroded any semblance of judicial independence and insulated the British state from accountability for its most egregious excesses.
- A government source described the Bill as a 'complete mess', and though portions of the proposed Bill may be recycled into other legislation, it is not expected that it will be revived in its original form at this point.