Beyond Definitions

The Need for a Comprehensive Human Rights-Based UK Extremism Policy Strategy

About this paper

The challenge from extremism has shifted dramatically in recent years in the UK and internationally, yet policy responses have failed to keep up with this evolving threat environment. This policy paper lays out the contours of an increasingly hybridised extremism threat landscape facing the UK, before considering the key components of a holistic policy strategy rooted in a rights framework.

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Executive Summary

The UK faces a fundamentally transformed threat from extremism and weaponised hate today than it faced a decade ago, characterised by an increasingly diverse and amorphous set of threat actors – both domestic and international. The international fallout from the Israel-Gaza crisis has typified how an increasingly chaotic online environment can catalyse real world threats to public safety, social cohesion and democracy across borders. However, policy responses remain caught in an overly narrow and siloed framing of the challenge unfit to respond to the hybridised threat environment the country faces now.

The government's new definition of extremism, updated in the aftermath of the 7 October Hamas attack on Israel, points to the need for conceptual clarity amid this shifting threat landscape. But with a revived terrorism threat, rising authoritarianism and the mainstreaming of extremism globally, it is vital for the government to back up definitions with concrete strategies, rooted in a rights framework, to prevent violence and protect against growing threats to democracy and pluralism.

In the first part of this paper, ISD provides an evidence-based overview of the landscape of extremism and targeted hate currently facing the UK, surveying the broad ideological spectrum of extremism, analysing the communities impacted by targeted hate and exploring the intersection of these harm areas with hostile state actor activity.

In the second section, we lay out the key components of a holistic policy strategy to respond to this interconnected set of threats, including practical considerations for effective implementation of a coordinated strategy across government.

Key Findings: Shifting Threat Landscape

- The **extreme right wing (XRW)** represents the UK's most dynamic extremism threat, with a particular concern around youth participation: 95 percent of minors recently arrested under counter-terrorism offences associated with extreme-right ideologies. Far-right groups have been energised by the Israel-Gaza conflict; some far-right groups violently clashing with police and pro-Palestinian protesters, whilst other white supremacists have expressed support for Hamas and their violent targeting of Jews.

- **Islamist extremism** remains the dominant terrorism threat in the UK and its impact should not be underestimated. The Israel-Gaza conflict has heightened this risk further, with Islamist groups mobilising around the 7 October attack by Hamas and the Israeli counter-offensive in Gaza. ISD research has also found terrorist content proliferating on mainstream social media platforms in the wake of the crisis. Hundreds of pieces of official branded terrorist content related to the attack have circulated on X – 90 percent of which was still online months later – receiving over 15 million views in the immediate aftermath of October 7.

- A long-term increase in hateful targeting of Jews and Muslims has been **significantly amplified by the Israel-Gaza conflict**. ISD found a 50-fold increase in the volume of antisemitic comments on YouTube videos about the Israel-Palestine conflict following the Hamas attack. Anti-Muslim rhetoric has also surged, with a 10-fold increase in hate speech on fringe alt-tech platforms after the attack.

- Authorities are being challenged by a rise in cases of 'hybridised' extremism threats where the role of a specific extremist ideology in radicalisation to violence is more ambiguous, or where broader online extremist ecosystems play a key role in motivating an individual towards violence. Relatedly, the **radicalisation of conspiracy movements** which emerged during Covid has manifested in highly localised campaigns of targeted abuse, harassment and violence throughout the UK.

- **Anti-LGBTQ+ hate** has become a major vector for far-right mobilisation in the UK, with a particular focus on the trans community and more than 50 protests tracked by ISD across the UK targeting

drag events between June 2022 and June 2023. Meanwhile, an increase in small boat crossings has been accompanied by a concerning rise in **anti-migrant hate**, including organised campaigns violently targeting the accommodation of asylum seekers, with a supposed refugee crisis emanating from the Israel-Gaza conflict animating far-right extremists.

- The lines separating **extremists and hostile state actors** are becoming ever blurrier, including increased mutual reinforcement between pro-Kremlin online networks and British far-right networks. There have also been at least 15 foiled plots by Iran against UK-based "enemies", including Jewish communities. Networks of thousands of Iranian, Russian and Chinese state-linked accounts on Facebook and X have used the Middle East crisis to exacerbate polarisation and deepen mistrust in democratic institutions in Western countries.

diverse manifestations of extremism-related harm beyond terrorist violence (including threats to human rights).

- Improved integration of counter-extremism efforts with **local violence prevention initiatives**, as well as more robust and consistent tracking of and action against hate crimes, including addressing the epidemic of gender-based abuse against women and girls online.

- A **counter-terrorism** apparatus which can respond to the emerging security threats the UK faces today (rather than going 'back to basics' to focus on legacy challenges), which includes an ever wider set of violent threat actors. In parallel - and going beyond the relatively narrow aperture of counter terrorism - a more strategic **democracy protection capability** is needed to confront the growing hybridisation of violent extremism and hostile state threats.

Key Recommendations: Holistic Policy Response

A holistic government strategy requires a coherent effort built around a clear programme of policy interventions ranging from 'upstream' prevention to 'downstream' law enforcement and security-focused efforts. The key components of this approach laid out in this paper include:

- A proactive **social cohesion strategy,** as outlined in the recent Dame Sara Khan review, which pursues proactive democracy promotion, cohesion work and investment in communities as an inherently important set of upstream positive social interventions, rather than as a means to a securitised end.

- Place the new definition of extremism within a broader community-backed **Counter Extremism Strategy**, to drive impactful community programming that addresses the mainstreaming of extremism within society and confronts the

Part 1: State of Play Across the Contemporary UK Hate and Extremism Landscape

Extremism Landscape

Islamist extremism

7 October has arguably revived the Islamist landscape, with reported upticks in Prevent referrals, CTIRU referrals and CT Policing reports. Both IS and al-Qaeda have produced online propaganda campaigns specifically naming London as an attack location. Conflict-linked attacks have occurred in Turkey, France and Switzerland and may well spill over onto British soil. The Israel-Gaza conflict has laid bare the antisemitism inherent to Islamist extremism, seen in coordinated efforts of entryism attempting to hijack pro-Palestinian protests to promote attacks on Jews. In addition, some of the organisations coordinating protests have themselves been linked to Hamas and its leadership over the years.

Across all terrorist ideologies, the risk of self-initiated terrorists represents the dominant UK threat. These individuals are not directed by any group, are often motivated by highly personal grievances and will mobilise their violence around an underlying ideology.

Even before the death of its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda had become a shell of their former self. A key former affiliate in Syria, Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS), actively distanced itself from the group. Islamic State (IS) meanwhile have been territorially diminished in Syria and Iraq and their proto-Caliphate dismantled; they have however made significant gains in Africa where multiple theatres of conflict are opening up and continue to challenge the authority of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Salafi-jihadi ideology that underpins both al-Qaeda and ISIS persists despite this, as does its power to inspire violence. At the heart of global Islamist ideology is a belief that Islam is facing an existential threat from the West; the only way to restore it to its former glory is the adoption of literalist interpretation of Islam which would unite Muslims under an Islamic state (or Caliphate). The activism of local (often ostensibly non-violent) Islamist groups in the UK is curated to convince mainstream Muslims of the efficacy of this agenda. At the same time,

it delegitimises any barriers to its success including democracy, secularism, human rights, man-made legal frameworks and religious pluralism. Imbuing their audiences with a sense of outrage, subjugation and marginalisation is critical to their success and so they will amplify legitimate grievances of anti-Muslim prejudice and coopt progressive language around 'colonial' Western regimes, while extolling the virtues of theocratic governance.

In recent years we have also seen attempts to normalise the Taliban regime and its extremist ideology while obscuring its human rights abuses. British academics and religious figures have held court with Taliban leaders, including those responsible for the denial of women's rights, even as the UN has found extensive human-rights abuses such as public floggings and executions for opponents of the regime. The United Nations (UN) has been unequivocal that terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom in Afghanistan than at any time in recent history and that there are no recent signs that the Taliban has taken steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist fighters.

In parallel to the spread of both Salafi-jihadist and Taliban doctrines in the UK, sectarian tensions have gained momentum through the prism of "blasphemy". This has been driven by international groups such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a far-right party with widespread support that calls for blasphemers to be beheaded, as well as Pakistan's notorious blasphemy laws. This has resulted in protests forcing cinemas to cancel screenings of 'offensive' films and calls for educators to be sacked for showing depictions of Muhammad in lessons on freedom of speech. The 2020 murder of Samuel Paty in France and the murder of Asad Shah in Glasgow in 2016 demonstrate the potential for terrorist violence to emerge from such movements.

The threat has also shifted in online spaces, and is increasingly characterised by broader communities of Islamist supporters rather than centrally directed propaganda outlets. Whilst still present on mainstream platforms — ISD research for communications regulator

Ofcom found four UK Islamist extremist accounts averaging over half a million followers on Facebook — we are seeing a growing presence on new and emerging platforms, including the gaming chat app Discord. In parallel, ISD have seen a phenomenon of ideological hybridisation as online Islamists borrow heavily from the online alt-right subcultures, sharing memes around the alleged moral decline of the West and the need to return to an idealised 'pure' society. Such ideological overlaps have been seen most recently in the case of Andrew Tate, who since converting to Islam (having expressed admiration for specific forms of conservative, patriarchal religious practice) has served as an unlikely bridge between online far-right and Islamist communities. This unlikely alliance is built on opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, "cultural Marxism," "globalism" and "wokeism", drawing disaffected young men into parallel online subcultures with links to the alt-right, the manosphere and the 'red pill' movement.

Far-right extremism

Although Islamist terrorism remains the predominant security threat facing the UK, far-right terrorism continues to represent a growing challenge. There are currently five extreme right groups proscribed in the UK: National Action, Sonnenkrieg Division, Feuerkrieg Division, Atomwaffen Division and The Base. The Community Security Trust's terrorism and hate crime database counts 13 extreme-right terror attacks and 13 extreme-right foiled plots over the past decade. Between January 2017 and March 2022, 12 of the 32 late-stage foiled plots related to extreme-right ideologies.

In 2021, just over 40 percent of terrorism arrests related to suspected XRW terrorism. As of 30 June 2023, 27 percent of people in custody for terrorism-related offences were categorised as extreme-right. Of particular concern is the young profile of individuals being arrested for XRW offences; in 2021, 19 of the 20 children arrested for terrorism offences belonged to extreme-right ideologies. Meanwhile, there has been

a parallel growth in older attackers, with recent far-right UK attacks tending to be perpetrated by older individuals.

The extreme right is also well represented in broader counter-extremism programming. In the year ending March 2023, 19 percent of Prevent referrals were for XRW radicalisation. This was the second highest category (behind those previously categorised as 'Mixed Unclear and Unstable'), having decreased by five percentage points as a proportion of overall referrals from the previous year. For the second year, the number of referrals for extreme right-wing radicalisation was greater than Islamist referrals. XRW cases also constituted the largest category of cases in the government's voluntary counter-radicalisation programme Channel (42 percent) for the fourth consecutive year. While caution should be applied to these figures — many turn out not to be clear examples of violent radicalisation but symptomatic of complex underlying needs — they still show an increasing trend that cannot be easily dismissed.

The profile of individuals involved in right wing terrorism vary. Profiles by Hope Not Hate of 20 extreme-right individuals convicted in 2022 reveal that although three individuals were convicted of membership of proscribed groups (National Action and Feuerkrieg Division), a greater number were convicted for their online activity, specifically the possession and distribution of terror-related material. This itself speaks to a broader global trend whereby involvement with terrorist movements is increasingly characterised by interactions with amorphous online communities rather than specific organisations. Such dynamics are reflected in the government's proscription of the accelerationist Terrorgram network.

Beyond terrorist mobilization there exists a broader far-right ecosystem, representing online communities, groups and movements who mobilise offline and drive hateful, exclusionary and supremacist ideology throughout the UK. The far-right occupy a constellation of digital spaces including fringe platforms such

as 4chan, Gab and Telegram, alongside mainstream platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and YouTube. Recent ISD research conducted for Ofcom highlights how the British far-right are capable of reaching audiences in the hundreds-of-thousands across these fora.

As well as operating in amorphous online communities, the British far-right continue to organize into a number of groups including neo-Nazi, Identitarian and other hate-motivated movements. Typically, these groups have small memberships but larger organizations such as far-right group Patriotic Alternative are capable of mobilizing hundreds of activists.

These groups engage in a range of activism including banner drops and leafletting campaigns. They also opportunistically seize upon broader societal dynamics, such as anti-asylum seeker or anti-trans hate (outlined below in more detail), to expand their audiences. Such activism typically brings together loose coalitions of actors, including established extremist groups, local activists and fellow travellers. One notable dynamic explored in greater detail below is the mobilization of groups which originally coalesced around COVID conspiracy theories engaging in hate-motivated activism, most notably in anti-LGBTQ+ mobilization.

The Israel-Gaza crisis has generated mixed reactions amongst far-right networks, although antisemitism remains a common feature. The overriding concern is one of forced migration into Europe from Muslim-majority conflict zones, with ethno-nationalists and white supremacists particularly animated by this; both groups have perpetuated antisemitic conspiracy theories. Meanwhile, accelerationist networks — whose primary aim is to hasten what they believe is the inevitable collapse of modern society — celebrated Hamas' attacks and called for their modus operandi to be replicated in Western countries.

Cultural nationalists frame their understanding of Middle East tensions through anti-Muslim prejudice and are more inclined to support Israel's military efforts

against Hamas than the struggles of Palestinian civilians. Although the English Defence League (EDL) officially disbanded in 2015 and spent the intervening years as an irrelevance, members took to the streets once again to counter-protest the pro-Palestinian demonstrations last November.

Hybridised extremism threats

Recent years have witnessed the diversification of the terrorist landscape beyond the traditional far-right/Salafi-jihadi dichotomy. Group decentralisation, the growth of lone actors and the evolution of online extremist ecosystems have given rise to a more ideologically and organisationally nebulous threat picture. However, it is not merely group structure and type of ideology that has changed, but the role of ideology in extremists' motivations and engagement pathways. In many of these cases, individuals are motivated towards violence by the aesthetics of extremism, socialisation within online ecosystems, or a fascination with nihilistic violence rather than a specific ideology.

Motivations for violent extremism increasingly intersect with other social issues, including a mental health crisis or loneliness and isolation in the wake of COVID-19. Similarly, there is a thin line exist between, for example, gender-based violence and misogynist violent extremist expressions within parts of the so-called Manosphere, a broad umbrella which includes sub-groups such as involuntary celibates (incels).

Under the UK Government's 'Prevent' programme, these threats have been filed in the "Mixed, Unclear or Unstable" (MUU) category, designed to recognise the hybridisation of extremism threats. This trend is not an insignificant shift: from April 2022 to March 2023, MUU cases accounted for the highest proportion of Prevent referrals and over a third of Channel cases. MUU's historical use as a catch-all category for poorly understood hybrid threats attempts to place 'mixed' as its own ideology, rather than recognising and countering its unique nature and motivators. Recent

disaggregated MUU data shows over a third of cases showed 'vulnerability present but no ideology or CT risk'. Incel violence and other grey area threats situated between extremism, hate and conspiracy theories challenge the traditional counter-terrorism frameworks developed by authorities. The 2021 Plymouth shooter's involvement in online incel sub-cultures, the role they played in his attack motivation and the subsequent debates around classification exemplify the practical implications of such trends.

In this context there are a range of examples of cross-ideological fertilisation, ranging from far-right and Islamist extremists sharing platforms and cross-posting operational material, to individuals accessing a diversity of online extremist content to pick and mix ideological elements in an incoherent and often contradictory manner. This trend was boosted following Hamas' 7 October attack, where online accelerationist networks expressed support for the Islamist group, praised the killing of Jews and called for the replication of their guerrilla-style strategies in Western countries.

An antisemitic undercurrent of a multitude of fringe beliefs has, since 7 October, served as a vector for accelerated hybridisation and the source of amplified harms to the Jewish community. Antisemitic actors from diverse and sometimes opposing fringes have united around their shared anti-Jewish conspiracy theories; one example is the appearance of multiple far-right figures including Patriotic Alternative founder Mark Collett on 5Pillars Deputy Editor Dilly Hussein's podcast. The podcast was also host to far-left rapper and activist Lowkey, exemplifying the spread of antisemitic attitudes among ideologically diverse actors.

Some violent extremists have no apparent ideological motivations at all, such as in the case of a 15-year-old British boy convicted for several terrorism offences, including building a viable CO2 bomb. The boy had engaged with a range of online material, including videos of the Columbine school shooters and the

English Defence League, had posted under the username "White Terrorist" to praise Adolf Hitler and told his peers of intentions to commit a school shooting. Despite his conviction under terrorism offenses, the Judge confirmed that he does "not appear to hold any particular ideology" and "it is unclear whether you were motivated by any extremist ideology".

In another recent case, two teenage boys were convicted of conspiracy to murder for a planned school shooting formulated in an online ecosystem which glorifies the aesthetics and nihilism of the Columbine shooters and their successors. Despite a vastly different gun control landscape and history of attacks on schools, transnational and anonymous online extremist ecosystems have influenced a rise in Prevent referrals for school massacres. Such threats have no discernible ideological programme but feature many contemporary mobilising factors of terrorism and are classified under Prevent. A recently jailed 17-year old with links to neo-Nazi Satanist network 764 highlights the hybridisation of different harmful online subcultures.

Such trends do not discount the role of ideology in radicalisation or its relevance to the choice of target in a violent attack. But it is a recognition that ideology alone is increasingly less relevant in the mobilisation to violence, and often grievances are more pertinent in the psychology of a radicalised individual than any coherent ideological affinity.

Radicalised conspiracy movements

The COVID-19 pandemic saw the real-time radicalisation of a conspiracy movement targeting healthcare workers, public officials and minority communities with abuse, harassment and threats. Since then, there has been a relative decline in the number of people attending conspiratorial protests, those participating in online conspiracy groups, as well as the vote share for conspiracist candidates. Nevertheless, belief in conspiracy theories remain significant: a recent survey by King's College London's

Policy Institute indicates that nearly one out of three Britons hold at least some potentially dangerous conspiracy beliefs. Meanwhile the infrastructure of conspiracy movements which emerged during the pandemic has pivoted to new topics and different tactics.

In general, conspiracy movements have outgrown their initial COVID-19 focus and broadened their themes. As belief in one conspiracy is commonly correlated with a wider distrust of 'official' narratives, it is unsurprising that conspiracy movements have engaged with a number of prominent topics in public discourse such as the war in Ukraine or climate issues. Furthermore, conspiracy movements have increasingly focused on LGBTQ+ communities, who are frequently portrayed as promoting a malicious agenda to groom children. ISD research found that such narratives have resulted in dozens of incidents of harassment of organisers of drag queen story hour events over the past year. Conspiracy movements have also become more engaged around climate-related issues such as the expansion of the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) in London or Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) in Oxford. Here, narratives from previous COVID-19 protests were often adapted - for example, false warnings about an allegedly imminent "climate lockdown", with climate protection measures portrayed as tools to supress or control ordinary people, leading to death threats and property damage.

The British conspiracy movement is relatively heterogenous and comprises a number of loosely connected groups, dominated by individual influencers. Well-known conspiracy theorists such as David Icke or Piers Corbyn use their broad reach on social media platforms to promulgate conspiracy theories and promote related activities. Following bans from mainstream platforms, conspiracy theorists have increasingly migrated to less moderated platforms, Telegram foremost among them. Beyond social media, the conspiracist newspaper "The Light", which was set up during the pandemic, remains an important offline dissemination tool for online conspiracy theories, with a monthly circulation of at least 100,000 copies. In this context we have seen explicit calls for violence and executions of politicians, journalists,

and doctors, as well as a broader culture of extreme harassment, with particular impacts on local democratic processes.

The continued activism of conspiracy movements in the United Kingdom raises several concerns. First is the attempt by conspiracy movements with roots in anti-lockdown activism to rebrand themselves as more legitimate organisations (such as "Save Our Rights UK" appropriating the language of civil rights), as well as actively seeking to influence mainstream political debates. A second concern is the increasing alignment of British conspiracy movements and far-right extremists: conspiracy movements have increasingly promoted far-right extremist content, especially those of Patriotic Alternative, within online communities. Furthermore, conspiracy theorists have increasingly attended demonstrations together with far-right extremists, for instance during the protests against LTNs in Oxford, although there are also rifts between these movements, including at anti-migrants protests. Finally, conspiracy movements can facilitate violent radicalisation among individual adherents. According to a survey by the BBC, nearly two out of three individuals who identify with the protests of conspiracy movements also consider violence to be legitimate.

The relationship between belief in conspiracy and violence is complex, as most people who believe in conspiracy theories never act violently on behalf of them. However, an increasing alienation from the mainstream and a perception of the government as hostile, as well as a fusion of one's own identity with that of the wider movement, can increase susceptibility to violent radicalisation; this is especially true where individuals have intensified their engagement in the conspiracy movement since the outbreak of the pandemic. The continued challenge posed by this ambiguous relationship between violence, extremism and conspiracy movements was thrown into stark relief by a revelation last year around a violent coup plot looking to overthrow the British government, showing the continued threat constituted by amorphous online groups.

Northern Ireland related terrorism

Northern Ireland Related Terrorism (NIRT) is an often-overlooked aspect of the broader terrorism landscape in the UK, yet remains a persistent and uniquely challenging threat. Recent ISD research for Ofcom found that the Northern Ireland-related accounts were among the most accessible terrorism-related channels in the country across mainstream social media platforms. Recent events such as the murder of PSNI Detective Inspector John Caldwell, the PSNI data leak and the loyalist paramilitary threat to mobilise to violence if the Northern Ireland protocol is not cancelled have prompted sporadic localised disturbances, intermittent acts of violence and provided fertile ground for deep-seated grievances to foment into more concrete action. The recent elevation by the UK Government of the threat level from moderate to substantial reinforces the potential challenge.

Whilst the Provisional IRA declared a ceasefire in alignment with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, a core of breakaway dissident Republican groups including Arm na Poblachta (Army of the Republic), the New IRA, Continuity IRA and Oglaigh nah Eireann remain active and committed to achieving Irish unification through armed struggle. These groups, mostly splintered from the Provisional IRA, believe that the British are occupiers who must be expelled from Ireland so that the country can be unified. Believing the Belfast Agreement to be illegitimate, their primary targets are law enforcement personnel and infrastructure which they perceive as symbols of occupation. Radical Republican political groups, such as Saoradh (linked to the New IRA) and the 32 County Sovereign Movement (founded by Bernadette Sands Mcdevitt, the sister of hunger striker Bobby Sands, and associated with the Real IRA) also reject the peace process. They have been linked to violent attacks and protests including the murder of journalist Lyra Mckee in 2019 and the explosive devices sent to police offices in the UK mainland in 2014.

The Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) serves as an umbrella group representing the interests of a coalition of proscribed loyalist paramilitary groups including the UDA (Ulster Defence Association), the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) and the RHC (Red Hand Commando). Whilst presenting a veneer of legitimacy, the LCC is a front group for post-ceasefire paramilitary loyalists to unify and disseminate shared grievances, including fear of demographic and political marginalisation. Loyalist paramilitary groups maintain visibility through protests, threats of attacks, organised crime and drug dealing. This criminal behaviour leads to fear and intimidation amongst the communities within which they operate.

Outside the activity of proscribed groups, broader sectarian hatred has been a major source of tension, often leading to violence and unrest. Historically, division has been exacerbated using disinformation and propaganda to destabilise constituencies and increase mistrust. Tactics include the spreading of rumours, the dissemination of false narratives to justify paramilitary action, the distribution of inflammatory leaflets, and the use of symbols, murals and sectarian songs and chants. ISD research has shown how social media are as a battleground for sharing and amplifying sectarian messaging. Offline sectarian hate crimes are also on the rise with increasing numbers of physical attacks, bonfires and the defacing of murals and graffiti.

Beyond sectarian hate, we have seen increasing anti-immigrant mobilisation across the Irish border and the Irish Sea. The founder of the far-right Irish Freedom Party, Hermann Kelly, (formerly Nigel Farage's UKIP press secretary) joined up with Yaxley-Lennon for a visit to Ireland for a documentary supporting anti-immigration protests. Meanwhile, Patriotic Alterative Northern Irish wing have called for protests targeting hotels housing refugees. Some Loyalist elements have also been associated with anti-LGBTQ+ messages, murals and graffiti. Jolene Bunting, a former member of Britain and ex-independent Unionist councillor in Belfast, was suspended from office for harassing a drag queen and describing them as a 'child groomer' on social media.

Playing on these divisions, in 2019 a [Russian-linked disinformation campaign](#) targeted Northern Ireland with harmful narratives, including false claims that the UK Defence Secretary had blamed the Real IRA for the poisoning of Sergei and Julia Skripal. The influence operation used a series of fake Facebook profile pages and was designed to exacerbate existing tensions between Northern Ireland and the UK as well as domestic divisions between sectarian groups.

Other violent extremist threats

Left-wing violent extremism, categorised by the UK Government under Left-Wing, Anarchist and Single Issue Terrorism (LASIT), sits in the wider "other" category under Prevent. The recent republication of the CONTEST strategy identified that left wing terrorism "is not currently present in the UK at any significant scale", in line with this year's Prevent figures in which "other" comprised 2 percent of referrals. There currently remains little threat from single issue actors including anti-abortion or animal rights violent extremists.

Hate Landscape

In the year ending March 2022, there were 155,841 hate crimes in England and Wales, a 26 percent increase on the previous year. There were increases in all strands of hate crime, most notably a 56 percent increase in transgender hate crimes. Race hate crimes accounted for the majority (70 percent) of hate crimes (109,843), sexual orientation-based hate crimes were 16.8 percent (26,152), disability-based hate crimes were 9.1 percent (14,242), religious hate crimes were 5.6 percent (8,730), and anti-trans hate crime was 2.8 percent (4,355) of all hate crimes. Among religious hate crimes, two in five (3,459) targeted Muslims and one in four (1,919) targeted Jewish people. 51 percent of hate crimes were public order offences, 41 percent were violence and 5 percent were criminal damage or arson.

Whilst perpetrators of hate crime are not necessarily extremists, broader hateful attitudes provide fodder for mobilisation by these communities, particularly on the far-right. Outlined below are deep dives into notable axes of targeted hate associated with extremist mobilisation. Several types of hate are not included – such as race-based and ableist hate – not because of a lack of severity (race-based hate constitutes the majority of hate crime), but because these are less associated with contemporary extremism.

Antisemitism

In recent years, British Jews have experienced both an increase in antisemitic incidents and the mainstreaming of antisemitic discourse. The Community Security Trust (CST)'s incident reporting figures demonstrate a sustained rise in antisemitic incidents, with over 100 incidents reported in every month in the first half of 2023.

This has spiked during the 2023 Israel-Palestine conflict; [with CST recording the highest, second and fourth highest monthly totals](#) for antisemitic incidents since 7 October. While antisemitism can clearly be differentiated from anti-Israelism, anti-Israel narratives can be expressed in an antisemitic manner, for example where Israel is essentialised as a collective of Jews. [Flare-ups in the Israel-Palestine conflict consistently produce an increase in antisemitic incidents](#), including verbal abuse, support for violent organisations and a resulting hostile environment for Jewish communities, with Israel and Jewish people perceived and expressed inter-changeably within extremist communities. In the online space, ISD [research](#) found a 50-fold increase in antisemitic YouTube comments on videos about Israel and Palestine in the immediate aftermath of the attack, and a three-fold increase in the use of antisemitic slurs on fringe platforms. [Manually labelling antisemitic YouTube comments against the examples in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition](#), analysts found 39 percent spread conspiracy theories, 19 percent shared classical antisemitism tropes and 12 percent called for violence against Jews.

Contemporary antisemitic conspiracy theories are rooted in deeply rooted conspiracy theories which frame Jews as greedy, over-influential, politically powerful, rich and controlling the media. Such conspiracy theories

gained traction across the political spectrum and in the mainstream; for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories about the 'Great Reset' and anti-vaccine campaigns featured antisemitic narratives, leading to a spike in online antisemitism.

Hate crime statistics published by the Home Office show Jewish people to be the second most targeted religious group (23 percent of religious hate crimes), representing an outsized proportion given the small size of the Jewish community (0.5 percent of the population). Regularly-recorded incidents include attacks on Jewish properties, desecration of Jewish cemeteries, verbal abuse and assaults such as the spate of attacks in an area of North London with a high population of ultra-orthodox Jews.

Antisemitism remains a core tenet of far-right mobilisation, whose proponents retain racial supremacist beliefs. Holocaust denial, which is legal in the UK, is common in far-right ecosystems, emboldened by decreasing consciousness of the Holocaust and the loss of the generation of survivors. Anti-Jewish conspiracy theories are often interwoven with homophobia and transphobia, forming 'big tent' conspiracy theories of which antisemitism remains an ideological glue. In the online space, accelerationist communities imagine an imminent 'race war', consequently promoting violence against Jews.

In terms of offline violence, the last decade has seen terrorist attacks against Jews from the far-right in Pittsburgh, Poway and Halle, and Islamists in Toulouse, Brussels, Paris and Texas (the latter committed by a British man). In the UK, the only recent case relates to the attempted arson of a synagogue in Exeter in 2018, committed by an individual with far-right motivations. A synagogue in Brighton recently experienced an extreme-right attack threat, which was disrupted by police. This cross-ideological threat picture prompted the Independent reviewer of Prevent to identify the need to investigate the central role of antisemitism in violent extremist radicalisation.

In the increasingly decentralised extremist landscape,

traditional group structures have given way to nebulous flat networks. Some highly antisemitic networks remain, including proscribed far-right groups National Action, Feuerkieg Division and Sonnenkrieg Division; extreme-right group Patriotic Alternative; Islamist groups including the remnants of IS and those who take inspiration from them; and state actors found to whip up hate against British Jews such as Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

On the far-left, perceived Jewish influence in financial and governmental institutions is interwoven into existing radical anti-capitalist and class war narratives. This dynamic was most notably witnessed in the Labour Party antisemitism scandal, resulting in the Equality and Human Rights Commission's ruling that the party had contravened equalities legislation on four counts for their treatment of Jewish members. Under the new leadership's efforts to rid the party of antisemitism the EHRC has given Labour a clean bill of health, and polling shows significantly increased trust in the party from the Jewish community. However, the impacts of mainstreamed antisemitism, and the legacy of online harassment, remain.

Jewish people perceive social media to be the most common space where antisemitism occurs, a view that is evidenced by a 37 percent increase in online incidents of antisemitism from January to June 2023 from the previous year. Online antisemitism is not merely the spread of antisemitic beliefs but the harassment of Jewish communities. On mainstream platforms, antisemitism often takes covert or coded forms, evading content moderation detection and qualifying as 'legal but harmful' language, thereby disqualifying it from the Online Safety Act. On alternative social media platforms where extremist ecosystems flourish, antisemitism is highly overt and explicit, including the celebration of attacks against Jews, the use of memes such as the Happy Merchant and open Holocaust denial. Social media's transnational reach and cross-platform ecosystem, combined with the legality of antisemitic content, demands policy attention beyond the Online Safety Bill.

Anti-Muslim hate

The last decade has seen incidents of anti-Muslim hate more than double, with Islamophobic narratives mobilising direct actions of hatred against the Muslim community and finding increasing purchase in the political mainstream. Muslim communities were the largest target of religiously motivated hate crimes from March 2021 to 2022, comprising 42 percent of incidents. Some incidents are related to specific campaigns, such as the 2018 'Punish a Muslim' day where the widespread distribution of threatening letters spread fear among Islamic communities. The past year has seen almost 90 percent of mosques experience hate crimes, from threatening letters to acts of violence and vandalism.

The Israel-Palestine conflict has triggered a sharp rise in anti-Muslim bigotry. Islamophobia monitoring charity TellMAMA reported a trippling in anti-Muslim incidents in the four months following the 7 October terrorist attack on Israel, totalling more than 2,000. Meanwhile ISD research has shown a 43-fold increase in anti-Muslim comments on YouTube videos about the conflict, a 422 percent increase in the use of anti-Muslim slurs on X, and a 10-fold increase on fringe platforms.

In the UK, key mobilising tropes which whip up anti-Muslim hatred among extremist networks are trickling into the mainstream. Emerging cases of paedophile rings in Telford and other cities were attributed by anti-Muslim actors to the perpetrators' Pakistani heritage, amplifying depictions of Muslim men as sexually exploitative. The trope has helped to mobilise various demonstrations as well as violent attacks targeting Muslims. Other themes include allegations that the mosques are replacing churches and that Muslims are developing 'no-go zones', where Sharia law is implemented and where it is unsafe or unwelcome for other British people.

Other spikes of Islamophobic incidents were evidenced around the COVID-19 pandemic and during flare-ups in the Israel-Palestine conflict; they have also been linked to agitation from state actors such as Russia. Muslim communities are victims of backlash from both Salafi-Jihadi and far-right attacks, with recorded spikes in incidents in the contexts of both IS activity and in the aftermath of the Christchurch terror attacks. Where Muslims are essentialised as refugees and refugees as Muslims, there is a strong intersection between anti-Muslim and anti-migrant hatred (outlined below).

A key concern for Islamophobia is its ability to gain traction in the political mainstream; a 2021 University of Birmingham survey found 25.9 percent of the British public feel negative towards Muslims, while a similar 2020 poll by Savanta ComRes found one in five young white non-Muslims believed that "British culture" is "under threat from invasion". Conspiracy theories such as "Eurabia" essentialise Muslims as a homogenous, violent, illiberal invading force, which is perceived to damage a shared European culture. Malicious actors spread theories that a high birth rate among Muslim communities is a deliberate attempt to destroy the white race, the basis of "The Great Replacement" conspiracy theory.

Mainstreamed Islamophobia is widespread across popular social media platforms, particularly where it does not meet the threshold for hate speech. HOPE not Hate have identified how, for example, Facebook groups serve to both introduce and ingrain a user with anti-Muslim content. On alternative social media platforms, radical right networks often engage in violent Islamophobic prejudice, producing conspiracy theories which often filter through to mainstream discourse. TellMAMA examined how dehumanising language both denies the humanity of Muslim individuals and compares them to animals, particularly in online spaces.

While key anti-Muslim movements such as the EDL and the British National Party (BNP) have largely dissipated, the influence of their beliefs on the far-right remains. Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, known by his activist persona Tommy Robinson, continues to spread anti-Muslim narratives to his significant audience on alternative social media platform Telegram. Yaxley-Lennon notably attended the EDL counter-protest last November.

A clear pipeline exists from online mobilisation to offline violence. One example is Hindutva, a form of Hindu ultra-nationalism which marginalises and sometimes advocates violence against the Muslim minority in

India. Spreading transnationally through groups and coordinated campaigns across mainstream platforms, Hindutva is regarded as having played a role (alongside Islamist mobilisation) in the 2022 flare up of violence in Leicester.

Anti-migrant hate

In recent years, activists across the extreme right wing/anti-minority spectrum have identified migration as a wedge issue to broaden their reach with the wider public. Alongside 'anti-groomer' protests (outlined later in this paper), asylum is seen as an issue by those groups to engage with those who might otherwise distance themselves from overtly racial agendas. While a focus on immigration is hardly new, three developments have caused anti-migrant activity to evolve in new ways to previous waves: the increase in small boat crossings across the Channel in the past five years and subsequent asylum backlog; the tactical evolution of activist groups, often through digital media; and the growth of harmful conspiracy worldviews cemented by COVID-19.

A previous focus on lorry crossings culminated in the 2016 Dover riots — the worst violence between XRW and anti-fascist groups in the last decade. However, since 2018 a steady yearly increase in the number of small boats crossings was compounded by COVID-19, backlogs in the asylum decision-making process and subsequent pressures on accommodation. The dispersal of asylum seekers in hotels, including in areas with little experience of diversity, had an additional impact on stretched public services. Taken together, these factors led to anti-migrant protests spreading across the UK at a scale not seen in recent memory.

The present wave of anti-migrant activism has had several distinct phases characterised by different players and tactics. This ranges from patrols mounted on the coast by far-right political party Britain First in 2019, through to self-described 'migrant hunters' filming boats arriving at Dover or hotels being used as asylum accommodation, to a series of protests initially orchestrated by Patriotic Alternative which peaked in the early months of 2023.

The 'citizen journalism model' of activism has blurred the lines between digital and physical activism are blurred. Much 'offline activism', e.g. hotel visits as pioneered by Tommy Robinson, is designed to create content for social media platforms. Patriotic Alternative's demonstrations were carefully choreographed around how they would be viewed online; ironically it was disagreements around an over-reliance on digital activism that split the group, breaking the momentum behind the protests in early 2023. Meanwhile, a digital drip feed of allegations linking sexual crime to perpetrators with migrant backgrounds has contributed to offline protests, most notably resulting in public disorder in Kirkby in Merseyside in February.

Domestic events are further reinforced by the global picture and the spread of anti-migrant tropes. The increase in protests in the UK in early 2023 was partly inspired by widespread and ongoing anti-migrant protests in the Republic of Ireland. Activists' social media feeds endlessly repeat gang violence in Stockholm, violent crime in Germany or 'shanty towns' on the streets of Paris.
Protests have continued throughout 2023, although smaller and less frequent; they are sometimes organised by far-right influencers looking to connect a disparate coalition of local campaign groups. Despite the salience of migration in political and public discourse, such groups have had no political success beyond a handful of candidates fielded by Britain First at 2023 local elections. They have also failed to hold any large-scale national demonstrations However, the wider environment is likely to continue to be highly favourable to anti-migrant activism, as migration will remain high on the political agenda as the UK enters the electoral cycle.

Activists seek to convey a sense of powerlessness through strap lines such as "we were never asked" (about migration). However, the arguments which they employ are becoming increasingly entwined in anti-democratic narratives about the alleged decline of Western society, presented as "the end game of multiculturalism". As explained below, campaigns against LBGTQ+ rights also convey the same idea of

"peak degeneracy". These are increasingly welded into a coherent and dystopian conspiratorial worldview with potentially profound societal impacts.

In October 2022, a far-right terrorist attack took place against a migrant processing centre in Dover. For many years the perpetrator, Andrew Leake, had been immersed in online far-right forums; while his mobilisation to violence was driven by personal grievances, his attack is a reminder that anti-migrant hate can fuel real-world violence. Although at the time of writing no formal motive has been publicly identified, an April 2024 terrorist attack at a Yorkshire hotel is reported as connected to the hotel's occupancy by asylum seekers. The perpetrator, a 31-year-old Worcester resident, is alleged to have attacked an Eritrean man with a knife.

This is doubling concerning as far-right groups, responding to the conflagration between Israel and Hamas, have spread fears of a surge in asylum seekers from the Middle East. Examining this rhetoric in closer detail, it is evident that cultural nationalists are more concerned by Muslim migration, ethno-nationalists and white supremacists have framed their arguments towards the conflict in terms of antisemitism and anti-migration, with some suggesting the conflict was orchestrated by Israel to force a migration crisis in Europe.

Anti-LGBTQ+ hate

In just eight years, the UK has fallen from first to seventeenth position in the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's (ILGA-Europe) annual review of LGBTQ+ rights in Europe. In 2022, the UK was condemned by the Council of Europe for "virulent attacks" on the LGBTQ+ community, putting it in the company of Russia, Poland, Hungary and Turkey. Police statistics from the same year showed that homophobic hate crimes had doubled and transphobic hate crimes tripled over the previous five years.

Anti-LGBTQ+ hate typically frames the community as posing a particular threat to women and children. This manifests prominently in the "groomer" slur, a rebranding of age-old anti-gay tropes that attempt to synonymise the LGBTQ+ community with paedophilia. This has more

recently coalesced through online movements such as QAnon, whose followers believe that an elite cabal of paedophiles rule the world and engage in child sex trafficking. The term "groomer" is used to spread the false idea that teaching children about LGBTQ+ lives is an attempt to "sexualise" them or "indoctrinate" them into non-heterosexual identities. Gender affirming healthcare as well as support services for trans children are similarly framed as attempts to "mutilate" and "sterilise" children.

This trend has resulted in the targeting of LGBTQ+ inclusive sex and relationship education, books that discuss LGBTQ+ lives, all-ages Pride events and corporate campaigns that promote LGBTQ+ inclusion. ISD tracked 51 protests targeting all-ages drag events in the UK between June 2022 and June 2023, five of which resulted in arrests and at least two of which resulted in the abuse and harassment of a drag queen.

Bookshops in the UK, particularly Waterstones, have also been the scene of small protests over the choice to stock books about LGBTQ+ lives and issues. Other activities engaged in by anti-LGBTQ+ actors include leafleting local areas to warn about the so-called "sexualisation of children", organising email and phone campaigns to libraries where all ages drag events were being held, and graffitiing homophobic and transphobic slurs in public places. At its most extreme, such dehumanising activity can set the stage for deadly violence.

Actors include white nationalists such as Patriotic Alternative and the Independent Nationalist Network, who were central in protesting Drag Queen Story Hour events across the UK. Conspiracy theorists who emerged from the anti-lockdown conspiracy milieu are also active, including individual influencers such as Piers Corbyn and groups like Alpha Men Assemble. Smaller "child protection" groups, often run by parents, bill themselves as defending the innocence of children. These include Child Trauma International, a registered charity, which infiltrated a Drag Queen Story Hour event in Blackpool in 2022, claiming the event was "child grooming." Far-right student groups such as the UK offshoot of Turning Point USA, also took a leading role in organising anti-drag protests throughout 2023.

A related effort to push back against trans rights has been popularised through the "gender critical" movement (also known as "trans exclusionary radical feminism"). This ideology frames trans inclusivity (in particular regarding trans women) as a threat to cisgender women. They claim that trans women are not "real" women, misgender them as "men" and use terms such as "trans-identified male" to reinforce their narrative. Anti-trans activists promote fear-based myths such as the claim that predatory men will take advantage of gender recognition certificates to attack women in bathrooms or prisons, or that men will change their gender to participate in women's sports. Groups such as the Women's Rights Network have also formed around this aspect of anti-LGBTQ+ mobilisation, while gender critical activist Kellie Jay Keen (aka Posie Parker) has been particularly prominent in organising rallies which have also attracted far-right extremists.

Intersection of Extremism and State Threats

Recent years have seen an increasing intersection between the activities of hostile state actors and extremists in the UK. Counter-terrorism police investigations involving state threats have quadrupled in the last the last two years, now accounting for a fifth of these units' overall case load. But the focus of counter-terrorism efforts on non-state Islamist actors following the 11 September attacks has minimised the role played by hostile state actors in promoting hate in the UK and amplifying the polarising activities of domestic extremists.

The range of state actors with a potential interest in targeting the UK is broad. The success of those information operations also relies on the receptiveness of diaspora communities in the UK to gain initial purchase. Over the past few years, state actors have rarely seeded new disinformation narratives or false claims themselves; instead they have concentrated on leveraging and amplifying divisions around political issues, or bolstering those movements whose objectives dovetail with their interests. ISD's

monitoring and research indicate that the Russian, Chinese and Iranian governments continue to represent the biggest state-backed threats to the UK. Since 7 October, Russian, Chinese and Iranian-state linked online networks have seized on the crisis to continue disseminating anti-Western ideologies.

Russia

The Kremlin is known to have courted relationships with extremists across the political spectrum. Examples includes an invitation for far-right politicians to address the Russian parliament in 2019. Among them was Paul Golding, leader of Britain First, an organisation that has engaged in intimidating activism such as 'Christian patrols' and Mosque invasions. Although support for Russia's illegal war is not universally held on the far-right, there is a history of interconnectivity between Russia and these fringe networks.

Conversely, many on the far-left have endorsed Russia's illegal war in Ukraine and have been cheerleaders for Putin's support for Bashar al-Assad during the Syrian civil war. This includes a network of pro-Kremlin academics at British universities who have been accused of 'whitewashing' Assad's war crimes.

An ISD investigation into a recent Russia state influence operation, Resistor Newswire, exemplifies the Kremlin's continued efforts to circumvent sanctions against official media outlets such as RT and Sputnik. It also reflected efforts to engage with far-right communities online, promoting itself as a 'pro-Trump Telegram channel' on the r/Trump subreddit. While it only has around 600 users in the UK, its discussion of polarising issues through Telegram and mostly defunct accounts on X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Rumble and Truth Social is instructive for those that focus on the Kremlin's international messaging.

The UK-focused channel associated with Resistor Newswire launched attacks on high-profile politicians from across the political spectrum, framing both Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Opposition Leader Keir Starmer as rich, elite, out-of-touch and potentially corrupt. While ostensibly politically neutral, the

channel frequently shares content directly from far-right and white nationalist British sources, including posting videos with Britain First watermarks. The administrators also shared posts from Yaxley-Lennon's Telegram channels, as well as content from the far-right Traditional Britain Group denigrating LGBTQ+ people and criticising immigrants.

 A far more successful operation attributed to Russian state media targeted German audiences, exploiting economic anxieties of Germans and celebrating both far-left and far-right politicians to undermine domestic support for Ukraine. There is no reason Russian state media spin-offs could not soon employ similar strategies in the UK, targeting anti-war protesters and coalitions.

Iran

Iran's status as a revolutionary theocratic state with global links to Islamist groups means it represents another example of growing 'hybridisation' of state and non-state threats. The Metropolitan police and MI5 have foiled 15 plots by Iran against British or UK-based 'enemies'. Meanwhile, the ongoing debate over whether to proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist group shows the limitations of an approach geared towards countering non-state threats.

Recent reporting from the Jewish Chronicle has shown how IRGC-linked institutions and individuals have targeted British Jewish communities. Examples includes student groups livestreaming commanders in the IRGC's "Lebas Shakhsi" secret police on social media. These men claimed that "the era of the Jews will soon be at an end" and calling for UK students to join "the beautiful list of soldiers" who would fight and kill Jews in an apocalyptic war.

Iranian online influence operations have typically been regarded as less sophisticated than Russia or China. When deployed in English-language contexts, they often hinge on portraying the West as degenerate, with a particular focus on antisemitic targeting of Jews and Israel, or heavily promote the Iranian state. The UK's far-left has a well-documented relationship with Iran: Professor David Miller, who was sacked from Bristol University for alleged antisemitism, now hosts a show called Palestine Declassified for Iranian state television channel, Press TV. Although much of the content is directed at Israel it has also been used to attack Jewish academics, media and UK counter-terrorism policy. Co-host Chris Williamson is a former Labour MP who was suspended for comments criticising the party's investigation into antisemitism. With the election of former PressTV presenter George Galloway in Rochdale, these figures now have parliamentary influence and legitimacy.

Ofcom has taken some actions — it revoked Press TV's UK licence in 2012, meaning the channel is only available online. But there limitations to the regulator's reach. LuaLua TV, which is based in the UK only operates online and is therefore not subject to Ofcom's broadcasting code. Banned in the US over suspected links to the Iranian regime, it has hosted interviews in which Hamas' terrorist attack against Israel on 7 October is described as "a step closer to victory". Conversely, Iran International TV — which opposes the Iranian regime in Tehran — was recently forced to remove its operation from the UK over threats to their safety.

China

Whilst increasingly active in offensive influence operations, China has a less direct relationship with domestic extremist activity in the UK. However, efforts to court the far-right populist party AfD in Germany and the revelation that the party's top candidate for the European elections was head of a long-running Chinese influence operation show the potential for overlap between extremist groups, state actor and domestic polarisation. This is particularly relevant in UK context given recent concerns over Chinese espionage in parliament, as well as the ongoing public debate about Chinese-owned tech companies operating in the country. Investigations of alleged electoral interference in both the US and Canada are also ongoing; the outcomes of these inquiries may impact the likelihood of Beijing targeting UK democratic processes.

Part 2: Building a Unified Policy Framework for Response

Key Elements of Unified Policy Framework

A holistic government approach requires a joined-up, multi-departmental strategy, built around a comprehensive programme of policy interventions. This should range from 'upstream' prevention to 'downstream' law enforcement and security-focused efforts.

This spectrum can be considered in terms of the constituencies such efforts must reach. Within a 'public health' model of intervention, this is framed in three levels. The first is primary prevention, focused on broad-based community-focused programming; this is followed by secondary prevention, which involves targeted interventions for those at risk; finally, tertiary prevention is aimed at disengaging those engaged in harmful activity. These three levels are focused on distinct constituencies and different types of threat; however, it is crucial that responses break down boundaries between traditionally siloed policy areas such as societal polarisation, counter-terrorism, hate crime and foreign interference.

ISD's work with international government partners on counter-extremism policy has shown how the following key elements — spanning from upstream to downstream — are necessary components of a holistic strategy for protecting communities and safeguarding democracy:

Bolstering community cohesion

Social cohesion has been systematically deprioritised or instrumentalised for narrow national security ends by successive governments. While Britain remains a pluralistic and cohesive country, flashpoints such as the communal violence in Leicester in 2022 show how local authorities often lack the resources, data and central support necessary to tackle highly-localised cases of extremism, conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns. 7 October widened rifts in community cohesion which can only serve to exacerbate polarisation and communal conflict. The recent Khan Review correctly identifies the need for greater strategic impetus around social cohesion policy, including better data on both potential vulnerabilities and resilience factors within communities.

It is also important that security-focused policies are decoupled from upstream positive interventions and measures. Democracy promotion, social cohesion work and community engagement should be pursued as a long-term investment in prevention, not just a means to a narrow, securitised end. The post-7 October environment speaks to the long-tail of threats including impacts on MPs' safety and the democratic process. The recent Independent Review of Prevent found that "community cohesion initiatives being partially funded with counter-terrorism resources [...] is potentially counterproductive if it makes communities feel under suspicion and alienated." The review also found that the scheme was "carrying the weight for mental health services," reflecting an underinvestment in these services at a community level.

Building on the recommendations in Dame Louise Casey's shelved 2016 review on integration, the Department for Levelling Up Housing & Communities (DLUHC) should allocate strategic funding to local organisations committed to bringing communities together on shared projects and endeavours, to encourage financing of initiatives which genuinely build cohesion.

In this context, it is crucial that all interventions build trust with communities and deliver on their needs. This means providing localised targeted support to communities around safety and security, investment in local services and responding to local issues. People must feel they are benefiting from interventions and that their problems are being addressed. For cohesion policies to succeed, they must be focused on the wide societal impacts of extremism and provide proper support to those affected, including those targeted not just by explicit violence but by intimidation, dehumanisation and the undermining of their rights.

Such effort could build on training provided to MPs on online and personal security and 'situational awareness' to help them better understand potential risks. This support can be extended to individuals facing intimidation and threats of violence. Where explicit and credible threats have been identified, an individual's address can be included in priority responses allowing an emergency call to identify the property as high-risk. Aside

from the practical support this provides, it imbues a degree of reassurance to those who find themselves on the receiving end of threats.

Re-establishing a clear counter-extremism strategy

Since the development of a specific policy strategy for countering extremism in 2015, work to address the wider impacts of extremism beyond terrorist violence has been largely neglected. Most substantive counter-extremism work has been again subsumed into other parts of government, including counter-terrorism and hate crime teams.

A newly updated definition of extremism provides an important launching-off point for meaningful action. It moves away from the much-maligned 'British values'-based conception, which was presented ideals of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law as unique to the UK and was unusably vague. Instead, it marks a positive first step by taking an approach framed around extremism's threat to human rights and social cohesion and rooted in concrete harms to communities such as violence, hatred and intolerance.

ISD has long argued — including through its work as expert advisors to the original Counter Extremism Commission — for a human rights-based definition of extremism. ISD's own working definition frames extremism as a supremacist system of belief based on the superiority of an identity group. In this 'social identity' conception, extremism, whether pursued through violence or mainstreamed through politics and social change, is fundamentally antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of fundamental rights and freedoms.

Beyond its composition, the viability of any definition requires extremism to be framed in absolute terms rather than in relation to a movable mainstream, to be implemented in a genuinely ideologically agnostic fashion and to be completely free from any party politicisation. The only way this can be achieved is through wide consultation, deep buy-in and trust-building with civil society, especially given extremism's deep community impacts.

It is essential cross-governmental action on extremism is underpinned by a clear, consistent and proportionate definition of extremism. However, sustainable definitions cannot exist merely as technical guidance for government engagement with communities. Having been effectively sidelined under subsequent leaders, this definition should be used as a launchpad for a renewed, long-term counter-extremism strategy which provides proactive investment in communities, confronting an increasingly 'mainstreamed' extremism threat across the ideological spectrum.

It is crucial that such a holistic counter-extremism strategy engages with the diverse manifestations of extremism-related harm beyond terrorism. As set out in a 2020 paper from the Commission for Countering Extremism, this includes social division and intolerance; crime, violence and harassment; mental health and wellbeing; the censorship and restriction of rights and freedom; and the undermining of democracy. This approach focuses on the behaviours exhibited by extremists and the real-world impacts of these behaviours on the victims and avoids falling into intractable debates on definitions of extremism.

It is also essential that an independent Counter Extremism Commission (CCE) can hold the government to account for its progress in addressing the societal mainstreaming of extremism. While its current mandate is to scrutinise and advise on the government's response to countering extremism, this work is insular and much of it opaque for those outside of the civil service. The new role of the CCE as a Standards & Compliance Unit for the implementation of Prevent is a welcome expansion of transparency for the programme itself. It should also incorporate scrutiny of the wider application of counter-extremism policy across Whitehall in a manner that is transparent, enabling the public to have confidence in the government's efforts to tackle extremism threats strategically.

Finally, the success of an effective extremism definition means much more discipline in clamping down on politicians' casual application of extremism terminology to legitimate causes, including climate activism and the mainstream of pro-Palestinian protests. This usage risks relativising such sensitive and significant terms in the public sphere. In a political environment where terms like "Islamist" have been wielded with abandon against public figures on the receiving end of extremist death threats, it is crucial for our democratic civic culture that all of society is working from a shared basis on extremism, rooted in respect for human rights.

Aligning counter-extremism with wider violence prevention initiatives

As the boundaries between violent extremism and wider identity-based violence become ever more blurred, it is essential that efforts to tackle terrorist, extremist and hate-fuelled violence are not exceptionalised but placed into the context of wider violence prevention initiatives addressing many of the same underlying challenges.

The government currently funds major initiatives for tackling serious violence and in 2022, the Home Office published a new Serious Violence Duty. This Duty confers a legal responsibility on relevant services to share information, to target their interventions (where possible through existing partnership structures), and to collaborate and plan to prevent and reduce serious violence within local communities. Additionally, an amendment to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 ensures that serious violence is an explicit priority for existing Community Safety Partnerships, ensuring they have a strategy in place to explicitly tackle it.

Amalgamating existing responsibilities and statutory obligations within safeguarding, mental health services, serious violence reduction and Prevent is valuable for local authority-led oversight boards. It means that in partnership with neighbourhood and counter-terrorism policing, they can establish prevention programmes employing a public health model to "determine the causes and correlates of violence, the factors that increase or decrease the risk for violence, and the

factors that could be modified through interventions".

Prevent has historically been criticised for "securitising communities"; by contrast, a public health model of violence reduction could be received with the consent of families and communities affected. Such an approach could ensure greater value for money and offers a triaging system whereby only instances of suspected radicalisation are passed to Prevent. This would ease the burden on counter-terrorism and provide a non-securitised approach where no extremist ideology is present.

Robust and consistent action against hate speech and hate crime

Hate crime and speech should be seen as separate but interlinked with terrorism and extremism. Not everyone who commits a hate crime is a part of an extremist movement or an adherent of an extremist ideology; only a very small minority are associated with a terrorist group. It is therefore necessary that alongside the holistic counter-extremism strategy, there is a complementary strategy to tackle hate. This should view it as both as a broader societal phenomenon and a specific criminal offence requiring robust enforcement.

Additionally, it is important that current legislation against hate crime remains relevant to the contemporary landscape of broader hate mobilization. Notably, while legislation encapsulates crime motivated by hostility based on race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or transgender identity, it does not encompass misogyny. This is particularly concerning as misogyny is becoming an increasingly pressing issue, through both its mainstreaming amongst young men and the expansion of misogynist extremist movements. Updating hate crime law to include sex and gender as protected characteristics would provide greater legal protections for women and girls, frequent targets of violence, abuse and harassment from groups and individuals.

A perceived disparity in the application of hate crime laws can fuel mistrust in policing and government. The Israel-Palestine conflict has led to sermons in religious

institutions that appear to contravene hate crime legislation. Where the threshold for criminality has been reached, action should be taken. Neither antisemitism not anti-Muslim bigotry should be left unchallenged; this is crucial to diffuse extremist narratives seeking to sow mistrust in the government and police.

A contextualised approach to counter-terrorism

The 2023 refresh of the government's CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy found that the threat from terrorism is once again rising, including a domestic terrorist threat which is less predictable and harder to detect and intervene against. Counter-terrorism approaches are further challenged by a plethora of more amorphous threats that do not fit neatly into existing definitions. In these cases, violence is targeted at groups or individuals based on a compendium of grievance narratives rather than a clear ideology. School massacres, incel-inspired attacks and conspiracy-driven violence would all fall under this more nebulous threat.

Currently, efforts to address these through early intervention and prevention fall within the remit of the Prevent Strategy. However, the 2023 Independent Review of Prevent, whose recommendations have been fully accepted by the government, recommended pulling the programme "back to first principles" and moving its response away from those hybridised threats with no clear ideological affinity.

The Independent Review of Prevent missed a fundamental opportunity to meet the complex challenges we face today by downplaying the growing threat of the far-right and readjusting priorities to focus on Islamist extremism. Fixating on a single form of extremism while downplaying other rising threats creates the counter-productive perception of a hierarchy of extremism instead of policy based on an impartial and systematic assessment of the available evidence.

Instead of reverting back to models based on black-and-white terrorism threats of two decades ago, we need a new framework of response. Prevention must reflect the profound and evolving threats to security, democracy and human rights challenges the UK faces today. These include the emerging threats posed by a terrorist landscape in which the role of organised groups has diminished; the growing prominence of accelerationist ideologies; violent conspiracy movements; and ideological hybridisation among online extremist communities.

Prevent's budget of just £40-£50m per annum accounts for less than 0.5 percent of the Government's counter-terrorism spending. Furthermore, counter-terrorism budgets are likely to reduce as a broadening threat landscape diverts these resources. This means there is currently little consideration of the void left 'upstream' in the growing landscape of grievance-based and identity-driven threats.

These threats are not easily mitigated through traditional social care pathways without the expertise that tailored interventions can bring; many of these cases are also associated with serious mental health challenges. Such cases require substantial investments in versatile and specialised intervention provisions to bridge online and offline threats, rooted in highly localised needs assessments with effective national level support.

Integrating counter-extremism with responses to hostile state threats

Based on the increasingly hybridised threat landscape, it is essential that counter-extremism is framed as an exercise in democracy protection, rather than just violence prevention. Given the growing overlap between hostile state activity and extremist mobilisation outlined in the section above, there is also a clear need for policy approaches that align domestic and international responses to these interrelated threats, rather than framing them as zero-sum issues. Calls for the establishment of a parallel CONTEST strategy for hostile state threats correctly speaks to the need for parallel capabilities around detection and

response in this domain, ranging from prevention to prosecution.

There is an advanced understanding within both national security and foreign policy departments within government of how state actors may seek to manipulate, including the tactics, tools and procedures (TTPs) they use to do so. However, to date this has been divorced from the impact these operations have on domestic audiences. Breaking down existing silos between agencies and establishing a more integrated government functions would provide the opportunity to respond holistically to this interconnected threat; it would allow agencies to draw on a deep pool of expertise on issues such as strategic communications and online threat monitoring. An overarching body, such as the Ministerial-led Defending Democracy Taskforce, should ensure that it connects with policy experts normally perceived to be outside its wheelhouse as well including ministers with oversight of counter-extremism policies.

International cooperation will be key in this regard. Calls for the creation of a US-UK Democratic Resilience Centre show promise in recognising the international dimensions of extremist and hostile state actor threats to elections. The UK is in a strong position to facilitate improved international policy exchange between European liberal democracies and the Five Eyes. The government can also play a vital role in recognising the transnational nature of these threats and building on mechanisms developed for international collaboration to counter specific terrorist groups (e.g. Counter Daesh Coalition).

However, it is essential that lessons are learned from the failures of previous approaches to counter-terrorism at an international level. Major mistakes have been made in partnering with authoritarian governments to tackle violent extremism, whitewashing the silencing of dissent and the undermining of human rights in these illiberal states. While authoritarian responses are rooted in control and censorship, liberal democratic efforts must arise from the principles of transparency and accountability, delivered through effective democratic oversight. When we fall short in protecting individual rights at home and fail to call out authoritarian abuses

internationally, we weaken the entire rights-based order we seek to protect through our counter-extremism efforts.

Online to Offline: Lining Prevention Efforts up with Emerging Digital Regulation

The new Online Safety Act enshrines a series of duties for social media platforms to protect UK users from illegal content and protect children online, with some services to be subject to additional requirements, such as stronger transparency obligations. However, it will take up to two years for all associated Codes of Practice and Guidance to be developed by the new social media regulator, Ofcom.

Crucial to the success of this endeavour will be proper resourcing for Ofcom to deal with the longer tail of smaller platforms, which are expected to benefit from an accelerating platform migration and displacement effects from regulation on larger social media sites. Ofcom will also have to grapple with international coordination between governments, regulators, law enforcement and companies.

ISD research for Ofcom found that alt-tech platforms Bitchute, Odysee, Gettr and Rumble were linked to by UK extremist and hate actors more often than Facebook, Instagram or Reddit.

However, even if the Online Safety Act has the desired impact on illegal content, content moderation alone will not be nearly sufficient to address the longer tail of online radicalisation outlined throughout this paper; this includes content described in previous iterations of the bill as "legal but harmful". This shows the importance of ensuring regulation is effectively lined up with a comprehensive approach to online safety, from prevention through to intervention.

Practical Considerations for Effective Implementation

Cross governmental coordination

There has been a concerted focus on encouraging better cross-departmental cooperation on counter-terrorism, particularly following the David Anderson KC Review into the 2017 attacks in London and Manchester. But the increasingly hybridised threat landscape means that whole-of-government collaboration beyond the traditional counter-terrorism milieu is increasingly essential.

This necessitates a response that cuts across departments including the Home Office, Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, Department for Education, Department for Health & Social Security and Counter Terrorism Policing. It will also require aligning parallel international facing work of the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and coordinating the online regulatory dimensions as they pertain to illegal harms in the Online Safety Act with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and Ofcom (see box above).

A clear delineation of responsibilities, including an effective oversight function, can address siloed working across these intersecting areas. A governing board which meets regularly and is chaired by the Prime Minister's Office, could oversee delivery of this policy area and ensure department move forward efficiently and with minimal friction.

There are increasing examples of government departments breaking down the natural tendency to work within siloed territories and budgets. The Joint Extremism Unit (JEXU) is jointly run by HM Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) and the Home Office, Homeland Security Group (HSG) and is the strategic centre for all counter-terrorism work in HMPPS.

These models can be replicated across broader counter-extremism policy, but this will require more than just structural changes - the concept of counter-extremism must be seen as a priority across agencies and departments whose thresholds conventionally sit below (cohesion, hate crime) or above it (serious violence, terrorism, state threats).

National/Local cooperation

Programmes like Prevent already have strong connectivity between national and local structures; it is further strengthened by the statutory duty on named authorities to have due regard for the prevention of terrorism. A similar duty exists for serious violence, along with similar national-local connectivity via Violence Reduction Units (VRUs). There is also close working between national and local responses for Hate Crime initiatives.

This model could be used to establish a national structure uniting all overlapping policy areas relevant to countering extremism and cascading strategic responsibility to regional geographic hubs which would turn oversee the granular operational delivery of programming. In this context, funding could be set at a national level encompassing hate crime, serious violence and radicalisation. Regional hubs could then allocate funds to local authorities and civil society initiatives determined by a regional risk assessment. The UK's counter-terrorism apparatus has developed closer partnerships through the new Counter Terrorism Operations Centre (CTOC), which proved invaluable in the capture of escaped suspect Daniel Khalife. In the same way, a localised prevention collaboration between mental health services, violence reduction units (VRUs) and local authorities could address the casework upstream of Prevent. This could offer interventions which do not securitise individuals or communities, delivering value for money in a challenging fiscal environment.

Models for national-local cooperation have been piloted through the Strong Cities Network, an international network of more than 200 cities hosted by ISD including Manchester and London. These local prevention frameworks provide a model for local government, local public services and civil society stakeholders to

collaboratively design and coordinate community-level prevention and resilience activities. These are developed against a local action plan and informed by a risk assessment which could include representatives from local education committees, youth engagement services, children and family services, social workers, public information/campaigns teams, religious institutions, local businesses, community policing teams, housing officers, and local councils. These localised responses can incorporate key online trends essential to prevention, and map salient extremist narratives and risks relevant to their local context to ensure online and offline risks are understood in parallel.

Such collaborative 'whole-of-society' approaches are key to tackling highly localised manifestations of extremism and engaging civil society in a way that does not securitise relationships with communities. For prevention to work effectively, much more must be done to build trust with communities and deliver on their needs, including providing targeted support. Communities must feel they are benefiting from interventions if governments are to build successful partnerships for countering extremism.

Conclusion

An effective prevention strategy must not merely tinker with existing structures but should be ambitious enough to think outside the box and fundamentally restructure cross-government responses to countering extremism, serious violence and radicalisation. While the Independent Review of Prevent fell short of recognising the evolving hybridised extremism landscape, it did highlight important fissures in the application of prevention work below the radicalisation threshold. This paper sets out how a revitalised and robust cohesion strategy, complemented by a broad and mature counter-extremism policy, can respond to a wider range of threats through a public health model of prevention.

A number of 'quick wins' emerge from this paper, which are outlined below:

- Establishment of a cross-Whitehall Prevention of Serious Violence and Radicalisation Board, chaired by senior No. 10 policy advisors and attended at director level by the relevant government departments: Homeland Security Group (Home Office Prevent), Serious Violence Unit (Home Office), Hate Crime Unit (Home Office), Mental Health Services (Department of Health and Social Care - Adults & Children), Counter Terrorism Police (Interventions).

- Integration of local authority safeguarding boards with Channel Boards would ensure that all safeguarding cases are dealt with by a unified body capable of determining the best intervention for a young person. By incorporating Channel into the broader safeguarding system, cases can be triaged to the most appropriate support (i.e. mental health services, social care or counter radicalisation interventions). In many local authorities, Channel will already be involved with other safeguarding responsibilities; this

makes it a natural fit which also guarantees wider safeguarding duties can be effectively cross-pollinated with Prevent's counter-terrorism expertise.

- Local authority Prevent Oversight Boards and Serious Violence Boards should be integrated with Community Safety Partnerships, providing regular updates on local risk, threats and programme delivery. These overarching partnerships already understand that no single agency can tackle crime and anti-social behaviour, and they unite police, fire and rescue authorities, local authorities, health partners and probation services with senior oversight to deliver hyper-localised strategies tailored to the needs of their communities. This will become more pressing with the continued regionalisation of Prevent. As Prevent Coordinators lose central government funding in many areas and the portfolio is subsumed into broader community safety responsibilities, local authorities require

closer collaboration between intersecting responses on hate crime, serious violence and radicalisation.

- The Israel-Hamas conflict has highlighted the limitations of the Charity Commission, whose purpose is one of supporting the sector to be more self-sufficient and effective in instilling strong governance. While it has a small team dedicated to dealing with extremist exploitation of the charitable sector, it is not equipped to deal with the volume or complexity of cases it is currently managing; the Commission is currently investigating 70 individual charities in relation to antisemitism and the promotion of extremism. Charitable status is a privilege given to those wishing to provide support to communities and there should be no tolerance for those who use their platform to target minorities, spread prejudice or promote extremist rhetoric. Charities which breach hate crime laws or which show exhibited persistent behaviour which could bring the sector into disrepute should have their charitable status rescinded; trustees should be prevented from holding future positions in charities. The Charity Commission's application of the new extremism definition may prove a useful tool to prevent the spread of hate speech, extremist rhetoric or sectarian language in charities.

- To improve the selection and application of cohesion initiatives, central and local governments should work collectively to develop a central repository and toolkit of proven successes. Projects encouraging shared achievements built on community collaboration should be prioritised over those focused on a single faith or ethnicity. In parallel with this, schools should be incentivised to ensure children from different communities learn alongside each other to foster acceptance of difference from an early age.

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