

Cameron's counter extremism plan rests on shaky foundations

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Underpinning David Cameron's focus on non-violent extremism, delivered in [a speech](#) outlining the government's counter extremism strategy, is the idea that there is a clear connection between radical ideas and radical action. The relationship between attitudes and behaviour is in fact far more complex, and targeting 'non-violent extremists' poses genuine risks for freedom of speech. [Sarah Marsden](#) examines Cameron's speech, finding that it rests on shaky foundations.



Billed as his most significant [speech on extremism](#) since taking office, David Cameron laid out his five year vision for combating extremist ideology at a school in Birmingham this week. In his speech, Cameron set out four principles the government believes important in defeating extremism: confronting extremist ideology; tackling violent *and* non-violent extremism; emboldening moderate Muslim voices; and building a more cohesive society. It was more detailed, and contained more nuance than comparable announcements in recent years, but the arguments Cameron set out face a number of significant challenges, both in terms of the [policy](#) likely to flow from it, and with respect to its fundamental premise: that by tackling extremist ideology, it will be possible to limit terrorism.

One of the major problems in preventing people from becoming involved in terrorism is that it's extremely difficult to predict who they are likely to be. There is no '[terrorist profile](#)', and the complex and heterogeneous nature of militant journeys challenge '[conveyor belt](#)' models of 'radicalisation'. Such problems perhaps explain why there has been such focus on ideology: as it is so difficult to identify specific indicators of risk, the primary visible marker – of commitment to a particular set of ideas – becomes the focus for intervention. The trouble is, the empirical evidence for ideology being a causal factor in engaging in violence is [far from clear](#). To paraphrase John Horgan, a prominent academic in the field: '[not all terrorists are radical and not all radicals are terrorists](#)'.

Beyond this, there seem to be two problem areas. The first is the tension between 'enforcing' British values and 'tackling non-violent extremists'. The second is drawing attention to the minority nature of extremism, while at the same time securitising increasing areas of public life and drawing attention to issues of integration and segregation which draw a very large net in terms of targeting any intervention strategy.

Underpinning Cameron's focus on non-violent extremism is the idea that there is a clear connection between radical ideas and radical action. However, the relationship between [attitudes and behaviour](#) is complex: holding extreme ideas is a [far from certain indicator](#) of engaging in extreme acts. Similarly, although extremist recruiters are an important focus for the security services, targeting 'non-violent extremists' poses genuine risks for freedom of speech, one of those fundamental British values the government wishes to enforce. The problem is all the more significant as it is far from certain what counts as non-violent extremism – or for that matter, what constitutes 'fundamental British values'. This matters, not only because such concepts put boundaries on what we, as citizens, are allowed to say, but perhaps more importantly, because without a clear idea of what 'non-violent extremism' is, there's a risk it is defined for political, rather than security reasons.

Beyond these issues, banning radical, but non-violent voices, runs the risk of shutting down legitimate dissent and reduces the space for the kind of debate that is so important for a healthy democracy. I've argued [elsewhere](#) that making it a statutory requirement for a range of public servants, including teachers, to identify potential 'extremists' risks reducing the space for difficult, but vital, discussions about how to negotiate difference in an increasingly pluralistic society. [Banning 'non-violent extremists'](#), through 'Extremism Disruption Orders', or 'Banning Orders' for extremist groups, presents an even more acute challenge. Not only is the relationship between radical ideas and radical action far from straightforward, engaging with radical ideas is an important feature of a liberal democracy in

its own right. The answer lies, not in draining the ideological swamp from which extremists are believed to emerge – as [Michael Gove](#) puts it – but in clarifying the muddy water through debate and discussion.

Finally, David Cameron has stated repeatedly [over the years](#) that those who subscribe to Islamist extremism are a minority. He's right. [Fewer than 450](#) people have been convicted of terrorism offences in the UK since 2001, and as [few as 100](#) may currently be fighting in Syria. As Charles Farr, the head of the Office of Security and Counter Terrorism [recently underlined](#), this small number should be understood in the context of the 2.7 million Muslims currently living in the UK. The implication is clear: tarring an entire identity group with the brush of extremism, as Cameron has [recently done](#), is not only potentially counter productive, it's also patently unsupported by the facts.

By focusing on community level questions of integration and segregation, the government risks overstating the threat, and repeating the mistakes of previous incarnations of the Prevent strategy, the controversial aspect of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy concerned with trying to prevent terrorism. One of the major challenges Prevent faced was the perception that it held the 'Muslim community' somehow responsible for Islamist terrorism. It was an approach that backfired and led to the [stigmatisation](#) of those it purported to support.

Given the extremely small number of people who go on to use violence and the difficulty in identifying who they are likely to be, there are no easy answers in the effort to prevent violent extremism. What does seem important is not to make things worse by misidentifying the causal processes implicated in violence, imposing limits on free speech, or laying the blame at any one identity group's door. Not only because doing so seems unlikely to reduce the risk of violence, but because it contributes to a divisive discourse that holds all Muslims responsible for the actions of a very, very few, and makes genuine community cohesion ever less likely.

In [previous research](#), I've [argued](#) that the reintegration of those who have actually been involved in violence is a two way street: the community needs to accept them, as much as they need to accept being part of wider society. The same can be said for those who are genuinely interested in joining groups like the Islamic State: they need to be able to hear the debates, feel part of a wider social project, and not be criminalised for being, non-violently, 'radical'. The proposals David Cameron set out today seem unlikely to bring this any closer.

About the Author

Sarah Marsden is a Lecturer at the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, in the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews. Her research focuses on contentious politics, terrorism, and collective violence, most recently examining the processes implicated in the impact and decline of violence, including efforts to support militant disengagement, 'deradicalisation' and reintegration. Amongst other journals, she has published in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. Her forthcoming book: *Reintegrating Extremists: 'Deradicalisation' and Desistance* (Palgrave MacMillan) examines efforts to resettle those convicted of terrorism offences in the UK over the last ten years.

