

## Who are the extremists?

*We at LSE sincerely apologise to Professor James Hughes for the fact that his article “Who are the Extremists?” was not published on the BPP blog in November 2023. An internal LSE grievance panel found that there were shortcomings on the School’s side in relation to editorial processes in this case, and in the way that the School engaged with the grievance panel itself. The grievance panel concluded, based on the evidence in front of them, that Professor Hughes was a victim of discrimination on grounds of his anti-Zionist philosophical beliefs. We accept that mistakes were made and we will be taking urgent steps to address the issues raised in the Grievance Outcome report and to implement the panel recommendations in full. As a matter of principle, we robustly defend and support academic freedom and free speech at LSE. This is a key priority for the School as an institution and so we are keen to ensure we address any defects there may have been in our processes to improve our practice in the future. The article is now published here, on the British Politics and Policy blog.*

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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in recent weeks has given salience to the question of what constitutes “extremism” in Britain. Conservative government politicians have challenged senior police officers to clamp down on pro-Palestine protestors and supporters and have criticised the Metropolitan Police in particular for being too soft on “extremism” and being too reticent to use counter-terrorism and other criminal laws to arrest and prosecute those suspected of “extremism”.

The commander of the Metropolitan Police, Mark Rowley, has joined the Government’s demands for a review of laws on terrorism and hate crimes, calling for greater “clarity” and an expanded definition of “extremism”. Equally, he has resisted, so far, the enormous political pressure from the Conservative government and pro-Israel lobby groups to ban protests and expressions of anti-Israel sentiment. An important context here is that about 80 per cent of Tory MPs are members of the Conservative Friends of Israel group. The expansion of that lobby has been nurtured by Israel over recent years.

This explains the almost unanimous pro-Israel positioning of the current Conservative government and its mirroring of the policy of the Israeli state itself by fusing criticism of the Israeli state with anti-Semitism, and attempts to ban anti-Israeli political expression.

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Home Secretary Suella Braverman is one of the leading pro-Israel voices in the Government in the effort to Israelise the policy approach to civil liberties in the UK. Her article in today's Times takes the issue of extremism in a new direction by linking the popular support for Palestinians and antipathy to Israel directly to the UK's past experience of dealing with violence and extremism in Northern Ireland. What precisely are the lessons to be drawn from extremism in Northern Ireland? Could the Conservative government's support for Israel itself be a form of "extremism"?

First, as regards the Conservative support for Israel. Numerous respected international organisations in the human rights field have declared Israel to be an Apartheid state, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Israel's own leading human rights advocacy organisation B'Tselem. Two successive United Nations Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, have produced detailed reports setting out the Apartheid nature of the Israeli state: Michael Lynk (Canada) in 2022, and Francesca Albanese (Italy) in 2023. Apartheid is a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute. Consequently, many (not all) Western democracies, including the UK, are complicit in the crime of Apartheid through their largely unconditional support for Israel. This is about the nature of the state of Israel in its subjection and repression of Palestinians, not the war crimes currently being perpetrated in Gaza.

Second, on the question of "extremism" we should remember that the UK has a long history stretching from its colonial past on pragmatically developing and interpreting laws that criminalise violent resistance and define extremism. The conflict in Northern Ireland is illustrative for the current discussion on extremism, and also on how the treatment of "terrorist" organisations is not a matter of objective meaning but rather of politicised thinking.

State emergency acts to undermine the rule of law were in existence in Northern Ireland from 1921 to the end of the Stormont regime in 1972 through the so-called Special Powers Act. Under Stormont many nationalist organisations were "proscribed", i.e., banned, including the political wing of the IRA, Sinn Féin. Under British direct rule in 1974 Sinn Féin was removed from the proscribed organisations list (largely to facilitate back-channel negotiation). On the Loyalist side, the British government only added the Ulster Defence Association to its proscribed terrorist list in 1992, despite the fact that its armed wing, the UFF, was responsible for hundreds of sectarian murders from its

formation in 1971.

We also now know from British government enquiries after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 that there was systematic cooperation (“collusion”) between sections of the state responsible for counter-terrorism in the police, army and security agencies, and Loyalist terrorist organisations. The Northern Ireland Legacy Act passed in September 2023 by this same Conservative government is primarily designed to shield British state agents from prosecution for criminal actions during the Northern Ireland conflict.

Although Mrs Braverman is keen to draw an analogy between extremism in England and Northern Ireland, we should also note that no effort has been made by successive Conservative governments to apply the countering radicalisation/extremism legislation enacted in England and Wales since 2011 (the “Contest” strategy) to Northern Ireland. Those strategies, though riddled with ambiguities, have been developed and expanded under Conservative governments to include “violent” extremism and subsequently “non-violent extremism”. Some politicians and Senior police chiefs have often described the Contest/Prevent strategies as “toxic” for poisoning relations with British Muslims, and for many British Muslims these strategies reflect Islamophobic tendencies in the Conservative Party (a view supported by former Conservative Party Chair Baroness Warsi).

The above inconsistencies are just a few from a plethora and should help us better contextualise the adding of Hamas in 2021 to the proscribed terrorist organisation list under the Terrorism Act 2000 by then Home Secretary Priti Patel, another vocal pro-Israel Conservative. Hamas’s behaviour had not changed since its military wing was added to the list in 2001, so why was it banned in 2021? The move was seen even by a BBC commentator at the time as reflecting “the deep contacts that Israel has within the Conservative Party”.

Perhaps, this is the most significant lesson to be drawn from the political convulsions in the Conservative Government over the mobilisation of anti-Israel sentiment. From the 1970s Israel invested enormous political capital in building a pro-Israel lobby within the US and today AIPAC is one of the most politically powerful forces in US politics. A similar effort has been made by Israel over recent years to achieve something similar in British politics – to capture a governing party and through it shape policy in ways that protect Israel and demonise Palestinians.

*All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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