

CAGE Response to Narratives of Division by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

24th January 2019

Introduction

This paper is a response to the newly released report 'Narratives of Division: The Spectrum of Islamist Worldviews in the UK' by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. The report charges a number of Muslim groups, including CAGE, of promoting a worldview and perpetuating 'divisive ideas that...at worst may be contributing [to] the cause of extremists' and undermining social cohesion in Britain.

Before we get to a detailed critique of the report, it is crucial that the role of Tony Blair himself is given due attention. His attempt to mainstream counter-extremism efforts as integral to 'social cohesion' should be seen in light of his role in dragging Britain into a disastrous invasion of Iraq, which eviscerated the country, leaving over two million dead and a society in tatters, from which rose the spectre of ISIS, which now provides the climate of fear to which his counter-extremism efforts play.

His role in spearheading the original PREVENT strategy, and links to despotic regimes - often taking place under this very shroud of 'counter extremism' - render this report, if not completely farcical, then at least a useful window into the real intent of counter-extremism.

Blair's refusal to sever ties and his seemingly relentless pursuit of wealth and business in the name of counter-extremism, not only endangers British activists travelling abroad - as CAGE highlighted in the wake of Blair's refusal to cut his 9-million-pound ties with Saudi Arabia in the wake of the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi¹ - but now turns its spotlight on legitimate Muslim organisations at home.

This latest report authored by his organisation the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change rests primarily on a tabloid-esque,

biased reading of the social media content of five Muslim organisations, the messaging of which has clearly been cherry-picked to validate a predetermined assessment of the groups and further a political agenda.

Key in this agenda is giving legitimacy to the Commission for Countering Extremism, and not only that, providing a road map to assist it in its mission of crafting a working definition of 'extremism'. Such a definition would no doubt form the basis of further counter-extremism measures by government, targeting more groups designated outside of the realm of acceptability. For this reason, it is crucial that this report be discredited piece by piece.

Setting out to achieve political goals

This analysis of the report's content - which compares the messaging to that of proscribed group Al Muhajiroun and is written in a manner that is meant to convince us that this is an objective analytical base - reveals that aside from being academically unsound, it is thoroughly driven by a clear set of political assumptions and goals that fall within Blair's neo-conservative and war-like world view.

Taking opinion as analysis, and innuendo as investigation, what is offered ultimately amounts to little more than a grand 'slippery slope to extremism' narrative used to discipline groups who step out of line of an acceptable field of discourse.

This response will see to debunk the central claims of the report, shed more light on the political motivations for it, and place its release in the current context of counter-extremism in Britain.

A Summary Of The Report

The report purports to have analysed the public messaging of five Muslim organisations – CAGE, Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), MEND, Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK (MPAC UK) and Hizb-ut Tahrir (HT) – each chosen on the basis of having been ‘accused of holding divisive or extreme views’ by a figure of authority, including MPs and/or government officials - and of enjoying a social media following of at least 10,000, which is taken as an indication of their influence.

The report then alleges that this messaging overlaps or aligns, in varying degrees, with those of the proscribed group Al Muhajiroun (ALM).

This conclusion is drawn out through a very skewed reading of the five groups’ content, and the methodology of the report is further called into doubt given the absence of an experiment control – Al Muhajiroun represents the ‘extreme’ here, but there is nothing explicitly presented to offer a ‘mainstream’ baseline for comparison, beyond the authors’ own subjective worldview.

Their messaging is categorised into six themes which according to the authors’ analysis are core to Al Muhajiroun’s own messaging and worldview, these being:

Victimisation

Good Muslim vs Bad Muslim

Islam vs the West

Delegitimising government

Centrality of Islam in politics

Justification of violence

Overlap with Al Muhajiroun’s messaging is taken as indication that these groups, whilst they – unlike Al Muhajiroun – fall short of criminality or full-blown ‘extremism’, operate in a ‘grey space’ that can provide the ideological fuel and create the conditions for extremism, division and eventually, violence.

The report then makes recommendations as to how government and political leaders can push back and challenge the

proliferation of these ideologies, honing in on the importance of dealing with divisive messages in the social media space, calling for greater government funding for community-based counter-extremism efforts, and – never to miss out on a profit-making opportunity - using the report as a sales pitch for the Institute’s toolkit for educators.

This is not a novel approach to countering extremism, quite the contrary; it is what we have come to expect from the sector – but it is for this and the following reasons why this report warrants a proper response and debunking.

Tony Blair’s reputation domestically remains toxic³⁴⁵⁶⁷ over his leading role in Britain’s disastrous invasion of Iraq, and his various political scandals during and after his premiership. However, his role as architect of PREVENT and his continued connections with political leaders globally provides some important insight into the workings of the governing class.

And though he has form in making outlandish, belligerent claims that groups such as CAGE ‘promote extremist views’ for opposing PREVENT⁸, he is also almost refreshingly transparent in his belief that Muslims represent the primary threat of extremism⁹¹⁰, in comparison to the coded language of government.

In effect, Blair is merely one highly unpopular advocate for an increasingly popular idea among government.

Therefore we will be responding to both the report’s dominant frameworks of analysis, and place them within a wider context of policy advanced by the likes of Tony Blair and his ilk.

The counter-extremism sector seeks to misguidedly define ‘extremism’ to sharpen PREVENT and the CCE

Over the last 8 years in particular, the framework of post-7/7 British counter-extremism has steered further and further away from combating violence in any concrete sense.

Instead it has prioritised targeting the supposed ‘grey space’ of

'extremism', including 'non-violent extremism'. This has been done in a fear-driven environment which has justified increased state intrusion into the legal affairs of Muslim, and increasingly non-Muslim, communities.

PREVENT is the pre-eminent ambassador for British counter-extremism, but since 2015 the government has operated a three-pronged, all-society approach to countering extremism, spanning PREVENT, the Counter Extremism Strategy 2015 and its Integration strategy.

The 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy included within its crosshairs practices such as Sharia Arbitration councils and 'entryism' within schools, charities and universities, and its mission includes 'contesting the online space'⁴. It marked out targets for counter-extremism that are a far cry from the more typical notion of 'extremism' put forward in political discourse as something approaching violence, and indicated the move to a more invasive, all-encompassing approach to counter-extremism.

The division between PREVENT and the Counter Extremism strategy is mostly a smokescreen, with the latter merely opening up a new front to implementing counter-extremism without being weighed down by the toxicity of the former.

Both operate off the same theoretical framework of countering 'extremist' ideology, and both effectively fit together at the level of the whole, forming a wide-reaching counter-extremism apparatus that pathologises swathes of practises and beliefs that are normative, non-violent and legal.

The creation of the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE) last year⁵, led by former Inspire head Sara Khan, is drawn from the Counter Extremism Strategy 2015. Its ongoing aim is to conduct a call for evidence and develop a non-legal, working definition of 'extremism'- which has yet to be defined legally, and probably can't be - which will invariably be mobilised and used to target individuals and organisations through PREVENT.

In the process it is effectively seeking the consent of Muslim

organisations and civil society for counter-extremism measures that will eventually be used against them.

CAGE have analysed the nature and mission of the CCE in more detail in our recent report *CCE Exposed: The Islamophobia Industry policing thoughts and beliefs*⁶.

Noting this context, we will outline why the Tony Blair Institute's report, its assumptions and theoretical approach, embodies the dangerous trajectory of British counter-extremism in a nutshell.

Through its misguided focus on the ideology that supposedly drives 'extremism', rather than the material circumstances and conditions from which political violence arises, counter-extremism essentially draws boundaries between acceptable thoughts and ideas whilst delegitimising others – and those that hold them – as extremist or 'extremist-adjacent' and therefore in need of surveillance and intervention.

It must be emphatically stated that despite the academic veneer of the TBI report, it is an ideological project through and through, with a certain set of politics embedded within the thematic analysis itself.

In conclusion, we wholly reject the analysis and conclusions of the report, and reiterate our call to drop the wrongheaded focus on the supposed ideology of 'extremism', as well as the persecution of Muslim advocacy organisations in pursuit of that.

Neither the recommendations of the report nor the current modus operandi of British counter-extremism will take us any closer to building a healthy, safe society, and this research only adds to the echo-chamber of official counter-extremism literature.

More about the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change

The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, also known as the Tony Blair Institute (TBI), was formed in 2016 as part of a merger between Tony Blair's previous organisations the

Tony Blair Governance Initiative and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation²⁴. It describes itself as non-partisan, conducts its activity internationally, and was created with the aim of 'making globalisation work for the many'.

Its specified funders have included the US State Department and a number of governments²⁵, and it was recently forced to admit that it had received around £9million in donations from an organisation managed by a Saudi Arabian government minister²⁶, a fact which was hitherto not made public.

The Institute's accounts state that Blair himself receives no remuneration through the Institute, but that he 'devotes at least 80% of his time' to it²⁷, and holds a supermajority of voting rights on its Board.

Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that Blair exercises a degree of oversight and influence over the projects undertaken through TBI, including this report.

The four pillars of the Institute's work are:

- **Governance:** Working to enhance the governance of African states
- **Middle East:** Working on the 'peace process' between Israel and the Palestinians
- **Co-Existence:** Countering 'Islamist extremism' through 'tackling the ideology behind violence, not just the violence itself.'
- **Renewing the Centre:** Revitalising the 'centre ground' of liberal democratic politics, and equipping political leaders to combat the rise of 'false populism'¹⁸

It is the latter two pillars that are most relevant to this report and to CAGE, and which we will explore in this piece.

In keeping with Blair's own proclamations that the threat of 'Islamist extremism' must be tackled at the level of ideology⁹, this latest report sits in a canon of research that TBI has conducted that delves into ideological and theological underpinnings of 'extremism' and/or political violence.

These include the 2015 report (under the Tony Blair Faith Foundation) 'Inside the Jihadi Mind: Understanding Ideology and Propaganda'²⁸, the 2016 'Milestones to Militancy What the lives of 100 jihadis tell us about a global movement'²⁹ and 2017's 'Struggle Over Scripture: Charting the Rift Between Islamist Extremism and Mainstream Islam'³⁰.

These reports are all premised on the basis of identifying, dissecting and tackling the supposed ideological and theological drivers of political violence, and how government and/or society can disrupt that ideology.

The TBI evidently sees itself as a player in the counter-extremist scene and seeks to situate itself as an authority in that sector. In January 2019 it released a collection of essays on 'Challenges in Extremism'³¹, bringing together contributions from such contemporaries as John Jenkins, associate of the influential rightwing thinktank Policy Exchange, Kim Cragin of RAND Corporation, Jamie Bartlett, advisor for the Commission for Countering Extremism, Ian Acheson, reviewer into 'Islamist extremism' in prisons, and more.

We must not forget that the Counter Extremism industry is politically and financially lucrative³², and would be an ideal entry point for Blair's apparent desire to return to British politics³³. Positioning his Institute as being at the cutting edge of counter-extremism and making an impact with its research would be a boost to those ambitions.

Given his relationship with repressive dictators such as the likes of Saudi's rulers and Egypt's Sisi, it is worth stopping to reflect on the possibility of a newly-relevant Blair bringing those lessons in tyranny 'back home'³⁴.

The politics embedded within the analysis

At core of the report is its analysis of narrative themes, which the authors purport are the result of a 'systematic and evidence-based analysis' of the five organisations' messaging.

There is much to be said about the methodology of the report, and its

deeply substandard level of research. However we will instead address the operationalisation of the themes, and the politics embedded within them, to show how these belie any claims of objectivity.

As mentioned the theme/categories are:

Victimisation (portraying the idea of Islamophobia or the persecution of Muslims as institutional or widespread)

Good Muslim vs Bad Muslim (criticising the legitimacy of certain Muslim individuals and organisations as representative of Muslims)

Islam vs the West (depicting the division between 'the West' and the 'Muslim world' as intractable and in conflict)

Delegitimising government (delegitimising the British political system and government)

Centrality of Islam in politics (calling for the role of sharia in political governance)

Justification of violence

Despite the veneer of objectivity, a cursory glance shows that these are politically and socially constructed themes, and by definition subjective.

For instance, criticisms of PREVENT included within the 'Delegitimising government' category could be perceived as 'delegitimising' from the perspective of government and its ideologues. On the other hand, it could be viewed as a form of democratic engagement, since holding government to account is a core value.

It is debatable whether objectivity is even possible in such a politicised context, so the more pressing issue to address is the way in which the authors' analysis is used, implicitly and explicitly, to advance a set of politics and delegitimise alternatives.

The report 'analysis' consists primarily of looking at the social media activity of the five groups to identify the prominence of the themes – no differentiation or system of weighting is allocated between original Facebook and Twitter posts, third party article re-posts, retweets and quotes.

The report takes a broad-brush approach to picking out examples and takes the liberty of interpreting them for the audience – with the authors conceding only the meekest of disclaimers that the report may not be wholly objective.

The theme of 'Islam vs the West' includes such varied examples as claiming that Western governments see Muslims through securitised lens (CAGE), a rejection of Capitalism and secularism (HT), Presenting the West as forcibly making Muslims integrate and assimilate (IHRC) and Accusing the US of being a state sponsor of terrorism (MPAC UK).

A good-faith interpretation of these messages would seek to engage with these narrative points, rather than problematise them outright.

To do so, the authors might reflect on how there has indeed been a whole host of intrusive 'integration' measures being imposed on Muslims as well as migrants and racialised groups more broadly in European states ^{27 28 29 30}.

They could note that documentation of the role of the US in arming and funding death squads in countries throughout for example South America has been well-established³¹, rather than implying this view as being kneejerk conspiratorialism.

Meanwhile, the perception of Muslims being seen through a securitised lens has been echoed by the likes of the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee³² and Citizens UK³³ - the report even notes the former without much contention.

This suggests that their more pressing anxiety is that it is a Muslim organisation that is voicing these truths, rather than the point in and of itself.

More broadly, the political ideology embedded within these categories is again brought out into the open. The rejection of Capitalism being linked to extremism here raises an immediate red flag: if establishment counter-extremists are empowered with the ability to mark out ideology as 'extremist' among Muslims, the precedent is set to be wielded against many others who oppose the political status quo - CAGE has seen this occurring through PREVENT^{34 35}.

For the theme of 'Justification of violence', examples include making the claim that foreign policy is a driver of terrorism, as opposed to ideology (CAGE) or otherwise highlighting the role of western foreign policy in fuelling discontent in the Muslim world (HT, IHRC, MEND).

Problematising this reflects the typical government-style approach of conflating explanation or contextualisation of violence, with justifying it or apologising for it. This is how government renders a topic of discussion pre-emptively illegitimate, with the effect of narrowing the window of acceptable discourse and never pointing us towards any realistic solutions.

Rather, this is done so that, at worst, the state continually escapes accountability, while at best, it is never compelled to self-evaluate or reflect.

For the theme of 'Victimisation', the report references posts that speak of an Islamophobia industry that benefits from targeting Muslims (CAGE) or conspiracies of institutionalised Islamophobia (MPAC UK), others that call Britain a racist country (IHRC), to those accusing Ofsted head Amanda Spielman and Sara Khan of bullying/defaming Muslims and Islam (HT) for their support for a hijab ban at a primary school. These posts are largely divorced from most of their context and are reframed as divisive, us-vs-them messages overstating the extent of Islamophobia in Britain.

Beyond the deeply condescending attitude of deciding for a community how much they are allowed to worry about in terms of their own safety, and what indeed they are allowed to discuss

amongst themselves as well as in wider society, framing the examples mentioned here as 'divisive' skirts the fact that the existence of an 'Islamophobia industry' has been the subject of books and papers^{36 37 38}, and that there is an ongoing discourse around the historical and present racism ingrained in Britain³⁹.

Not contextualising the comments of these organisations omits vital context with regards to the hijab ban for example – making it out instead to be a case of bullying 'extremists' who are continually attacking 'well meaning' counter-extremists.

Therefore even a quick look at the themes and how they are organised makes it clear that they are not neutral or merely descriptive. Rather, they are prescriptive and designed to designate acceptability.

An attempt to uphold a crumbling consensus around liberal centrism

This acceptability relies on the underlying assumption that the scale of 'extremism' is ultimately a scale of palatability to mainstream political norms.

Embedded in this is a set of political assumptions that remain unspoken and are taken for granted, against which all other stances are defined – similar to how the notion of 'Fundamental British Values' are taken as the litmus test by government to determine whether an organisation or political ideology can be designated 'extremist'.

The political mainstream in which this report situates itself has been constructed by a generation of political leaders of which Tony Blair and current British leaders are a part. This 'mainstream' is based around a consensus on neoliberal capitalism and the authority of the state, governed by liberal democracy.

Figures like Blair have defined the political status quo and now jealously guard that as the acceptable centre ground, whilst decrying any attempts to challenge that centre ground and its failings - even as it rapidly loses its hegemony - as being hollow,

divisive and/or inherently populist.

This 'zero point' of the political centre is itself rife with internal contradictions. For example, in the context of the Muslim organisations included in the report, any perceived 'justification of violence' is taken as a strong indicator of 'extremist' beliefs, yet the authority of the state to engage in active, violent warfare should not be questioned – thereby reinforcing the state's monopoly on violence.

Furthermore, the decision of Muslim communities to question the authority of those who claim to represent their interests is labelled in the report as playing 'Good Muslim vs Bad Muslim'.

This is a perverse inversion of the phrase 'Good Muslim Bad Muslim', which was initially coined to describe the deeply damaging behaviour of governments in playing Muslim communities off one another based on their relative compliance to state norms.

This motivated the Blair/Brown Labour government's approach to PREVENT, and stemmed in part from the practice under state multiculturalism of defining and designating appropriate 'representatives' as interlocutors for communities – which again, would go unchallenged by this report or its proponents.

This all goes to show how the report, and by extension the British counter-extremism architecture upon which the report is premised, serves to defend and guard the political status quo rather than people.

If the current trajectory of PREVENT and counter-extremism continue, by targeting more non-Muslim groups, this will have a stifling effect on the ability to challenge the state and question political norms, even if they are widely accepted as being problematic for the majority of people.

Forbidding any ideology that challenges state policy

The report makes its rationale clear by stating that:

'our findings have consistently highlighted the role of ideology in fuelling extremism and emphasised the complex but undeniable link between the ideas that underpin nonviolent and violent extremism', whilst the groups chosen in the report were done so for 'holding or promoting extreme views of an Islamist nature'. This was all knitted together by a call upon political leaders to challenge such views more robustly.

The premise, made explicit throughout the report, is that the ideology shared by these groups are either 'extremist', approaching a level of 'extremism', or resulted in the exploitation of divisions to create the conditions for extremism to develop, including violently. This is the 'grey space' mentioned in the report, which the authors argue requires greater challenge and intervention.

This is of course precisely the focus of PREVENT and counter-extremism more broadly, and is among CAGE's primary contentions with PREVENT.

By focusing on ideology as a driver of political violence - rather than the material circumstances which shape and determine the perceived usefulness and application of violent acts - PREVENT not only mistakenly draws a line between political belief and violence, but it also opens the door for the state to police thoughts and expression, while never changing its problematic policies.

In fact, such an obvious dodge of simple common sense enables the state to sidestep or downplay questions of domestic and foreign policy which shape those material circumstances, and then shift the blame for political violence on to communities – especially Muslim communities, who are constantly implored to root out the supposed 'extremists' in their midst⁴⁰.

The shift in PREVENT over the years towards challenging

'non-violent extremism' and those that oppose 'Fundamental British Values' has enabled the state to mark out more and more political expressions as deviant and thereby justify disrupting them.

This report continues along that trajectory, marking out not just what expressions and topics are illegitimate, but going further to set out the boundaries within which certain topics are permissible, and where they become illegitimate. Though Tony Blair is not in power, this report serves to signal support for this direction of travel, and legitimise further encroachment of the state on society.

The use of Al Muhajiroun and guilt-by-association through ideas is a tabloid stunt

The use of Al Muhajiroun as a 'baseline' for extremist positions is worthy of attention. Invoking the threat presented by Al Muhajiroun is topical as it leverages the fear of the day – the release of leader Anjem Choudhary from prison last October has provoked much concern among MPs and ministers⁴¹.

His release has also been used as justification for the need for greater counter-terror powers through the Counter-terrorism and Border Security Bill⁴², and the report describes Al Muhajiroun as being 'the most visible Islamist group in the UK' for a period.

But beyond that, there appears to be a political utility to comparing the groups in the report to Al Muhajiroun.

The logic is as such: Al Muhajiroun are 'extremists' – criminally so – and the components of their worldview therefore represent the 'extremist' fringe of thought. Any groups sharing overlap with aspects of that worldview are thus in risk of, or actively, approaching 'extremism'.

Al Muhajiroun here epitomise the problem, and therefore their political thought becomes a 'black hole' of 'extremism' – allowing the report authors to tar anyone who approximates

similar talking points as illegitimate. This is a sort of guilt-by-association without any actual association needing to be proven.

In this respect, the methodology of this report is not too dissimilar to that of The Sun's infamous '1 in 5 Muslims sympathy for jihadis' headline⁴³, which rested on a conflation of various findings and bad-faith interpretations to fit a predetermined political point.

Again, this approach exemplifies that of PREVENT and counter-extremism. Rather than viewing the grievances aired by Al Muhajiroun, such as the existence of structural Islamophobia, state oppression and British warfare in Muslim-majority lands, as being materially grounded, the authors are able to outrightly dismiss them, rather than engage them constructively. They do this simply by categorising them as being inherently 'extreme'.

This label can then be easily broadened to include groups that recognise the root of those grievances but choose to express and articulate them in entirely different ways, to achieve different ends, and with a degree of nuance that is steamrolled by the authors. Instead, the limited frame of acceptability is afforded only to politically amenable groups like Tell MAMA, mentioned in the report, who actively engage British counter-extremism⁴⁴.

There is a deep arrogance in this stance, which ensures counter-extremists can never properly deal with the roots of discontent, as they choose not to engage with them – the aim, as outlined in this report, is to delegitimise and push those that raise these issues out into the political wilderness, whilst preserving a narrow window of acceptable discourse.

The report reveals strong links between counter-extremism and the discredited PREVENT policy

As mentioned in the introduction, this report is significant not for its own merits, or lack thereof, but for what it illuminates with regards to the counter-extremism apparatus and its real intentions and self-serving logic.

In short, this report embodies the approach of British counter-extremism, and maps out its logic.

The relationship that PREVENT describes between 'extremist' ideology occupying a space before 'terrorism', but which can lead to it, has often been conceptualised as a 'conveyor belt' or 'iceberg'. In recent years, and in the face of strong academic criticism of the so-called 'conveyor belt theory', the government and PREVENT practitioners have been at pains to distance themselves from such a theory, and/or deny that it exists at all.

Despite this, what is often described, through PREVENT and the likes of this report, are slightly more developed articulations of a conveyor belt-style analogy; conveyor belts in all but name. The core components of the analogy remain, even whilst not expressed with the rigidity of a 'theory'.

Here, there remains the central notion that there is a causal link between extremist ideas on one hand, and mobilising individuals towards political violence on the other.

Again, this sidesteps the question of how political circumstances shape the field within which actors determine the usefulness and legitimacy of violence – and it allows the likes of Tony Blair to play down the impact of his destabilisation of Iraq and the Middle East as a driver of political violence, whilst playing up the threat of what he terms 'extremist' Islamist ideology.

Relatedly, the increased use of PREVENT against the far-right in recent years allows the government to evade the question of how their domestic policy, fiscally and in terms of anti-immigration measures, have legitimised and created the condition for far-right politics to draw strength, whilst then managing the consequences of that through PREVENT.

This dual-polar approach against the 'Islamists' on one end, and the far-right on the other, reinforces the legitimacy of the state in holding down the aforementioned 'centre ground' of politics.

However, this has come into conflict with the fact that internationally, more authoritarian and brazenly right wing

leaders like Donald Trump are all but dropping the pretence of being concerned by the far-right^{45 46} in their PREVENT-influenced Countering Violence Extremism (CVE) programme.

Once they shed themselves of the baggage of defending the political 'centre ground', Trump and his kind help illuminate the fact that at the core of PREVENT (and its global shadow CVE), is a coercive apparatus of surveillance that offers dangerous power to political leaders – and thus lies the problem with PREVENT.

Seeking to support and direct the CCE

The connection between this report/TBI and the CCE is important to note.

The 'grey space' between Muslim political activism and 'extremism' that this report seeks to tackle overlaps strongly with the 'grey areas' between extremism, integration and terrorism that the CCE Terms of Reference highlight as its priority⁴⁷.

In the recommendations, this report mentions working towards establishing a working definition of 'extremism', which the CCE has announced as an objective⁴⁸, and the need for 'broad-based engagement with communities that go beyond self-appointed gatekeepers'. This dovetails with Sara Khan's statement of intentions to do just that in her role - as well as her proclamation that "there is no such thing as the Muslim community"⁴⁹ in order to evade the question of her widespread lack of legitimacy among Muslim organisations.

This report also reiterates the core talking points of the CCE and Sara Khan – namely the issue of counter-extremists being 'bullied' by their communities^{50 51}, the increased interest in 'extremist' material online and on social media⁵², the increasingly popular theory of 'reciprocal radicalisation' or 'cumulative extremism' - when Muslim 'extremists' and far-right groups feeding off one another legitimises the other⁵³ – and also name drops groups represented on the CCE's 'Expert Group', including Fiyaz Mughal/Tell MAMA and Hope Not Hate.

The practical links between the TBI and CCE run deeper - in

October 2018 Emma El Badawy, TBI's Co-Existence Head of Research, joined the CCE's Expert Group⁵⁴, whilst fellow CCE Expert Jamie Bartlett contributed towards a recent TBI report, as mentioned earlier.

Revolving door aside, the greater issue lies in a convergence of interests among an influential grouping of counter-extremists, making efforts to mainstream their approaches and reconstruct British counter-extremism to suit their aims, both financial and political.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Tony Blair Institute's report Narratives of Division: The Spectrum of Islamist Worldviews in the UK is a poorly developed, poorly designed hatchet job against Muslim organisations, masquerading as research.

Beneath the surface of 'objective' science, the report serves as little more than an extended co-sign for repressive counter-extremism policies in Britain, and implicitly seeks to defend an outmoded politics of a crumbling 'centre ground'.

Moreover the report is introduced and overseen, and likely conceived, by an individual whose political track record includes the condoning of widespread crack downs on dissent in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, offering PR for autocrats in Kazakhstan⁵⁵, and whose personal war-mongering in Iraq and other countries in the Middle East has taken the world into a dangerous era, and destroyed the lives of millions of people.

Blair's links to the CCE utterly discredit the counter-extremism sector and reveal its efforts as being about silencing dissent in order to fortify a crumbling 'centrist' consensus.

CAGE roundly reject the theoretical premise and methodological execution of the report, in particular the central point that ideology is the primary driver towards political violence rather than material conditions such as foreign and domestic policy.

This report should be viewed as a particularly unpolished insight into the twisted logic of British counter-extremism, which should give all those concerned with justice and freedom of belief and thought serious pause so they can realise:

Here is a clear example of the type of rationale deployed by political leaders under the marketable and sugar-coated guise of counter-extremism, to police thought, ideas and expressions that threaten to expose their war-profiteering.

As such, we reiterate our call for a boycott of the CCE, as well as an outright rejection for their calls to define 'extremism', which would only result in communities and civil society groups becoming conspirators in their own oppression.

Britain and the world do not need more money spent on reports such as these. We need to see real accountability for war crimes committed in the name of the 'War on Terror'.

Rather than individuals continuing to treat this unending conflict as an ever-providing cash cow, Blair and those who profit from war, fear and divisions, and whose intent is quite clearly to control us so they can continue to profit from us, do not deserve podiums at international conferences. Rather, they deserve to be tried on multiple allegations related to war crimes, in line with the rule of law.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://institute.global/news/narratives-division-islamist-worldviews>
- ² <https://www.cage.ngo/blairs-role-in-the-counter-extremism-sector-is-normalising-abuse-and-risks-endangering-british-activists>
- ³ <https://www.lbc.co.uk/radio/presenters/stig-abell/stig-abell-blair-is-the-most-toxic-political-figur/>
- ⁴ https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/explore/public_figure/Tony_Blair
- ⁵ <https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/opinion-perspectives/it-is-time-for-tony-blair-to-stop-talking-and-go-away>
- ⁶ <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/09/the-ghoulish-post-politics-career-of-tony-blair>
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CAGE is an independent advocacy organisation working to empower communities impacted by the War on Terror policies worldwide. The organisation highlights and campaigns against such policies in hope to achieve a world free from oppression and injustice.

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