

# The Telegraph

## The government was absolutely right to reject this flawed definition of Islamophobia

RICHARD WALTON | 16 MAY 2019



***Adopting the term would impede counter-terror efforts and have chilling effects on free speech***

I was delighted to learn that the government had rejected the definition of Islamophobia created by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims. Their definition – that “Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness” – is simply unacceptable in any modern democracy that values freedom of speech.

Equally, with the terrorism threat remaining high, we cannot afford a definition that would undermine our existing counter-terror legislation. The President of the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC), Martin Hewitt, was quite right when he wrote to the Prime Minister recently to explain the negative far-reaching consequences for policing and counter-terrorism operations of accepting this definition.

The definition would impair our ability as a society to debate the causes of Islamist extremism. It works against the necessary current call for open and far reaching debate on Islamist and other threats, and effectively proposes a form of blasphemy law which could result in police interventions and arrests by officers for alleged Islamophobic words and behaviour.

## **Islamophobia**

**“Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness”**

*—All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims definition*

It is also entirely plausible that independent commentators such as journalists, politicians and others expressing opinions relating to the causes of Islamist terrorism could be labelled as – and potentially prosecuted for – being "Islamophobic". Furthermore, if these expressions were deemed to be a type of racism, then the individuals concerned could well be charged with race hate crimes.

More worryingly, acceptance by the UK Government of the proposed APPG definition of Islamophobia would result in the effectiveness of its own counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST being seriously undermined, making the country less safe from all forms of terrorism.

The strategy and methodologies used for dealing with far right extremist threats by the UK police counter-terrorism network and intelligence agencies are identical to those used for combating Islamist and all other terrorist threats. The undermining of any of our strategic and operational capabilities as a result of Islamist groups exploiting a new definition of Islamophobia would have a seriously detrimental impact on the UK's ability to keep all communities safe from terrorism. That includes keeping Muslim communities safe from far-right terrorism.

At a time when the country faces an unprecedented threat from terrorism, including increasing far right threats, it is vital that the UK Government's counter-terrorism strategy is not undermined or degraded in any way. Doing so would likely result in damage to public confidence in the agencies charged with combating terrorism.

Adoption of the definition would also potentially result in government departments, the police and intelligence agencies being branded and labelled "institutionally Islamophobic" by Islamist campaign groups and others. Under the terms of the proposed Islamophobia definition, this allegation would be almost impossible to refute owing to the nebulous and expansive formulation of the APPG definition.

The Pursue and Prevent strands of the UK's CONTEST strategy would be the most adversely affected if the Government accepted the APPG definition, in particular, police executive counter-terrorism powers to stop and search extremists travelling through ports and after terrorist attacks (for instance, returning Isil fighters from Syria or travelling far right extremists).

Disruptive and investigatory powers used by Government Ministers – such as the powers relating to exclusion that were used against the Isil "jihadi bride" Shamima Begum – would also be undermined. This would represent a particular risk in the case of individuals linked to terrorist groups overseas who pose a serious threat to national security and wish to return to the UK.

Finally, the government's own Prevent work would be seriously undermined, in particular, the statutory duty for local authorities, schools, NHS trusts, universities, the police, prisons and the probation service to safeguard those at risk from being drawn into terrorism or supporting terrorism. This would mean weakening the country's ability to divert individuals away from all forms of extremism and terrorism.

It is deeply regrettable that the Labour and Liberal Democrat political parties have already formally accepted this definition of Islamophobia, presumably without having carefully considered the impact of such a decision on human rights, freedom of speech or the rule of law.

In an apparent attempt to show political support for a vulnerable minority community who are undoubtedly experiencing higher levels of hate crime, these leaders have been misled unwittingly. Yet it seems that sense has prevailed in the announcement that the government will not be travelling down this particular blind alley.

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<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/05/16/government-absolutely-right-reject-flawed-definition-islamophobia/>