

Opinion Counter-terrorism policy This article is more than 14 years old

David Cameron's crackdown on extremism is counterproductive

Robert Lambert

Muslims who work to oppose the influence of al-Qaida in Britain deserve to be recognised – not labelled subversive extremists

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 David Cameron has begun a clampdown on extremism, withholding cash from 'suspect groups'. Photograph: Kai Moerk/AP

To be effective, UK [counter-terrorism policies](#) should always aim to achieve a degree of legitimacy and credibility in minority, often alienated, communities where terrorist movements that plan bomb attacks seek recruits, influence and support.

The need for legitimacy and credibility arises from an analysis that acknowledges the crucial importance the Provisional IRA, al-Qaida and most other terrorist movements place upon their strategies for propaganda, recruitment, retention and support. Central to this analysis in respect of UK counter-terrorism policy is the understanding that all UK residents have a potential stake in reducing violence in their towns and cities, whether it is inspired by politics or not.

David Cameron's [crackdown on extremism](#), however, ignores such thinking. Although he has not named names, it seems clear that some of the most effective opponents of al-Qaida influence in Muslim communities in the UK are set to be reclassified as extremist and subversive. This will no doubt be the confident expectation of [Maajid Nawaz](#), director of [Quilliam](#), a counter-extremist thinktank that branded mainstream Muslim organisations as "extremist" in a secret list [revealed in the Guardian](#) last August.

Cameron's willingness to turn counter-terrorism partner into counter-subversion target is also the basis for Charles Moore's satisfaction at the

prime minister's recognition that "[non-violent extremism is the entry chamber for terrorism itself](#)".

For Moore and Nawaz, and now for Cameron, it seems it is worth sacrificing effective counter-terrorism partnerships with Muslim "extremists" in the long-term interests of national security and social cohesion. We would not, Moore explains, partner with BNP leaders to combat violence by far-right thugs. We should not, by the same token, the argument continues, partner with and legitimate "Muslim extremists" to counter al-Qaida terrorism in any event.

If it was based on real evidence it would be a strong argument. Instead, all of my police and research experience points to the fact that the most effective opponents of al-Qaida influence in Muslim communities in the UK are wrongly labelled extremist and still less do they provide an "entry chamber for terrorism itself".

As a result of Cameron's new policy, several Muslims who al-Qaida strategists regard as serious and credible opponents in the battle for young hearts and minds will be hampered in their important counter-terrorism work. Fortunately, Cameron's decision to deny effective Muslim community initiatives legitimacy and funding will not entirely halt effective grassroots work against al-Qaida influence but it will reduce its scale and impact. It will also make life difficult for local partnerships where Muslim community groups are branded extremist and subversive by the government. As a consequence, trust and mutual respect between police and Muslim community projects will be replaced by relationships of control and distrust, or no relationships at all - both outcomes serving al-Qaida better than counter-terrorism.

Effective opponents of al-Qaida need street credibility: that invariably entails maintaining the same robust opposition to the "war on terror" as to al-Qaida terrorism. For example, significant al Qaida influence in and around the Finsbury Park mosque in north London has been successfully tackled by [credible Muslims](#) who have also been at the forefront of the anti-war and anti-racist movements. Whereas the area was once dominated by Abu Hamza's pro-al-Qaida propaganda it has been replaced by youth work that has allowed former al-Qaida supporters to become responsible citizens.

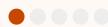
This is brave, dangerous and demanding work that deserves recognition. It has been accompanied by equally effective work against street crime and antisocial behaviour. While local MP [Jeremy Corbyn](#) and local police support such work, Cameron looks set to reclassify it as extremist and subversive.

In fact, Tony Blair's government halted [Prevent](#) money for this counter-terrorism work in Finsbury Park several years ago. Since then, the work has been community led and will hopefully continue regardless of Cameron's policy, with the money coming from the pockets of local Muslims who fund youth work against all kinds of criminal and antisocial behaviour. Cameron's new policy will cause harm, however, when local politicians and police are discouraged from working in support of their hitherto trusted Muslim partners.

Like Blair, Cameron appears to be have been seduced by Muslim voices who purport to be experts in counter-extremism, such as Nawaz of Quilliam and [Haras Rafiq](#) of Centri, who have been quick to endorse Cameron's tough new policy. Both Quilliam and Centri were first fostered by the Blair government to undermine effective opponents of the war on terror in Muslim communities. Although Quilliam has lost some government funding it looks set to retain significant influence even if some of its key players begin to operate within different organisations.

False classifying Muslim groups as subversive "extremists" either because of their opposition to the "war on terror" or because of their adherence to "political Islam" risks doing more to boost al-Qaida recruitment, influence and support than reduce it. The same policy will do little to stem the significant growth of far-right political violence and intimidation against Muslims and their places of worship and congregation. Cameron and his advisers should think again.

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