



Ministry of Housing,  
Communities &  
Local Government



Department for Levelling Up,  
Housing & Communities

## Guidance

# New definition of extremism (2024)

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**Applies to England**

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# 1. Introduction

The threat from extremism has been steadily growing for many years. While the government and its partners have worked hard to combat this threat, the pervasiveness of extremist ideologies in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Israel on 7 October 2023 highlighted the need for further action. This new definition of extremism adds to the tools to tackle this ever-evolving threat. This is in line with the first duty of government – to keep our citizens safe and our country secure. The definition updates the one set out in the 2011 Prevent Strategy and reflects the evolution of extremist ideologies and the social harms they create.

Most extremist materials and activities are not illegal and do not meet a terrorism or national security threshold. Islamist and Neo-Nazi groups in Britain, some of which have not been proscribed, are operating lawfully but are seeking to replace our democracy with an Islamist and Nazi society respectively. They are actively radicalising others and are openly advocating for the erosion of our fundamental democratic rights. Their aim is to subvert our democracy<sup>[footnote 1]</sup>.

Extremism can lead to the radicalisation of individuals, deny people their full rights and opportunities, suppress freedom of expression, incite hatred, erode our democratic institutions, social capital and cohesion, and can lead to acts of terrorism. The Independent Review of Prevent made clear the importance of placing greater emphasis on tackling ideology and its radicalising effects and in its response the government committed “to challenge extremist ideology that leads to violence, but also that which leads to wider problems in society, such as the erosion of freedom of speech”<sup>[footnote 2]</sup>.

The new definition sits alongside a set of cross-government engagement principles. The definition and engagement principles will be used by government departments to ensure that they are not inadvertently providing a platform, funding or legitimacy to individuals, groups or organisations who attempt to advance extremist ideologies.

The definition and engagement principles will be the first in a series of new measures to counter extremism and religious hatred and promote social cohesion and democratic resilience. This work will complement the government’s updated Prevent and CONTEST Strategies, the Defending Democracy Taskforce and the Integrated Review as part of a collective endeavour to uphold our national security and resilience.

The ways in which extremist agendas are pursued have evolved since extremism was first defined by government. As such, government’s approach must adapt too. Our new definition is narrow and sharper, and provides more

specificity on extremist ideologies, behaviour and harms. The new definition draws on the important work of Dame Sara Khan and Sir Mark Rowley as set out in the 2021 Operating with Impunity report which demonstrated that it is possible to protect freedom of expression whilst countering some of the most dangerous extremist activity taking place in Britain. This new definition does not seek to stymie free speech or freedom of expression. There are concerns that those expressing conservative views will be classified as extremist. This is not the case.

## 2. The definition

Extremism is the promotion or advancement of an ideology<sup>[footnote 3]</sup> based on violence, hatred or intolerance<sup>[footnote 4]</sup>, that aims to:

1. negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms<sup>[footnote 5]</sup> of others;  
or
2. undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy<sup>[footnote 6]</sup> and democratic rights<sup>[footnote 7]</sup>; or
3. intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2).

The types of behaviour below are indicative of the kind of promotion or advancement which may be relevant to the definition, and are an important guide to its application. The further context below is also an essential part of the definition.

## 3. Behaviour that could constitute extremism

**Aim 1 (negate or destroy fundamental rights and freedoms):** Behaviour against a group, or members of it, that seeks to negate or destroy their rights to live equally under the law and free of fear, threat, violence, and discrimination. Including:

- Using, threatening, inciting, justifying, glorifying or excusing violence towards a group in order to dissuade them from using their legally defined rights and freedoms.

**Aim 2 (undermine, overturn or replace liberal democracy):** Attempts to undermine, overturn, or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights. Including:

- Advocating that the UK's parliamentary democracy and democratic values and rights are not compatible with their ideology, and seeking to challenge, overthrow, or change our political system outside of lawful means.
- Using, threatening, inciting, justifying, glorifying or excusing violence towards citizens, in order to dissuade them from participating freely in the democratic process.
- Subverting the way public or state institutions exercise their powers, in order to further ideological goals, for example through entryism, or by misusing powers or encouraging others to do so.
- Using, threatening, inciting, justifying, glorifying or excusing violence towards public officials including our armed forces, police forces and members of local, devolved or national legislatures, in order to dissuade them from conducting their obligations freely and fearlessly, without external interference.
- Establishing parallel governance structures which, whether or not they have formal legal underpinning, seek to supersede the lawful powers of existing institutions of state.

**Aim 3 (enabling the spread of extremism):** Intentionally creating a permissive environment for behaviour in aim 1 or aim 2. Including:

- Providing an uncritical platform for individuals or representatives of groups or organisations that have demonstrated behaviour in either aim 1 or aim 2.
- Facilitating activity of individuals or representatives of groups or organisations that have demonstrated behaviour in either aim 1 or aim 2, including through provision of endorsement, funding, or other forms of support.
- The dissemination of extremist propaganda and narratives that call for behaviour in either aim 1 or aim 2.
- Attempts to radicalise, indoctrinate and recruit others to an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, including young people.
- Consistent association with individuals or representatives of groups or organisations that have demonstrated behaviour in either aim 1 or aim 2 without providing critical challenge to their ideology or behaviour.
- If any behaviour listed in aim 1 or aim 2 has occurred previously, a refusal by the individual, group or organisation that conducted the behaviour to rescind, repudiate or distance themselves from the behaviour.

## 4. Further context

The lawful exercise of a person's rights (including freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression, freedom of association, or the right to engage in lawful debate, protest or campaign for a change in the law) is not extremism. Simply holding a belief, regardless of its substance, is rightly protected under law. However, the advancement of extremist ideologies and the social harms they create are of concern, and government must seek to limit their reach, whilst protecting the space for free expression and debate.

This definition is intended to reflect an ordinary, commonsense meaning of the word "extremism", whilst enabling a more precise and workable use of the term in real-life cases. In constructing this definition, government is striking a proportionate balance between protecting our democratic right to freedom of expression and belief, and not curtailing the civil liberties and rights of people in the UK, whilst safeguarding them and our democratic institutions against the wide-ranging harms of extremism. For example, "Intolerance" in the context of the definition is closely linked with "violence" and "hatred" and is to be applied to mean an actively repressive approach rather than simply a strong opposition or dislike.

Extremists can be individuals, groups or organisations, where there is evidence of behaviour conducted to further any of the three aims set out in the definition. The behaviour must also demonstrate the advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance. The examples of behaviour above are indicative and not exhaustive; we must have the flexibility to reflect the changing nature of how extremists operate in the UK over time.

Extremists may exhibit one or more of these behaviour to advance their violent, hateful or intolerant ideological goals, but there are times when individuals, groups or organisation who do not hold or seek to advance an extremist ideology may undertake superficially similar behaviour. Government does not seek to target these individuals, groups or organisation and brand as extremist those who are engaging in fair debate; understanding the intention behind the behaviour when assessing for extremism risk is key. Those seeking to identify whether certain behaviours are extremist should look to identify intention first, and then, where it is not clear whether the explicit intention is extremist or not, investigate whether the behaviour forms a pattern that is promoting or advancing an extremist ideology or goal<sup>[[footnote 8](#)]</sup>.

This definition is not intended to capture, for example, political parties that aim to alter the UK's constitutional makeup through democratic means, or protest

groups which at times may cross into disruption but do not threaten our fundamental rights, freedoms, or democracy itself. Lawful expression of one's beliefs, for example advocating for changes to the law by Parliament, exercising the right to protest, or expressing oneself in art, literature, and comedy, is not extremism.

In investigating whether an individual, group, organisation or behaviour can be considered "extremist", government has a responsibility to ensure fair and reasonable judgements are made, which are justified based on a careful consideration of the context, quality, and quantity of available evidence. Any action or ideology that may be extremist must be considered in its wider context, where possible drawing on a range of evidence, to assess whether it forms part of a wider pattern of behaviour and whether that pattern of behaviour has been conducted with the aim of promoting or advancing an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance.

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1. [Operating with impunity: legal review](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operating-with-impunity-legal-review) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operating-with-impunity-legal-review>), Commission for Countering Extremism, 2021.
2. [The response to the Independent Review of Prevent](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-prevents-report-and-government-response) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-prevents-report-and-government-response>), 2023.
3. Ideology: A set of social, political, or religious ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that contribute to a person's worldview.
4. This phrase is found consistently in the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights; see for example *Perinçek v Switzerland* (App. 27510/08). "Intolerance" in the context of the definition is closely linked with "violence" and "hatred" and is intended to mean (and is to be applied to mean) an actively repressive approach rather than simply a strong opposition or dislike.
5. In particular those rights and freedoms listed in Schedule 1 to the Human Rights Act 1998. Lawful expression of one's beliefs, for example advocating for changes to the law by Parliament, exercising the right to protest, or expressing oneself in art, literature, and comedy, is not extremism.
6. Parliamentary democracy: The UK is a parliamentary democracy which consists of a constitutional monarch as Head of State, who exercises a number of constitutional and ceremonial duties; Parliament, which is the supreme legislative authority with the ability to make or unmake any law; government, which is drawn from and accountable to Parliament; and a judiciary which is independent from government and Parliament.

7. Including the right to vote, the right to join a political party, or the right to stand in elections.
8. We typically judge a pattern of behaviour to be the exhibiting of 3 or more instances of extreme behaviour that align to one or more extremist aims in the space of 6 months, but this yardstick must be flexible and considered proportionally and contextually in line with the evidence.

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