

SOAS ICOP Policy Briefings

To Inform Government and Parliamentary Debates

Henry Jackson Society: The Threat to British Democracy and Society Caused by Security Think Tanks by *Richard McNeill-Willson, Rob Faure Walker, and Isobel Ingham-Barrow* (03 December 2021) richard@mcneilwillson.eu

Extensive and demonstrable links between the UK government and security think tanks such as the Henry Jackson Society (HJS) indicate that their undue influence is **negatively influencing the UK's security**. A new [report](#) indicates that the influence of security think tanks on counterextremism strategy is such that they have even likely stymied the supposed independence of the forthcoming Shawcross-led Review into the PREVENT Strategy.

Concerningly, the Henry Jackson Society and other similar organisations have [documented connections with far-right groups](#); nevertheless, the Government continues to engage with them at the highest levels. Whilst HJS is far from transparent, what little is known about their funding [links](#) it to a **network of organisations in the UK and the US that have the common purpose of normalising the othering and exclusion of Muslim communities within Western public, political, social, cultural, and economic life**.

Past and current key figures within HJS present and voice notable anti-Muslim, anti-Islam, and anti-immigration attitudes that mirror far right extremist ideologies and political agendas. They misrepresent and pathologise minority communities in the West, often demonstrating a **reluctance to distinguish between perpetrators of violence with (socio-)political grievances [who draw on religious language](#), from Muslims in general who may share grievances but not the violent tendencies of fringe individuals/ groups**.

Moreover, the definition of 'extremism' adopted by the Government's PREVENT strategy includes 'the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group' (J.M. Berger, 2018, *Extremism*, p.170). The hostile action the HJS promotes against 'out-groups' for Western society's perceived survival means that the Government's counter-extremism strategy, on its own terms, promotes the supposed threat of 'extremism' that it proclaims to address. This is evidenced in the appointment of individuals from security think tanks to government roles (such as Robin Simcox as interim head of the Commission for Countering Extremism, and William Shawcross to lead the Independent Review of PREVENT). **Given the nature of such individuals' political leanings and attitudes, their appointment suggests a deeply entrenched political framing by the Government of these types of projects**.

As such, security think tanks such as HJS are able to encourage and promote Islamophobia through institutional bodies; this serves to push the UK Government towards increasingly repressive policy positions against British Muslims and minorities. In this way, the far-right has been brought into the heart of the UK Government, thereby **affording greater credence and strength to Islamophobic, xenophobic, and highly securitised narratives that frame Islam and Muslims in hostile terms**.

While we await the recommendations of the Shawcross-led Review of Prevent, it is not surprising that [leaks indicate](#) that it will pivot away from far-right terror to target the unqualified, **'amorphous and contested' notion of 'Islamism'**. Such a course, however, **will not increase the security of the British public, but it will increase the sense of exclusion of many British Muslims, thereby undermining foundational democratic principles, such as equality and freedom of expression**.

We therefore call upon the UK Government, MPs and members of the Lords to repudiate the role of security think tanks in Government and make use of evidence-based and independent research.

For further information contact the author at richard@mcneilwillson.eu. Contact Prof Alison Scott-Baumann for access to other experts at as150@soas.ac.uk, and visit [our website](#) for more information. *The views expressed in SOAS ICOP Briefings are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of SOAS.*