

## **Islamophobia in Europe: Counter-extremism policies and the counter-jihad movement**

Government counter-extremism policies across Europe have institutionalised Islamophobia, rendering Muslims a suspect community. These policies emerge from a feedback loop between European governments and the ‘counter-jihad’ movement – organised Islamophobes able to hide their own extremism under the cover of resistance to ‘Islamism’.

As well as using ‘Islamism’ as cover for their Islamophobia, the counter-jihad movement developed the term ‘Islamofascism’ to present its advocates as carrying the mantle of resistance to Nazism. In this way, the counter-jihad movement has been able to appeal to both right and left-wing constituencies to promote Islamophobia. Furthermore, the counter-jihad movement and its ideologues work through the state rather than against it, making it far more effective than the anti-establishment far-right.

Assisted by intellectuals and policymakers, the movement has grown exponentially across Europe and been influential in shaping government counter-extremism policies. Our report explains the origins of the movement; its contemporary influence in the UK, France and Germany; and the consequences of this influence on policy.

### **The United Kingdom:**

UK counter-terrorism legislation has shrouded Muslim communities in suspicion and mistrust. Legislation emanating from the government’s Prevent strategy has made it mandatory for public sector workers to spot supposed signs of ‘radicalisation’, which has contributed to a climate of Islamophobic paranoia that has allowed the counter-jihad movement to flourish.

Spinwatch’s report examines the organisations and individuals that make up the counter-jihad movement in the UK, including Anne-Marie Waters’ Sharia Watch, Stand for Peace, the English Defence League and PEGIDA UK. We also consider how these groups have been legitimised by political allies such as Lord Pearson and Baroness Cox, who have hosted them in Parliament. At the same time, the UK’s counter-jihad movement has transatlantic relationships and influence through co-ordination with US-based Islamophobic organisations such as the Gatestone Institute.

Many organisations and individuals in the counter-jihad movement escape government classification as far-right extremists by using protection provided by these political allies – Baroness Cox and Lord Finkelstein both sat on the Gatestone Institute’s board. Similarly, the formerly Home Office-funded Quilliam Foundation legitimised the English Defence League’s Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, presenting him as ‘reformed’ in 2013. Since then, Yaxley-Lennon has founded a media network and attracted attention for Islamophobic ideas across the English-speaking world.

Our report places these activities in a political and ideological context, to be viewed as a systematic interaction between government policy and an extremist Islamophobic movement constantly influencing each other.

### **Germany:**

In comparison to the UK and France, Germany places a greater emphasis on tackling right-wing extremism. But the German authorities are overwhelmingly focused on the traditional neo-Nazi far-right, while the more sophisticated counter-jihad movement is able to influence government threat perception. Germany's rapidly intensifying counter-extremism policies have started to institutionalise a culture of collective blame and suspicion towards Muslims, thus creating a fertile environment in which Islamophobic attacks can be justified as revenge.

Our report assesses the tactics used by prominent Islamophobic organisations and politicians in Germany. As in the UK, several counter-jihad groups frame their Islamophobic rhetoric and actions as 'counter-extremism'. PEGIDA does so implicitly, while *Bürgerbewegung Pax Europa* and the *Stresemann Stiftung* do so explicitly, raising serious questions about why counter-extremism frameworks so often prove amenable to exploitation by the Islamophobic far-right.

### **France:**

After numerous attacks since 2015, France's counter-terrorism measures have intensified. Government campaigns such as *Stop Jihadism!* have emerged seeking to deradicalise potential terror suspects. But instead of preventing terrorism, they have assisted the rise of the far-right. In the French context, the concept of *laïcité* has been consistently weaponised against Muslims.

The idea of Islamophobia as 'free speech' is particularly pronounced in France. Counter-jihad ideas and tropes appear most deeply entrenched within intellectual circles and among politicians – the most notable example being former prime minister Manuel Valls' usage of the term 'Islamofascism'. The adoption and normalisation of this language by French politicians has had violent consequences – the *Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France* (CCIF) recorded a 10 per cent increase in Islamophobic acts between 2013-14 and a further 19 per cent rise in 2015.

The major political winner of this normalisation of Islamophobia has been the rebranded far-right *Front National (FN)*, which uses the language of the counter-jihad movement to defend itself against accusations of racism. The long-term success of the *FN* in normalising Islamophobic language is borne out in a 2013 Ipsos poll which showed that 75 per cent of French people viewed Islam as 'incompatible with French society'. Our report examines the French far-right political organisations, left and right-wing public intellectuals and politicians who have created this climate of fear.

### **Counter-jihad movement funders:**

Spinwatch's investigation into non-profit tax filings between 2009-16 has found a commonality between the British, German and French counter-jihad movements – all

are being sustained by American ‘donor-advised funds’ which allow individuals to anonymously route money to controversial non-profits.

Our report sheds light on the involvement of the little-known but deeply influential donors providing the counter-jihad movement’s lifeblood. Among them is the British financier and self-described ‘counter-jihad fixer’ George Igler, who has funded the EDL’s Stephen Yaxley-Lennon as well as individuals associated with PEGIDA.

We also establish the transatlantic funding networks that sustain the London-based Henry Jackson Society, the Quilliam Foundation and the Counter Extremism Project. And we reveal the involvement of Robert and Rebekah Mercer in financing some of the most influential propaganda efforts of the counter-jihad movement in the UK.

### **Recommendations:**

Governments must fundamentally rethink the underlying ideological assumptions of existing counter-extremism policies, as they are not only failing to prevent political violence but appear to be fomenting Islamophobia and assisting the far-right.

Anti-racism campaigners should not wait on governments to reform their counter-extremism policies but instead act to directly challenge them, pursuing legal strategies.

Researchers should no longer analyse the far-right Islamophobic counter-jihad movement in isolation but take into account how it interacts with government policy to create a dangerous climate for Muslims in Europe.

Press and broadcast media should treat self-described ‘counter-extremist’ individuals and organisations with more caution. Without scrutiny and without examining the motives of such organisations, media organisations become complicit in the amplification of narratives provided by extremist ‘counter-jihad’ ideologues.