

# RISHI SUNAK

**IMPACT:** Rishi Sunak was the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Leader of the Conservative Party, the first British-Indian to be prime minister and when elected, the youngest holder of the office in modern times. As leader of the party and the head of state, Sunak failed to tackle Islamophobia both within the party and amongst wider British society.

- Rishi Sunak was born in Southampton in 1980 to immigrant parents of Indian origin who moved from east Africa. During his time at the University of Oxford, where he studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics, Sunak joined the Conservative Party. Before entering politics in 2015 as a member of parliament for Richmond, Sunak worked in the financial sector including at Goldman Sachs. **During his early days in politics, Sunak supported the Brexit Referendum and campaigned for Brexit and deregulation.**
- In 2019, **Sunak supported Boris Johnson as the Conservative candidate for prime minister. Following Johnson's appointment, Sunak was appointed Chief Secretary to the Treasury.** Johnson has a history of making inflammatory anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and racist remarks. **In July 2022, Sunak resigned from his position as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the second senior position in the government, due to “deep economic splits”.**
- In November 2022, PhD researcher Muhammad Cagir Bilir of the University of Leeds stated that Sunak's remarks about Islam and extremism during his leadership campaign “shows the direction of the government's immigration policies”. **Bilir noted that “When Sunak launched a campaign for the conservative leadership (to become prime minister), he produced a discourse that emphasized the fight against 'Islamic extremism,' equating Islam with terrorism.”** This included remarks in which Sunak vowed to widen the government's definition of “extremism,” to encompass those who “vilify our country”.
- Prevent, part of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy, began in 2003 and gained greater importance following the 7/7 London bombings in 2005. Critics have noted that the policy effectively renders all Muslims potential criminals and a U.N. expert called for the policy to be abandoned. After years of criticism of the program, the UK Home Office announced an independent review of the Prevent program in 2019. In January 2021 during Johnson's leadership, William Shawcross was appointed Independent Reviewer of Prevent. Shawcross is a former trustee and director member of the Henry Jackson Society, a neoconservative think-tank that has been accused of stoking Islamophobia. Shawcross' appointment was met with huge criticism due to past remarks about Islam. In 2012, Shawcross said: “Europe and Islam is one of the greatest, most terrifying problems of our future. I think all European countries have vastly, very quickly growing Islamic populations.” In response to Shawcross' appointment, a spokesperson for the Muslim Council of Britain said: “The appointment of William Shawcross gives further evidence that this Government wants to troll Muslims and sweep widespread concerns about Prevent under the carpet”.
- In response to Shawcross's appointment, the review was boycotted by a coalition of 17 rights organizations including Amnesty International. **In May 2022, the Guardian reported that leaked draft extracts from the government's review of the Prevent strategy stated that the UK government was “too focused on right-wing extremism” and should focus its attention on “Islamic extremism.”**
- In response to pro-Palestine protests in March 2024 as Israel's war in Gaza continued, **Sunak called for increased support for the Prevent program and ordered universities to address “extremist activity” on campus.** Sunak also asserted that protesters should not be allowed to call for “violent Jihad or for the eradication of any state,” further implying a religious agenda to pro-Palestine protests.
- **Under Sunak, the UK government widened the definition of extremism and “refocused” the Prevent Program to “Islamic extremism,” which Sunak claimed was “by far and away the single largest terror threat**

**to the UK's national security".** The government now defines extremism as "active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs". This effort to widen the definition was led by Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Leveling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations. Gove's involvement with the new definition has also been criticized given his previous comments. The Muslim Association of Britain, one of the organizations Gove named as having "Islamist orientation", described Gove's move as a "blatant effort to stifle dissenting voices". In 2024, he claimed pro-Palestine marches in London were organized by "extremist organizations".

- **The definition of extremism has drawn criticism from rights organizations as it can be used to intentionally target Muslim communities and pro-Palestine groups. The label of "extremists" would also mean that the group would be barred from receiving government funding.** Critics argue this move increases the risk of targeting certain groups, such as Muslims, undermines freedom of speech, and creates more division. Qari Asim, chairman of the Mosques and Imams Advisory Board, said: "If it's left to people to apply any definition of extremism and call anyone extremist at their whim, then that is going to create huge division in our society". Additionally, Muslim organizations like the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the largest Muslim umbrella organization in the UK with over 500 affiliated mosques and organizations, have a higher likelihood of being targeted according to Zara Mohammed, the Secretary-General of MCB. Mohammed states the recent move by the government will only exacerbate Islamophobia rather than addressing the actual issue.
- **In May 2024, the definition of "extremism" was changed again in the face of rising islamophobia and antisemitism in the UK.** While the definition has been more precise, critics have warned that Gove's policy can still be harmful to Muslim communities. Justin Welby and Stephen Cottrell, archbishops of Canterbury and York, said that the new definition "risks disproportionately targeting Muslim communities, who are already experiencing rising levels of hate and abuse".
- **Sunak's government's change in the definition of extremism increased the risk of harming pro-Palestine supporters. Chris Doyle, director of the London-based Council for Arab-British Understanding, said that Gove's initiative aims to "play culture wars" and "to link the pro-Palestinian protests to extremism and anti-Semitism".** The prime minister alluded in his speech that extremists are attempting to create division in the UK and further adding that he fears the Palestine protest had "descended into intimidation, threats and planned acts of violence".
- In March 2024, with rapid growth of anti-Muslim incidents following Israel's war in Gaza, the UK government pledged £117 million into protecting the Muslim communities. In contrast, Sunak pledged £54 million of new funding to protect Jewish communities.
- **In January 2024, British Muslim Member of Parliament (MP), Zarah Sultana, asked if the Prime Minister would call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. In response, Sunak told her to call on " Hamas and the Houthis to de-escalate the situation," implying Sultana of being affiliated with Hamas and Houthis.** In response, British MP Naz Shah called on the PM to apologize for using an Islamophobic trope, stating that "It really has been a new low, and a new painful blow today for the Prime Minister to have said to a British Muslim in this House, the member for Coventry South, that she should tell Hamas and Houthis to stop doing what they're doing." **Sunak did not apologize for his comment and said it had "nothing to do with anything else other than to recognise the instigators of this violence and illegality" of the situation.**
- **In February 2024, former Tory MP Rehman Chishti, said Sunak had been absent when it came to engaging with the British Muslim community.** During the previous leadership election, Sunak assured him of his commitment to engaging with the Muslim community, expressing, "We will work together on this if I become prime minister." However, Chisti claimed that Sunak had "made the calculation" that he doesn't require the support of Muslim voters for his political objectives.

- Rishi Sunak's cabinet included individuals who have a history of making anti-Muslim statements. In October 2022, he **appointed Suella Braverman as the Home Secretary, In February 2024, she published an [opinion piece](#) stating that "Islamists are bullying Britain into submission". Additionally, Braverman described the peaceful pro-Palestine protest in London as "[hate marches](#)"** claiming that protesters "chanted for erasure of Israel from the map." Additionally, in February 2024, she wrote in [The Telegraph](#) that "[Islamists, the extremists, and the antisemites are in charge now](#)" when referring to political pressure regarding Israel's [genocide](#) in Gaza.
- In February 2024, **Conservative MP Lee Anderson, the former deputy chairman, [claimed](#) the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, was under the [control of Islamists](#) in widely condemned remarks that led the Conservatives to suspend him. Sunak refused to condemn Anderson's remarks and [repeatedly declined](#) to say whether the comments were Islamophobic or anti-Muslim.** Instead, Sunak stated Anderson was suspended from the party only because his comments were "[wrong](#)". While Sunak added that he believes "[racism or prejudice of any kind is completely unacceptable](#)," he refused to use the word 'Islamophobia' when it came to describing Anderson's action.
- **In contrast to the Sunak government's public condemnation of antisemitism, it did not make similar statements condemning Islamophobia.** For example, Sunak noted "[the explosion in prejudice and antisemitism since the Hamas terrorist attacks on 7 October](#)," but failed to comment on the [rising levels of Islamophobia](#) in the country.
- In a February 2024 [piece](#) for the Guardian, Nick Lowles [noted](#) that "Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment run deep in the Conservative party". Polling by Hope not Hate conducted among Conservative party members [revealed](#) that a majority, 58%, believe Islam is a threat to the British way of life. Additionally, 52% of respondents [believed](#) in the "[no-go zones](#)" conspiracy theory. In 2019, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims published a report on the definition of Islamophobia. It [defined](#) Islamophobia as "rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness". Several of the UK's major political parties, including Labour, Liberal Democrats, and Scottish Conservatives, have embraced the definition provided by the APPG. However, **the UK Conservative party [rejected](#) the definition, citing that the term is "[not in line with the Equality Act 2010 and would have severe consequences for freedom of speech](#)".** In 2019, the government stated that it [will seek to establish a definition of Islamophobia](#). However, nothing has materialized. In an article with The Independent, a spokesperson for the Muslim Council of Britain said: "[British Muslim communities have witnessed over three years of failed government policy towards defining Islamophobia](#). Critics have claimed that the conservatives party's animosity toward Islam is the reason they haven't accepted it or come up with a definition of Islamophobia on their own.
- **In May 2024, Sunak gave a speech at the right-wing Policy Exchange think tank, where he described the issue of migration as a national security problem.** Sunak stated, "With 100 million people displaced globally, illegal migration is placing an intolerable strain on our security and our sense of fairness. Unless we act boldly, this problem is only going to grow." In 2022, Policy Exchange published a report, accusing Muslim critics of the Prevent program of [enabling terrorism](#) and creating an "Islamist support base" for the review. In 2023, the think tank published a report, urging the government to impose a [strict dress code on Muslim women](#). Layla Aitlhadj, a director at Prevent Watch said: "[As a charity, Policy Exchange must remain non-partisan and be detached from government. Yet it would appear Policy Exchange is neither, acting primarily as a vehicle for political propaganda and anti-Muslim narratives](#)".
- In 2023, **Sunak's government introduced the plan to pass the controversial [Rwanda deportation policy](#).** Originally proposed by Boris Johnson in 2022, the Rwanda policy would send all illegal immigrants that come to Britain to Rwanda. **In November 2023, the UK Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the [bill was unlawful](#) as it breaches the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which the UK is a signatory to.** Despite the UK's role in establishing the ECHR, Sunak expressed: "If the Strasbourg Court make me choose between the ECHR and this country's security, I will choose our country's security every single time", even suggesting a [possible withdrawal from the ECHR](#) if it conflicts with the country's security needs. Sunak's government went to significant lengths in defending the problematic policy. In an interview with the BBC, Suella Braverman stated that the

government will “[do whatever it takes](#)” to ensure the bill gets passed, even calling the European Court of Human Rights as “interventionist” and “politicized”. According to former deputy minister Oliver Dowden, Sunak believed the Rwanda policy was the “[best thing we can get](#)” to tackle illegal immigration. Human Rights Watch stated the passing of the Rwanda bill [violates human rights of asylum seekers](#) as it risks the lives of people who fled to the UK to seek safety.

- While there have not been any public comments about Sunak’s support for Indian Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and his Hindu nationalist agenda, the prime minister did **comment on the [BBC Modi documentary on the 2002 Gujarat riot saying, “I am not sure I agree at all with the characterization” of Modi.](#)** In addition, Sunak’s in-laws are said to be firm Modi supporters, with his [father-in-law](#) even attending the consecration ceremony of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya in January 2024. The Ram Temple is built on the ruins of the [Babri Masjid](#), which was destroyed in 1992 by a [mob of Hindu nationalists](#) belonging to the Vishva Hindu Parishad and allied organizations. The demolition of the mosque triggered widespread riots resulting in the death of around [2,000 people](#), predominantly Muslims.

Bridge Initiative Factsheet