

**CUMULATIVE RADICALISATION
BETWEEN THE FAR-RIGHT AND
ISLAMIST GROUPS IN THE UK: A REVIEW
OF EVIDENCE**

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INTRODUCTION

Since the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich on May 22nd 2013, there has been public and policy concern over spiralling violence between Islamist and far-right groups in the UK. Academics and experts refer to this as ‘cumulative’ or ‘reciprocal’ radicalisation / extremism. In this short provocation essay, we test four assumptions of this concept, and suggest that further research work is necessary before it is of practical value for policy making. This essay is not a comprehensive review of the subject, but is rather a provocation to further debate. We also note that cumulative radicalisation can affect several parties; it is not necessarily dichotomous (the obvious example is that far-left movements may also be affected). However, for simplicity we focus only on Islamists and the English Defence League (EDL) / similar groups. Our aim is to raise a set of related questions for policy makers – especially the recently appointed ‘task force’ on radicalisation – when considering possible responses. With the leader of the EDL recently quitting the group, there is a strong possibility that the EDL will fragment into smaller groups, which could potentially increase this cumulative process.

BACKGROUND

Professor Roger Eatwell of the University of Bath first coined the term ‘cumulative extremism’ in a 2006 paper called ‘Community Cohesion and Collective Extremism in Contemporary Britain’. Eatwell examined how ‘different forms of extremism are constructed in discourse by other extremists and how they relate in the more concrete world’. He illustrated how race riots in Bradford during 2001 occurred after members of the British National Party and National Front organised a protest that drew a response from Muslim fundamentalist groups.

Eatwell’s argument is that extremists of both groups effectively enter a ‘cumulative’ process whereby the activity of one group leads the activity of another to become more extreme or provocative, which in turn may further radicalise the other group and so on. Similar sorts of

behaviour have been noted in other disciplines, notably behavioural and social psychology, such as the creation of enemy outsiders, and the process of ‘othering’ different social groups.ⁱ Some studies suggest that coming into contact with opposing views more generally can also harden opinions.ⁱⁱ

There is a strong intuitive case for this phenomenon. The English Defence League (EDL) was founded in response to a 2009 protest march by an Islamist group in Royal Wootton Bassett. Since then, the EDL and Islamist and / or far-left groups have frequently sought to provoke each other. In 2009, Labour’s then Communities Minister John Denham argued that it was ‘pretty clear that [the EDL’s] tactics [are] designed to provoke, to get a response and hopefully create violence’.ⁱⁱⁱ The EDL has frequently demonstrated in areas with large Muslim populations. Islamists have also undertaken provocative demonstrations – such as those at Royal Wootton Bassett, or the burning of poppies – to provoke and anger the far-right.

Clearly, this sort of provocation results in some kind of response. A counter-terrorism officer in the West Midlands police recently argued that EDL demonstrations were in some cases pushing Muslims toward radicalisation; and may make recruitment to Muslim militancy easier.^{iv} Indeed, in May 2013, British Muslims from the West Midlands pleaded guilty to plotting an attack on EDL members, having been caught with a homemade bomb, guns, knives and a machete.^v A video of the Lee Rigby murder suspect, Michael Adebolajo, was unearthed leading an EDL counter-rally as far back as 2010. In June 2013, the radical preacher Anjem Choudhary announced the creation of an EDL-type, vigilante street group called Islamic Emergency Defence (with the highly provocative IED acronym), which aims to prevent - and it appears retaliate against – anti-Muslim attacks. Similarly, the EDL saw an increase in online support following the Woolwich attacks, (but not necessarily a sustained increase in demonstration turn out). Following the Woolwich murder, there was a marked increase in hate crime against Muslims and attacks on mosques.

Because of these events, journalists, commentators and academics have been frequently referring to a new wave of ‘cumulative

radicalisation’. Matthew Goodwin – an academic expert on the far-right – recently cited the phrase in a piece for The Guardian where he describes the danger of “violent and sporadic reprisals and, at the absolute extreme, an enduring cycle of violent or terrorist action”.^{vi} Professor Nigel Copsey has recently argued that the “The EDL hopes ... that cumulative radicalisation on the streets will force the Government into illiberal action against Britain’s resident Muslims”.^{vii}

Shortly after the Woolwich murder, the Prime Minister announced a new taskforce to focus on radicalisation. Cumulative radicalisation is likely to feature. However, in order for the theory to be of practical value and use, this concept must be carefully interrogated. In this paper, we identify four assumptions that we believe are concomitant with the cumulative radicalisation theory. We briefly test the extent to which (admittedly limited) available evidence supports each assumption. These assumptions are:

- The activities of one side will result in an increase in the support for the other side (or, the ‘recruiting sergeant’ argument).
- The activities of one side will ‘trigger’ a violent retaliation from the other (the ‘spiralling of violence’ argument).
- The process affects both sides equally (‘equal weight’ argument).
- Given a symbiotic relationship of this nature, tackling radicalisation of one side also requires tackling radicalisation of the other side (‘they are both as bad as each other’ argument).

Assumption 1: the activities of one side will result in an increase in the support for the other side (or the ‘recruiting sergeant’ argument)

This assumption suggests that EDL demonstrations act as a ‘recruiting sergeant’ for Islamist extremists, allowing their ideas to find more traction with British Muslim youth and increasing the size of their explicit or tacit support base (and vice versa).

The genesis of the EDL – formed in 2009 in response to planned protests by an Al Muhajiroun offshoot group – suggests that the presence and behaviour of Islamists in Luton led directly to the creation of the EDL.

However, it is not clear how far this was a phenomenon specific to Luton, reflecting the unique circumstances of the town, the football hooligan scene, and the slow growth of online activism, through groups such as the United British Alliance. Indeed, 2009 was around the time that the terror threat from Islamist extremism was beginning to recede.^{viii} According to most evidence, the size of the extreme Islamist movement in the UK has been either stable or declining since around 2007, when the then Director of MI5 Jonathan Evans reported that 2,000 individuals were being monitored. More recent estimates have placed it closer to 1,000.^{ix} Surveys around this time were also showing that overall the popularity of Islamist thinking was waning.^x

Nevertheless between 2010 and 2011, there were a series of court convictions of UK based Islamists, as well as increasing media attention of so-called ‘grooming gangs’ – a key plank of the EDL’s propaganda. However, these events did not appear to provide a sustained fillip in the EDL’s popularity. The EDL’s support base (both online and off) was slowly decreasing from 2010 to 2011, plagued by internal factionalism and disputes.

Certain provocative actions and behaviours may be more significant than general trends. The ‘Poppy Burning’ by Muslims Against Crusades (MAC) took place on 11th November 2010, which was followed by an immediate counter-demonstration by around fifty EDL supporters. However, the short-term aftermath does appear to show an increase the number of demonstrators attending events. In the six month period directly before the poppy burning incident there had been 9 EDL demonstrations with an average of 600 participants. This rate of demonstration was almost the same in the 6 months after with 9 demonstrations taking place, but these involved an average of around 1,000 participants.^{xi}

Finally, despite there having been a surge of *online* support – the EDL increased its Facebook ‘Likes’ by around 100,000 in the immediate days following the Woolwich attack – this too has not been accompanied by a major increase of demonstration attendance. Police estimates suggest that somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000 people attended a demonstration in Newcastle in response to the murder of

Drummer Lee Rigby – around the same attendance level of the larger demonstrations of 2009 and 2010.^{xii} Over the course of the following weekend, when the EDL and the BNP planned a ‘day of protest’, there were only a few hundred protestors despite plans to hold more than 50 demonstrations in towns and cities across the UK.^{xiii}

More broadly, the European Values Study found that, in 2000, 14% of UK citizens would not want to have Muslims as neighbors. Eight years on - after 7/7, 21/7, and the 2006 Atlantic plot - that figure had fallen to 13%. In both instances, the UK was among the top three most tolerant countries in Europe. Recent research findings released by Matthew Goodwin also support this claim: he found support for the EDL among the population at large has fallen since the Woolwich attack (and subsequent EDL demonstrations).

The evidence available to support this claim appears varied. While there is certainly a response following activities by an opposition group, a series of other factors are likely to be significant in determining what precisely that response is.

Assumption 2: the activities of one side will ‘trigger’ a violent retaliation from the other (the ‘spiralling of violence’ argument)

Even if overall levels of support for groups is not affected by the activities of an opposition group, the motives and motivations of those already involved may become more radical as a result – potentially making violent retaliation more likely. (Or at least, precipitating some change in tactics or aims). We call this ‘the spiralling of violence’ argument.

Following the Woolwich attack, there was an increase in hate crimes – including violent attacks – directed against Muslims. According to Tell MAMA, an anti-abuse monitoring group, there was a ten-fold rise in attacks on Muslims overnight after news of Lee Rigby’s murder was announced, including 11 attacks on mosques. Reported attacks on Mosques included three petrol bombs thrown at one congregation while they met in Grimsby, bacon being left on the steps of a mosque in Cardiff and multiple incidents of vandalism across the country.^{xiv}

According to a recent comprehensive study in the US, this spike of ‘retaliation’ is common following a high profile event like the Woolwich murder.^{xv} The study found that such spikes were most pronounced if the attack was carried out by Jihadists against a symbol of national identity. Following 7/7, there was an equally large rise in hate crime. The number of religiously motivated crimes rose to 269 in the three weeks following the attacks, compared to just 40 for the same period in 2004^{xvi}, which was a 500 per cent increase.^{xvii} This was before social media lowered the bar for participation and before the EDL were formed. (Many of the incidents reported to Tell MAMA have been social media abuse - something that barely existed in 2005). More broadly, the formation of the EDL over the five-year period from 2006/7 to 2010/11 coincided with a 26 per cent drop in the number of racially or religiously aggravated offences in England and Wales.^{xviii}

Considering the relationship from the other perspective, the recent conviction of five men on charges of plotting to attack those attending an EDL rally provides some *prima facie* evidence that EDL activities might be radicalising Islamists and inspiring violent action. However, this might equally demonstrate that the EDL provides an easier, softer target for violent Islamists to attack, rather than being the driving force behind the radicalisation to violence.

More broadly, reviewing the data in relation to radicalisation to violence among Islamist groups, our 2010 research found that radicalisation to violence was driven more by an emotional response than a rational one.^{xix} Effectively conceived propaganda that highlights atrocities against Muslims and innocents appears to be incredibly important. While EDL protests have featured certain stirring images, and may arouse anger and the desire for violence, they are not the same type of images used in Islamist propaganda. This has included graphic images of innocent Muslims – including women and children – disfigured or dead. The extent to which an EDL demonstration *in itself* would motivate an Islamist to violence remains unclear. But it could provide an easy target, and the possibility of a violent ‘football hooligan’ type clash that may appeal to some young men.

Therefore we can expect to see, following a terrorist attack, an increase in ‘revenge’ attacks for a short period. In the aftermath of an Islamist

act, police and counter-terrorism officials should step up monitoring of far right forums and groups (and vice-versa). However, this does not necessarily mean a general and sustained uptick of violent attacks in society. Moreover, research suggests that it will fall back to the same level as before an attack (which it did post-7/7) rather than sparking a self-sustaining cumulative process.

Important questions therefore remain regarding precisely how the activities of opposing groups play into an increased likelihood of retaliation and threat from violence more generally – and how long that phase of heightened risk will usually last.

Assumption 3: that the process affects both sides equally (the ‘they both need each other’ argument)

Cumulative radicalisation contains the assumption of a symbiotic relationship: that the structure, size and inclination to violence of each group depends on the existence and actions of the ‘other’. We call this the ‘they need each other’ argument.

Literature that refers to cumulative extremism in the UK tends to refer to the radicalisation of groups on the right as a response to sections of radical Islam.^{xx} Aside from the a small number of cases such as those cited above, there does not appear to be any coverage in the academic or policy literature on the radicalisation of Muslim groups in response to EDL activities with a small number of exceptions, which claims that EDL activity is making it easier to recruit members to radicalised Muslim factions.^{xxi}

Certainly, the available evidence about motivations for individuals recruited into organisations like the EDL suggests that Islamist extremism is one of several factors – although concerns about immigration and distrust of the existing political system may be equally important.^{xxii} However, research into the factors that predict levels of support for extreme Islamist groups also reveals a mixed and varied set of factors – with the size of the far-right not generally considered significant.

Our 2010 study, *The Edge of Violence*, based on substantial field work, compared violent and non-violent Islamists to highlight the specific

drivers to violence. We found that often the appeal of violence was not something that naturally followed radicalisation. There were many people who held radical ideas, but were not drawn to violence and condemned the violent actions of those who shared their beliefs.

Instead, the inclination towards violence was there all along for many, rather than being the culmination of a process of radicalisation – and members tended to be driven by a combination of anti-Westernism, religious fervor, and perceived oppression of Muslims around the world (including foreign policy). The existence of far-right parties and movements did not appear significant. Indeed, other researchers, such as John Horgan, have found many Jihadists are ‘accidental’ – networks, friends and chance meetings often all play important roles.^{xxiii} In other words, the existence and activities of far-right groups may, in some instances, be used as one of many post hoc justifications for violence, but do not appear to be the underlying drivers of violent behaviour. Our suspicion is that the existence and activities of Islamists in the UK are a more significant factor in driving support for the EDL than vice versa.

However, further research is needed, particularly in order to explore the ways in which different threat types might result in different manifestations of support. For example, across Europe there are significantly higher levels of support for far-right political parties than in the UK, even though the UK is perhaps the country most at risk from Islamist extremist attacks. There may be an important relationship between *street based* manifestations and the Islamist threat, although there are also some cases where this is not borne out (a far-right street based group in Italy, Casa Pound, which easily rivals the EDL in size, has focused far more on housing and immigration, although it is plausible they would focus on Islamism in the event of an increase of the Islamist threat in Italy.)

Assumption 4: Tackling radicalisation on one side, requires also tackling radicalisation on the other side (the ‘they are both as bad as each other’ argument)

Since the Woolwich attack, policy discussions have turned to the need to spend more effort addressing extremism and radicalisation. It is important that extremist groups are analysed according to the same

measures: policy should not be driven by one set of communities or religion. However, it does not follow that because Islamists and the EDL are both in some senses radical and may play off each other, that they are equally dangerous to society and therefore should receive equal treatment. Radical Islamists and the EDL are different, and this should be reflected in any measures taken.

The nature of the threat from extreme Islamists and groups like the EDL is very different. The threat from Islamist terrorism remains the most significant in the UK. There are at present around 1,000 suspects being monitored, while 74 convicted al-Qaeda Islamists are serving prison sentences for terrorism related charges, compared to 17 for right-wing terror related offenses.^{xxiv} Moreover, Islamists have been convicted for attempting to massacre thousands of innocent civilians, such as the case of the 2006 Mid-Atlantic plot. The EDL, by contrast, are a street based and online collective of individuals, which is chaotically organised. A Freedom of Information Request to the Home Office revealed that 188 EDL members had been arrested at large-scale EDL demonstrations between 2009 and 2011.^{xxv} On the whole, the risk posed by the EDL still remains low level - usually incidents such as public disorder and street violence - rather than large-scale terrorist activity. While there have been some convictions, these have tended to be of a less serious, though by no means an insignificant, nature.

There is, of course, a threat from more extreme far-right elements: as of 2011 there were 17 individuals serving a prison sentence for far-right related terrorist or violent activities, and the scale of the threat these groups represent – usually neo-Nazi movements and lone wolves like Anders Breivik – appears to be increasing according to European security services.^{xxvi} According to the former leader of the EDL, ‘Tommy Robinson’, the EDL does have some extreme far-right elements within it.

The UK Government’s Prevent agenda is specifically aimed at stopping terrorism, not criminal behaviour or public disorder. Therefore, in so far as Prevent work might focus on the far-right, it should focus on the latter groups. (In fact, it is already doing so: it has been reported that 33 per cent of all referrals to the Channel were not Muslims.^{xxvii})

CONCLUSION

Labels and terminology can have a significant impact on the way a phenomenon is understood and addressed. ‘Radicalisation’ has been one of the most contested words of the past 10 years among social scientists. Disputes and disagreements over terminology had significant implications for the Government’s ‘Prevent’ counter-terrorism strategy.

Similar care is needed with respect to this new concept. There may even be countervailing trends. Rather than leading to greater levels of support for each group, it could be that an extremist group’s actions only serve to isolate them further. For example, following the Woolwich attacks, there was broad social unease about the activities of both the EDL and the Islamists. The swift and conclusive denunciation of the Woolwich attack by Muslim leaders may have played an important role in illustrating to a very wide audience how isolated radical Islamists are.

We conclude that there is certainly a great need for further study in the area. Certainly aspects of the concept of cumulative radicalisation are valuable; in particular (following Busher & Macklin’s recent work on the subject) it is necessary to determine why cumulative radicalisation occurs under certain circumstances (and what those circumstances are.) Indeed, other aspects of the environment are likely to be significant in how groups respond to provocations, such as policing tactics, political opportunities, socio-political positions of members and more. How the departure of Tommy Robinson from the EDL will affect this process is not clear.

We therefore suggest that some resources are dedicated to understanding the phenomenon in more detail before drastic changes to existing counter-radicalisation policies are made.

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