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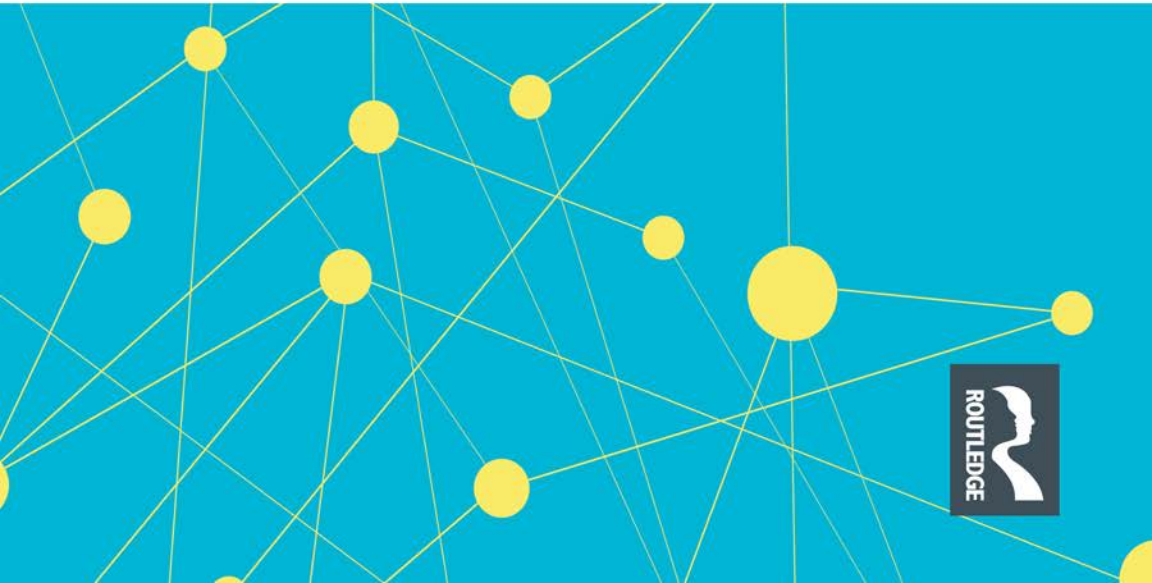
ANTI-ISLAMIC PROTEST IN THE UK

POLICY RESPONSES TO THE FAR RIGHT

William Allchorn



Anti-Islamic Protest in the UK

Demonstrations by far-right groups, such as the English Defence League, Britain First and PEGIDA, have caused considerable social and civic unrest in UK cities for nearly a decade. But how should policymakers respond to far-right and anti-Muslim activism? Drawing on extensive primary research with stakeholders, local authorities and policymakers, this book investigates the political, socio-economic and historic trends that fuel this form of political extremism across the UK. It also maps the different types of policy responses available to local politicians, police forces and behind-the-scenes policy officials involved in the day-to-day management of anti-Islamic street protest. The author demonstrates that it is only through developing successful countermeasures in the realm of politics, security and community-based politics that politicians, police and state actors will truly get to grips with this new far-right activism.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

BNP	British National Party
BUF	British Union of Fascists
CCCPG	Community Cohesion Contingency Planning Group
CONTEST	UK Government's Counter-Terrorism Strategy
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation
DCLG	Department of Communities and Local Government
EDL	English Defence League
ELM	East London Mosque
HMIC	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies
LDDC	London Docklands Development Cooperation
MP	Member of Parliament
MEP	Member of European Parliament
NF	National Front
REP	Republikaner Party
SFC	Structured Focused Comparison
Tell MAMA	Tell Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks
UAF	Unite Against Fascism
UPL	United People of Luton

Introduction

Why policy responses to the EDL and Britain First?

The role of Islam in the United Kingdom, and Western societies more generally, has become a hot topic over recent decades. Starting with the Salman Rushdie affair in the late 1980s through various measures imposed against jihadi terrorism and culminating in debates on its public expression, Islam and its adherents have been subject to significant antagonism in Western Europe and the United States (Saggar 2008). This antagonism is not at the margins of UK and European politics. One has only to look at the salience of Islam in the 2012 French presidential elections (Alexander 8th April 2012), recent debates about alleged introduction of so-called Islamism in UK schools (Wintour 18th July 2014) and the spectre of ISIS-inspired terror attacks across Europe in 2015, 2016 and 2017 in order to ascertain its mainstream importance.

The perceived 'risky' status of Islam and Muslim communities has been shown most actively amongst anti-Islamic[1] campaigners. Keen to shrug off reputations of anti-Semitism and classical forms of biological racism, one of the most prominent satellite issues that has come to form the focus of radical right-wing populist campaigns since the mid-2000s has been public expressions of Islam. As one key author on the European radical-right suggests, though 'Islamophobia is certainly not an exclusive feature of the populist radical-right,' such movements 'tend to stand out in both the "quality" and quantity' of their vehemence towards Islam, 'which they describe as an inherently fundamentalist and imperialist religion-cum-ideology' (Mudde 2007: 84).

In the UK context, the main harbinger of this more anti-Islamic form of politics has been the neo-fascist British National Party (BNP). Keen to modernise its ideology away from ethno-nationalism and towards a more populist (and therefore moderate) form of nationalism (Copsey 2007), it successfully fought local and European elections on a ticket of voluntary repatriation of 'non-indigenous' citizens (BNP 2005: 14) – winning over fifty Council seats, two places in the European Parliament and one Greater London Assembly seat in the process. Since the BNP's implosion in 2010, however, the organised UK far right has experienced a process of fragmentation and re-orientation back towards a more direct action form of politics. As one recent report has noted, Britain's far right is now more 'isolated and in retreat' than at any point over the past twenty years – 'becoming more extreme and violent' in the process (Hope not Hate 7th February 2016). This

has had the effect, not just of moving the far right onto the UK's streets, but also transitioning the UK far right into the more pernicious (and criminal space) of online and offline anti-Muslim protests and attacks – accounting for two-fifths of all incidents from 2013 to 2014 (Feldman and Littler July 2014: 3).

This book examines responses to two of the most significant anti-Islam movements in Europe at the time of this transition, the English Defence League (EDL) and Britain First. Starting with the former, the EDL's emergence came in response to the picketing of a UK army regiment's homecoming parade in the South Bedfordshire town of Luton by the Islamist extremist organisation Al-Muhajiroun (Harrison 14th March 2009). Calling itself a 'human rights organisation,' the EDL aims to 'protect the inalienable rights of all people to protest against radical Islam's encroachment into the lives of non-Muslims' (EDL Website 2013). At its emergence in June 2009, the group mixed a unique blend of ultra-patriotism and anti-Muslim populist politics, with a potent harnessing of social media to recruit supporters and publicise its activities. Its *modus operandi* – and the focus of this book – has, however, been its offline activities: organising over fifty sizeable and disruptive protests in towns and cities across the UK in order to demonstrate against what it sees as the 'creeping' effects of 'Islamisation' within UK public life (Goodwin et al. 2016: 5).

Turning the latter, and drawing its lineage more directly from the BNP, Britain First is a slightly different 'beast' when compared with the EDL. Initially launched in May 2011 via the website, 'British Resistance' (The British Resistance 13th November 2011), Britain First started as a formally constituted far-right political party that combined the expertise of former BNP fundraiser Jim Dowson and former BNP Councillor Paul Golding. As one report by anti-fascist collective, Hope not Hate, suggests: 'Britain First . . . managed to escape the ghetto of race hate pages on social media by pressing and heavily pushing a message of moral outrage and panic into mainstream issues' (Hope not Hate June 2014: 16). Indeed, by June 2014, it was estimated that nearly 2.3 million Facebook users had interacted with materials published by Britain First – demonstrating a far more savvy use of social media than the EDL ever did (ibid.: 17). More recently, however, Britain First has moved its (largely successful) online form of activism into the offline space – by carrying out demonstrations, 'Christian Patrols' and 'Mosque Invasions' in a number of areas with large Muslim populations across the UK. Drawing on an 'increasingly confrontational and direct action approach' (Allen 2014: 360), however, Britain First distinguishes itself here from its predecessor, the EDL – both in the level of aggression it displays and in the religious fervour that is unique to its particular form of far-right activism – with Christianity playing 'a much more significant role' (ibid.); both in terms of the group's ideology and in its street patrols and protests.

Such visceral and disorderly forms of anti-Islamic protest have not gone unnoticed. Since 2010, there has been a burgeoning body of academic literature that has almost exclusively examined the rise and fall of the English Defence League. This has been debated: whether the origins and drivers of the English Defence League can be seen as far right, football hooliganism or an exclusively

working-class phenomenon (Copsey 2010; Garland and Treadwell 2010; Jackson 2011; Alessio and Meredith 2014), and whether the EDL's support base actually coheres with these popular stereotypes (Bartlett and Littler 2011; Goodwin 2013; Goodwin et al. 2016; Treadwell and Garland 2011). Moreover, EDL scholarship has tried to uncover the dynamics and extent of the group's commitment to 'anti-Islamism,' with some ascribing a deeper, 'Islamophobic' cause to the group's politics (Allen 2011; Busher 2014; Jackson 2011; Kassimeris and Jackson 2015; Pilkington 2016; Treadwell 2014). Furthermore, there have also been attempts to apply social movement theory to explain the group's specific form of grassroots organisation and its (limited) trajectory – with the group going into decline a mere two years into its existence (Jackson 2011; Busher 2013, 2015; Pilkington 2016).

As one prominent expert on anti-Muslim protest noted in 2014, however, we still know precious little about these groups and their 'possible impacts' (Busher 2014: 208). For example, few researchers have explored the effect the EDL and Britain First have had on community tensions, public-order, racially or religiously motivated hate crime, or the mobilisation of radical Islamist groups (ibid.: 1–2). Moreover, few scholars have examined the origins, ideology and modus operandi of Britain First (See Allen 2014; Hope not Hate June 2014; Brindle and MacMillan 2017 for exceptions). Looking again at consequences, another prominent area overlooked are how mainstream politicians have responded to anti-Islamic activism between 2009 and 2018. Only one chapter of a policy report by far-right expert Dr Nigel Copsey (2010), and one paragraph by the UK's leading scholar on Islamophobia, Dr Chris Allen (2014), have sought to shed light on how the UK government and national politicians have engaged with this new form of anti-Islamic protest. There has, however, been no thorough-going analysis of how the UK Politicians – alongside other policy practitioners – have responded to the EDL and Britain First mobilisations where the groups have manifested themselves the most: at the local level.

This omission is peculiar for several reasons. First, there has been a plethora of interventions by local authorities and mainstream political elites towards the EDL and Britain First. Most local authorities – in liaison with the police – helped manage these protests under the 1986 Public Order Act, and have therefore had to devise preparations and come up with informal policy solutions to mitigate the impacts of public disorder, community tensions and anti-Muslim attacks when these groups come to town. Moreover, the actions of these new insurgent groups have also animated Members of Parliament and local Councillors to offer their own denouncements, diagnoses and policy solutions. In particular, both MPs and Councillors regularly comment on anti-Islamic demonstrations amongst their constituencies and try to enact countermeasures to curb these groups – embarking on (sometimes extensive) local news, Parliamentary and collaborative local campaigns to obstruct the EDL and Britain First from protesting within their own particular locales. Politicians have therefore been at the forefront of responses to anti-Islamic protest in the UK.

Second, these interventions speak to a wider and more pertinent philosophical question about how policymakers 'tolerate the intolerant.' In particular, such a

question has plagued the minds of liberal philosophers for centuries, with the likes of John Locke (1689), John Stuart Mill (1869), John Rawls (1971) and Michael Walzer (1997) all grappling with what Karl Popper once called the 'paradox of tolerance' – i.e. that 'unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance' (Popper 1945: 581). Whether (and why) local politicians have gone too far in censoring or restricting this form of far-right protest, therefore, is a weighty philosophical and moral question that can only be answered by looking at how particular local authorities and politicians have dealt with this new form of protest on a case-by-case basis.

Third, a burgeoning academic interest lies in examining both the nature and effectiveness of political responses to the contemporary far right in Europe. Though mainly focussed on party-political manifestations, some scholars at the *exclusivist* end of far-right responses suggest that a speedy and coherent 'no-platform' or 'cordon sanitaire' response by politicians helps collapse extreme right mobilisations (Art 2007), while some *inclusivists* suggest that mainstream elites should try to emulate far-right policies on multiculturalism and migration (Bale et al. 2010). Furthermore, some advocate less political and more sociologically informed responses – positing that, in order to reduce racial and religious prejudice, politicians should be tackling the problem of right-wing extremism at a mass level by, for example, promoting social interaction between ethnic minorities and other resident populations as well as stimulating greater engagement between politicians and voters (Goodwin 2011). Such typologies, however, have yet to be applied to anti-Islamic activism in the UK – omitting a systematic overview of strategies and tactics available to policymakers when dealing with these problematic groups.

More specifically, this delay also prevents the collation and distribution of lessons and best practice that could be used for other, related forms of anti-Islamic protest that have grown up in recent years; both as a result of the continuing splintering and fragmentation of the BNP and EDL in the UK but also as a result of the growth of broader 'counter-jihad' movement internationally. Whether it be PEGIDA in Germany, the Bloc against Islam in the Czech Republic or Identitarian movements in Austria and France, similar questions surrounding public-order, community cohesion and counter-extremism policy will be raising their heads there. The UK case therefore speaks to a broader environment of anti-Islamic street activism that we have seen grow up in the past five years, in Europe but also in North America and Australasia.

Aims of the book

In order to address this 'response' lacuna then, this book seeks to examine: how have UK policy practitioners responded to the English Defence League and Britain First over the past nine years? This main research question will be answered through over 60 semi-structured elite interviews conducted by the author with senior police officers, Members of Parliament, local Councillors and behind-the-scenes officials who have experienced sizeable and/or frequent anti-Islamic

protest, from 2009 to 2017. More specifically, we will focus on policy responses in Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester, Luton and Tower Hamlets – all places with storied histories of far-right mobilisations. These empirical case studies will form the backbone of the book and will for the first time provide some answers as to what underlying factors have helped stymie or stimulate successful interventions towards anti-Islamic protest. Moreover, they will also provide the basis for the first rigorous and sustained scholarly analysis of EDL and Britain First demonstrations – illuminating the drivers and determinants of the groups' main forms of anti-Islamic activism.

Moving on to more theoretical concerns, the ontological and epistemological positions that underpin this book are very specific. In terms of the former, the ontology of the research is linked to foundationalism. This is based on the belief that there is a world out there to be discovered, but that 'the real world effect on actions is mediated by ideas' (Furlong and Marsh 2010: 190). Moreover, in terms of the epistemological approach taken, a realist interpretation of events is used. In the case of political responses, for example, local politicians' understanding of anti-Islam protest groups, their political belief systems and understanding of their role are crucial in understanding how they respond to and manage the group. Moreover, and as shown in Figure 1.1, the local political and social context as well as politician's life experiences temper this more ideational field of understanding – determining the types of responses, how they are arrived at and what elites deem to be 'possible' when managing anti-Islamic protests.

What will be found in the course of this study, therefore, is that while the default response of local mainstream political elites has been to exclude both of these groups, there have also been more limited cases of inclusion – with policymakers sustainably engaging with both communities affected by and communities prone to support anti-Islamic activism. It will be argued that a renewed emphasis needs to be placed on this more local-level engagement and interaction in order to responsibly deal with and prevent the threat posed by the EDL and Britain First, as well as other far-right groups, in the years and decades to come. Only by tackling the populist and prejudicial drivers of such groups can we ameliorate their potentially divisive and corrosive impact on UK politics and society.

Outline of the book

Before detailing this book's findings and discussing their implications, we will spend the next chapter placing this current wave of anti-Islamic protest in international, historical and contemporary context. The purpose of Chapter 1 will therefore be to examine how the current epoch fits within the history of the UK far right, as well as a broader shift in the European far right towards anti-Islamic campaigns. Chapter 2 will then move on to detail the book's typology and what specific policy countermeasures can be brought against anti-Islamic groups. The main purpose of this chapter is to familiarise the reader with the burgeoning literature on responses to the far right in Europe more generally as well as responses to the EDL and Britain First more specifically. Following this discussion of typology,

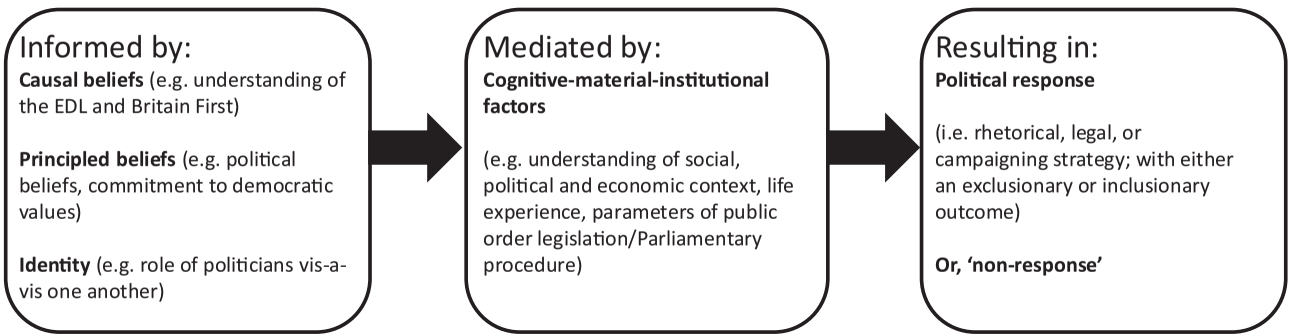

Figure 1.1 Causal model of politicians' responses

Source: Based on the typology used in Goldstein and Keohane (1993: 8–11).

we will move on to look at the book's main findings. The main part of this book looks at five UK locations where the EDL and Britain First have demonstrated the most and in sizeable numbers: Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester, Luton and Tower Hamlets. Each chapter deals with a separate case study and will, first, detail the background of each urban location before examining the strategies used by elites when anti-Islamic protest has come to town. What will be found in the main bodies of these chapters is that, while a tiny minority of local authorities have been arguably 'ready' to deal with these protests, the majority of local authorities have been on sizeable organisational learning processes in order to adapt, address and calibrate their responses to this new form of anti-Islamic protest. This has seen mixed results that have ranged from political schism to significant success in curbing this new far-right 'threat.'

Last but not least, the book will conclude by evaluating the nature and effectiveness of these responses. It will be argued here that a shift from exclusion towards more dynamic forms of inclusion are needed in order to address the EDL, Britain First and other UK anti-Islam groups that have become a lightning rod for white working-class disaffection over recent years. Moreover, and specifically in relation to the public-order aspects of managing anti-Islamic protests, it will be suggested that a more low-key, consensual style of policing and a less confrontational style of anti-fascist activism is needed in order to help ameliorate the potentially disorderly effects of such demonstrations. Before we come to this, however, we first need to establish how the EDL and Britain First fit into the UK's broader history of far-right activism, as well as the broader context of anti-Islamic protest. It is to this task that the first chapter will now turn.

Note

1 Here, 'anti-Islamic' is used to describe the English Defence League and Britain First's particular form of protest. This is a slightly altered version of Pilkington's (2016) 'anti-Islamist' characterisation of the EDL and aims at the groups' main area of grievance: not just radical Islam or 'Islamism,' but the beliefs, tenets and theology of Islam itself.

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1 Context

The rise of anti-Islamic protest and the evolution of the UK Far Right

Introduction

Post-Brexit, the UK far right suddenly launched itself back into media attention and newspaper headlines. Following the murder of Batley and Spen MP Jo Cox, there was a renewed crackdown on this particular form of extremism – starting with a court injunction against Britain First (York 15th August 2016) and culminating in the proscription of National Action in December 2016 (BBC News 12th December 2016). Related to this, there was also a spike in xenophobic attacks and hate crime – seeing a 41% increase in the immediate aftermath of Britain voting to leave the European Union (BBC News 15th February 2017). Many people would expect such an environment to be fortuitous for such a fringe political movement.

As we explore in this chapter of the book, however, the UK far right has been continuing to struggle to find relevance ever since the implosion of the neo-fascist British National Party at the 2010 General Election. In what follows we, first, sketch the emergence and development of the UK historic far right. Second, we bring this analysis up-to-date – outlining how the UK far right has morphed and changed more recently. What will be argued is that, since the BNP's implosion in 2010, the organised UK far right has experienced a process of fragmentation and re-orientation back towards a more direct action, 'vigilante-style' form of politics. This has seen the UK far- right shift into a more criminal and crowded marketplace of methods and ideas. First, however, we will sketch the all-important international context that has informed the rise of anti-Islamic protest in the UK – looking at the transnational movements that have helped to grow such activism over the past two decades.

The rise of anti-Islamic protest: 'counter-jihad' and transnational far-right activism

The origins of contemporary anti-Islamic activism on the far right started in the 1980s but gained substantial momentum after the 11th September 2001 terror attacks in the United States. Starting on the internet but then quickly transitioning itself into party-political election campaigns, the Twin Tower attacks gave momentum to Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis and the notion of a