Ethnicity and Politics in Contextualising Far Right and Islamist Extremism

by Tahir Abbas

Abstract

This article critically reviews contemporary understandings of the drivers, objectives, and the social and political distinctions of far right and Islamist extremism as reciprocal and correlative threats. While social structure and identity politics are important themes in the social science literature on the radicalisation of far right and Islamist extremist individuals and groups, there remain significant knowledge and policy gaps. Based on a discourse analysis of two related concepts, this article seeks to explain the nature of similarities and differences. As exclusivist and self-reinforcing narratives, the actions and perspectives of one group embolden the other. Policymakers need to understand far right and Islamist extremism as phenomena with shared local driving forces and impacts. This approach would also avoid duplication of effort, as well as misrecognition and insensitivity, in counterterrorism efforts. It also generates valuable political inroads into grounded notions of social cohesion.

Keywords: Far right, Islamist extremism, politics, radicalisation, identity, spatiality

Introduction

In late July 2016, an 18-year old German-born man fatally shot nine young people in a fast-food restaurant and a shopping mall in Munich. He was a child of Iranian parents who had sought refuge in Germany in the early 1990s. As news first came in, the immediate response was to suggest that this incident was an example of an Islamic State-inspired or -instigated act of terrorism. Indeed, after a spate of attacks in Brussels, France and Germany during 2016, the Sonboly attack appeared to be another instance of radical Islamism leading to violent extremism. There was, however, a twist to this story. Due to various personal, psychological and political motivations, the Munich shooter–now named Ali David Sonboly, although born Ali Sonboly–had subscribed to a 'pure racial identity'. It transcended his co-ethnic cultural, immigrant and minority background of friends and relations. 'Lone actor' Sonboly idolised Anders Behring Breivik, a convicted far right violent extremist terrorist, [1] and he carried out his tragic shootings on the fifth anniversary of the Breivik attacks in Oslo, Norway, on 22 July 2011, which killed 77 people. The stark reality was that Sonboly did not feel comfortable in his own skin: he murdered others because of insecurities regarding his individual ethnic and cultural identity. What was peculiar about the Sonboly episode were the twin issues of radicalisation and far right extremism in an individual who was born into a Shia Muslim household but subsequently rejected his past. It confirmed how identity formation and self-realisation journeys of a few young people exist within various instances of conflict. It leads some to radicalisation and ultimately violence. This event was a reminder that similar issues at the margins of society affect a variety of young people challenged by their local and global identities.

It is now increasingly apparent that an anti-Muslim outlook plays a part in radicalising far right extremists. [2] In Britain, the English Defence League (EDL) operates as an ethnic nationalist group with links to the British National Party (BNP) and football hooliganism.[3] It reflects the wider notion of 'reactive co-radicalisation'[4] or 'cumulative extremism'[5], which is a response on the parts of states, organisations, groups and individuals to the apparent threat of Muslims in the West. These sentiments have also become a defining feature of current forms of Islamophobia [6], much of which also demonstrates a correlation with rising populism and nationalism.[7] In recent years, the far right have also demonstrated a discernible shift from ethno-racial to cultural-ideological forms of extremism. Breivik's objections were against various

ideological strands: not merely ethnic and religious differences in society but also the ideologies and philosophies of multiculturalism and diversity underpinning them—the idea of *différence*. Breivik was also hostile to broadly conceived notions such as Marxism and liberalism.[8].

This article establishes two principles. First, in thinking through radicalisation, it is important to situate the debate within the wider economic, political and cultural contexts of post-industrial urban centres. Second, conceptualisation of these extremisms suggests how identities conflict due to the simultaneous moving terrains of localisation and globalisation. This article is an attempt to explore the theoretical and conceptual nature of the symbiosis that defines and characterises far right and Islamist extremism. It synthesises current knowledge on the similarities and differences between these two extremisms arising from disjuncture between social structure and identity, the knowledge gaps raised in existing research, and the ramifications for policy and practice in this area. The conclusions discuss the repercussions of these growing extremisms and the implications raised for further research in this area.

Structural and Cultural Context

Understanding radicalisation is all about appreciating context and perspective. In some respects, radicalisation refers to pathways. In others, it relates to outcomes. Furthermore, radicalisation does not always equate with terrorism. [9] This lack of clarity over what is radicalisation distorts the understandings of violent extremism,[10] in particular where there is confusion over clearly problematic social outcomes that are high priority security threats. No two countries define 'radicalisation' in the same way. For some, violence is the main concern. For others, an ideology that may or may not lead to violence is the primary focus. All definitions, nevertheless, recognise the notion as a highly individualised and largely unpredictable process. [11] For the purposes of this discussion, radicalisation refers to both the *processes* and *outcomes* of violent extremism.

That far right and Islamophobic attacks result in Islamist-inspired terrorism is now a given. It reflects a shift within broader right-wing extremism, with many groups and individuals – including Breivik – condemning Nazism, fascism and anti-Semitism but defining their cause as a defence against the perceived threat from Islam.[12] A significant proportion of 'lone actor' terrorists, however, are solely preoccupied with neo-Nazi symbolism and the idolisation of far right figureheads and their ideologies. However, there is relative underreporting and under-analysis of the threat from right-wing extremism in North America and in Europe.[13] Pavlo Lapshyn, a Ukrainian far right terrorist convicted for the murder of 82-year old Mohammed Saleem from Small Heath in Birmingham, confessed killing Saleem because he was a Muslim and because there would be no witnesses. Saleem had been walking home from his local mosque in the late hours of 29 April 2013. In June and July 2013, Lapshyn attempted to bomb three mosques in Walsall, Wolverhampton and Tipton during Friday afternoon prayers, the busiest time of the week. [14] His devices failed on all three occasions.

Western European societies and economies have transformed profoundly since the deregulation of the financial sector and the dominance of privatisation of public utilities and economic neoliberalism that began in the 1980s.[15] This has led to repercussions for youth identities, particularly in urban spheres.[16] The inner cities, oft-forgotten by urban planners and policymakers until the deleterious conditions facing disadvantaged 'underclass' groups cannot be neglected any further, are sites of diverse communities. Here, residential concentration emerges largely through a lack of choice, not through choice. [17] Post-war ethnic minorities cluster in specific urban areas to utilise social, economic and cultural capital for group survival. Simultaneously, the spatial concentration of deprived marginalised majorities is also an opportunity to protect group norms and values associated with the group identity, which, in the light of present politics, perceives a threat from the dominant (or subordinated) other. The general overriding discourse, however, is to present 'self-styled segregation' among ethnic minorities as a self-induced rejection of integration. This

discourse, though, is harmful for many minorities who are on the receiving end of frequent vilification, alienation and discrimination. [18]

Majority white communities also suffer from the predicaments that lead to extremism, radicalisation and violence, but media and political discourses concentrate less on such groups, markedly skewing the debate. [19] Deindustrialisation, post-industrialisation and globalisation affect Muslim minority groups in the inner cities of Western Europe, but these concerns also affect majority groups who can turn to far right political views for solace.[20] In general, there is limited discussion on the associations between extremist far right and radical Muslim groups. Developments to such thinking would help to explore the synergies between arguably two parallel and similar radicalisation and violent extremism outcomes. [21] Indeed, from 1970 to 2012, Islamist extremists only carried out 2.5 per cent of all attacks in the USA. This was compared to 4.9 per cent for Jewish groups. That is, over 90 per cent of all attacks were carried out by non-Muslims. [22]

The separation between white indigenous and Muslim minority groups is defined, arguably, through differences in identity formations at local and global levels. It reveals a distinct layer of conflict, locking both groups in intense struggle for the least in society. A crucial feature in the radicalisation of far right and Islamist extremists is, therefore, the search for an alternative, 'purer' identity [23]. Although both groups have made various political impacts, their electoral successes, however, haven been until recently negligible [24]. This was the case until the Brexit vote in the UK, which was, in part, motivated by negative discourses on immigration, refugees and questions of national political identity.[25]

Socio-Spatial Identities in Conflict

At the individual level, various social, psychological, economic and structural issues can problematise the formation of identities, introducing the need for self-actualisation, which is the realisation of individual potential. This applies to both Muslim minorities and the 'left behind' white working classes. In both cases, apprehensions arise over multiculturalism, dislocation and identity conflict. A lack of hope leads to psychological conundrums, leaving countless young men vulnerable, exposed and then pliable to external influences. With limited educational and employment opportunities due to entrenched patterns of discrimination and disadvantage, the uncertain futures facing various young men in inner city areas, minority and majority, create challenges with limited opportunities. [26]

Notably, these anxieties affect young men of all backgrounds. Part of the reason for the radicalisation of both European-born Muslims and far right youth is an aspect of their coming to terms with hegemonic masculinity in the context of intergenerational disconnect, combined with economic insecurity.[27] Such dominant male aspirational qualities include notions such as heterosexual, attractive and high-earning. Britain First, the English Defence League and what were organisations such as Al-Muhajiroun and Islam4UK consisted of young men with limited education, employment or social status. These men are outraged and simultaneously embittered by the spiritual or material challenges of their existence. Many of the recruits to Islamic State heralding from the inner cities of Western Europe display similar anxieties and aspirations.

Disconnect is also highly relevant in the context of minority communities with particular cultural characteristics. Research has shown that the existence of patriarchy among Pakistani and Turkish fathers acts as a form of dominance over the family. [28] This includes power over sons who reproduce patterns of dominant hegemonic masculinity within the home, which may lead to greater separation between fathers and sons. These behaviours derive from an Islamic as well as cultural reading of the role of the male head of household. In wider society, however, these same fathers experience racialisation and subjugation in the work place, while suffering wider labour market penalisation of the group as a whole. Therefore, it appears there are internal issues within homes reinforced by patriarchal practices, but this is in the context of a situation where Muslim minorities face ethnic and religious penalties in the labour market, further affecting income

levels [29], status and a sense of persecution felt by Muslim men. In these situations, these Muslim minority masculinities are multiple and situational.

The local, regional and transnational interconnects the space in which these masculinities are constructed and deconstructed. [30] For example, British South Asian Muslims have endured interchangeable characterisation as either effeminate or hyper-masculine. In the early phases of post-war migration and settlement, due to their apparent 'nimble' nature, these men were ascribed feminine characteristics. At the same time, they were regarded a threat because of their 'dark and handsome' allure. [31] The latter ensured that employers, often through the assistance of unions, did not permit minority men to share workspaces with white English women. In the post-9/11 climate, however, British Muslim men are seen as a threat to society projected through the classical orientalist lens of violent hypermasculinity. [32]

To address the problems of Islamist extremism, Western governments have identified 'Muslim communities' as the most 'vulnerable' to radicalisation compared with other groups. Muslim groups are therefore seen as the main target group to benefit from engagement with CVE policy, where the policy of 'Prevent' is the equivalent of CVE in the UK.[33] Far right groups are notably absent from the discourse on 'Prevent', although referrals from far right groups grow year upon year. It focuses on disengagement from radicalisation and reintegration at a community level, while building resilience, engagement and participation in society, underscored by maintaining community cohesion through 'shared values'. There has been fierce resistance to the 'Prevent' policy among community actors arguing that the policy is intrusive. It is viewed by some as an attempt to delegitimise criticism of politics and policy while maintaining the status quo concerning foreign policy, and ignores the complete absence of domestic policies to help integrate ethnic minorities.

The phenomenon of 'convert radicalisation' among white groups is associated with a lack of suitable grounding in community values or the adoption of Islam as a method of rebellion. [34] Inter-generational disconnect and the importance of the socio-economic and socio-cultural context are also important considerations in the experiences of 'white' as well as Muslim minorities. A broad sense of alienation transpires among a wide range of communities due to the political, religious and cultural transformations of the social milieu that has occurred in light of wider developments to thinking and practice on localisation and globalisation.

In the midst of material challenges facing young men (and women) in Western European and North American societies, particular concerns arise over hypermasculinity and hypersexuality (an over-concentration on sexual activity).[35] This apprehension refers to unrealistic expectations placed upon young people. It creates fear, anger and anguish, rather than a smooth transition from youth to adulthood. Here, 'jihadis' and far right young men experience equivalent challenges, where differences in religion and culture regarding 'the other' are problematised and subsequently politicised. In quite considerable ways, hypermasculinity diminishes the confidence of young people in Britain. The consequences are that young people become encouraged to prove themselves- to seek recognition, to become somebody–by using all mean necessary.

Disconnected Tribalisms

A crisis of masculinity (and femininity) is at the centre of many of the predicaments facing marginalised communities. It is created by a lack of social mobility, persistent unemployment, growing anomie and political disenfranchisement, fuelling a national identity crisis. The effects are anger, fear, loathing, intimidation and violence. In reality, when trying to understand radicalisation among young Islamists and far right extremists, one needs to look at the role of the individual, social structure and the question of anomie. Islamist radicals are anti-globalisation, while far right extremists are anti-localisation but both are pro-totalitarian. These groups wish to instil a sense of purist identity politics and both have a utopian vision

of society. Furthermore, both have a narrowly defined vision of the self, which is exclusive of the other, where identities are *domaine de l'imaginaire*. In the case of far right groups, much of their motivation stems from a counter-jihadist discourse. Here, radical Islamists also experience status inconsistency. Both groups are the structural and cultural outsiders of society *and* directly opposed to each other.

As new tribalisms emerge, radicalised groups situate a core narrative at the heart of their newfound tribalisitic radicalisation.[36] Membership of this new tribe is both ascriptive and aspirational, shaped by how the young are using the internet as an instrument in their radicalisation.[37] All of these young people variously enter into the theatre of radicalisation and violence due to emotional, psychological, ideological and sociological factors. Measures targeting such acts of crime must recognise the multi-layered nature of the processes involved in radicalisation, and hence introduce more joined-up policy thinking at a much earlier stage of the process. It is thus vital to understand the intersecting paths towards radicalisation affecting Islamists *and* far-right extremists in order to achieve the necessary impact on research, policy and practice. The need to appreciate the dynamics of radicalisation as embedded in social processes at the structural level, where concerns over identity, belonging and self-realisation, remains fundamental.

The recent murder of MP Jo Cox in June 2016 brought to the surface major concerns regarding far-right extremism in Britain today. Media and political discourses tend to focus on Islamic political extremism, with little attention given to far-right violence. These acts are no aberration either. Rather, various reporting necessarily suggests that far right extremism has become a considerable worry, and in recent periods there are more examples of violence and terrorism at the behest of these groups than that of Muslims in Western Europe. Why is it that we hear so little about it? In addition, why do principal actors regard it differently from that of Islamic political radicalism?

First, when far-right extremism does occur, it is invariably underreported or misreported. Furthermore, when a discussion does ensue, the dominant argument is that it is some kind of violence carried out by loners or the mentally ill. When it comes to young Muslims involved in acts of serious violence, there are unconscious associations made with Jihadism, Islamic radicalism or even the Islamic State. Indeed, there is a particular reporting bias of such crimes inherent in the media, and it has a long history.[38] There is also a sense that Islamic extremism is a given, while far right radicalisation is an emerging phenomenon. Thus, in the recent case of the murder of Jo Cox, while evidence was emerging relatively quickly that the assailant had direct associations with sinister far right groups, as well as a chequered history with far right activism, most media and political elites were slow to take the story up to its fullest. It confirms the bias against far right extremism while maintaining an overt focus on Islamist radicalisation.

Second, in many ways, two sets of 'left behind' groups are in direct competition with each other, one racialised and alienated and the other marginalised and alienated, but both emerging in the context of neoliberalism and economic restructuring in post-industrial urban settings. As social divisions widen, these groups remain angry, voiceless and underrepresented. For far right groups, they vehemently hold onto a sense of identity presented to them as potentially at risk due to the emergence of other groups in society seemingly taking away or diluting the purity of this identity. Such representations are ideological, selective and political. Indeed, the idea that to be a Briton is to be one in a nation of immigrants was strongly held until the event of 9/11. After which multiculturalism was seen in wholly negative terms. Due to the conservative politics of anti-Europeanism and ethnic nationalism, however, being English remains closely associated with Anglo-Saxon blood. Race is the signifier here, but an imagined race, as is perennially the case when it comes to ethnic nationalism. [39]

An Historical Accident

Muslims who came to Britain at the end of the Second World War found themselves subordinated and subjugated by the workings of industrial capitalism. After its collapse and replacement by neoliberal globalisation, many of these Muslim communities were confined in the inner city areas to which they first migrated. In the 1950s and 1960s, in locations such as Birmingham, parts of the North and areas in Greater London, diverse groups lived cheek by jowl with indigenous Britons *and* in relatively peaceful harmony. As the pace of deindustrialisation accelerated, the extent of 'white flight' enhanced due to fears of residential concentration at the hands of specific ethnic minority groups accused of fragmenting communities. The response was political then and it is political now. In various parts of these same inner city areas today, while those groups who desired to leave have left, minority and majority, what remains are the poorest and most excluded of white Britons. In these areas, the third and fourth generation offspring of Muslim minority groups are trapped due to racism, social immobility as well as cultural separateness. It leads to excluded groups in society who are in intense competition for the least in society, where Islam has replaced race and ethnicity as the main categories of difference.

How states react in response to these challenges can enflame localised conflicts if the thinking behind actions is premature. As elites become ever more powerful and wealthier relative to the rest of society, they hold onto a notion of an exclusive and inward looking Englishness. In an ironic twist, the working classes have always remained loyal to the workings of classed English society, in particular, the monarchy. In an effort to sustain their existence, working class groups enhance their identity formations through an allusion to a pure Englishness, subsequently rejected by elite groups who have little interest in English groups at the lower rungs of society, regarding them as a blot or a burden. Right-wing politicians in the mainstream, however, continuously focus on immigration as a way in which to protect English society from 'alien others' whose alleged objectives are only to dilute and dissect. Vehemently re-expressed by groups at the bottom of society, who consequently project their anxiety outwardly, such sentiments lead to alarm and, to an extent, hate towards their nearest neighbours; namely Muslim minority groups in inner-city areas.

Since the end of the Cold War, global politics has shifted attention onto the Muslim world, while in Western European societies Muslim minorities are increasingly seen in religious terms rather than ethnic or cultural ones. It gives Muslims greater exposure, which is negative and in some cases hostile and violent. Political elites instrumentalise local area tensions for political gain, nationally and internationally. As some young men expressing forms of hyper-masculinity, combined with self-realisation, engage in acts of violence and extremism, there are automatic associations made with a global phenomenon, further legitimising invasive foreign policy and regressive domestic policy on integration. With the securitisation of multiculturalism now the norm, where Muslim cultural and religious differences are seen as problematic in relation to matters of security, Muslim minorities are even more under the spotlight, receiving even greater attention from vast swathes of society that generalise Islam and Muslim. It leads to the accusation that Islamophobia has passed the 'dinner table test' to the extent that it has become hyper-normalised.[40] As the levels of frustration among certain young Muslim men lead to the point of no return, they vent their anger at the global level, rendering their local area realities invisible. Many Muslim men do not fight for their local communities, but for an imagined global project, leading to a further vacuum at the local level, filled by the machinations of right-wing politics, fermented locally but curated nationally.

Therefore, the question of the associations between two sets of similar experiences points to local area considerations. The failures of government to introduce policies that bring about equality and fairness to limit the deleterious consequences of neoliberalism are evident. This disappointment is also about the loss of the imagination of the nation in a global climate of inequality and competition, where national elites hold onto an imagined notion of the nation as well its peoples. No more are concerns about social justice and equality presented as major planks in policy thinking, but rather vacuous notions such as 'values', which has no direct purpose in bringing communities together–as, in reality, they are exclusive rather than inclusive.

Groups already facing downward pressures on social mobility are pushed down by the machinations of elite groups, leading to intense levels of competition and conflict in certain local area communities. Some of this reaches fever pitch violence and what is ultimately terrorism. Thus, both sets of violent extremism are the result of the biopolitics of the state, but among groups in opposition to each other due to narrow definitions of identity. Far right groups project their angst nationally, while jihadists project it globally. These realities emerge in various spatial formations, reflecting the search of self-actualisation due to their 'left behind' status with few or no alternative routes to empowerment or status.

Concluding Thoughts

This article has shown that issues of social structure and identity politics are important to take into consideration when attempting to understand the nature of radicalisation and extremism among those who engage in far right extremism as well those drawn to Islamist extremism. Further research is required to understand the intersections of these variables in specific situations. It is also important to examine how understanding these concepts can determine how best they can feed into policy development. Moreover, the approach needs to engage with extremism as a wider societal issue, not simply as a task for particular communities. It ultimately places accountability on government and authorities to take greater responsibility for the problems *and* the solutions to violent extremism. In the current political climate, violent radical Islamism is seen as a function of Muslim communities, in which lie all the problems *and* all the solutions.

Implications for further research include ensuring that far right and Islamist extremists are regarded as similarly problematic with distinctively related issues as the path towards radicalisation is often local and urban in nature and outcome. There is also a need to recognise that these kinds of extremism are two sides of the same coin, where limiting one will invariably reduce the other. Both extremisms feed off each other's rhetoric. It is compounded by elite discourse that seeks to maintain a divide and rule approach to dealing with differences in society. It is combined with the issue of the diminished status of white working class communities in general terms. Greater understanding of the linkages, interactions and symbiosis between these two oppositional but related forms of extremism is crucial for going forward. This is especially the case in the current climate, where a post-truth, post-normal world has gained ascendancy, while experts are derided and the status quo prevails.

About the Author: **Tahir Abbas** *is a Senior Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and Visiting Senior Fellow at the London School of Economics in London. He has previously held positions at Fatih University in Istanbul, Birmingham University, and the Ministry of Justice in London. His recent books include Critical Muslim 16: Turkey (with Z Sardar, Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2015), Contemporary Turkey in Conflict (Edinburgh and Oxford University Press, 2016) and Muslim Diasporas in the West (Routledge, 2017).*

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