Far-right Islamophobia
From ideology to ‘mainstreamed’ hate crimes

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Introduction

The far right’s attempts to promote anti-Muslim hatred in the UK have not been successful on its own. Instead, it has corresponded with a normalisation of anti-Muslim bigotry in more mainstream circles. While the organised far right in Britain is, electorally at least, at its lowest ebb since perhaps the 1980s, cognate ideas appear to have become more acceptable within British political culture and society, particularly over the question of Islam. In showing this, the present chapter first reflects upon the far right’s articulations of Islam, demonstrating that it has become part of wider political discourse. It will then turn to the question of Islamophobic hate crime – the manifestation of anti-Muslim ideas translated into attacks against individuals. While not necessarily drawing a causal link between the growing ‘acceptability’ of Islamophobia and hate crimes, it does seek to place the ideas which motivate attacks on Muslims and indeed other ethnic and social minorities into a broader context. As the chapter will conclude, it is impossible to remove the reality of hate crime, which is overwhelmingly targeted towards ethnic minorities, from the political and social climate in which it exists. Tackling the surge in hate crime – which spiked 18% in 2015, 19% in 2016, and fully 29% in 2017 (Home Office 2017) – requires positive action in order to prevent its further rise.

Far-right Islamophobia and its mainstreaming

Anti-Muslim prejudice has been subject to a number of different definitions, and this article does not seek to contribute to the debate over what and what does not constitute Islamophobia. The Runnymede Trust, in their hugely influential 1997 report Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All, defined Islamophobia at its most basic as ‘unfounded hostility towards Islam’. It also highlighted certain ‘closed’ views of Muslims which tend to constitute Islamophobia, including: Islam seen as a single monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to new realities; Islam seen as separate and other – (a) not having any aims or values in common with other cultures (b) not affected by them (c) not influencing them; Islam seen as inferior to the West – barbaric, irrational, primitive, sexist; Islam seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism,
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engaged in ‘a clash of civilisations’; Islam seen as a political ideology, used for political or military advantage’. Despite the report being written fully two decades ago, these criteria remain key features of Islamophobic discourse (Runnymede Trust 1997).

Not unrelatedly, the scapegoating and demonisation of outsiders is integral to far-right politics. In the most extreme cases, this has historically manifested itself as violent anti-Jewish conspiracy theories. After the Second World War, as migration from the Commonwealth arrived on British shores, blacks and Asians were subjected to similar treatment on the grounds of their colour and race. Yet at the turn of the 21st century, particularly following 9/11, Muslims and the religion of Islam have become the dominant out-group targeted by the far right in Britain and beyond. More troubling, far-right rhetoric has fed off a more subtle ‘liberal’ Islamophobia (Mondon and Winter 2017).

The Islamist-inspired terrorist attacks conducted by al-Qaeda in the United States on 11 September 2001, which led to the murder of just under 3,000 people, led to a significant backlash for Britain’s Muslim population. A report commissioned by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia published less than a year after the attacks demonstrated that 9/11 had led to an increase in attacks on Muslims. While the press reported on these attacks, ‘a disproportionate amount of coverage was devoted to extremist Muslim groups and British Muslims who declared their willingness to join an Islamic war against the West’ (Allen and Nielsen 2002, p. 29). Furthermore, although many leading politicians called for calm, others were not so sensitive to events. Former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said she ‘had not heard enough condemnation [of the 9/11 attacks] from the Muslim priests [sic; referring to Imams]’ (BBC News 2001). Such sentiments, namely that British Muslims either being extremists or not doing enough to distance themselves from extremists, have become common refrains in Islamophobic discourse.

The far-right British National Party sought to capitalise on anger towards the British Muslim community almost immediately and were the first party in Britain to ‘weaponise’ Islamophobia in after 2001, making attacks on Islam a key focus of their campaign literature. It offered a convenient opportunity for the party, who were seeking to ‘rebrand’ their earlier stances on race and immigration, which held that a Jewish conspiracy was controlling global politics. The newly-installed leader, Nick Griffin, believed the ‘clash of civilisations’ between Islam and the West was now the narrative which the party should focus on: ‘This is the threat that can bring us to power. This is the Big Issue on which we must concentrate in order to wake people up and make them look at what we have to offer all round’ (Griffin, quoted in Copsey 2007, p. 77). The party’s 2005 manifesto spoke of the threats Islam posed ‘to our democracy, traditions and freedoms’, and pledged to crack down on the ‘creeping Islamification and dhimmitude of Britain’ (British National Party 2005).

The BNP’s focus on Islam appeared to bring the party some success, fuelled by wider events such as racial tension and localised violence between Asian and white communities of Bradford and Oldham in 2001 and, in particular, the 7 July 2005 terror attacks in London. The BNP picked up dozens of council seats, a seat on the London Assembly and 2 European Parliament seats. However, they declined sharply after this final triumph in 2009 and drifted into irrelevance shortly thereafter. The English Defence League took their place as the dominant Islamophobic political outlet on the far right, but differed in several respects. The EDL was not a political party, but a street-based social movement, whose provocative marches drew crowds of 1,000s. It also sought to distance itself from far-right politics, by claiming to be pro-Jewish and anti-racist – merely attacking extremism rather than a race. As Nigel Copsey argued shortly after their founding:
[While the EDL] projects itself as a defender of democratic freedoms from ‘Islamic fascism’ – it is hard to escape the racism that permeates the ranks. This racism is not so much ‘old-school’ racism based on skin colour, but rather ‘selective racism’ – a cultural racism directed at all (and not just militant) Muslims (‘Pakis’).

(Copsey 2011, p. 5)

EDL activists also referred to influential public figures and commentators who influenced them. Some were on the far right, such as Dutch politician Geert Wilders. However, others were less clearly affiliated, such as newspaper columnist Melanie Phillips; the commentator and Associate Director of right-wing think tank The Henry Jackson Society, Douglas Murray; or the former Telegraph journalist Andrew Gilligan (Busher 2013, p. 70). It is clear that while the far right have sought to rebrand themselves as non-racist they have found a climate where it is increasingly possible to claim that no transgression from the mainstream has occurred.

The example of Melanie Phillips is revealing. She is a regular commentator in the national press, for the right-wing tabloid The Daily Mail and centre-right broadsheet The Times. Phillips regularly writes polemics criticising Islam, immigration and multiculturalism. The central thesis of her 2007 book, Londonistan: How Britain is Creating a Terror State from Within, argues that Britain’s Muslim community poses a threat to the country’s security (Phillips 2007). Following the 2015 refugee crisis, she argued against allowing refugees into the country, arguing that it would ‘alter the cultural balance of the country forever’. Using the language of the far right’s ‘clash of civilisation’ thesis, Phillips argued:

The Arab and Muslim world is disintegrating into chaos, war and terror. The ascendancy of radical Islam is producing untold barbarism. The West-imposed model of the nation state is collapsing into tribal warfare. A dying culture has turned murderously upon itself whilst trying to simultaneously conquer the wider world.

(Phillips 2015)

It is difficult to imagine such rhetoric regarding other ethnic or religious groups in Britain – such as Jewish or black people – passing unopposed. As this instance exemplifies, the media have played a large role in the normalisation of Islamophobic sentiment. A report by the University of Exeter’s European Muslim Research Centre demonstrated a direct link between portrayals of Muslims in the media and hate crime. It showed that ‘assailants of Muslims are invariably motivated by a negative view of Muslims they have acquired from either mainstream or extremist nationalist reports or commentaries in the media’ (Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010, p. 11). More recently, Leicester University’s Centre for Hate Studies has argued that hate crimes have been ‘fuelled and legitimised by politicians and the media’ (University of Leicester 2016). It is this context which has seen more moderate political parties and individuals criticise Islam, such as the UK Independence Party.

The UK Independence Party (UKIP), initially founded as a single-issue party in the early 1990s to oppose Britain’s membership of the European Union, transformed into a right-wing populist party under the leadership of Nigel Farage. Farage always rejected the claim that UKIP were far right. Yet he often could be found making Islamophobic comments, such as in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack in 2015, where he referred to Muslims across Europe as a ‘fifth column’. UKIP’s hard-line stances on immigration and multiculturalism often spoke to Islamophobic tropes, while the party gave voice to individuals who singled out Islam for criticism. Gerard Batten, a long-serving MEP, has described Islam as a ‘death cult’. Farage’s replacement as leader, Paul Nuttall, campaigned in the 2017 General Election for a ban on the burkah and ‘sharia courts’ on the grounds of ‘integration’ (Elgot 2017).
The party instrumentalised the Rotherham grooming scandal to criticise the Muslim community, with the party’s Yorkshire MEP Jane Collins claiming that political correctness enabled Muslim grooming gangs, leading to young white girls being ‘gang-raped, beaten and threatened at gunpoint’ by Muslim men. During the party’s 2017 leadership campaign, Ann Marie Waters, the founder of the Islamophobic organisation ‘Sharia Watch’, described Islam as a ‘cancer’. Waters was the bookies’ favourite to win the leadership on an anti-Muslim ticket shortly before the leadership vote, but finished a distant second behind Henry Bolton.

This first section has sought to demonstrate the various ways in which Islamophobia manifests itself on the far right, and how anti-Muslim ideas have seeped into the mainstream. We will now move away from elite discourse in politics and the media towards the impact of Islamophobic ideas ‘on the ground’ – hate crime. It will initially reflect on some of the challenges facing the reporting of hate crime, before analysing what is known about anti-Muslim hate crime based upon quantitative data collected from the Tell MAMA hate crime reporting service.

**Hate crime**

Obviously, anti-Muslim hate crime is not the only form of hate crime. Since 2014, reports analysing Tell MAMA data by Feldman and Littler have advocated the disaggregation of recorded hate crime, which now takes place in England and Wales, and is separated into race, religion, sexuality, disability and transgender hate crimes. Some individual police forces, such as Greater Manchester Police have also started including ‘alternative lifestyles’ such as goths or punks, while there is a burgeoning debate over whether to include misogyny as another strand of recorded hate crime. Separately analysing these different types of incidents, as well as online and offline attacks, can help paint a more detailed picture of either geographical ‘hotspots’ offline and ‘trigger events’ online.

The former, ‘hotspots’, refers to recorded locations in the UK where a specific strand of hate crime victim, a disabled or LGBTI person, for example, might be at risk of higher incidents of hate crime – although just why this is still remains unclear. Take ethnically-based hate crimes, which accounted for 78% of all recorded incidents in the 2016/2017 survey for England and Wales, released in October 2017 (Home Office 2017). Is a person more likely to be the victim of one of these 62,685 recorded racial hate crimes in locations with, say, higher or lower percentages of BAME persons? Or again, is an attack more or less likely in places with newer ethnic communities, or instead, in places that are more or less affluent, or even politically more left- or more right-wing? This area of research is in its infancy, and owes much to the employment of ‘big data’ approaches to quantify areas of greatest concern. Accordingly, these are basic questions that are only now starting to be addressed with disaggregated hate crimes data – a pressing task that should be, likewise, energetically taken up by all 44 forces in England, Scotland and Wales.

In terms of ‘trigger’ events, which will be addressed further in this chapter, Britain’s decision to leave the European Union in June 2016 repeatedly has been highlighted as a factor in the well over a year since the vote. The 2015/2016 hate crimes survey for England and Wales contained an annex that showed a 41% increase in hate crimes in July 2016 – one month after the vote to leave the EU. This is supported by other surveys, reports and much anecdotal evidence, meaning that, for some perpetrators at least, the Brexit vote acted as a kind of ‘licence’ to attack innocent people on the basis of their perceived ethnicity, religion, disability or sexuality (for instance, there was a 196% increase in LGBT attacks).

That this problem was exacerbated by the Brexit result is highlighted in a scathing report by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which identified incidents of
‘racist media coverage’ that entailed a ‘negative portrayal of ethnic or ethno-religious minority communities, immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees by the media in the State party, particularly in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, as well as the rise of racist hate speech on the Internet.’ (UNCERD 2016, p. 4) In their summary findings, the August 2016 report for the UK and Northern Ireland included in their ‘Concerns and Recommendations’:

The Committee is seriously concerned at the sharp increase in the number of racist hate crimes especially in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the weeks prior to and following the referendum on the membership of the European Union held on 23 June 2016. In particular, the Committee is deeply concerned that the referendum campaign was marked by divisive, anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric, and that many politicians and prominent political figures not only failed to condemn it, but also created and entrenched prejudices, thereby emboldening individuals to carry out acts of intimidation and hate towards ethnic or ethno-religious minority communities and people who are visibly different. The Committee remains concerned that despite the recent increase in the reporting of hate crimes, the problem of underreporting persists, and the gap between reported cases and successful prosecution remains significant. As a result, a large number of racist hate crimes seem to go unpunished. It also remains concerned at the negative portrayal of ethnic or ethno-religious minority communities, immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees by the media in the State party, particularly in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, as well as the rise of racist hate speech on the Internet.

(UNCERD 2016, p. 4)

Britain undoubtedly has a growing problem with hate crime. The most recent national data (excluding Scotland) shows a 29% increase from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017 when compared to the year before – which itself saw a 19% increase from the previous year. 2016/17 was in fact the biggest rise since the series began in 2011/2012. According to the Home Office, ‘the increase over the last year is thought to reflect both a genuine rise in hate crime around the time of the EU referendum and also due to ongoing improvements in crime recording by the police’ (Home Office 2017); meaning that increased knowledge about, and willingness to report, hate attacks – clearly a positive – can actually be driving the ostensibly ‘negative’ of increased incidents. That may well be true, even if under-reporting of hate crime remains a major hurdle for both police forces and third sector organisations like Tell MAMA or its organisational model, the Community Security Trust (the CST; which monitors anti-Jewish hate crimes). For over three decades, the latter group has shown that building up community trust, raising awareness among vulnerable communities, and forming strong links with enforcement and government agencies is the best way of establishing a picture of how, and where, and even when, hate crime can effect specific communities (it is also worth noting that third sector agencies have higher trust than policing bodies: in January 2014 the UK Standards Agency withdrew the ‘gold standard’ status from ‘police crime figures’ due to allegations of ‘fiddling’ (Travis 2014). They have also shown that the more detailed the reporting, the better: details of street-based attacks include not only the words or actions used, but specific location and time of day of the attack; the gender of victim and perpetrator; whether the victim ‘looked Jewish’ (Community Security Trust 2016, p. 7); and whether the perpetrator was perceived to be acting spontaneously. (The same goes with online attacks, with the perpetrator’s gender often substituted for social media platform, avatar and screenshot of text and/or images.)

Three final points on the general nature of reporting are worth bearing in mind before we turn to the next section on anti-Muslim attacks. First, as suggested above, like other forms of
crime, hate crime can also be *opportunistic*. That is to say, circumstance or context can play a key role; in fact, premeditated hate crimes seem to be in the minority. Second, the word used twice above, *perception*, is vital in the matter of hate crimes. This extends to the definition of hate incident itself, here from the Hate Crimes Operational Guidance on Policing: ‘any non-crime incident which is perceived by the victim, or any other person, to be motivated (wholly or partially) by a hostility or prejudice’ (College of Policing 2014, p. 3). How a victim perceives an attack is therefore crucial. This is especially the case in terms of what is called ‘intersectionality’ – where a victim might be, say, black and Muslim, or Jewish and disabled, etc. In the words of a September 2016 Scottish government ‘Report of the Independent Advisory Group on Hate Crime, Prejudice and Community Cohesion’:

> Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categories. The intersectionality of hate crime was considered to be a crucial factor by most of the stakeholders who took part in this research, and was also emphasised in the literature and research studies consulted. It is important to think about how experiences of victimisation based on multiple protected characteristics might be better captured both in quantitative and qualitative research – for example by considering the statistics at an individual level – and addressed more effectively in responses to hate crime. This is recommended as a subject area for future research.  
> (Scottish Government 2016, p. 27)

One final point to bear in mind, which is surely the most important: the matter of aiding victims. Being attacked for your identity can take many forms – online or offline, physical or verbal – but there are some important consistencies. Being the victim of a hate crime is painful; it typically makes victims feel vulnerable and anxious, and by its very nature undercuts levels of community cohesion. Listening to and caring for victims, lowering barriers to reporting, and taking these attacks seriously are what we all owe, and what we are all owed, in this country.

**Islamophobic hate crime**

We will now turn to what are called, often mistakenly ‘Islamophobic’ incidents. Mistaken, because these are *attacks* on people for their identity rather than simply merely ‘incidents’; but also because it is unlikely that ‘phobia’, or fear of Muslims, is really the central issue. In a 2016 book entitled *Fear of Muslims?*, for instance, the editors Douglas Pratt and Rachel Woodlock suggest that we are perhaps, rather, dealing with ‘Islamoprejudice’. In a post 9/11 era – and in the UK, 7/7 –anti-Muslim prejudice has become so ‘normalised’ that ‘hyper-critical statements that would otherwise be recognised as prejudice if expressed about other historically vilified groups such as Jews and Blacks’ (Pratt and Woodlock 2016, p. 7). A similar point was raised during the case of Channel Four News presenter Fatima Manji, who was attacked by *The Sun* columnist Kelvin Mackenzie for wearing a hijab while reporting on the July 2016 terror attack in Nice (Mackenzie has since had his contract with *The Sun* terminated after comparing mixed-race footballer Ross Barkley to a ‘gorilla at the zoo’). A complaint made to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) about Mackenzie’s comments by Manji and ITN news was rejected.

In the appeal, Manji, said she and her family had to take safety precautions after she was ‘singled out personally by Kelvin MacKenzie because of my religion’. The letter, seen by *The Guardian*, says: ‘This was akin to hate speech and incitement against an individual. Freedom of expression does not stretch to allow such speech if the newspaper personally
targets the individual.’ She concludes: ‘Many will question when would IPSO ever find a breach of the clause prohibiting prejudicial references to an individual’s religion’ (Weaver 2016). In an earlier and more well-known sentiment expressed in January 2011 Baroness Sayeeda Warsi argued that anti-Muslim prejudice had ‘passed the dinner table test’ of acceptable conversation, stemming from a ‘sense of suspicion towards those subjects whose ultimate loyalty is presumed to lie with a supranational religion’:

One of the most important aspects of our identity is our belief in equality before the law. But deep, entrenched anti-Muslim bigotry challenges that tradition because it implies that one section of society is less deserving of our protection than the rest. I commend those who understand and condemn the cancer of Islamophobia . . . The deeper Islamophobia seeps into our culture, the easier becomes the task of the extremist recruiting sergeant. (Warsi 2011)

Like the aforementioned UN report for Britain, these findings are in close keeping with a trio of reports by Teesside University’s Centre for Fascist, Anti-fascist and Post-fascist Studies (hereafter CFAPS), published in summer 2013, summer 2014 and summer 2015. These are thus within the context of what an increasing number of scholars, following Aristotle Kallis’s terminology, have termed the ‘mainstreaming’ of anti-Muslim prejudice through the ‘breaking of taboos’ around the public expression of bigotry and xenophobia (Kallis 2013). Stocker has similarly argued that, more generally, 21st century Britain has witnessed is ‘the growing mainstreaming of far-right ideas and their co-option by more centrist political forces’ (Stocker 2017).

In now turning to the figures from the three CFAPS reports between 2013 and 2015, it bears remembering that this is based on self-reporting data, with recorded metrics by Tell MAMA of variable quality (such as that related to location – e.g. London, a specific borough, or even a postcode). It is not, and cannot be, a representative sample of the country as a whole. That said, these figures remain the most detailed we have available for the 4–5% of the UK population that is Muslim – which is roughly ten times the size, for instance, of the Jewish community in Britain. The 2012/13 report saw a total of 584 cases reported to Tell MAMA in their first year of operation. Of the 130 hate crimes taking place offline, 55% took place on the street – meaning that it is likely more than half were opportunistic attacks that may have been prompted by circumstance, context or ‘speedy’ radicalisation (if such a thing exists). While this is in keeping with our formative understandings of hate crimes, the next figure certainly is not. In fact, it has not been replicated in any other disaggregated figures: many more women than men are victims in public: fully 80% of recorded offline victims were women wearing ‘visibly Muslim’ clothing at the time of the attack. Put simply, hate crime overwhelmingly tends to be male on male, with the exception of anti-Muslim attacks, the majority of which are male on female (fully 78% of reported offline perpetrators were male).

Above all, the first report showed that fully 300 of the 434 reported online attacks had some kind of link to the far right (which excludes UKIP in this report): an EDL hashtag, reference to the BNP or National Front, hotlinks to a counter-jihad website, and so on. While some have dismissed online attacks as merely keyboard warriors expressing unpopular opinions via Facebook or Twitter, it is worth stating that nearly two-thirds of reported online hate attacks threatened offline action. This can extend to posts with personal information like a home address or details of family members – let alone threats of real world violence – which, of course, can be enormously intrusive and upsetting. Moreover, online attacks can also create a ’tsunami’ effect whereby Facebook friends or Twitter connection ‘pile on’ to a victim who is being attacked by an offender’s contacts – via retweets, under the line comments, or Facebook shares.
Finally, the data from the first year suggests that far-right participation in anti-Muslim attacks is oversized – especially online. The organised far right in Britain remains comparatively small in terms of the population as a whole: less than 5% nationally. But offenders related to far-right groups account for four times this amount in offline attacks, and a staggering fourteen times this amount for online attacks. This is because less than a fifth of offline attacks, 19%, identified offline links to the far right. While this number is small, it is not that surprising: offenders usually don’t typically wear EDL or other far-right apparel, and unless they also shout slogans affiliated with these groups, such a link can be difficult to verify. That is far less the case with online attacks, where nearly 70% were linked to the far right by way of a hashtag or other affiliation (Copsey et al. 2013). This suggests that, especially online, there is a small, hard core of far-right offenders – perhaps serial or repeat offenders. A corresponding recommendation here is to look more closely at far-right groups’ participation in anti-Muslim attacks, ranging from those specifically engaging with Islamoprejudice as a central ideological tenet – such as Britain First and the various ‘defence leagues’ (EDL, Infidels, etc.) – to neo-fascist groups that like the National Front and the BNP who advocate anti-Muslim bigotry alongside anti-Semitic, anti-gay or ethically-based attacks. Either way, all of these groups have had it too easy in terms of the policing and prosecution of anti-Muslim hate crimes.

CFAPS’s second report, released in July 2014, had a different emphasis: ‘cumulative extremism’. This term is used to refer to the cyclical ratcheting up of violent activity between opposing communities, with acts of violence perpetrated by a sub-group (however small) of a given community against members of another community, triggering acts of violent retribution by members of a sub-population of the second community against members of the first. This process is often seen to be self-perpetuating, akin to a downward spiral, with each act of violence triggering a response that begets further violence. In the just over ten years since this term was coined by the political scientist Roger Eatwell (2006), the idea of diametrically opposed ideologies goading each other into more extreme acts – most often in the scholarly literature referring to jihadi Islamists and the far right – has taken off in policy circles, particularly in terms of Prevent. Yet there has been precious little empirical evidence to back up these interpretations, instead often relying on specific cases, such as that in June 2012 when six jihadi Islamists were apprehended on the way to a 750-strong EDL demonstration in Dewsbury with guns, knives and a homemade explosive device. All received sentences of more than 18 years each.

To date, the most detailed evidence to support the ‘cumulative extremism’ thesis came in the wake of the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich by two Islamists on 22 May 2013. The wake of this appalling attack saw nearly four times more online and offline reports – a spike of 373% recorded in the Tell MAMA data – in the week after 22 May 2013 when compared with the week beforehand. Steep spikes in attacks on Muslims were also recorded in this period by Manchester, London and the West Midlands constabularies (at the time, the only large police forces disaggregating hate-incidents). Therefore, it is unlikely this resulted from simply higher rates of reporting, or greater awareness of Tell MAMA; in fact, fully 5 of 6 hate incidents reported to the latter were not reported to the police: indeed, only 3% of victims of online attacks went to both Tell MAMA and the police during this period. Addressing the problem of under-reporting is surely amongst the greatest challenges in better understanding hate crimes. That is to say, of the 734 hate incidents recorded in our second report – 599 reports of online attacks, and 135 reports for those offline – probably represent a small proportion of the total anti-Muslim incidents in Britain between 1 May 2013 and 28 February 2014. Nor were these only words, troubling as that still would be: in the three months after Drummer Rigby’s murder, Tell MAMA documented 34 anti-Muslim attacks on property, most notably in places of worship, ranging from graffiti to arson. There were also 13 cases of extreme violence recorded,
often resulting in a victim’s hospitalisation. CFAPS’ second report, in short, suggested that anti-Muslim attacks were getting worse, not better.

Perhaps the most revealing figure relating to ‘cumulative extremism’ in CFAPS’s second report was the monthly breakdown of incidents. It was bad enough that roughly half the recorded attacks over the 10-month recording period took place in the 9 weeks following Drummer Rigby’s murder. Just as troublingly, there was also an elevated ‘baseline’ of attacks, meaning the expected number of attacks per day, week or month increased palpably in the six months after 22 May 2013. Even after August 2013, a higher ‘baseline’ could be discerned, whereby average month-by-month attacks were higher in later 2013 than they had been a year earlier. In sum, Muslims in Britain were at decidedly increased risk of public attack for their faith, in particular through online abuse, in the days and even weeks following Drummer Rigby’s murder.

While these findings represented stark changes from our first report, some aspects of our findings clearly remained consistent: the increased likelihood of online incidents – particularly of anti-Muslim abuse – second; the majority of recorded offline cases involving female victims; and third, the large proportion of far-right perpetrators (albeit lower, at 40% of online incidents, most likely due to changes in recording procedures by Tell MAMA, most notably a ‘drop down bar’ to record specific far-right organisations and the removal of all ‘open response’ questions). Nevertheless, the conclusions were in keeping with the previous year:

‘Trigger’ events like the murder of Drummer Rigby clearly magnify the possibility of far-right groups and others victimising Muslims simply for who they are and what they believe. While Britain remains a place of inclusion, stubbornly high figures of anti-Muslim incidents also remain, and demand attention from policymakers and all people of goodwill in Britain alike.

(Feldman and Littler 2014)

Use of the term ‘trigger’ events is important here, and formed the backdrop for CFAPS’s third report from last June. This final report covered the 12-month period between 1 March 2014 and 28 February 2015, with online hate incidents covering 402 of 548 attacks, or again about two thirds, of all recorded data analysed from Tell MAMA. In keeping with our previous two reports, the majority of offline attacks were perpetrated by white men against ‘visibly Muslim’ women. Importantly however, we added a degree of nuance to our previous analysis of ‘cumulative extremism’. There, the aftermath of an outrageous daytime stabbing attack on an off-duty soldier in London was captured on smartphone, and then swiftly disseminated around the world; the murderers Michael Adebowale and Michael Adebolajo were shown with literally bloody hands and unanimously associated with jihadi Islamism. While in terms of guilt, of course, none of directly relates to the nearly 3 million Muslims in Britain going about their daily business, the frame presented by some of the tabloids criticised in the UN report above, as well as that quickly snowballing on social media platforms, carried a ‘mainstreamed’ message of Islamoprejudice. As we saw previously, this added up to a perfect storm of elements leading to a sharp rise in anti-Muslim attacks, both online and in person.

To be sure, this picture of ‘cumulative extremism’ is useful. But important variations can exist, as the nature of apparent jihadi Islamist attacks recorded in 2014/15 show regarding the 7 days following terrorist attacks in Paris, Copenhagen and Sydney. Briefly, the Paris attack on 7 January 2015 saw a mass shooting at the offices of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, followed by a related anti-Semitic assault on a kosher grocery store. In all, 17 victims were murdered and three gunmen were killed; it so rocked France that millions took
to the streets on 11 January, including dozens of European leaders assembling in Paris, under the banner ‘Je suis Charlie’. A month later, another jihadi Islamist assaulted a public event in Copenhagen, followed by a shooting outside the city’s Great Synagogue, which left two people dead and five innocents injured. Although like the Paris and Copenhagen attacks – perpetrated by an adult male with a violent criminal past, with assailants ultimately killed by police – in the case of the 14 December 2014, 18-hour Sydney hostage standoff, the circumstances were somewhat different. There, while Man Haron Monis claimed an ISIS affiliation, he was swiftly identified as having a history of mental illness, thus providing an alternative frame for the ongoing media coverage. This raises questions about the role of the media in mediating and framing news coverage – which seems to be a vital pre-requisite for ‘cumulative extremism’. Acts of jihadi Islamist extremism come to the attention of far-right groups via the mainstream media, filtering through a complex network of blogs, social media pages and forums before reaching their final audience (Littler and Feldman 2015).

Conclusion

Ultimately, it may be that the severity of the ‘cumulative extremism’ cycle is, in part, determined by the level and tone of media coverage. Where media outlets might single-mindedly stress the jihadi Islamist, or even Muslim, nature of an attack, devoting significant coverage to this interpretation, a violent response is likely to be greater than in cases where the religious background of the attacker is downplayed, or rejected in favour of an alternative explanation – as with the Sydney attacks, where the attacker was identified as mentally unwell and with a criminal past. Similarly, where a terror attack receives greater or more sustained media attention – as with the 60-hour, multisite, coverage of the attacks in Paris in January 2015, or the domestic significance of Drummer Rigby’s murder in May 2013 – it is likely to generate a more hateful and inductive response than where the media offer lower levels of coverage (as in Copenhagen and, especially, Sydney. Importantly, the latter is 10 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, with the attack commencing in the early hours of 15 December 2016 in the UK).

This raises very direct questions about the effects of irresponsible journalism, and the dangers of uninformed speculation as to terrorist motivation. While it is naturally important for the media to present honest and impartial coverage, granting greater voice to more nuanced or alternative explanations of terrorist motivation – as in Sydney – may do much to reduce the ferocity of the ‘cumulative extremism’ backlash – and ensure that the wider Muslim population in the UK remains trusted, heard, and protected. And if this is the case with ‘cumulative extremism’, so too with ‘trigger’ events more generally, which, as was made plain after ‘Brexit’, need not be a terrorist attack at all.

References


