Extremism in the UK

A Tale of Two Terrors: The British Extreme Right Organises While Islamists Scatter

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Once again, the dividing lines that distinguish between variations of violent extremism in the UK have morphed, but addressing the similarities and differences between the extreme right and violent Islamists should help to ensure that the UK’s counter-terror strategy is as synchronised as possible with the current threat picture.

Two contrasting terror trials were recently concluded in the UK. The separate convictions of Naa'imur Rahman and Mohammed Imran, and the sentencings of Christopher Lythgoe and Matthew Hankinson brought together two sides of the terrorist threat facing the UK. With one linked to Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS) and the other to the extreme right wing (XRW), the two cases highlighted the shifting nature of the two ends of the threat spectrum, with the XRW rallying around the threat of violent Islamists, while Islamists point to the XRW as evidence of the clash of civilisations they perceive as being at the heart of, but also the similarities that exist between these two threat sources. Given that both have been prioritised in the latest iteration of the UK’s counter-terror CONTEST strategy, it is unlikely that this is the last time we will see a similar temporal coincidence of the two types of cases.

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Ostensibly, the two cases are very different. The Lythgoe and Hankinson convictions are part of a larger case linked to the proscribed XRW terrorist group National Action (NA). The first time in decades a right-wing organisation has been made illegal in the UK, the network they created was one of the first instances of an organised effort on the part of the British XRW. Illustrating their aspiration in a message to the group’s community on the communications app Mumble shortly before the group was formally proscribed by the Home Office, Lythgoe told the leadership to pass messages of sustenance along to ‘people further down the NA hierarchy’

Make sure they understand that the SUBSTANCE of NA is the people, our talents, the bonds between us, our ideas, and our sustained force of will. All of that will continue into the future. We’re just shedding one skin for another. All genuinely revolutionary movements in the past have needed to exist partly underground. These are exciting times.

In stark contrast, the case against Rahman and Imran was a clear articulation of the chaotic and increasingly diffuse threat posed by violent Islamist extremism, where isolated individuals advancing the ideology have tenuous or limited links to the sharp end of the threat. Rahman claims that his uncle, who was killed in an American drone strike while fighting in Syria, was pushing him to launch an attack. Imran was eager to go fight abroad himself. Both were connected to each other through a variety of social media applications and had some links to fighters abroad – although it later emerged that some of these contacts were in fact undercover law-enforcement agents posing as Daesh supporters. The men believed that they were operating as part of a wider network but were in fact quite isolated. This is very much an articulation of the sort of disorganised terrorist threat that is opposite to what has been expressed in the more organised NA plot, with both Rahman and Imran being fairly detached from the extremist community but seeking to advance its ideology through individual action.

Allied predatory sexual behaviours are surprisingly common among offenders on both sides of the ideological spectrum

Looking back on the history of the XRW and violent Islamist threats in the UK, these plots show an almost complete role reversal between the two. During the mid to late 2000s, the XRW threat was characterised by isolated individuals like Neil Lewington, Martyn Gilleard or Terence Gavan, who accumulated massive amounts of weaponry, indulged in anti-social behaviour, or sought paedophilic material – all the while showing clear sympathies to the XRW cause – but who were largely loners. When attempted plots were uncovered, they were seen as shambolic at best. The exception to this was the Aryan Strike Force (ASF), disrupted in 2009, which boasted a global online network of around 350 individuals. Led by
administrators in the UK, the group was largely an online community, although police uncovered evidence of limited training camps in Cumbria and that one member managed to make a substantial amount of the poison Ricin. But even then, the ASF was mostly an online network, while the NA group was more politically active both on and offline.

In contrast, the violent Islamist terror threat of the same period was characterised by sophisticated networks linked to Al-Qa’ida affiliates around the world. Leaders in distant countries provided training and direction to plotters in the UK and throughout the West. There were isolated loners that latched onto violent Islamist ideology to try to launch attacks, but this was the exception rather than the norm.

Compare this to today: while Rahman and Imran had some links, these were distant and there is limited evidence of clear direction from foreign-based leaders.

This divergence is reflected in some ways by the men’s commitment to their plots. Jack Renshaw of NA, who had separately pled guilty, wanted to attack MP Rosie Cooper and a police officer who had angered him; he seemed fairly consistent in his commitment to this particular act. In contrast, from available evidence, Rahman was fairly scattered in his plotting. While the chief plot for which he was convicted – of wanting to detonate an explosive device in Downing Street and decapitate the prime minister – continually emerged in his planning, he had numerous other plots in mind. At one point he considered using a drone to attack the Wimbledon tennis tournament, while at other times he discussed going to fight abroad. Rahman had the idea of driving a truck into a crowd, or using one as a bomb and then using guns to shoot people in a hybrid active shooter plot. He was, however, unable to drive and did not know how to shoot (or source) guns.

But while the threat may have gone in divergent directions, there are a surprising number of similarities as well. Both plots targeted prominent political figures: Rahman had an ambitious plan to storm Downing Street and murder the prime minister, while Renshaw wanted to murder an MP and a police officer. At one point he considered the Home Secretary, but ultimately deemed this too difficult a target. This shows a collective anger against the political class and a desire to punish them on both sides of the XRW versus violent Islamist ideological spectrum.

Both plots were inspired in part by other attacks and would have served as revenge for personal attacks perceived to have been made against the individuals. In the case of Rahman, he saw the attempted Parsons Green bombing from earlier in 2017 as ‘the start’ and was impressed by the Manchester Arena bombing. He saw his attack in part as vindication for his uncle’s death in Syria at the hands of the International Coalition Against ISIL. Similarly, the NA cluster was inspired by the 2016 murder of MP Jo Cox and saw Zack Davies’ racially inspired attempted murder of a dentist in a Tesco supermarket as a precedent. Renshaw’s desire to target a particular police...
Evidently, we are still at the stage of managing a threat rather than eradicating a problem, which is potentially all that will ever be achieved

The latest version of CONTEST highlighted that ‘Islamist terrorism is the foremost terrorist threat to the UK. Extreme right-wing terrorism is a growing threat’. These two cases show what these menaces look like in practice, and what similarities exist between the two. CONTEST pledged an increase in the volume of resources for targeting the XRW, while the broader violent Islamist threat is now characterised as a series of discrete and seemingly random terrorist plots. The tools needed to counter this sort of threat are included within the new Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill, which necessitates longer sentences for terrorism offence convictions and gives authorities the tools needed to disrupt plots earlier on. There is of course a danger in this approach, as individuals may receive heavy sentences for relatively limited activity or involvement, but given the current threat picture, police and security services clearly feel a need to bolster their capabilities in this regard.

There are broader points to consider about the growth of these two threats. First, the rise of a more organised XRW is in many ways a reflection of the increased polarisation of political discourse in the UK. As far-right narratives increasingly creep into the mainstream conversation, the more extreme fringes become empowered, anticipating that the tide of debate is moving in their direction. Second, the problem of a more diffuse and complicated threat picture is not exclusively a problem with violent Islamists. Soon after the conclusion of these two terror trials, another member of NA, Jack Coulson, was sentenced to four years for downloading terrorist manuals. This was his second offence, with the first linked to building pipe bombs as a minor. There was little evidence provided that he coordinated his action with others in the NA group, illustrating how direction and coordination within the XRW is also quite loose.

Last year highlighted how the terrorist threat in the UK remains persistent and can abruptly catch security forces off guard. It may now be typified by more low-tech efforts using basic weaponry, but the ideological background has amplified and is only likely to become more complicated as time goes on. The new iteration of CONTEST reflects this threat picture, but it is important to consider how much the terrorist menace in the UK has evolved since CONTEST was first devised, and to raise the question of whether a more dramatic overhauling of the structure is required. The threat picture has progressed, from one characterised by an external threat touching the UK’s shores and using UK nationals, to one of homegrown terrorists conducting attacks without the stage of managing a threat rather than eradicating a problem, which is potentially all that will ever be achieved.

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