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Terror in Finsbury Park: Copycat Retaliation or Cumulative Radicalisation?

By Cameron Sumpter

Synopsis

A dangerous cycle of reciprocal provocation between far-right and Islamist extremists has emerged in the United Kingdom in recent years. The latest terrorist attack in London may represent an escalation of this dynamic.

Commentary

THE SUSPECTED assailant in the van-ramming attack near Finsbury Park mosque in London on the night of 18 June 2017 was a 47-year-old Cardiff man who had allegedly been thrown out of a pub over the weekend for “cursing Muslims”. According to an eye witness, Darren Osbourne shouted “I want to kill all Muslims – I did my bit” after he ploughed his rental van into a crowd of people on the pavement.

If accurately recounted, this last statement implies the attacker believed he was contributing to a broader cause, which not only proves that his brutal onslaught was clearly an act of terrorism but may offer clues to aspects of his radicalisation within the current climate.

Mutual Instigation

The concept of reciprocal or “cumulative radicalisation” was coined in 2006 by Roger Eatwell, who described it as “the way in which one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms”.

Both grievance and revenge have been identified as key ingredients in the often complex mix of factors which contribute to an individual’s decision to commit an act of terrorism. Such sentiment can involve macro considerations such as structural

inequality and opposition to military interventions abroad, or from a different perspective, perceived threats to national identity and outrage over immigration policy at home.

Anger may then develop more acutely on micro and meso levels – through the mutual reinforcement of peers and the incitement of ideologues reacting to a different strand of violent extremism.

Following the suicide bombing of a pop concert audience in Manchester in late May, controversial British broadcaster Katie Hopkins tweeted: “Western men. These are your wives. Your daughters. Your sons. Stand up. Rise up. Demand action. Do not carry on as normal. Cowed.”

And one week before the Finsbury Park attack, a bitter concoction of far-right groups descended on a park in central Manchester from where the 1200-1500 attendees protested against the recent terrorist attacks by spouting Islamophobic abuse. Former English Defence League (EDL) leader Stephen Lennon, alias Tommy Robinson, delivered a fiery speech through a megaphone, warning the government that “people have had enough and are no longer gonna sit by any longer”. The crowd responded by chanting: “Muslim peoples off our streets!”

A YouTube video circulating after Sunday’s attack showed Robinson exhorting that “the British public ... will end up taking matters into their own hands ... Inaction will only facilitate the creation of a disgruntled and angry population who will end up cleaning out this Islamic problem”. Robinson has since received numerous death threats via social media.

Reciprocity

The EDL was established in reaction to a group of Islamist protesters who triggered widespread scorn in 2009 for heckling a homecoming parade of British soldiers in the city of Luton. The far-right group’s demonstrations have at times involved alcohol-fuelled violent football-club rivalry, but predominantly feature unifying chants of “We all hate Muslims,” which have in turn agitated others into action.

Michael Adebolajo (who would go on to murder Fusilier Lee Rigby on a London street in 2013) spoke at an anti-EDL rally in September 2009, before travelling to Kenya the following year where he allegedly tried to join the Somalia-based extremist organisation, al-Shabaab. In 2012, six men received heavy prison sentences for a plot to attack an EDL demonstration. The group was armed with a bomb, knives and guns but were halted by a routine police traffic stop before reaching their target.

Complicating the picture is the rise of anti-fascist (Antifa) protest groups, which have existed for decades but found renewed energy in reaction to the increasing prominence of far-right groups in recent years. Antifa demonstrators typically dress head-to-toe in black, while covering their faces and antagonising adversaries through taunts and counter protests. Several showdowns in the United States last year descended into chaotic street violence.

Two weeks ago, EDL-linked protesters were “laughed out of Liverpool” by a much larger Antifa cohort, who played the comical Benny Hill theme song on a loudspeaker as police ushered the far-right supporters from the scene. Earlier protesters had sat on the pavement to block the EDL march while chanting “Nazi scum off our streets”.

Tit-for-Tat Terrorism

In the aftermath of the Finsbury Park attack, a 28-year-old London man told reporters at the scene that he thought the incident would “only fuel Muslim extremists to carry out more attacks”.

This all plays into the hands of Islamic State strategists, who have explicitly stated their desire to divide multicultural societies and provoke violent uprisings in Muslim communities the world over. A February 2015 article in *Dabiq*, the group’s English language magazine, titled *The Extinction of the Grayzone* argued that space for “hypocritical” moderate views was dwindling and that “Muslims in the crusader countries will find themselves driven to abandon their homes for a place to live in the Khilāfah (Islamic State) as the crusaders increase persecution against Muslims living in Western lands”.

The Syria-based organisation clearly aims to exacerbate discrimination and provoke hate speech toward Muslims through its proliferation of indiscriminate violence; an actual retaliatory terrorist attack must be seen as a gift.

Random Retaliation or Evidence of Escalation?

According to academic literature on violent radicalisation, individual pathways toward terrorism are varied and involve messy combinations of contributing factors – from global political and religious concerns to deeply personal emotional issues and lived experiences.

From what happened at Finsbury Park, it appears clear that Darren Osbourne’s decision to ram a van into Muslim people on the street was in large part influenced by similar attacks in London earlier this year. Whether it was simply a copycat reaction in a moment of intense anger or directly linked to broader reciprocal radicalisation in British society remains to be seen.

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