Interview – William Allchorn

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Dr William Allchorn is an Adjunct Associate Professor in Politics and International Relations at Richmond, the American University in London and Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the Policing Institute for the Eastern Region, Anglia Ruskin University. He is an expert on radical-right extremist social movements in the UK, Western Europe and globally. He has most recently advised the UK, US and Australian governments on their approaches to radical-right extremism. His first book, *Anti-Islamic Protest in the UK: Policy Responses to the Far Right* was published by Routledge in 2018. Recently, William's research has shifted to studying the violent far right threat landscape. His latest book, *Moving beyond Islamist Extremism – Assessing Counter Narrative Responses to the Global Far Right* , was published by Ibidem (an imprint of Columbia University Press) in early 2022.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Owing to key electoral breakthroughs in France, Austria and Italy, there has been, what is called, an explosion in literature on far-right extremism over the past two-and-a-half decades. This has ostensibly focused on party political manifestations of the so-called third (between the early 1980s to the early 2000s) and fourth waves (from 2010s to the present day) of far-right extremism. Key debates that have received sustained attention within scholars in the field of far-right studies include how we conceptualise the different faces of contemporary right-wing extremist ideologies, whether economics or culture has led to its resurgence, and the political (dubbed internal and external supply-side) factors that have accounted for cross-national variations in breakthrough and success.

One of the key criticisms made of the early literature, however, was its 'breathless' band wagoning on contemporary developments. Instead of 'serious scientific study, normative and emotional viewpoints were a sign of a literature dominated by 'avowed opponents'. This has been reflected in later literature. Little has been written, for example, on the less visible non-party political manifestations of the extreme right, such as the EDL. Moreover, there is only a budding, but so far underdeveloped, empirical literature assessing the effectiveness of responses and the democratic effects of the current extreme right 'threat'.

Happily, there has been a change in the shifting sands of scholarship on far-right extremism more recently that has taken a closer look at how external actors' responses to the far-right enable and inhibit the rise of the movement, as well as breaking down the dichotomy of culture versus economics when explaining its rise, and the role of far-right actors in International Relations that has really shifted the scope of focus of studies. Moreover, there have been agenda-setting articles that have pushed the boundaries of what we conceive as the far-right beyond Eurocentrism, Electoralism and Externalism.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

In 2024, the global radical right has rarely been far from the headlines. Recent electoral victories in Portugal and The Netherlands show a continued appetite for authoritarian, populist and nativist politics and the splintering of the right within domestic electorates further solidifies the position of fringe ideologies apace. Moreover, we see such trends illustrated internationally with the rise of illiberal authoritarian governments in Hungary, India and Russia. Whether it's the hype surrounding the performance of national-populist parties in the forthcoming European Parliamentary

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elections or the performance of such parties in Europe at the national level, we should be worried – we are living in an unprecedented moment; one defined by phenomenal uncertainty and chaos where the edifice of the old liberal order is starting to crack, and a new illiberal one is appearing in the midst of our politics and institutions. Such is the complexity and seriousness of these shifts that perhaps now more than at any other time quality analyses are needed to make sense of the underlying currents and to inform our own engagement with this issue in the public sphere.

The most influential scholars that have prompted shifts in my thinking on the far right and its role within democracies have been the works of Cas Mudde, Elizabeth Ivarsflaten and Ami Pedahzur. Each have given significant understanding to the role of the far right, how the far right overcomes its reputational challenges in order to place itself at the heart of democratic systems, and how immunized systems might and could work to resist further encroachment and erosion of our democratic institutions as the global radical right continues its march into the halls of power. The major shift that I have observed over the last ten or so years is how the parliamentary far right (e.g. national populist parties) has gone from an "outsider" to an "insider" threat. Moreover the extra-parliamentary far right (e.g. street movements and terror cells) has also metastasized into an organization that is increasingly digitally anchored, transnational in focus and horizontal in how it structures itself – making it increasingly difficult to respond to (and mitigate) this threat.

What motivated you to explore the topic of anti-Islamic protests in the UK?

I was first drawn into the study of anti-Islamic protest based off the rise of its UK predecessor, the British National Party (BNP). In particular, I was intrigued by the fact that an avowedly neo-Fascist party had proven so successful during the 2000's in a context where failure was the norm. In particular, I was interested in the party's moderation strategy that occurred under its second Chairman, Nick Griffin, converting the party from a political pariah into a respectable electoral party capable of entering Britain's mainstream by adopting a national-populist agenda. Fortunately for British Democracy as a whole, the party imploded at the 2010 General Election but this lead to a fragmentation, splintering and radicalization of the UK far right that would further drive the movement onto the streets and into both vigilante (à la Britain First) and terror tactics (à la National Action) as the electoral opportunity structure closed after the election – leading to one of the most dramatic rises in far-right street protest in the UK since Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists in the 1930's. The implosion of the BNP undoubtedly influenced mainstream UK politics as a whole with a populist shift by UKIP from a single-issue anti-EU party to national-populism (without the same taboo factor), seeing the mainstreaming and normalization of far-right ideas, post-Brexit.

Can you discuss some of the key findings or insights from your research on anti-Islamic protest in the UK?

The rise of anti-Islamic protest emerged as a prominent aspect within the far-right activist movement, evolving from the leaderless dynamics of the 2010s post-BNP era. In the UK context, two groups are of particular importance: the English Defence League (EDL) and Britain First. The former started in 2009 in response to the picketing of a military home-coming parade in the South Bedfordshire town of Luton. The latter started in 2011 as a website but then quickly spread its activities to the streets in June 2014 onwards – with its Christian patrols, Mosque invasions, protests, and marches stoking tensions and jeopardizing community cohesion. Both have moved in the same circles as far-right terrorists and attackers. Anders Behring Breivik, for example, wrote in his 2083 manifesto how he was 'impressed' with the EDL's campaigns against the spread of Islam and Sharia Law in the UK. Furthermore, Darren Osborne – a UK far-right terrorist who drove a van into worshippers at the Finsbury Park Mosque in June 2017 – was influenced by the 'drip effect' of Britain First's anti-Muslim activism; both online and in the Rochdale area.

My research involved 58 interviews with a mixture of politicians, police officers and behind the scenes officials in five key cases of EDL and Britain First activism: Luton, Leicester, Birmingham, Bradford, and Tower Hamlets. These explored the local drivers of anti-Islamic protest but also tracked the 'what, how and why' of policymaker's preparations and responses to these protests. I found that localized drivers revolved around high levels of deprivation, the presence of industrial decline, social polarization between religious communities, the current or past presence of extreme right or extreme Islamist groups, and a credibility attached to these groups by marginalized local populations were important in their local success.

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What is the relationship between anti-Islamic protests and broader far-right movements in the UK?

In recent years, the move towards anti-Islamic politics by extreme right parties in the UK under the BNP has also been accompanied by the growth of more shadowy informal online and offline transnational network of actors, called the 'counter-jihad' movement. The sole purpose of this new 'pan-European far right movement' is not to win elections but to 'combat the perceived threat of "Islamization" through European-wide protests and awareness and advocacy campaigns' (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Brun, 2013: 1). Moreover, it is 'vehemently against anti-Semitism' and (at least strategically) holds a 'liberal [and progressive] position' on various social and political issues in order to construct an unenlightened and regressive Muslim 'Other' (Archer, 2013: 181).

Scholars posit that this new, social movement turn in far right anti-Islamic politics started in 2007 at a conference of activists and bloggers in Copenhagen with greater formalization occurring in 2012. Key themes within its rhetoric include that belief that a process of Islamization is occurring, that 'strict sharia imposed in countries such as Saudi Arabia, or by extremist groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan…, is integral to Islam' (ibid: 42). It also asserts that Islam is an aggressive and un-reformed religion and that the outcome of all of this is imminent civil war (ibid: 43).

The movement can be divided between more populist and radical elements (Berntzen and Sandberg 2014: 4). The former encompasses the blogs of Pamela Geller *Atlas Shrugs* and Robert Spencer *Jihad Watch*, rhetoric of populist radical right parties and 'counter-jihad' umbrella groups such as Stop Islamization of Europe. They emphasize the 'dichotomy of the people versus the Elite, and warn … against the "Islamization" of society' (ibid). The latter encompasses the various other European defense leagues and anti-Islamic social movements that adopt more direct action tactics, include groups with more overt support for violent measures, and subscribe to some of the wilder conspiracy theories which suggest that 'political and cultural elites have entered into a secret partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists' (ibid).

Though nebulous and small, the significance of this new movement cannot be underestimated. It has provided the inspiration for one of the most horrific terrorist attacks in recent years. It was this extremist milieu that provided an important influence on Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian lone-wolf terrorist who killed 77 people in a murderous rampage on 22nd July 2011 (Goodwin, Cutts and Janta-Lipinski 2014: 2). His 1,518 page manifesto, '2083: A European Declaration of Independence', contains partial reproductions of materials found on self-styled 'counter-Jihadist' blogs such as the 'Gates of Vienna'. Moreover, apart from some key points of departure, the rhetoric contained within original sections of the document are remarkably similar to more radical sections of the 'counter-jihad' movement (ibid: 10).

Finally, and most importantly, it was in this online environment that spawned one of Europe's most prominent anti-Islamic social movements: the EDL. Paul Ray, a BNP supporter and native of Luton, 'began blogging in 2007 with a strong anti-Islam focus that was inspired by the growing Counter-Jihad movement in the United States.' (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Brun 2013: 9). He went on to be a formative member of the EDL in 2009 and founded some of the keys themes of the group including the idea of a pan-Islamic war against the West, Islamization, state and media complicity in the influence of Islam, and the problematization of the role of Muslim migrants in British society that have reverberated within UK politics over several decades (ibid: 10).

What are some of the most common policy responses to anti-Islamic protests?

With this far-right shift and concerns over increasing Islamist extremism in reaction to the Gaza conflict, one of the serious tasks now facing us as democrats is how to respond to political extremism. To what extent should we tolerate the intolerant within liberal democracies? How do thresholds, enacted in policy and law, between unpalatable views and dangerous actions look in concrete reality when dealing with political extremism? And how should our leaders and the police respond to extremists when they are found to be operating in a specific town or city?

Published in 2018, my book and research tried to shed light on some of these questions. Looking at specific cases in Birmingham, Bradford, Luton, Leicester and Tower Hamlets, I found that local politicians successfully used counter tactics to curtail the divisive and disorderly aspects of these protests. These were mainly exclusionary tactics –

placing restrictions on the locations of protests, the groups themselves and the movement of individuals.

One particular challenge was how local folklore, or rumors were seized upon by both the mainstream, including the media, and extremist groups. In Tower Hamlets, for example, the normalization of the narrative that Islamist extremism is rife in the borough and that there are "no-go zones" for anyone other than Muslims saw the area being keenly targeted by the far right. In Leicester, it was rumors that the EDL were planning to attack a mosque (and the subsequent counter-reactions to this) that needed to be addressed when far-right mobilizations became apparent. Indeed, "cumulative extremism" can be as much of a problem as extremism itself. This type of situation should be something that is keenly avoided in any governmental approach to any type of extremism now.

What have been the most effective policy measures in addressing anti-Islamic sentiments and protests in the UK?

The main argument of my book is that an "inclusionary turn" is needed when dealing with any hue of "extremist" protest. Building on Ami Pedahzur's notion of an "immunized" democracy, I subscribe to the notion that better cross-community contact, grassroots educational initiatives against prejudice and a re-engagement between politicians and disaffected constituencies are all important preventative methods when dealing with political extremism.

Such basic everyday measures are needed to build a broader civic movement against extremism in the years and months to come. This might, for example, include mainstream politicians and police visiting local communities that have heightened concerns around protests to liaise with them and listen to them. It might mean paying greater attention to extremist myth-making online.

As democrats, I think we need to make sure that our responses are not based on the stigmatization and racialization of others. Extremism is a multifaceted threat that can feed off of grievances and animosities – both real and imagined. I think it is incumbent for us – as citizens – to have a realistic sense of the threat from extremist actors of all stripes because how we perceive and deal with intolerant people in our society has important policy implications. Why? Because it has a bearing on who we are, how we function as a democracy and the direction of travel when it comes to counter-extremism and counter-terrorism policies going forward.

Have you noticed any significant shifts or trends in the nature of anti-Islamic protests and the responses to them?

One of the most significant shifts in the UK sphere has been the decline of anti-Islamic protests in the 2010s and the rise of anti-migrant protests in the early 2020s. During 2022, for example, there were 253 visits and protests outside hotels, hostels and other accommodation centers housing refugees and asylum seekers – posing a 102% increase on the previous year. Predominantly focused on anti-Muslim forms of mobilization since the early 2000s, the UK far right experienced a shift back to more biologically racist themes that were catalyzed in the summer of 2020 as a result of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in June of that year. For example, a large-scale protest attended by Britain First, the UK National Front and Democratic Football Lads Alliance activists as well as other anti-minority protestors in June demonstrated the exploitation of anti-BLM narratives by the organized far right, and the possibility of a unifying mobilization theme for the fractured movement, which has struggled to retain relevance after the implosion of the neo-fascist British National Party and the nationalist populism of the UK Independence party.

In terms of responses, most of the more traditional response architecture has stayed but there has been little empirical focus and examination on the efforts of elites, police and officials to grapple with these protests. In particular, there has been little work looking at the varying relational fields between activists themselves, security forces, political and cultural elites and the general public and how this provides insights into what situational mechanisms (such as "communication problems between police and protesters," "property damage," and "spatial incursions") and contextual factors (such as "communication difficultés" and "presence of violently motivated participants") that feed into the escalation and de-escalation of anti-migrant protests. I'm hoping to explore this further in a European Research Council project that updates my PhD and post-PhD research and investigates how UK policymakers and law enforcement have responded to the rise of anti-migrant protest activism within the far right

over the past eight years.

What recommendations would you offer to policymakers and stakeholders dealing with anti-Islamic sentiments and protests in the UK?

The third major conclusion of my 2018 book was a commitment to seeing more long-term preventative strategies being exercised by elites when the EDL, Britain First and other far-right groups come to town. The frequent use of exclusionary strategies by elites is not unexpected due to the popularity and short-term effectiveness of such techniques, but initiatives that are based around social interaction or elite engagement with community concerns are arguably the most effective when dealing with the drivers of political extremism in the long-term.

This is not new. Such initiatives however need to be sensitively structured and broached in a genuine way to work. As one set of scholars have rightly pointed out based on lessons related to earlier versions of the UK's Prevent Strategy, they also need to be initiated and wanted 'from below' rather than something that is seen to be implemented 'from above'. Therefore, a more system-wide look at what other educational and civil society responses are required will also need to be factored into preventative work. Only then will far-right extremism be more comprehensively addressed. Only then will we have adequately responded to the EDL and Britain First in the all-important context of post-Brexit Britain.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

The most important advice that I would give to young scholars is to persist and not give up on the research and matters that mean the most to you. As precarious as your position might feel, be confident in the quality and innovativeness of your study and make sure that you devote time to networking with fellow senior and junior colleagues alike in order to get over any road bumps or blockages on your journey to what you want to achieve with your work. As many recent edited volumes attest, it is my firm belief that the most exciting and innovative research comes from emerging early career scholars in the field, and I have made it my mission to devote time and efforts mentoring and meeting these individuals as other senior scholars also committed the same to me. I will therefore encourage any early years scholars to reach out to me if they have doubts or are seeking advice. My door is always open.