

## The British Counter-Jihad Movement no longer really exists but its impact can still be felt

*Joe Mulhall* explores the history of the Counter-Jihad Movement and argues that while British counter-jihadists have failed to mimic the successes of their American counterparts in being brought into the mainstream, it is hard to call the movement a failure.



An English Defence League march in Newcastle. Wikimedia: Gavin Lynn

The self-named **Counter-Jihad movement (CJM)** is a disparate mix of people and organisations who believe that western civilisation is under attack from Islam. Some are more extreme than others but all generally agree that Islam is a supremacist religion and many see little difference between violent Jihadists and ordinary Muslims who live their lives quite peacefully.

Most counter-jihadists believe that European liberal society is aiding Islam through mass immigration and policies of multiculturalism, which they believe reject any criticism of Islam.

The CJM is a transnational nationalist movement that generally spurns the narrow nationalism of the traditional far right in favour of continent wide, or more specifically occident wide, brotherhood. A mythical, usually Christian, western culture and identity is purportedly facing extinction due to an Islamic invasion. Therefore, the movement has often adopted imagery associated with the Crusades. Counter-jihad street demonstrations have featured cross emblazoned shields and images of **armour clad knights**. The mass murderer Anders Breivik **quoted** from St. Bernard of Clairvaux's *In Praise of the New Knighthood* in Latin in his infamous manifesto, *A European Declaration of Independence*. The idea of a clash between the Christian West and Muslim East is also why one of the movements most important blogs, Gates of Vienna, takes its name from the 1529 Siege of Vienna by the Ottoman Empire, led by Suleiman the Magnificent.

The movement's roots can be traced **back to the 1980s**, though it crystallised in its modern form following the attacks on 11 September 2001. The Counter-Jihad movement began life as a predominantly internet-based political discourse, centred around blogs such as Atlas Shrugs,



Gates of Vienna and Jihad Watch and the movement's primary ideologues were writers such as Fjordman (*aka* Peder Nøstvold Jensen) and Bat Ye'or.

By the second half of that decade the disparate activists of the CJM began to formalise their networks with important meetings such as the Counter-Jihad Summits in 2007 in Copenhagen and Brussels. Transnational organisations such as Stop Islamisation of Europe (SIOE) and the International Civil Liberties Alliance (ICLA) acted as offline forums for activism that had previously been confined to the internet. Then in 2009, the English Defence League (EDL) was **formed** and their demonstrations became the most visible manifestation of counter-jihad activism in Europe.

Today this first wave of counter-jihad organisations are all but defunct. Most attempts to organise across borders have failed with the Defence League network and more recently the international Pegida branches both **failing to gain traction**. To all intents and purposes the CJM, in its original form, no longer really exists.

However, while the European counter-jihad movement is no longer a cohesive force there are still hundreds of anti-Muslim organisations and websites that are active and continue to push the conspiratorial anti-Muslim hatred that is the heart of counter-jihad ideology.

### The British context

From roughly 2009-2012, the EDL was the most important and well-known counter-jihad group in Europe. Its regular demonstrations **attracted thousands** and made news around the world.

The founder and leader Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (*aka* Tommy Robinson), a **convicted football hooligan** from Luton, became a leading figure with important contacts across Europe and North America.

The EDL peaked at their homecoming **demonstration** in Luton on 5 February 2011. The demonstration attracted 3000 people making it probably the largest anti-Muslim demonstration ever held in the UK.

However, by the end of 2011 the EDL began to decline which Joel Buser **convincingly argues** was because they 'found them[selves] at a tactical impasse' with many activists being 'sceptical about the value of flash demonstrations, leafleting, organising petitions and undertaking legal challenges against proposed Islamic buildings'.

The repetitiveness of endless demonstrations coupled with the **leadership's crackdown** on violence, hooliganism and alcohol as well as the police decision to increasingly deny access to town centres and move demonstrations to isolated periphery sites reduced the atmosphere and excitement of events. What followed was a downward spiral as ever-smaller demonstrations increased **internal tensions and infighting**, seeing many EDL activists break away to form their own groups or quit the movement entirely.

The **murder of off-duty soldier Lee Rigby** in Woolwich in May 2013 provided a brief pause in their downward trajectory but despite their best efforts to capitalise on the tragedy they achieved little more than the swelling of social media numbers and a few larger demonstrations. The final hammer blow came in October 2013 when Lennon and his cousin and deputy Kevin Carroll **stood down as leaders**.

While the EDL have continued to organise minor demonstrations they are no longer of any importance to the international counter-jihad movement. A plethora of EDL splinter groups still exist though many, such as the infidel groups, have morphed into more traditional far right outfits, for example adopting antisemitic views.



**Britain First**, a group led by former BNP member Paul Golding, has supplanted the EDL as the premier counter-jihad street protest group with their provocative 'Christian patrols' and mosque invasions garnering them media headlines and their savvy online campaign gaining them a huge following on social media. However, they have failed to convert their online success into offline activism and the group **remains tiny** in terms of real activists.

The only genuinely counter-jihad political party in the UK is LibertyGB which remains an irrelevance despite **causing outrage** by running in the Batley and Spen by-election triggered in October 2016 by the murder of the incumbent MP Jo Cox by far right activist Thomas Mair.

While LibertyGB have no influence in the UK their leader Paul Weston remains a well-known figure on the international counter-jihad scene. He continues to write for the Gates of Vienna website and in March 2016 he embarked on a **speaking tour of North America**, meeting leading American activists including Brigitte Gabriel and Frank Gaffney.

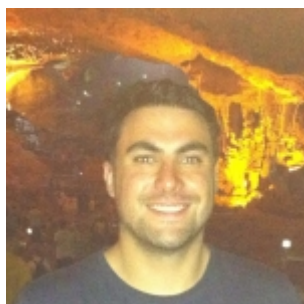
Increasingly the role of obscure European counter-jihad activists like Weston and **Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff** from Austria is to go to America and preach the gospel of a fallen Europe: a continent conquered and destroyed by Islam. By playing into American counter-jihadists' existing prejudices on Europe and its 'no-go zones', figures who have little traction in Europe find themselves mixing in exalted circles in the USA.

Essentially, the counter-jihad movement no longer exists in the UK, at least not in an organised sense. That is not to say the activists have all disappeared and outlets such as Alan Lake's 4 Freedoms Forum are still active. Though the Law and Freedom Foundation is inactive, its founder Gavin '**mosquebuster**' Bobby continues to give speeches.

However, while British counter-jihadists have failed to mimic the successes of their American counterparts in being brought into the mainstream – Trump's team is replete with numerous prominent counter-jihad activists – it is hard to call the movement a failure. The **normalisation** of anti-Muslim rhetoric over the last ten years has been striking and references to a Muslim invasion and 'demographic time bombs' are increasingly common in the mainstream, especially in the wake of the **2015 refugee crisis** and the **2015 Paris attacks**.

Perhaps the counter-jihad movement no longer exists in the UK because it has served its purpose in introducing its toxic ideology into the mainstream.

## About the author



**Joe Mulhall** is Senior Researcher at the anti-racism organization HOPE not hate. @joemulhall\_

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