

When anti-Islamic protest ends: Explaining the decline of the English Defence League

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*There are been multiple studies exploring the rise and fall of the English Defence League, which attribute failure to factors including the lack of vision, internal infighting and the state's responses. **William Allchorn** argues that although these explanations are useful, they fail to acknowledge how changes in the external political and security environment may have affected EDL protest.*



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After [recent accusations](#) directed at the EDL's former co-leader, Tommy Robinson, of inciting racial hatred at Euro 2016, fresh questions can be asked about why the EDL, which had 'started to look...like a serious social movement group' (Busher 2013: 211), rose so quickly but also declined so dramatically. While fragmented accounts, by the likes of [Jackson](#), [Busher](#) and [Pilkington](#), have tried to chart the developmental trajectory of the protest movement by focusing on intra-movement dynamics, there has been little systematic analysis of how changes in the external political and security environment may have affected EDL protest. In this article, I will look at existing explanations of EDL decline and suggest a third, competing explanation of the group's demise. To conclude, I will discuss how this is applicable to the study of the far right and social movements more generally.

Explanation 1: 'The EDL as a limited political movement'

The first explanation of EDL demise suggests that the group's limited success was down to a lack of ability in influencing public policy and branching out into electoral politics. In Paul Jackson's impressive [report](#) on the group, he essentially suggests that – during the group's growth phase from late summer 2009-early summer 2010 – it adopted the classic far right tactic of 'March and Grow' '...holding provocative marches, selected on themes that would garner much-needed wider publicity'. In this sense, then, Jackson suggests that 'the EDL is a limited social movement, which though disruptive at its sites of protest, has not risen to a level where it can influence the political agenda.'

Other explanations of EDL decline also pick up on the limited nature of the movement with damning effect. For example, in Joel Busher's excellent [monograph](#), he suggests that 'Grassroots [EDL] activists found them[selves] at a tactical impasse' at the end of 2011, with many activists 'sceptical about the value of flash demonstrations, leafleting, organising petitions and undertaking legal challenges against proposed Islamic buildings'. Moreover, Busher also [picks up](#) on the single-issue and non-party political nature of the group – with a decision to move into party politics in November 2011 receiving 'scant support from grassroots activists...'. In addition, there are also hints from the EDL's former co-leader, Tommy Robinson, about a lack of clear objectives and vision for the group. In his 2016 biography, Robinson admits that there 'really wasn't a plan'; that 'We had created a massive street protest group virtually overnight...but hadn't a clue how to develop it'; and that 'there was no goal, no motive, other than to shout out opposition to what was happening in our...country.'

Explanation 2: 'The EDL as initially successful and then splintering'

The second explanation of EDL demise suggests that, while initially successful, that the group increasingly ran out of momentum due to the splits, factioning and infighting. In Pilkington's excellent 2016 [account](#) of the EDL, she suggests that – while 'the trajectory of the movement shows a rise in attendance to a peak of around 2000 (January–April 2010) followed by a decline to around 800–1000 during the second half of that year' (p.39) – '...internal 'infighting' and 'factioning' [was] perceived by [EDL] members as one of the main constraints on the efficacy and future of the movement'. Moreover, this is also corroborated by Busher's earlier account of EDL decline. He suggests that,

'each demonstration that did not attract as many participants as organisers had hoped for [during this period]...led to recriminations', that these recriminations activated sub-group identities (such as 'football lads', 'patriots', 'counter-jihad supporters', and those allied with the 'established far right') which in turn made it hard for the activists to perform the 'rituals' needed to create whole group solidarity.'

Explanation 3: 'The EDL worn down through state responses and political competition'

One explanation of EDL demise that only receives a minor hearing in EDL scholarship is the notion that state responses and political competition effectively wore down the fledgling movement. While intra-movement dynamics have been the mainstay of the most accounts of EDL decline, little has been said of the changing political and security environment around the EDL. For example, only once are new policing strategies suggested to be important at reducing the 'buzz' or 'rush' of demonstrations (Busher 2015: 151). Moreover, the only other account to assert the importance of state responses are those former EDL co-leader, Tommy Robinson, who complains (rather neurotically) not just about 'a conspiracy by the British state' to 'allow [Islamic extremism]' but also to persecute him.

A further explanation?

What I'd like to argue here is that, while internal developments are significant in accounting for the demise of the EDL, it was also changes in the political and security environment that closed the broader external political opportunity structure for the group as well. For example, and as the far-right monitoring group Hope not Hate has pointed out [elsewhere](#), the electoral rise of UKIP from May 2010 onwards has played no small part in creating a home for the 'left behind' voters that resemble the EDL's support base (Ford and Goodwin 2014). Moreover, and drawing on [my own PhD research](#) on policing, political and public policy responses to the EDL, it appears that it was the 'tactical adaptation' of elites that increasingly parlayed and outstripped the innovative techniques of the EDL (McAdam 1983) and that it was this process of 'tactical adaptation' to EDL protest that had the effect of reinstating the 'power disparity' between the fledgling movement and the UK state – with no effective 'tactical counters' (for example, standing for office or adopting more extreme methods of protest) established by the latter. For example, in the case of Birmingham, elites went on from fairly chaotic scenes of EDL protest in 2009 to a more aggressive and

robust set of campaigning tactics in subsequent protests. In addition, Luton Borough Council actively prohibited the EDL protest from its main town square and helped set up a Far Right Specialist Interest Group to share experiences and best practice of dealing with EDL protest. Moreover, in Bradford in 2013, elites shuffled protestors out of the City's main shopping street after initial chaos in 2010 and placed them near the City's interchange train station.

What does this mean for the study of the UK far right and social movements more generally? While the factionalism and the organisational limitations are clearly inherent in the demise of the EDL, this article has argued that the political and security environment around the time of EDL decline was also important. While the indirect and overtly structural nature of political and security explanations need to be taken into consideration when assessing the causal validity of explanation 3, UKIP and the tactical adaptation of the UK state to the EDL were clearly instrumental in syphoning support from the protest movement. This therefore is a key reminder that both internal and external factors need to be considered in the trajectories of social movements, and suggests that other anti-Islamic groups (such as PEGIDA UK, the South East Alliance and North West Infidels) would do well to weigh the [crowded market place](#) they find themselves in.

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