

Can partnership approaches developed to prevent Islamic terrorism be replicated for the extreme right? Comparing the Muslim Brotherhood and Generation Identity as ‘firewalls’ against violent extremism

Christopher J. Morris^{a1}

^aLecturer, University of Staffordshire

Abstract

Drawing on both official and scholastic descriptions of the Muslim Brotherhood and Generation Identity, this article suggests that in the UK context, some striking similarities exist between the two organisations. Both represent ostensibly nonviolent permutations of their respective extremist movements. Despite this similarity, a stark distinction exists in the response of the UK government. Although, like many Islamist civil society actors, the Muslim Brotherhood has benefited from the perception that nonviolent extremist groups can help address terrorism and radicalisation, the same contention is yet to be made regarding political extremists from within the far right. This article first uses the Muslim Brotherhood as an example to illustrate the standards that have been contrived in the UK for distinguishing nonviolent extremist organisations from their violent counterparts. The intention here is to demonstrate that just as the Muslim Brotherhood is identified as the prototypical example of ‘political Islam’, counterparts for this type of organisation can be found in different extremist contexts. It will be postulated that in particular, Generation Identity may be thought of as occupying an analogous position within the context of far-right extremism. The purpose of this comparison is to explore the viability of utilising ‘nonviolent extremists’ to prevent violent extremism across different movements; it will be contended that although the results of such an arrangement could be replicated, there is a need to consider the adverse impacts in the initial context before attempting to reproduce the approach.

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Introduction

The connection that is said to exist between some forms of religious or political extremism and terrorism has proved useful in terms of justifying law and policy. This postulated

¹ Author contact: Christopher J. Morris Email: Christopher.morris@staffs.ac.uk; University of Staffordshire College Rd, Stoke-on-Trent ST4 2DE

relationship has also proved useful in addressing the political extreme right, showing the connection between the aspects of extreme far-right politics and violence against certain identity groups; this has been frequently asserted as the basis to suppress ethnonationalist and extreme nationalist groups (Rydgren et al., 2018). Perhaps as a result of this process, new extreme right-wing organisations have sought to divest themselves of their connections to previous groups and now often visibly emphasise nonviolent forms of activism, with a characteristic example being the transnational Identitarian movement (Azmanova & Dakwar, 2019). Even when far-right groups make such commitments, however, scepticism often remains, with some going as far as to suggest that groups orientated around this political ideology have an intrinsic relationship with violence (Murdoch, 2019). Although this scepticism is perhaps warranted given the past trajectory of extreme right-wing groups, it potentially precludes working with the wider far-right movement to address the terrorism and violent extremism found on its fringes.

The link between Islamist religious extremism and terrorist violence has also caused the UK government to advance law and policy options, with numerous examples of this taking place (Home Office, 2019). This pattern does not hold in relation to all forms of Islamic extremism, however, with some extremist groups being identified as part of the solution. Characteristic of this inversion is the manner in which the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has been identified as a potential ‘firewall’ against Islamist or jihadist terrorism (Parliament UK, 2017). The argument is that by suppressing the MB and comparable organisations, the UK would make individuals more likely to resort to violence in pursuit of their aims because the political option provided by the MB being would be unavailable (Parliament UK, 2017, p. 3). Although many remain sceptical, it is not unusual to see civil society actors advocating for the MB on this basis (Barlow, 2018; Bushra, 2014). Moreover, it has been postulated that a policy of tolerance and engagement yields additional rewards in terms of intelligence and community cohesion (Hellyer, 2007, p. 20), enhancing the effectiveness of counter extremist programmes and initiatives (Cherney & Hartley, 2017, pp. 751–753). If these benefits can be reliably asserted in relation to Islamic extremism, then the

possibility of using other types of nonviolent extremist organisations in a similar partnership approach merits consideration.

Spurred by the fear that acts of terror similar to those witnessed in Norway and New Zealand could be replicated (Stott, 2019), far-right terrorism is now steadily moving up the UK security agenda. At some point, it may be anticipated that the threat of far-right violence may eclipse that of ‘jihadist’ terrorism, as is the case in the US (Byman, 2020). To address this rising trend, a number of solutions applicable to other forms of extremism have been considered in relation to this rising threat (Koehler, 2019). Indeed, UK authorities have already gone as far as to incorporate ‘former’ far-right activists into initiatives to help address this growing threat.² Extrapolating such trends, it is not unthinkable to suggest that a partnership with an active nonviolent extremist organisation could be implemented, mirroring the in place for Islamist groups. Given the benefits of ‘firewalling’ alleged in relation to Islamic extremism, it is not unreasonable to suggest that a similar strategy may be fruitfully employed to mitigate the threat of far-right terror. If this approach was to be taken, then a priority would be identifying a partner similar to the MB within the extreme far-right to replicate the same alleged benefits. The far-right is, after all, an umbrella term encapsulating a range of groups, ideologies, actions and behaviours (Mudde, 1995). Somewhere within this morass of opinions and approaches, there is likely a possible partner to be found. In this regard, it can be postulated that Generation Identity (GI) or a similar Identitarian group can serve as one such possibility for attempting such an arrangement. Using this group can be suggested based on GI’s most visible features, which emulate those of the MB in a rough sense: a transnational organisation, vocally committed to nonviolence and with an established branch in the UK. If such a policy was to be implemented to address the far-right, then GI may represent a strong possibility for a partnership.

The intention of the current paper is to first provide an overview of both the MB and GI, here with a focus on the operations of their respective national branches within the UK. It

² For instance, participating as ‘independent advisors’ in the Mayor of London’s programme.

will be demonstrated that there are some similarities between the two. Emphasis will be given to the position of both groups within their respective movements, emphasising the manner in which both groups have sought to emphasise their nonviolent methods while maintaining a consistent end goal. GI will then be shown to possess similar characteristics to those expressed by the MB. This will serve as an initial indication that it is possible to replicate the partnership approach, notwithstanding the existence of some distinctive challenges.

Based on the existence of a viable nonviolent extremist group within the extreme right, the present study will pose the following question: Why, given their similarities, is the MB embraced as a firewall against extremism, while GI and the political extreme right are excluded from similar counterextremist initiatives? It will ultimately be asserted that although it is possible to identify GI as a partner, the prospect of replicating the outcomes achieved in the initial context of Islamist extremism in relation to other emergent forms of extremism is a complex proposition. It is, for instance, possible to conclude that the MB has benefited from the status and influence conferred by partnership and providing an extreme right organisation with a comparable uplift may not be expedient, especially in light of the limited benefits that can be attributed directly to partnership arrangements of this nature. This, in addition to the absence of demand for such strategies in the far-right context, means that this approach is unlikely to be replicated.

This exercise is timely; a piecemeal response to different types of extremism creates the appearance that the UK government is exhibiting bias, either failing to treat some movements with the caution that they merit or granting privileges to some extremist movements while excluding others. It is now often stressed that counterterrorism initiatives are predominantly targeted at addressing the Islamist threat (Ahmed & Bashirov, 2020; Stevenson, 2019). The current article seeks to examine some complexities that emerge when attempting to address this imbalance, applying exiting strategies to the now ascendant threat of the extreme right. It can also be contended that this process permits a reinterrogation of the compromises that have been made to address Islamism terrorism and political violence; if

these cannot be replicated in relation to other extremist movements, then a basis exists to question their original justifications behind these policies and approaches.

How to define an appropriate partnership with an extremist group

Even in the absence of direct and explicit involvement in terrorism and political violence a relationship between nonviolent extremist groups and their violent counterparts can be hypothesised. The role that nonviolent groups can play in relation to terrorism has however been contentious, with the nature of this relationship subject to extensive debate. To summarise, nonviolent extremist groups have been suggested as either speeding up an individual's progression into violence or, alternately, representing an alternative to violence, discouraging individuals from adopting more drastic and violent methods.

The current paper first addresses the perspective that nonviolent extremist groups facilitate an individual's path to violence or that such groups act as a 'conveyor belt' (Baran, 2005). For instance, in the context of Islamic terrorism, it has been asserted that a number of key figures have graduated from 'nonviolent' groups to join or found violent ones, with a similar process having been alleged in relation to extreme right-wing terrorism (Orofino, 2020). Although such cases are not necessarily typical of all individuals involved in nonviolent extremism, the connection has proved sufficient to allege that nonviolent groups constitute a security threats, irrespective of whether they actively engage in violence themselves. Such a perspective, when embraced, has far-reaching consequences; attempts to address the root causes of terrorism attempted through associated religious and civil society groups have drawn criticism from, among others, nonviolent extremist groups themselves. To return to the UK context, much of this criticism has coalesced around the government's wider prevent strategy, which, at times, has emphasised the role that religious extremism plays in driving terrorism. Critics generally emphasise the absence of any deterministic, provable link between belief and violence, as well as the adverse impact that such an approach is alleged to have had on the UK's Muslim population in particular (Guhl, 2018, p. 208).

Serving as a counterpoint to the conveyor belt theory is the perspective that nonviolent extremists instead serve a valuable role in mitigating violent extremism, preventing the migration of individuals into more extreme groups. As an approach, ‘firewalling’ is fairly intuitive; it refers to the capacity for nonviolent extremist groups to decrease the risk of terrorism by providing potential terrorists with alternative avenues for change through political activism and individual development (Parliament UK, 2017). Identifying the groups capable of acting as a ‘firewall’ is an often-difficult exercise, however. As the concept of violent extremism is so hazily defined (Striegler, 2015), identifying a nonviolent extremist organisation is liable to be fraught with difficulties. It is, for instance, challenging to identify groups that are similar enough to share a common language and appeal to potential violent extremists while concurrently professing nonviolence to a sufficient degree to evade legal sanctions. The vague definition of radicalisation, as well as the changing relationship extremist groups often have with violence, further contribute to this difficulty, along with the unwillingness such groups may have to enter into arrangements with government or official bodies. Then, there are the selective policies applied by government and law enforcement partners, which need to ensure that the identified partners do not express sentiments or undertake actions that place them outside of the law. Finally, it is possible to stress the transnational nature of the challenge which moves such assessments beyond purely domestic considerations (Ranstorp, 2007, pp. 223–224). Any organisation considered for such a partnership must accordingly demonstrate that it is ‘fundamentally nonviolent’ (Parliament UK, 2017) and likely to remain committed to nonviolent activism. Recently, the concept of firewalling has been advocated fairly extensively, with some going as far as to suggest that former combatants can play a role in discouraging others from violence (Clubb, 2016).

Based on official sources and descriptions, it is possible to determine a definition and some broad criteria used to identify the appropriate partners for community engagement and who can act as ‘firewalls’. For instance, it is possible to first eliminate groups that would be considered illegal because of overt commitments to the use of violence or those that have

openly sought to radicalise others.³ Organisations likely to be proscribed can also be considered inappropriate. Further illumination can be gained from examining the standards used by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) when it identified the MB as an appropriate partner, given that the MB remains the prototypical example of ‘firewalling’. In this regard, the concept of ‘political Islam’ was used to delineate groups committed to the political process from those that are not (Parliament UK, 2017). Specifically, three criteria have been established, as follows:

Our general principles for engagement with Political Islamist parties and groups are their (i) rejection of violence; (ii) commitment to democratic processes with inclusive governance and tolerance of other faiths and minorities; and (iii) respect for international agreements. (Parliament UK, 2017, p. 4)

There is certainly space to consider whether the MB itself meets these requirements. Indeed, to suggest that the UK’s permutation of the organisation is consistent with any of these criteria requires detaching the branch from its wider international organisation, as well as from the circumstances of its origins and much of its history. In the context of the current study, however, these three criteria can assist in identifying other potential partnerships to limit terrorism and political violence within other extremist movements.

Alongside official perspectives, scholarship emphasises the value of partners to address terrorism. Investigations conducted into such programmes have revealed that a range of different strategies for community engagement have been trialled, with each approach bringing distinct benefits and drawbacks (Vermeulen & Bovenkerk, 2012). In relation to nonviolent extremists or fundamentalists, scholars point to several benefits that cannot be replicated to the same extent by a partnership with more moderate groups and spokespeople

³ Although the boundary between violent extremism and nonviolent extremism is often unclear, it is possible to identify certain views and behaviours that result in the individual or group being considered violent, such as engaging in violence or directly calling for others to do so.

or broader strategies of engagement aimed at wider Muslim populations (Lambert, 2013, pp. 223–224). Along with avoiding involving—and therefore stigmatising—the wider group in question (Harris-Hogan et al., 2016), several of these alleged benefits relate to limiting violent extremism and terrorism. It has frequently been alleged that nonviolent extremist groups can be used as community partners to address the threat of extremism because of their credibility within their respective wider community and their potential to engage potentially violent extremists. In relation to Islamic extremism, it is suspected that effective partners can use their knowledge of Islamic scripture and jurisprudence to offer convincing alternative interpretations (Hassan, 2015), leading individuals away from violence.

Critics of ‘firewalling’ and similar partnerships have indicated the detrimental impact that such relationships impose. For instance, it can be suggested that in choosing to partner with such extremists, government agencies neglect relationships with moderates, failing to support the ongoing transition to modernity taking place within the faith (Desker & Ramakrishna, 2002, p. 167). Then, there is the view partnering with such groups ‘normalises’ the axioms and ideals that such groups hold, ultimately making the state a partner in the radicalisation process (Maher & Frampton, 2009, p. 12). Therefore, it is critical to balance the benefits and drawbacks of such a partnership.

Although criticism of partnership arrangements is certainly present, it remains possible to stress that there is no empirically proven link between nonviolent extremism and terrorism (Briggs, 2010, p. 975). If this absence may serve as the basis for partnerships with nonviolent Islamic extremist organisations, then the same absence can be invoked in relation to other forms of nonviolent extremism. Concurrently, however, it must be acknowledged that the drawbacks alleged in relation to extremist Islamist partnerships are likely to remain in relation to other forms of nonviolent extremism, so comparable care must be taken in identifying potential partners. Applying the standards established for partnership to other strands of extremism is not, however, a simple task. The challenge relates to the absence of a clear definition of nonviolent groups that are applicable across different types of extremism. Although the guidelines established by the FCO provide a rough basis and it is additionally

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possible to draw on descriptions of appropriate partners provided by government and scholastic sources, it is difficult to truly determine what features to look for in a ‘firewall’ in other forms of extremist movement.

If it is accepted that the case of the MB has some explanatory value in terms of defining what an extremist partnership looks like, then identifying groups that run in parallel with the MB in other extremist contexts could expedite the wider application of this strategy. If, as the current study suggests, an analogue for the MB is present in the extreme far-right, then an opportunity to attempt such a partnership exists.

Features of the Muslim Brotherhood and Generation Identity

As stated, it is difficult to understand the concept of ‘firewalling’ with any degree of certainty, particularly when moving beyond its initial boundaries in relation to ‘political Islam’. It can, however, be stated that the MB provides the prototypical example of such a partnership arrangement. In the UK context, the capacity for the MB to act as such has been actively considered. The UK is not alone in identifying the MB as a tool to be wielded against extremism and other ills. Comparable strategies can, for instance, be found in France (Peter, 2006), with Germany also having recognised the organisation’s value as an instrument to further the country’s security (Steinberg, 2010). The MB has, for what it is worth, identified itself as capable of fulfilling such a role. It is not unfair to conclude that the MB represents an archetypical example of a nonviolent group. Identifying a potential candidate organisation or group to act as a ‘firewall’ within the context of far-right extremism can, therefore, be partially accomplished by identifying an organisation that holds a roughly analogous position within the ‘far-right’ to that occupied by the MB within its respective wider movement.

The MB has represented a relatively stable presence within the wider Islamist movement. Unlike the more aggressive jihadist movements with which the MB arguably shares a vision (Counter Extremism Project, 2019), it claims to have committed itself to the political process as a means of achieving its ultimate aim of Islamic restoration (Perry, 2018,

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pp. 1–32). In terms of influences, although the MB draws heavily on Islamic theology and axioms, it has been profoundly influenced by both fascism and Marxism, replacing ideas of ethnic and class-based unity with religious oneness to better appeal to an Islamic audience (Chertoff, n.d.; Karsh, 2013, pp. 16–17). In turn, it has been cited as a key influence for more overtly violent movements like ISIS and al Qaeda (Counter Extremism Project, 2019).

The MB has grown in scope from its origins in Egypt, now boasting a presence across the Muslim world and within the global Islamic diaspora, founding branches across Europe and North America (Vidino, 2011, pp. 6–7). The MB, although ostensibly nonviolent, has been designated a terrorist organisation on several occasions,⁴ and there are clear, demonstrable instances of its members engaging in violent behaviour, including assassinations, terrorist acts and even armed conflict (Rinehart, 2009). Arguably, its goal of completely eliminating all non-Islamic influences from public life is at odds with the approach it expresses; indeed, it has been implied that the MB is rather circumspect when addressing its target audience, with the veneer of nonviolence cultivated purely for the benefit of external observers (Kuran, 1998). Nevertheless, its failure to commit to the type of jihad advocated for by prominent ‘name brand’ movements such as ISIS has led to criticism and infighting with other groups on several documented occasions (Leiken & Brooke, 2007, p. 107).

As a transnational movement, the MB has become prominent in a number of different regions, often presenting a different profile to take advantage of different circumstances and prevailing conditions (Lynch, 2016). In the UK, the MB has succeeded in presenting itself as a potential ‘firewall’ against extremism, with the FCO having recognised the value of the group in stabilising democratic transitions (Parliament UK, 2017), building on the longstanding sentiment that engagement with the Muslim community mitigates fundamentalist terrorism (O’toole et al., 2016; Spalek & Lambert, 2008). The argument is that by restricting political Islam, the UK government enables violent Islamists to gain ground

⁴ 114th CONGRESS 1st Session S.2230 - Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act of 2015 (November 3, 2015) sec 2.2.

both overseas and in the domestic context (Lynch, 2010). This concept has been met with some scepticism, with the opposing perspective stating that groups like the MB act as a ‘conveyor belt’ to extremism (Parliament UK, 2017). Lamentably, there is a lack of concrete, empirical evidence advocating for either argument, with the role played by the MB likely being considerably more complex.

The prototype of the MB helps establish several features that should be possessed by potential firewall partners. The group in question should be relatively well established and ideally share the goals of violent extremists but not the methods. It is critical that the partner is effectively a competitor to these groups, rather than a moderate alternative. There is additionally a sense to be gained that a group or organisation need not be excluded from partnership based on its past behaviour or manner of operation in other regions and states. Even before examining other strands of extremism, some conformity can be anticipated; several of these features are likely to be replicated by groups in other forms of extremism; the MB has proven successful and, therefore, represents a model for others to emulate.

Like the MB, GI is not native to the UK but represent a local permutation of the pan-European Identitarian movement (Archie Henderson, 2020, pp. 20–21). Ideologically, GI has remained relatively consistent with the core axioms of contemporary far-right thought. In particular, the group is orientated around the idea that a ‘great replacement’ of native European populations is being undertaken, along with expressing concerns regarding the processes of globalisation and Islamisation, which together represent the key issues the group focuses on (Cosentino, 2020). The core ideas the group expresses have been used to justify violence by other groups within the extreme right, and GI itself has become entangled with acts of terrorism and calls for political violence, much to its consternation (Dearden, 2019).

It is frequently asserted that Identitarian movements represent an attempt to launder aspects of well-established fascist ideology, presenting ethnonationalist policies with a more benign and accessible face (Richards, 2019). This perspective suggests that when compared with the wider far-right, GI is not differentiated by ideology but solely by methods and aesthetics. Indeed, it can be conceded that although the group vocally commits itself to

nonviolence, this claim is not considered credible because of the wider movement the group inhabits. It is even possible to allege that plausible connections exist between GI and acts of far-right terrorism (Archie Henderson, 2020, p. 21). Although these links are often tenuous, they may be used to assert that GI supports such actions and is indirectly responsible for the ' increasing prevalence of such events.

Although the 'firewall' concept seems to have been contrived solely in relation to the MB, if it is to be considered viable, then the expectation follows that it would function similarly in relation to other equivalent forms of extremism. In the context of extreme right-wing groups, GI represents a serviceable analogue for the MB; indeed, just as the MB has been identified as a typical example of nonviolent or 'political Islam', GI can be thought of as embodying 'political' ethnonationalism, Identitarianism or far-right extremism, depending on the terminology used. Instead of resorting to force, GI proposes achieving the restoration of an 'ethnically European Europe' largely through media engagement and political activism, not violence (Willinger, 2013, pp. 100–101). It can be postulated that GI shares a common language with violent extremist movements and, therefore, is ideally situated to reduce far-right political violence and terrorism by providing an alternative pathway for susceptible individuals. Before examining if such a partnership would be of use, however, it should be determined if GI meets the standards for such a partnership established in relation to 'political Islam'. First, however, it is important to understand the limitations of such an approach that are imposed by the differences between the two organisations.

Key differences

It is possible to mention some broad conformities between GI and the MB. These similarities are interesting but do not provide a basis to allege that the two are identical or that they are likely to have a comparable impact on the prevalence of terrorism within the UK context. It is better to contend that both groups are aspiring to embody the same model of activism while experiencing different challenges and obstacles arising from their disparities in their age and competence, as well as those imposed by their respective ideologies.

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A number of key differences between the two groups are likely to lead to divergent results should similar strategies be attempted in relation to both; first, it is important to specify the respective histories of the two organisations. Emerging in 1928, the MB developed in the context of extreme authoritarian suppression, an experience that has since dictated its often indirect approach (Kuran, 1998). Despite its often clandestine approach, the MB enjoys global brand awareness and a level of credibility that is arguably yet to be paralleled by any contemporary extreme right group. Standing in testament to this profile are the extensive number of studies and histories that have been produced. Generally emphasised are the group's clandestine nature (Wickham, 2013, p. 91), its pragmatism and its track record of controlling its members (Vidino, 2020). The history of the movement and its global presence arguably contribute to the organisation's credibility, and this can be understood as constituting a significant portion of the group's appeal as a partner.

In relation to GI, it is not possible to refer to an extensive cannon of literature to determine its history. GI is considerably younger, and although it has been mentioned in many surveys of the contemporary extreme right, it has yet to merit much in the way of specific attention. This is not to say that the group is entirely obscure, with it having been the subject of the focus of anti-right-wing activist groups both internal to the UK (Murdoch, 2019) and based on GI's wider European presence (Beirich & Via, 2020). These reports generally emphasise connections and similarities between GI and the wider extreme right. The limited scholarship and information concerning the organisation does, however, indicate a number of characteristics that differentiate it from the MB. In addition to its relative youth, the groups' origins are significantly different, and accordingly, GI does not seem to have yet experienced the same level of authoritarian suppression that contributed to the MB's early development.⁵ Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that GI or any comparable organisation within the UK's far-right can draw on foreign support to the same extent as the MB. Yet as a pan-European movement, GI has been identified as a growing force (Nissen, 2020). It is not

⁵ This is not to say that GI has not faced sanctions, only that the level of suppression experienced by the MB in its formative stages is difficult to replicate in a contemporary European context.

inconceivable that GI, given time and the right incentives, may continue to develop, ultimately becoming a stable presence within the extreme right.

Even a cursory examination of the two groups' respective histories illustrates a number of key differences that would complicate juxtaposing any policy from one to the other. It is possible to suggest that the two organisations are in very different phases of development and, therefore, merit different solutions; moreover, it is challenging to present GI as meriting the same response as the more fully actualised MB.

In addition to the different historical profiles of the MB and GI, it is important to consider the impact that their different ideologies are liable to exert. Even if the groups are a match in terms of their capability and sophistication—which is far from the case—then their identities alone would be sufficient to differentiate an official response. To begin with, the MB, which is unsurprisingly orientated around Islam, permits the group to frame its activism within the context of this religion, arguably permitting it to benefit from specific protections provided by law for religious groups. In the UK context, white race-based activism has faced challenges; any group advancing claims of ethnic superiority or the unique franchise of ethnic Europeans generally faces a range of legal sanctions and exclusions designed to limit their spread and discredit their core message (Goodwin, 2011). GI has a significant barrier to overcome in this regard.

When developing policies and laws to address nonviolent extremists in the UK context, it would be beneficial to understand the structure of both organisations in as much detail as possible. This is, unfortunately, not truly practicable, with many relevant features being the subject of contention at best and completely obscured in many cases. The MB is by nature clandestine, so it is naturally difficult to definitively understand, even though its presence in the UK can be understood as comprising a bare handful of core members who together with the groups' international presence and serve to coordinate UK activities. Its more direct influence is facilitated through a number of partners and affiliates, a number of which have been identified. In lieu of clear and identifiable lines of control, the MB's network is mapped out through a web of disaggregated organisations. Although several of these

organisations are centred on influencing politics in the UK, several others further the work of the MB in other nations. Therefore, the true scale of the organisation is perhaps not best understood in its numbers but in the number of other groups and organisations over which it holds sway or influence. Its relatively small tangible profile has not prevented the UK government from treating it seriously, and the group illustrates the limitations of trying to understand nonviolent extremist organisations through a more conventional lens.

An acknowledgement of the key differences between GI and the MB, both in terms of their history and ideology, serves to illustrate the boundaries and limitations inherent in any such comparison. Based on these differences, it is not appropriate to affect a direct comparison between the two organisations in terms of their likely impact or relationship with terrorism. It is possible to state that both are attempting to utilise the same broad approach; many of the strategies employed by the MB may be replicated by GI or a similar organisation within the extreme right. It is particularly important to emphasise that there is nothing to suggest that GI will ever rise to the level of the MB in the UK context. However, GI does prove that the model adopted by the MB can be successfully emulated within the specific context of far-right extremism. Based on this similarity, it is possible to examine if, differences notwithstanding, GI could represent a potential partner to address the growing threat of extreme right terrorism. This would require at the very least that GI is capable of a roughly comparable commitment to the same core behaviours as the MB; this will now be examined, beginning with the first key characteristic of nonviolence.

Nonviolence

The first central aspect that an organisation such as GI needs to demonstrate is nonviolence, or 'rejection of violence' (Parliament UK, 2017). Based on the interpretation of this principle in relation to the MB, it is appropriate to apply some boundaries. The MB, for instance, has not exactly been nonviolent in all its iterations (Vidino, 2011), and it would, therefore, be unfair to apply a higher standard to GI or other 'firewall' prospects. Vocal commitment to nonviolence while refraining from supporting and enabling violence in an

overt manner should be sufficient, with some latitude in terms of past actions and the activities of the branches in other states. While recognising the violent potential present in such movements, it can be conceded that many nonviolent extremist groups are likely to remain so, as long as the prevailing circumstances remain constant.

An organisation capable of acting as a ‘firewall’ must be vocally committed to nonviolence. The MB for instance has made a number of vocal commitments to nonviolence and, according to MB leadership, the group remains committed to this principle (Hamid et al., 2017); this is a view that has been restated by MB members and associates in the UK context. While MB membership remains unclear, the identified proxies Islamic Society of Britain (ISB), Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) and Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) all use nonviolent approaches (Jenkins, 2015). In the case of the MB, there is a basis to be sceptical regarding the extent of this commitment based on the message articulated in its core doctrine, as well as the trajectory of the MB in past instances.

What causes an organisation like the MB to transition into violence? The transition may be deliberate. Ultimately, it is emphasised that upon attaining a critical mass of support, its vision would have to be imposed within a nation by a vanguard of collected individuals (Qutb, n.d., pp. 64–65). This would suggest that any organisation inspired by the MB is concealing its violent aspirations until their objectives can be practically realised. Reinhart provides a second theory as to why the MB may resort to violence; examining the group under its early leadership, Reinhart suggests that the group’s initial resort to violence was the result of repeated frustration with the failure to achieve change through political means (Reinhart, 2009). Whatever the reasoning, there is no escaping the reality that the MB has transitioned into violence in the past, and similar eventualities are possible in the future.

However, the UK MB’s commitment to nonviolence and recognition as a ‘fundamentally nonviolent’ organisation by the UK government is not necessarily at odds with the past behaviour exhibited by the organisation outside of the UK. Although the organisation has been associated with terrorism and political violence in the past, it can be stressed that the MB today would have to overcome significant internal barriers to openly

support the use of force (Hamid et al., 2017, pp. 7–13). In addition to the general disposition of the global MB, it is possible to suggest that the circumstances that have caused the MB to support or facilitate terrorism and political violence are unlikely to be present in the UK; the MB is unlikely to muster a sufficient vanguard to make such a change in strategy viable, and at the current juncture, the MB in the UK is unlikely to give into this frustration, with quietism and political activism having yielded benefits that arguably exceed those attainable by force.

In relation to nonviolence, it is possible to examine an organisation like GI and see similar trends emerging, even if they have not yet become established within the far-right Identitarian movement. At first glance, there is no denying that organisations on the extreme right have frequently undertaken a transition from vocal nonviolence to supporting or facilitating violence. A characteristic UK example here is National Action (NA), which began as a nonviolent organisation but was unable to maintain its outward rejection of violence, ultimately leading to the organisation being proscribed (Allen, 2019). It could be anticipated that GI, or for that matter any similar faction within the far-right, is susceptible to a similar process of collective radicalisation. For GI to be recognised as rejecting violence to a sufficient degree to be recognised as a ‘firewall’ against extremism, it must be demonstrated that it is unlikely to succumb to the same process as many similar organisations within the wider movement.

There are several indications that GI could be considered sufficiently nonviolent to act as a candidate for partnership. It has been recognised as having made a vocal commitment to nonviolent action (Murdoch, 2019), even if there is scepticism surrounding this commitment. It is then possible to specify some similarities between the group’s ideological underpinnings and those of the MB, particularly as they pertain to the use of force. First, contemporary extreme right thinkers have long articulated the need for a ‘quiet revolution’, emphasising a long-term cultural change (Bar-On, 2013, pp. 88–89). Much like the MB, however, this long-term nonviolent strategy serves as a potential precursor to collective violence once the movement has achieved a position of strength. Like the MB, GI can be said to have a goal that

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would be prohibitively difficult to achieve without the application of force; even without contending that GI are falsifying their aims, the goal of ‘remigration’ can be aligned with other past and current instances in which national movements have sought to restore a given territory to the exclusive use of an ‘indigenous’ population. Although Identitarians cite previous examples of ‘remigration’ upon which such a policy could be predicated (Zúquete, 2018), such examples do not generally conform to a reasonable definition of being nonviolent.⁶

GI has additionally recognised the risk of degeneration into a violent movement and has undertaken steps to prevent this from occurring, ejecting members as needed; indeed, the UK branch has been sanctioned for not suppressing statements that did not conform to the core message of GI (Mulhall, 2019). Although such measures do not demonstrate the presence of internal compliance mechanisms comparable to those possessed by the MB, this represents an improvement on many previous iterations of the extreme far-right. Moreover, much like the MB, the organisation can be said to be aware that the overt use of force or direct incitement to commit acts of terrorism are not expedient under prevailing circumstances; not only does the example of NA illustrate this peril rather eloquently, but GI has demonstrated an awareness that the use of force is likely to alienate the public, setting back their mission (Willinger, 2013).

The capacity of GI to actually achieve the conditions required to realise their goals, however, is distant. It is possible to specify the repeated failure of violent extreme right organisations to transition into politics in the UK context, and given enhanced laws to proscribe organisations, GI can be assumed to recognise that a collective transition into a violent group would not serve its agenda. Much like the MB, it can be contended that in the absence of an extraordinary change in circumstances, GI is likely to remain committed to political activism. Like the MB however, it is not possible to consider the groups’ nonviolent methods as devoid of consequences. Over time, it can be anticipated that GI and other groups

⁶ The evacuation of Europeans from Algeria along with other instances of decolonisation are used as touchstones yet are difficult to characterise as nonviolent.

may garner more support for their policies; this may not be as a remote eventuality as it initially seems; the notion of ‘remigration’ has recently made headway in other European contexts (Nissen, 2020), and the risks of GI and the wider Identitarian movement building on the increasing regional prominence of these policies needs to be anticipated.

Ultimately, it is possible to conclude that both the MB and GI make a commitment to nonviolence that is comparable in scope. There are naturally some practical differences between the two organisations that can be specified; GI is relatively less established and, hence, is less likely to possess the adequate mechanisms to ensure that its membership maintains a convincing outward commitment to nonviolence. It is possible to speculate that because no sanctioned relationship has been cultivated between such groups and the state, the incentives that have caused the MB to devote itself to a visible policy of nonviolence are not yet present in relation to GI. In addition to these variations, however, there is a basis to suggest that there is a normative distinction between commitments to nonviolence made by Islamist groups and commitments made by extremist far-right organisations; the latter are more likely to be viewed with scepticism in European contexts because of recent history (Ajanovic et al., 2016), at least for the time being.

Commitment to democratic processes

Alongside nonviolence, the status of the MB as a ‘firewall’ against violent extremism relies on its ‘commitment to democratic processes with inclusive governance and tolerance of other faiths and minorities’(Parliament UK, 2017). Generally, the MB has made a number of commitments to following the democratic process. It is possible to suggest that the group has seemingly adapted to democracy, with the case of the organisation in Egypt, Turkey and Tunisia seemingly demonstrating the organisation’s reconciliation with the democratic process (Hazran, 2020; Özcan, 2018). In the UK, the organisation has additionally made commitments to democracy through its identifiable proxies. This vocal support for democracy has led some to the conclusion that the group represent ‘participationists’ rather than extremists (Perry, 2018, pp. 26–27). Others have suggested that the group represents a

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profound threat to Western democracies, and even though the nature of this threat is different from that posed by violent extremists and terrorists, it is no less profound (Vidino, 2011). Here, the threat is based on rhetoric rather than the use of force (Mohamed & Momani, 2015). This criticism can be levied based on the group's core ideology and past behaviour. The group's core ideology is naturally critical of democracy, which to them represents the characteristic example of a Western system of governance; moreover, democracy is generally considered subverting 'rule by god' (Kepel, 2004, pp. 31–32). Not being Islamic in nature, a democracy does not form part of the MB's ultimate vision. The group is, however, committed to using whatever tools needed to advance its vision, the ballot being central to this mission in many cases (Vidino, 2009). Accordingly, it can be claimed that the MB supports the use of democracy in pursuit of an undemocratic end.

GI, like the MB, recognises that the democratic process is useful. Like the MB, GI is rooted in a rejection of Western democracy, at least as democracy is currently expressed (Bar-On, 2012). Ideologically, the Identitarian movement is grounded in the 'nouvelle droit' or 'new right' philosophical movement, which is generally critical of democracy as it is currently understood, though the reasons for this rejection vary. Although various reasons are given for rejecting democracy, a general sense can be gained that Identitarians regard democracy as a key cause of Western civilisation's current predicaments. An examination of the philosophical underpinnings of the 'nouvelle droit' does, however, reveal a commitment to utilising democracy and the freedoms upon which it is contingent. This commitment has been characterised as tactical rather than genuine (Bar-On, 2012). Indeed, this commitment to nonviolent methods has been aligned with the influence of the far left on the thinking of the far-right, particularly in terms of its methods (Bar-On, 2011).

The commitment to democracy expressed by the MB and GI can perhaps be viewed as the result of a contamination, or the adoption of strategies from other ideological movements. The MB is recognised as having deviated from previously established Islamist tactics, drawing upon, among others, Marxist and fascist ideas (Hansen & Kainz 1, 2007). The similarities between the ideas and tactics developed by Marxist thinkers and the MB's

approach can be indicated even if this adoption is not recognised as a deliberate action on the part of the MB (Kandil, 2011, p. 39). It would, however, be peculiar to suggest that the group has existed in isolation since its inception, particularly given its expressed desire to utilise whatever methods available (Vidino, 2009) to achieve its ultimate aims.

In the case of the extreme right and groups like GI, it is again possible to postulate that its disposition towards democracy is also a product of adoption. This can be asserted based on its intellectual origins within the new right, with key thinkers such as de Benoist (De Benoist, 2017) and adopting the axioms of left-wing thinkers such as Gramsci for an extreme right audience. The contemporary Identitarian movement has additionally been described as neo-Gramscian (Schlegel, 2020), having adopted the counter-hegemonic strategies described by the thinker. Indeed, examinations of the contemporary far-right often reveal the manner in which the techniques pioneered by the far left—specifically those relating to activism—are increasingly exhibited by extreme right groups and social movements (SPLC, 2018). There is the contention that such approaches may be acquired indirectly; it has been postulated that far-right extremists are often inspired by the approaches pioneered by Islamist extremists (Brzuskiewicz, 2020). An adoption of a Gramscian approach by such groups may cause certain far-right groups to follow Islamists into nonviolence, just as they mirrored previous escalations in approach.

To some extent, both GI and the MB can be thought of as having adopted an approach derivative of the programme of counter-hegemonic activism specified by Gramsci, though each has tailored their approach to their own audience and mission. This can be thought of as inculcating both with a disposition towards democracy that is ultimately hostile but unlikely to present an immediate threat, so long as the conditions do not noticeably alter.

It can be contended based on the FCO's definition and prevailing understanding of 'democratic values' that some broader commitments need to be demonstrated, however. In terms of tolerance, it is possible to identify instances in which both GI and the MB fall short. It is undeniable that GI is vehemently opposed to diversity within Western society, suggesting that homogeneity is a prerequisite to social peace (Generation Identity, 2013, p. 33). This

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aligns the group with the MB, who regard comprehensive Islamisation as a goal (Parliament UK, 2017). In both cases, it is possible to identify a range of groups whose presence would not be viable in light of these long-term aims. It is possible, however, to speculate that it is feasible to overlook some of these shortcomings should the value of the partnership exceed the adverse consequences imposed by the group's presence.

International agreements

Consistent with the ongoing process of globalisation and the transnational reach that extremist organisations often have, the importance of partnerships with political extremists who conform to international agreements is undoubtedly necessary (Adamson, 2005). It would certainly not be expedient for the UK to foster a working relationship with an extremist organisation if this came at the expense of international censure, for instance. A growing concern is that the UK may suffer the consequences from harbouring extremists that are condemned in other national contexts; indeed, it can be contended that the UK has already suffered reputational damage for harbouring a number of extremists in this manner (Innes, 2008). It is further possible to speculate that the failure to address extremist groups, even those of a political nature, could entail legal consequences, though this possibility is far from certain (Cassese, 2001, p. 994).

The MB demonstrates the complex nature of the international sphere and its increasing relevance to domestic counterextremist initiatives. Here, the MB's ambiguous position in the UK is partially a product of the group's international profile. On the one hand, the MB in the UK have benefited from external factors, with other states having lobbied on the group's behalf (Roberts, 2014). On the other hand, the MB has been designated as a terrorist organisation by several different nations.⁷ It is additionally important to understand how the MB's UK presence could further the mission of groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, both of which are unambiguously violent organisations the MB habitually supports.

⁷ See US Congress (n 4).

Although the MB has, at best, an uncertain relationship with international agreements, it is worth mentioning the manner in which the MB is disaggregated from its activist proxies in the UK (Jenkins, 2015). The MB also conceals its membership, providing a plausible basis to deny the existence of any connection between its activities in the UK and the wider organisation. Given that this disaggregation is partially responsible for the group avoiding a designation of a terrorist organisation (David Cameron, 2015), it can be postulated that this feature insulates the groups' presence in the UK from being held accountable for the wider MB's often contentious international profile.

Again, the manner in which the MB has demonstrated adherence to international agreements should inform the approach taken to other potential partners from different extremist movements. In relation to far-right organisations like GI, it is critical that their UK presence is sufficiently disaggregated from any international aspects of the movement that are inconsistent with international agreements. This may prove challenging; somewhat counter intuitively for an organisation with pronounced nationalist positions, GI has something of a transnational profile. Therefore, it is to be anticipated that any violent actions committed by or supported by GI internationally could impact the viability of any partnership within the UK context.

It is also important to emphasise that partnering with an extreme right-wing organisation, even if the goal is to address terrorism and radicalisation, has significant drawbacks. Considering GI, for instance, the transnational nature of the organisation is a critical aspect to consider; if GI is to be considered a potential partner by the UK while concurrently being rejected by other European nations, this could have profound consequences for the UK's reputation. The UK government needs to be mindful of the perception and response of other nations to its partner organisation.

Does the firewalling relationship make sense, and under what circumstances could it be used to address far-right extremism?

As the case of the MB demonstrates, the UK government does not demand ideal partners in its efforts to address violent extremism; although the initial guidance on the concept of a ‘firewall’ was not especially clear, the use of the MB as an archetypical case provides a more detailed picture of this arrangement. In terms of applying this strategy in the context of far-right extremism, the current study has determined that the MB and GI intersect in some key areas; although GI is yet to demonstrate the staying power and sophistication of the MB, there is a basis to suggest that it envisions itself as occupying a similar position within its respective movement; it can be recognised as sharing the same ultimate vision as violent extremists within the extreme right, making a comparable commitment to nonviolence, democratic principles and international agreements to that made by the MB. Both GI and the MB recognise that the utility of nonviolent methods can exceed those of violent approaches. Both have committed to democracy, even though this is based on the realisation that, again, their methods and activism work well under such prevailing conditions. Although some ambiguity exists in the extent to which either organisation can be thought of as respecting international agreements, the absence of tangible, provable links between different branches and the group’s international leadership could be cited as a mitigating factor in both cases.

Naturally, there are some practical limitations that may preclude replicating partnership approaches within the extreme far-right context. It has to be conceded that GI is not as developed or sophisticated as the MB. Being the younger group, it is yet to accumulate many of the features that characterise the MB; the absence of these features limits their resemblance to one another. Whereas MB has demonstrated significant internal mechanisms for maintaining discipline within its members and affiliates, no organisation within the far-right has yet demonstrated the capacity to do the same. It could be reasonably suggested that GI will succumb to the same problems that initiated the downfall of NA, for instance.

Moreover, it is arguably the influence that the MB has over the wider Islamist movement that makes it an effective ‘firewall’ (Maher & Frampton, 2009, p. 23). The ecology of the far-right has some pronounced differences; at the current juncture, GI, or for that matter any other group, has yet to accumulate anything like the influence marshalled by the MB over other organisations within the movement. In addition to specifying the practical differences between GI and the MB, which are certainly apparent, it is possible to suggest that their respective extremist movements are different, perhaps different enough to complicate transferring strategies from one to the other.

Limiting any application to the UK context, it can be postulated that the MB has benefited significantly from its status as a shareholder in preventing extremism and radicalisation (Vidino, 2010, pp. 118–119). In addition to providing the organisation with a degree of mainstream legitimacy, this relationship insulates the movement from competition with other Islamist groups, giving the appearance that it has forward momentum towards its ultimate aim. If a comparable offer was made to a nonviolent extremist group within the extreme right, it may prove to be a sufficient incentive to engender within its followers a deeper commitment to nonviolent methods while concurrently enhancing its status within the wider movement. Though such a step is not to be undertaken lightly, offering such an endorsement to an extreme right group would assist in producing a viable partner for countering violent extremism.

It is also worth emphasising the degree to which the initial concept has been contested. The benefits and drawbacks of partnering with the MB—both in the UK and internationally—have been well documented. The UK government is cognisant of these drawbacks, as evidenced by its own reviews of the organisation. Yet there is also a need to consider a demand problem. Successive instances of Islamist-motivated terrorist attacks have cemented the threat in both public awareness and the UK’s security agenda. As time has passed, the persistent risk of Islamist-motivated terrorism has motivated calls to expand and deepen partnerships with leaders and organisations in the Muslim community. The MB, which has largely succeeded in its mission to present itself as a leader within this community, has

effectively capitalised upon this demand (Vidino, 2010, pp. 96–99). It is additionally possible to postulate that the demand arising from the alleged benefits of such partnerships has caused the UK government to be less critical regarding the partners it engages.

It is this issue of demand—so influential in facilitating partnerships with the likes of the MB—that is likely to drive the inclusion of organisations like GI. Just as the firewalling partnership was initially contrived to address the then preeminent threat of Islamist terrorism, as the relative threat of far-right motivated terrorism grows, more drastic measures are likely to be justified. In the UK context, the threat of far-right extremist terrorism is frequently equated with that arising from Islamist extremist groups. The difference in how the two threats are dealt with is becoming increasingly unsustainable. The very fact that potential partners can be identified within the far-right incites the question as to why collaboration has not been attempted yet.

The more important question is perhaps more difficult: Would such an approach be of actual utility in terms of reducing terrorism and radicalisation? The results of partnering with the MB to address Islamic extremism are far too ambiguous and contested to conclude that firewalling is a good approach in its initial context. In relation to the extreme right, it is possible only to suggest that equally contested results will be achieved, with opinion likely to be just as divided.

In terms of implications for policymakers, it is first worth noting that the approach pioneered by the MB is effective enough to be replicated. GI is perhaps the first of many extreme right groups that may attempt to identify itself as a necessary interlocutor between the British government and an often disaffected section of the UK population, mimicking the behaviour of the MB in relation to Muslims. Although such a move could conceivably be alleged to provide a means of addressing terrorism and political violence, it has clear drawbacks, many of which are made apparent by examining the manner in which ‘nonviolent extremism’ is defined. A partnership with any extreme right organisation that replicates the same flexibilities apparent in the current approach in relation to the MB would not necessarily preclude behaviours that could be damaging in terms of both the domestic context and the

UK's international profile. Decision makers should perhaps be mindful of the consequences of inclusion on the extremist movement in question. Just as the position of the MB was cemented by partnership, selecting an extremist group could effectively constitute an endorsement of the chosen group, providing it with access and resources not generally possessed by other extreme right groups. The UK government should perhaps be careful before playing 'kingmaker' in relation to what may otherwise remain a fragmented and divided extremist context. Finally, when juxtaposing strategies from the Islamist context to the extreme right, it is important to acknowledge that differences exist; although there is a need to exhibit parity and fairness between different forms of extremism, the very clear differences between different ideologies and their respective organisations need to remain a consideration.

Conclusion

Generally, it has been noted that counterextremist strategies are applied almost exclusively in relation to Islamic communities, even though terrorism stemming from the far-right represents a comparable threat (Schanzer et al., 2016, p. 32). As the far-right continues to grow in prominence, this disjunction will become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Although there are many potential programmes and approaches that could be carried over from Islamist terrorism to address extreme right-motivated terrorism, the present paper has focused on a single approach: the assertion that partnering with a nonviolent political extremist group can assist in preventing violent extremism. By examining the application of this approach to the MB, the criteria established to describe such an arrangement have been resolved in greater detail, permitting an exploration of the concept in other extremist contexts, specifically the extreme right.

There are grounds to suggest that the UK could affect a partnership arrangement with a nonviolent extreme right group, mirroring the relationships cultivated with nonviolent Islamist extremists. Although some specific challenges would make a precise replication of

this arrangement difficult, the conformity demonstrated between GI and the MB does suggest that the results of such an arrangement could be broadly reproduced; indeed, it can be suggested that based on the prior adoption of the MB, GI may have potential for being brought into such a partnership, broadly conforming to the criteria established for describing groups capable of acting as firewalls against violent extremism.

There are, however, some considerations to keep in mind, both in relation to the specific approach of ‘firewalling’ and perhaps when attempting to carry the tactic across other strategies to address extreme right-wing terrorism. As the current paper has illustrated, the approaches utilised in relation to Islamist-motivated terrorism often have drawbacks that need to be taken into account before attempting to apply them in a new context. Indeed, the contention that partnerships with nonviolent extremist groups can exert a beneficial impact on violence and terrorism is contested to such a degree that applying a similar approach to the far-right may be difficult.

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