

Why We Fight: Understanding the Counter-Jihad Movement

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Abstract

This paper deals with a network that can be loosely described as the ‘Counter Jihad Movement’ (CJM). CJM activists are a loose collection of bloggers, political parties, street movements, think tanks, campaign groups and pundits across several countries, all united by the shared belief that, to some degree, the ‘Muslim world’ is at war with the ‘West’. Overall, the CJM shares a great deal with fascism and right wing extremism more broadly. However, the movement is varied enough that not all components sit easily alongside traditional conceptions of right wing extremism. In stark contrast to other far-right extremist groups, CJM contributors often code their rhetoric in the language of human rights. Occasionally the CJM have been indirectly implicated in violence. In July 2011, 77 people, the majority members of the left-wing Workers Youth League, were murdered in Norway in attacks carried out by Anders Behring Breivik. Breivik attempted to justify his attacks in a compendium of political thought that drew heavily on the writings of CJM sources. This article attempts to provide an overview of the CJM and highlight some of the key research debates in the area, including the rhetorical relationship between state-backed counter terrorism and the CJM, links to violence, and the similarities and contrasts between the CJM and traditional far-right narratives.

Introduction

This paper is intended to provide an overview of a movement in extreme right politics, termed here the Counter Jihad Movement (CJM). The CJM is difficult to categorise and analyse. Partly, this is a result of the novelty of some of the ideas expressed by contributors to the CJM and the rhetorical distance it has attempted to establish from more traditional forms of right-wing extremism. It is also a result of the complex make up of the CJM that stretches across various borders, often using digital platforms to connect a diverse range of groups and organisational forms. Despite these challenges, the CJM is a strain of extreme political thought that has tentatively begun to acquire a semblance of legitimacy. In addition, the common CJM narrative is positioned to take advantage of ongoing debates within wider civil society on security, immigration, terrorism and the status of Muslim populations.

Attempts to describe the CJM have been manifold and various researchers have tended to start their investigations with different aspects of the wider CJM ranging from specific authors (Bangstad, 2013), terrorists (Jackson, 2013), narratives of the European Union (Denes, 2012) and street based movements (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun; Goodwin, 2013). Nevertheless, it is hard to overlook the connections between these diverse groups. Goodwin’s description of the CJM portrays a scene characterised by diverse country specific movements linked to a wider international network

‘...of think-tanks, bloggers and activists, the counter-Jihad scene incorporates the ‘defence leagues’ in Australia, Denmark, England, Finland, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Serbia and Sweden, groups such as Pro-Cologne and the Citizens’ Movement Pax Europa in Germany, Generation Identity in France, the ‘Stop the Islamization’ networks in Europe and the United States, the American Freedom Defense Initiative and the International Civil Liberties Alliance.’ (Goodwin, 2013: 3)

In addition, several political parties have also been linked to the the CJM (Kundnani, 2012: 6-7; Gardell, 2014; Berntzen & Sandberg, 2014).

This survey considers the CJM as a broad and loose transnational political movement. This is beneficial for developing an understanding of the wider narrative of the CJM and worldview that underpins it, however it also risks homogenising a diverse range of political groups. It is equally important to understand how diverse the CJM is and that its manifestation is likely to be dependent on individual country contexts and specific movements. Berntzen and Sandberg (2014: 761) argue that the anti-Islamic movement they identify in Norway, while sharing rhetoric and identity with other groups, is distinctive to Norway. This is perhaps the most useful template for understanding the CJM, a loose central narrative focusing on broad and transnational themes from which more country specific groups can draw inspiration.

One potential explanation for the hybrid of international movement and country specific groups is the extent to which actors within the CJM have exploited the web for curating and transmitting their messages. The prevalence of the web as organisational glue within the CJM has been noted in several accounts of the CJM and its activities (Jackson & Feldman, 2011: 32; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013:

52; Lee, 2015). The web has often been seen as enabling the CJM to operate more effectively, bringing together geographically separate actors into a more effective international organisation (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013: 3). This is also consistent with wider analysis of social movements and their use of the web to support decision making and increase the chances of engagement by reducing formal barriers to entry (Castells, 2012: 222). Activists within the CJM have also focused on the web as a key tool for organising and coordinating the movement under conditions of ‘repression’ (Bodissey, 2011a; see also Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013: 18). Ironically, this reliance on the web out of the need to maintain organisational resilience also makes the CJM accessible to researchers in a way that more closed and hierarchical movements are usually not (see for example: Digital Methods Initiative, 2013).

Despite the adherence to loosely connected organisational forms, there have been attempts to foster cooperation between activists through a range of organisations such as the 910 Group (later the Centre for Vigilant Freedom and later still the International Civil Liberties Alliance), Stop Islamisation of Nations (SION) (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013: 18-20). Even more recently there are new groups emerging and forging international links. The German, Patriotic Citizens Against the Islamisation of the West (Pegida), founded in 2014, for example, is due to be re-launched in the UK in 2016. Despite attempts to coordinate and cooperate, the CJM is bound together principally by a shared set of beliefs and a desire to perpetuate and disseminate a particular world view rather than more formal and identifiable modes of organisation.

Narratives of the CJM

Several accounts have included summaries of the basic beliefs of the CJM (Carr, 2006; Zúquete, 2008; Fekete, 2011; Kundnani, 2012; Goodwin 2013; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013; Gardell, 2014; Lee, 2015). In addition, there is an abundance of material online describing the beliefs of the CJM written by activists themselves.¹ Briefly, the beliefs of the CJM can be summed up as follows:

- Islam is not seen as a religion but a political force hostile to the West.
- The West is regarded as culturally, politically and demographically weak and in long term decline.
- The West is seen as undergoing a process of Islamisation in which Muslim immigration leads to changes in the cultural, racial and religious composition of the West and Europe in particular.
- Western leaders and elites such as the media and academia are regarded as either being complicit or incapable of preventing this process; often they are described as cultural Marxists.

Adding to the complexity of defining the CJM, echoes of the ideas that form the CJM narrative are often present to some degree in mainstream political thinking. The idea that Islam, and Islamism specifically, can be incompatible with commonly accepted Western norms is by not the exclusive preserve of a fanatical fringe (Griffin, 2012: 219). Likewise, inclusion or exclusion of groups from the CJM, in particular because membership is so ethereal, can often appear to be political point scoring. A recent early draft of an extensive report on the CJM released by campaign group Hope Not Hate was widely criticised for including several figures considered moderates in some quarters (Dysch, 2015). Carr (2006:2) describes counter jihad ideas as having spread from a fascist fringe to the conservative mainstream and highlights writers such as Mark Steyn, Niall Ferguson and Melanie Phillips. In the Norwegian context, Berntzen and Sandberg (2014: 762) identify a continuum of political groups that subscribe to counter jihad narrative to a greater or lesser extent. Caution and individual researchers’ own careful judgement are ultimately the benchmarks for inclusion or exclusion from the CJM. However, two key markers can be helpful in distinguishing the extreme from the merely hawkish.

Eurabia

Several writers have suggested conspiracy as a key marker for extremism in different interpretations of the CJM narrative (Berntzen & Sandberg, 2014: 762; Carr, 2006: 6). In particular, those who view the hypothesised Islamisation of Europe as being part of a deliberate and coordinated political project under the hand of Islamists and multiculturalists are generally presented as more extreme than those who lament the weakness of European leaders in the face of globalisation. The more conspiratorial version of the

¹ A history of the CJM written from the an insider’s perspective is available on the website Gates of Vienna: <http://gatesofvienna.net/notable/history-of-the-counterjihad/>

CJM narrative draws heavily on the Eurabia thesis which constitutes an underlying master template. The theory itself was published in *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*, written by Bat Ye'or in 2005 (a pen name for Gisèle Littman)². At the heart of *Eurabia* is an understanding of global politics based on a heroic version Israel and a Muslim world with an unreformed concept of jihad at its core. Europe meanwhile is presented as a nest of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. Europe, Ye'or argues, has surrendered to Islam and is in a state of submission (described as dhimmitude) in which Europe is forced to deny its own culture, stand silently by in the face of Muslim atrocities, accept Muslim immigration, and pay tribute through various types of economic assistance. The blame for this, according to the theory, rests with a range of folk devils including: communists, fascists (both Vichy collaborators and neo-Nazis), the media, universities, mosques and Islamic cultural centres, European bureaucrats and above all, the powerful Euro-Arab dialogue (EAD).³ Unsurprisingly, Ye'or's thesis has come in for criticism. In 2006, one academic described the Eurabia thesis as '*flat-out barking gibbers*' (Carr, 2006: 7-8). A somewhat more sympathetic review highlighted Ye'or's acknowledgement that not all Muslims were hostile (Miller, 2006). Inevitably, post Breivik, Ye'or's work has been subject to further criticism (Bangstad, 2013: 370).

Despite the centrality of this conspiracy, the day-to-day role of Eurabia in the CJM may have been overstated to some degree (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013: 46). Analysis of websites linked to the CJM suggests strongly that the Eurabia theory is not often referred to (Lee, 2015). However, while the Eurabia thesis may not have everyday relevance within the CJM, it has attained broader significance within the movement: for example prominent CJM activist Fjordman titled one extensive series of essays *Defeating Eurabia*. It is also worth noting that despite the significance given to *Eurabia* as a political tract, it exists in a wider universe of similarly themed accounts including writers such as Oriana Fallaci, Mark Steyn, Melanie Phillips and George Weigel (Carr, 2006: 2-3; Bangstad, 2013: 371).

Homogeneity

In addition to adherence to the Eurabia theory, a further possible marker for extremism is the extent to which Muslims are reduced to a homogenous group in discourse (Fekete, 2011: 35; Melagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013: 53). In discussing the term 'Islamophobia', Zúquete (2008: 323) argues that a defining aspect is the tendency to treat Muslims as a monolithic block. This point was also a central tool for differentiating between 'closed' and 'open' views of Islam in an early report on Islamophobia produced by the Runnymede Trust (Conway, 1997). Some CJM activists suggest that they oppose only extremist Islam rather than Islam itself. However, this is often tokenistic and liable to be rejected in subsequent statements (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013: 54). Narratives are also likely to differ according to audiences, with online communities, for example, being far less guarded in their analysis when compared to public pronouncements (*Ibid.*). Even from within the CJM, some activists are keen to distance the movement from stereotyping and hatred of Muslims whilst acknowledging the propensity of some 'keyboard commandos' to lapse into hate speech (Goska, 2015). An alternative approach by CJM activists has been to argue that precautionary approach is necessary given the scale of the threat posed. Ye'or (who acknowledges that not all Muslims believe the same things) argues that hostility to non-believers is a major trend and that to ignore it would be 'criminal and suicidal' (Ye'or, 2011: 30).

Studying the CJM: key debates

The CJM is complex and as a result it has sparked a number of ongoing debates about its nature. What follows aims to highlight some of the key debates emerging from the development of the CJM.

The CJM and the extreme right

Perhaps the foremost debate in this area asks where the CJM sits in respect to extreme right ideology. Superficially, it is easy to see the CJM as something apart from stereotypical fascist groups. Certainly the CJM sees itself as something apart from other extreme right groups (Melagrou-Hitchens & Brun: 29). This claim depends heavily however on two factors: the definition of the extreme right and the specific component of the CJM analysed.

² For more on Littman, her publications and qualifications see: Bangstad, 2013.

³A more in-depth summary of Eurabia written from the point of a CJM activist can be accessed here: <http://gatesofvienna.blogspot.co.uk/2008/10/defeating-eurabia-part-1.html>

The extreme right can be thought of as a party family with common characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and the strong state (Mudde, 2000: 11). Nationalism in particular can be seen as the hub from which other features extend, providing a justification for demonising outsiders and rejecting liberalism (Copsey, 2008: 78). The centrality of nationalism, however, is on first sight slightly inconsistent within the CJM given the prominence of writers who concern themselves so much with broader ‘Western’ culture as opposed to national identities. There are two issues here. The first is the focus on the European level as opposed to a national level political unit. Although many CJM activists do focus on the supra-national level, this is often localised in country-specific mobilisations, e.g. the English Defence League (EDL). Second, the reliance on culture as opposed to more stereotypical ethno-nationalism is also seen as atypical of extreme right groups (Kundnani, 2012: 6 Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun: 35). Indeed, the expansion of nationalism to a broader cultural level in extreme right narratives has been suggested as a potential source of future conflict as a commitment to broad Western values and seems likely to jar with the desire to protect national sovereignty (Zúquete, 2008: 329). However, its greater focus on the cultural rather than national level does not exclude the CJM from the extreme right space. For Jackson (2013: 250), the cultural turn does not represent any dramatic shift in thinking. Instead, culture is used to construct a demonised other in much the same way that race was previously. Equally Meleagrou-Hitchens and Brun (2013:37) also see a potential for illiberalism in cultural nationalism. The substitution of culture for race in this way is also a trend in other extreme right groups, including those with explicitly fascist roots (Rhodes, 2009: 145; Edwards, 2012; Hafez, 2014).

Other criteria for membership to the extreme right family are also open to some question in the case of the CJM. Certainly, CJM writers have notionally incorporated democracy and a commitment to human rights (in particular free speech) into their narrative. However, this position is entirely consistent with a number of extreme right groups that have attempted to transition to more electorally-friendly (but still extreme-right wing) narratives such as the French Front National and the British National Party (Mammone, 2009). The authenticity of many of these transitions has been widely questioned by those working on the extreme right with some suggesting that they are merely superficial masks for a more extreme inward face concealed from the public (Copsey, 2007; Mammone, 2009).

Analysis of specific CJM activists has certainly suggested that some aspects of the CJM are more extreme than others. Paul Jackson analysed the writings of Fjordman (AKA Peder Jensen) as reproduced in the Breivik manifesto and argues that they:

‘...conform to a typically fascist discourse that gravitates around tropes of heterophobia, extreme national purification, and political revolution emerging from a period of warfare and crisis.’ (Jackson, 2013: 248)

Jackson later summarises the emergent ideology underpinning Breivik and supported by Jensen as ‘Islamophobic fascism’ (Jackson, 2013: 265). Other analyses of the Breivik manifesto as a whole also seem to support this view, identifying Breivik’s position as within the ‘fascist tradition’ based on his adherence to a romantic warrior ideal and fixation with (European) rebirth (Gardell, 2014: 132-3). In contrast, analysis of other activists within the CJM has stopped short or categorising them as fascist. Melagrou-Hitchens & Brun (2013: 33), focusing to some extent on the EDL, agree that they exhibit many fascist tropes, including an affinity for marches and speeches with little regard to their consequences, but overall they fall short of the revolutionary changes demanded by archetypal fascist groups. Stemming from this, Jackson highlights the range of ideological extremism within the wider CJM space – suggesting that where anti-Muslim discourse is the basis of political mobilisation it tends to be manifested in the discourse of ‘neo-populist politicians’ such as the Dutch Geert Wilders rather than the more explicit fascism of Jensen (Jackson, 2013: 251). In summary, the ideological position of the CJM is as varied as the activist within it. Given the extreme heterophobia on display in either interpretation, both revolutionary and populist positions can be interpreted as lying within the extreme right space.

The CJM and violence

Regardless of how the CJM is classified ideologically, the rhetoric in some quarters of the CJM indicates an ambiguous relationship with violence. While the CJM as a whole has not been seen to deliberately engage in, support, or condone, terroristic political violence, there is a broader question over the extent to which the CJM bears responsibility for acts of violence seemingly inspired by its activists (Meleagrou-

Hitchens & Brun, 2013: 2). Certainly the CJM (in the European context) has been explored explicitly as a catalyst for political violence (Kundnani, 2012; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013).

The clearest case of violence linked to the CJM is that of Anders Breivik; the commonalities between Breivik and the CJM have been noted by several writers (Kundnani, 2012: 4; Jackson, 2013; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013: 2; Goodwin, 2013: 4; Titley, 2014). Prior to launching his attacks, Breivik posted a compendium that featured the plagiarised writings of prominent CJM activists (Gardell, 2014). The relative significance of different activists has been speculated at, but key figures include Bat Ye'or, Robert Spencer and Fjordman (Bertnzen & Sandberg, 2014: 763; Gardell, 2014: 132). Of the 772,643 words of the Breivik manifesto, 112,735 were reproductions of Fjordman's writings (Jackson, 2013: 248).

Despite these influences, Breivik was not claimed by any wider political group, lacked extensive social networks and is often described as a 'lone wolf' terrorist (Berntzen & Sandberg, 2014: 772). Certainly this explanation has been embraced by CJM. Following the attacks Fjordman published several essays attempting to distance Breivik from the wider movement (Fjordman 2011; 2012). More recently Fjordman published an essay attacking Breivik's mental state claiming that Breivik wanted to damage 'Islam-critical' writers (Spencer, 2014; Fjordman, 2015). Despite attempts to distance Breivik from the CJM, the fact remains that he was able to steep himself in the counter jihad world view in part thanks to the efforts of CJM activists. Jackson suggests that such writings provide a 'license to hate', or a framework to justify acts of violence (Jackson, 2013: 248, see also Kallis, 2007).

It should also be considered that the Breivik attacks were spectaculars, commanding media attention around the world, and included a compendium conveniently setting out the motivation. However, most violence directed against minority groups does not make the headlines and it is not nearly so planned. Street movements in particular have the potential to lead to violence, in particular violence directed against groups demonised by political rhetoric. The English Defence League's demonstrations were often accompanied by violence directed against counter demonstrators, the police and Asians (Treadwell & Garland: 2011: 629-630; BBC, 2015b). In addition, there is a constant low level background of hate incidents that also seem to reflect the CJM narrative although the degree to which this violence can be described as ideological is open to question.

CJM and official security narratives

Lastly, it is worth considering the extent to which the CJM narrative aligns with more mainstream political narratives. Following 9/11, Muslim communities in Western countries have become potential targets for both the extreme right and to some extent government counter terrorist policies (Abbas, 2004). Some argue that Muslims' outsider status predates the 9/11 attacks (Abbas, 2004: 32; Carr, 2006: 18; Fekete, 2011: 39). Nevertheless, the focus on counter terrorism activities in the wake of the 9/11 attacks has been presented as leading to anti-Muslim sentiment and furthering exclusion (Fekete, 2004: 4).

The idea that extreme groups can feed off, and in the process radicalise, one another is well established (Eatwell, 2006). Kundnani (2012: 10) develops this model of cumulative extremism further to include government security narratives, highlighting the (unwitting) alignment between the counter-terrorism rhetoric of governments and the claims made by extreme right groups. In particular, he identifies the reliance on a values and identity narrative that conforms closely to that of counter jihad groups (Kundnani, 2012: 15). Fekete (2011: 40) also notes the importance of locating counter jihad politics in the context of the global security environment. Further analysis is needed in order to properly contextualise the links between government and counter jihad narratives, however this initial speculation highlights the salience of the counter jihad narrative given the wider political climate.

Conclusions

This paper is intended to provide a brief and broad overview of the CJM. Crucially, the CJM is presented as being fluid. Different observers will draw a different political line around the movement, often largely reflecting their own political concerns. While there are some useful markers of extremism, a researcher's considered judgement and extreme caution are essential. Indeed, it is worth questioning the extent to which the CJM can really be considered a coherent movement. Despite the fact that activists themselves recognise the existence of the movement, the lines between membership and non-membership are blurred and contested. Despite this, there is value to considering the 'top level' narrative of the counter

jihad in order to understand the common components in the narratives of a diverse set of groups ranging from political activists to fully registered political parties. Readers should recognise, however, that this narrative is filtered through national and organisational concerns on the ground.

Of greater importance is the possible future challenge the CJM represents to the existing political narrative in Europe and the US. Explicitly revolutionary fascist groups have proved largely easy to identify and contain politically and even attempts to sever the connection with previously explicitly fascist ideology have met with relatively mixed success. The War on Terror and the ensuing counter terrorism focus of national governments and civic society however, have created a massive target of opportunity for those extreme right groups able to take advantage of it, be they new groups or groups with a longer history attempting to make the populist transition by shifting from anti-Semitic to anti-Muslim narratives. The continued use of force by the US and European powers in the Middle East, the rise of ISIS, and the refugee crisis, all contribute to the salience, and therefore the political potential, of the counter jihad narrative.

Many of the groups aligned with the CJM so far can be dismissed as flash in the pan social movements and ultra fringe political parties and in general there is limited evidence so far that the CJM world view is gaining serious traction in civic debates. However, there are worrying aberrations. The (currently) ongoing Trump primary campaign in the US (Iftikhar, 2015), the success of the formerly fascist French Front National in the wake of the Paris attacks (Wilsher, 2015), and the willingness of Czech President Miloš Zeman to address anti-Muslim campaigners (Lane, 2015), seem to suggest that in some circles the CJM narrative is seen as having political value. At least one scholar has also highlighted the 'lethal mainstreaming' of previously taboo ideas as established political actors seek to cash in on far-right narratives in an atmosphere of crisis (Kallis, 2013: 221). The rhetoric of the CJM, in particular its focus on human, may constitute the boldest attempt yet to normalise what is (in many cases) an exclusionary narrative predicated on a conspiratorial and homogenised view of both the Muslim world and the West.

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