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The Jihadi Threat to Scotland: Caledonian Exceptionalism and its Limits

By Stefano Bonino

At a fragile time in the history of Western-Islamic relationships, particularly given the global threat posed by the Islamic State and the unprecedented number of European Muslims who have traveled to conflict zones in the Middle East, the comparatively fewer problems Scotland has experienced with violent radicalization are worthy of study. One explanation is that the nature of Scotland's body politic and the orientation of its policies—in some ways similar to Canada's—have reduced the appeal of grievance-based jihadi propaganda. An economically better off and more upwardly mobile group of south Asian immigrants settled in Scotland compared to England, spreading across the country and fostering relatively harmonious relationships with the wider society. Yet, pockets of Islamist extremism, the Islamic State's global political allure and distortion of Islam to spread its worldview, and ongoing concerns about ultra-orthodox elements in the Pakistani community suggest that Scotland is far from immune to the threat of violent jihadism.

The rise of the Islamic State, the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and the recent attacks on Paris and Brussels have heightened the threat springing from international terrorism in the United Kingdom, which raised its threat level to “severe” in August 2014 and still stands at the same level 20 months later.¹ The radicalization of young British Muslims has been explained in multiple forms, ranging from an explosive mixture of ideology, grievance, and mobilization² to personal vulnerabilities and discontent over foreign policy.³ Several studies have focused on the English Muslim community, while the situation of Muslims living in Scotland has been relegated to a dimly lit corner of research.

There are lessons that counterterrorism experts can learn from Scotland. Some trans-Atlantic similarities emerge between Scotland and Canada and explain how a social democratic politics with relaxed attitudes toward immigration and less aggressive foreign policies is attractive to Muslim communities, potentially reducing the appeal of grievance-based jihadi propaganda. The peculiar so-

cial and economic environment, which Scottish Muslims inhabit, seems to, at least partially, steer communities away from propaganda that seeks to draw into its ranks alienated, disenfranchised, and dissatisfied young individuals. But while Scotland has managed to engage in a successful process of community cohesion, which is built around an inclusive sense of Scottishness, there remain questions as to whether the allure of violent Islamism is reduced or simply hidden. The existence of Islamist movements with an ambiguous stance toward violence, the global appeal of the Islamic State's religious messaging and viscerally anti-Western ideology, and recent scandals engulfing some ultra-orthodox Scottish-Pakistani community leaders call for caution when assessing long-term trends.

An Inclusive Social and Economic Landscape

The socio-economic background of the Muslim community living in Scotland is the first element that plays in favor of community cohesion and that lessens the impact of grievance-based jihadi propaganda. Scottish Pakistanis, who make up almost 60 percent⁴ of the total Scottish Muslim population, trace their roots to the relatively well-off Punjab. Conversely, many Pakistanis who migrated to England between the mid-1940s and the late 1950s originate from poorer Mirpur in Pakistan. The Scottish Muslim population is also fairly small. It numbers around 77,000 people, about 1.4 percent of the total Scottish population,⁵ making it relatively easy for local authorities to address social grievances and for law enforcement agencies to monitor risky individuals. Ethnic segregation is very limited, especially in comparison to England. Aside from Pollokshields and Govanhill in Glasgow,⁶ there are no predominantly Muslim neighborhoods in Scotland. Moreover, the Scottish Pakistani tradition of self-employment has led to low job competition with the Scottish white majority. Today, Scottish Pakistanis make up the highest proportion of self-employed people among all minority ethnic groups in Scotland⁷ and have higher employment rates than English Pakistanis in London, North West England, and East of England.⁸ Overall, Scottish Pakistanis have sown the seeds for economic success in the country and have offered a public image as a hard-working community, bestowing on younger generations a future of relative financial stability.

In the current political climate, it is important to note that Muslims in Scotland have stayed out of major trouble. The 1988-1989 Rushdie Affair-related disturbances and the riots in England in 2001 and 2011 were not mirrored by similar violent actions in Scotland. The small Scottish Muslim community certainly has a limited capacity to mobilize on streets compared to its English counterpart. The English riots were also a result of context-specific, fragile relationships⁹ between local ethnic minorities in the cities involved and the white community, including the police.¹⁰ However, it is undisputable that a lack of violent street protests and riots has had a widely positive effect on community relations in Scotland. Surveys by Ipsos MORI in 2010¹¹ and the Scottish Government in 2011¹² demon-

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strated that Scots largely consider Muslims to be part and parcel of the wider community. Muslims also share the civic ethos enshrined in Scottish nationalism and profess to uphold strong Scottish identities.¹³ Hostilities toward English people living in Scotland have displaced some anti-Muslim prejudice.¹⁴ Meanwhile, religious sectarianism between Protestants and Catholics in Scotland has often steered prejudice toward the “Irish question”¹⁵ rather than the settlement of predominantly South Asian, Muslim communities. The lack of an established neo-fascist tradition in Scotland is palpable in the invisibility of the Scottish Defence League (SDL), the offshoot division of the English Defence League.

The support that the English Defence League has garnered in England since it was formed in 2009 to respond to an anti-Afghanistan War demonstration organized by the now proscribed extremist Islamist group Al-Muhajiroun has never been replicated by the SDL in Scotland. Extremist Islamist groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun, and leading preachers, such as Omar Bakri Muhammad who radicalized many English Muslims in the 1990s and 2000s, historically failed to find widespread support in Scotland.¹⁶ Overall, a positive social and economic landscape has facilitated the development of a fairly successful Muslim community, in turn lessening the attractiveness of grievance-based jihadi propaganda.

A “Minority-Friendly” Political Context

The Scottish government has often aligned itself with political stances and causes that are very palatable to the Muslim community, further reducing the appeal of grievance-based jihadi propa-

ganda. With a mixture of astuteness and stubborn contrarian attitude toward anything perceived to be English, the government has managed to keep a lid on those feelings of anger that have troubled a section of the English Muslim community and that have been directed toward Westminster. The Scottish National Party (SNP), Scotland’s governing party since 2011, has used its historical opposition to the Iraq War¹⁷ to win Muslim support. Many Muslims switched their support from Labour to the SNP in 2003¹⁸ and ideologically joined the political stance of Scottish nationalists. The nomination of Humza Yousaf as the first-ever Muslim Minister in the Scottish government in 2012 and the fact that the small Scottish Muslim community boasts both the first Muslim Member of Parliament, Mohammad Sarwar in 1997,¹⁹ and the first Muslim councillor, Bashir Maan in 1970,²⁰ in Great Britain, are often cited as evidence that the Scottish body politic is particularly Muslim friendly. The Scottish government’s stances in favor of Syrian refugees²¹ and Russian president Vladimir Putin²² and in opposition to Prime Minister David Cameron,²³ air strikes in Syria,²⁴ Israel,²⁵ and the Trident nuclear program²⁶ demonstrate that what divides Scottish and English politics conversely unites Muslims and the Scots.

The socialist egalitarianism that is propounded in Scotland draws inspiration from a historical sense of oppression at the hands of the English “rulers” and a not-too-subtle anti-British agenda. Having expressed, and sometimes possibly exploited, global feelings of victimhood, Muslim communities in Scotland often join in the Scots on the “oppression caravan” and anti-imperialism campaign. Muslims’ strong belonging to Scotland is as much a result



Then Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond comforts a member of the Muslim community at the Central Mosque in Glasgow, U.K., on July 1, 2007, after a terrorist attack at Glasgow airport.

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of positive life experiences as it is a consequence of a marriage of mutual convenience. Scotland's progressive politics and civic nationalism manifest themselves in an "aspirational pluralism"²⁷ that allow political elites to market an institutional inclusivity, which is favored by a lack of Muslim minority claims for multifaithism and multilingualism²⁸ that could otherwise risk fracturing public opinion.

While many of the factors explaining the harmonious relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims are very unique to Scottish recent history, their underlying principles are to be found in a social democratic politics with a positive attitude toward settled immigrants and less 'aggressive' foreign policies. Across the Atlantic, these principles are well mirrored by Canada, particularly so under the new leadership of the Liberal Party led by Justin Trudeau. The multicultural ethos of the Scottish government closely resembles Canadian politics, which has managed to foster some of the highest levels of Muslim integration.²⁹ The pledge made by the Scottish government to withdraw nuclear weapons, yet enter NATO, should the 2014 Independence Referendum had succeeded, resonates with the Canadian experience of abandoning its nuclear arsenal in 1984 while remaining a full member of NATO.³⁰ Canadian refusal to partake in the Iraq War and a primarily non-militaristic approach to the current war against the Islamic State³¹ show striking similarities with Scottish political attitudes toward war. Notably, "the 'small n' Canadian nationalism of the 1970s onward: welcoming, inclusive, peaceful"³² brings about images of today's Scottish nationalism, with its power to alienate English elites and win Muslim hearts.

While the spectre of populism looms behind any type of nationalism, and the SNP has ostensibly embraced anti-British positions, the political stance taken by the party have undoubtedly gained unprecedented domestic support from the Scottish Muslim population. Arguably, domestic and foreign policies should consider longer-term, wider national and geopolitical dynamics and interests. However, for local exercises of community cohesion and the prevention of violent extremism, the Scottish government could not find any better marketing tool to draw Muslims into their ideological ranks than to oppose many of the policies rolled out by the disliked London elites. Being Scottish "because we are not English" may well be the new badge of identity for a generation of Scottish Muslims, who are disenfranchised by a political system that they perceive to be concentrated in the faraway palaces of power in London. Overall, Scottish political astuteness could well help to starve violent Islamist recruiters of the oxygen that they need to turn young Muslims against Scottish society.

Only a tiny minority of the around 800 U.K. citizens who joined the Syrian conflict have traveled from Scotland.³³ Recently, senior Police Scotland officers claimed that, notwithstanding the severe threat faced by the United Kingdom, Scotland and its communities are not at risk of an immediate Islamist terrorist attack.³⁴ The prominent case of Aberdonian student Yousif Badri, who was arrested in June 2013 but was cleared of terrorism charges two years later, is a good example.³⁵ The political response to the bombings of Glasgow Airport in 2007 was controversial, yet some would argue it was shrewd. Former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond offered the world a unique example of political astuteness by voicing a call for unity from Glasgow Central Mosque.³⁶ Today, almost 10 years after the terrorist attacks, Scottish Muslims still remember Salmond's pledge of solidarity. Current Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon followed on Salmond's footsteps by delivering her trib-

“The lack of a sustained backlash against Muslim communities after the Glasgow bombing was peculiar. Increased intolerance against Muslims certainly followed the incident, but the communities soon resumed their normal lives.”

ute to the victims of the Paris attacks in November 2015 from the same mosque.³⁷ The lack of a sustained backlash against Muslim communities after the Glasgow bombing was peculiar. Increased intolerance against Muslims certainly followed the incident,³⁸ but the communities soon resumed their normal lives. The fact that the perpetrators were neither Scottish-born nor Scottish residents washed off any sense of group responsibility, while the lack of public appeal of anti-Muslim street organizations reduced the likelihood of an explosion in inter-community tensions.

A Limited Backlash against Security Measures

Security measures at airports and on the street remain a key tool in preventing terrorism and apprehending suspects. In Scotland, Muslim reactions to these measures have been mixed. Some have lamented checks at Scottish airports to be disproportionately directed toward their community,³⁹ although there are no publicly available statistics to support or disprove these claims. In 2011, some prominent members of the community went as far as to boycott Glasgow International Airport.⁴⁰

Conversely, stop-and-search activities on streets have treated Muslims in a fair manner. Unlike in England, where the Equality and Human Rights Commission claims that black and ethnic minorities are disproportionately stopped and searched,⁴¹ there is no evidence that the same has happened in Scotland.⁴² Scholars⁴³ posit that Police Scotland have overused non-statutory stops and searches and disproportionately targeted young people rather than minorities per se. Despite the furor that stop-and-search activities on Scottish streets have caused,⁴⁴ they have not fueled particular discontent from the Muslim community. Workshops jointly organized by the Muslim Council of Scotland and Police Scotland for religious personnel and mosque representatives, in light of the global and national threat posed by Islamist terrorism, have allowed security operators to enter delicate spaces and develop best practices to counter the ideologies of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State in partnership with local Muslim communities.⁴⁵

The Limits of Scottish Exceptionalism

While Scotland might not experience the scale of threat faced by some other Western countries, it is not immune to violent Islamist radicalization. Across Western countries, it is not just grievances and a sense of alienation from mainstream society that have driven violent radicalization and terrorist recruitment. The distortion of Islamic teachings and the political use of religion by the Islamic State and likeminded groups have also played a key role in enticing young people to adopt their worldview.

The knowledge gaps in Police Scotland's counterterrorism strat-

egy recently exposed by the Scottish Police Authority (SPA) demonstrate that the risks of a potential terrorist attack in the country should not be underestimated.⁴⁶ While the spectacle of terrorism is likely to hit major European cities hosting disenfranchised Muslim communities, the possibility that Islamist militants will strike against Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, or Dundee in the future should not be ruled out. This warning was recently echoed by Police Scotland.⁴⁷ Aside from the Glasgow bombings, publicly known high-profile incidents include the cases of Glaswegian Aqsa Mahmood, who fled to Syria and turned into a recruiter for the Islamic State in 2013,⁴⁸ Aberdonian Abdul Rakib Amin, who joined the Islamic State in 2014 and was killed in a drone strike conducted by the Royal Air Force in Syria one year later,⁴⁹ and a mysterious Glaswegian woman who was allegedly ready to carry out a terrorist attack in August last year.⁵⁰

Long-term, more subtle threats could be posed by groups that may exploit Scottish tolerance and hands-off approach to ambiguous Islamist ideologies. For instance, some critics have questioned the former relationships of government with the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB).⁵¹ The MAB has connections with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵² Opinion about the Muslim Brotherhood in the West is split.^a The more pessimist perspectives include a recent expert submission to the U.K. Cabinet Office, which alleges that the group may endanger social cohesion, maintains ambivalent positions toward violence, and carries out fundraising efforts for Hamas.⁵³

Controversies have also surrounded some prominent Muslim initiatives and institutions. The Scottish Islamic Foundation, a group launched in 2008 to promote community cohesion and active citizenship,⁵⁴ closed its doors four years later amid claims of ineffectiveness.⁵⁵ In another instance, an investigation recently conducted by the Scottish Charity Regulator called into question the activities of Scotland's biggest mosque, Glasgow Central Mosque. The investigation unveiled that mosque managers had funneled £50,000 to the European headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat, a revivalist Sunni movement, in Dewsbury, England, in 2011.⁵⁶ In a struggle to change the internal operations of the mosque and reform old-fashioned cultural attitudes toward women, the younger generations of Muslims that briefly took control of management in mid-2014⁵⁷ have faced resistance and scorn from the conservative, orthodox elements of the older Pakistani community.⁵⁸ Recent revelations that Habib ur Rehman, the imam of the mosque, had defined Mumtaz Qadri's murder of former Governor of Punjab in Pakistan, Salman Taseer, for alleged blasphemy, "the collective responsibility of the ummah" have raised fresh concerns about the ultra-orthodox sections of the community.⁵⁹ These concerns are heightened by allegations of links between two senior figures at Glasgow Central Mosque and Edinburgh Polwarth Mosque and Sipah-e-Sahaba, a

U.K.-proscribed violent group operating in Pakistan.⁶⁰ Last month's murder of Asad Shah,⁶¹ a Glaswegian Ahmadiyya Muslim shopkeeper, at the hands of a Muslim man from Bradford, England, due to Shah's adherence to Ahmadi beliefs,⁶² has added fuel to intra-community sectarian and cultural tensions. The death threats that Aamer Anwar, a prominent Scottish Pakistani human rights lawyer, received after condemning violence and calling for unity in Scotland⁶³ encapsulate the complexities of this divide.

Amid police investigations into terror links,⁶⁴ fears of sectarian violence,⁶⁵ political support for Aamer Anwar,⁶⁶ and appeals for tolerance issued by the Muslim Council of Scotland and Glasgow Central Mosque,⁶⁷ public calls for unity and rejection of violence are extremely important. Today, the message that Khalid Latif, the New York Police Department (NYPD)'s Muslim chaplain, gave to the Scottish community in 2014 is more important than ever. Speaking in Edinburgh at an event organized by the Scottish Police Muslim Association, Latif encouraged Scottish Muslim leaders to be more vocal in their opposition to the Islamic State and other jihadi terrorist groups.⁶⁸ This approach recognizes that the Muslim-friendly Scottish body politic can only keep a lid on grievances. Yet, it does not tackle the ideological rejection of Western modernity and the skillful manipulation of Islamic teachings that make the Islamic State's narrative so attractive to young Muslims across Western societies. This tainted narrative requires both credible religious and community members to deliver sound counter-narratives to local communities and the gradual empowerment of the younger, more liberal Scottish-born section of the Muslim community.

Conclusion

Scotland sits within a multinational state, the United Kingdom, which is a key target for a major terrorist attack.⁶⁹ However, Scotland hosts a relatively integrated Muslim community that has managed to foster rather harmonious relationships with the wider society, including law enforcement agencies. Scottish Muslims have demonstrated that community cohesion within a nation united along civic, rather than ethnic, lines is possible.

The "Scottish exceptionalism" of successful Muslim integration certainly has much to do with a social democratic political orientation that is particularly attractive to minorities. Yet Scotland's political landscape has also heightened ongoing fractures with England in a game of tribalism that has kept a lid on violent extremism but, at the same time, has turned a blind eye to the potential long-term consequences of maintaining a soft approach toward radicalism. Scotland's extreme tolerance could prove to be a fertile ground for the development of Islamist movements, which may not exploit deep-rooted sociopolitical grievances but may take forward anti-Western rhetoric, an ideological rejection of modernity, and distorted interpretations of Islam. Ultimately, the outcomes of the ongoing rift within the more orthodox and more liberal sections of the Scottish Pakistani community will trace the trajectory of the Scottish Muslim community of the future. **CTC**

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