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Sweden bomber's Luton link must not reinforce cliche

Robert Lambert

Labelling Luton a 'breeding ground for terror' lends weight to the EDL, when the group's activities should be under scrutiny, too

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Members of the English Defence League at a march in London, July 2010. Photograph: KeystoneUSA-Zuma/Rex Features

On the face of it, this [failed bomb attack in Stockholm](#) appears to be an example of what is often described as "lone wolf" terrorism. Even if Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly was acting alone, however, the description doesn't do justice to al-Qaida strategists and propagandists who have been promoting, fostering and facilitating this kind of tactic for some time, encouraging all forms of insurgency, including small-scale, individual acts.

Police investigating the Luton connections of the dead Stockholm bomber will, of course, keep an open mind about his motivation and let the evidence direct their enquiries and conclusions. More immediately, Swedish and UK police will wish to establish whether [al-Abdaly](#) was acting alone or in a conspiracy with others. Investigations often reveal unexpected evidence and every individual case needs to be assessed on its own merits.

Whatever is finally uncovered about the shape and character of the plot, a predictable reaction to the news has already started to take shape.

The [English Defence League](#) and the extremist nationalist milieu that surrounds it has roots in Luton and will interpret news that the Stockholm bomber is linked to Luton as further proof that Muslims in Luton are terrorists, terrorist sympathisers, extremists and subversives.

But while pursuing those involved in al-Qaida extremism with every means at our disposal, it would be wrong not to recognise the part EDL has played in fomenting violence in [Luton](#) and elsewhere.

In 2009 the EDL staged an aggressive protest in Luton in response to a demonstration by the extremist fringe al-Muhajiroun against British troops.

Shortly afterwards a mosque there was firebombed.

Messages sent to the mosque left little doubt as to the anti-Muslim nature of this act of political violence. Not only did the attackers wrongly conflate the mosque with al-Qaida and al-Muhajiroun, they also failed to recognise the extent to which the mosque had been at the forefront of countering al-Qaida and al-Muhajiroun propaganda for more than a decade.

As such the mosque in Luton is best seen as tackling two kinds of terrorism and political violence: al-Qaida-inspired terrorism on the one hand and extremist nationalism on the other. That the mosque is seen by both sets of opposing extremists as an enemy is proof positive of its effectiveness.

And if al-Qaida-inspired terrorism warrants a multi-agency nationwide counterterrorism strategy that includes a strand in which community-based projects seek to prevent young people becoming al-Qaida terrorists or supporters, then the same resources should be deployed to tackle extremist nationalism.

Although the UK counterterrorism strategy (Contest) and its "Prevent" strand have fundamental flaws that need to be addressed, it seems reasonable that the government should treat both threats with equal importance and in the same way. To afford primacy to one over the other as is the case at present is hardly calculated to inspire Muslim community confidence, a necessary prerequisite for success in Prevent.

On the contrary, a failure to afford the same priority to both weakens Muslim community confidence and also has the potential to be used by al-Qaida propagandists who seek to exploit reasonable Muslim community grievances to attract new recruits and supporters.

The Swedish link to Luton should be used as an opportunity to drive this insight home, not to dust off unthinking cliches about a British "breeding ground for terror".

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