



'Banff bomber' may be tip of iceberg

STEPHEN STEWART

A team of university researchers is spearheading one of the first studies into the growing problem of radicalisation in remote areas of Scotland.

Previous research into the UK Government's bid to counteract terrorism and radicalisation has focused on big cities.

St Andrews University researchers fear people like "Banff bomber" Connor Ward, jailed for life in 2018 for plotting terror attacks on mosques, may just be the tip of the iceberg.

A mix of lockdown, social and geographical isolation and the rise of digital hate sites has pushed extremism into the north-east, Fife and more remote areas such as the Highlands and islands.

Two men - one from Aberdeen and another from Fife - are awaiting trial for allegedly plotting terror attacks on Muslim people across Scotland.

Dr Tim Wilson, who heads St Andrews University's world-renowned Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), said terrorism tended to happen on high-profile stages - major city centres, international airports, venues that will get noticed.

But now attacks or plots are emerging in quieter and unexpected locations.

Dr Wilson added: "There seems to be a way in which the internet is diffusing attack possibilities and perhaps diffusing

recruitment and radicalisation possibilities too.

"What we have been seeing is a tendency to fragmentation. Politically motivated attacks are often more amateur and conducted with more primitive means.

"But because of that spontaneity and the fact that they are clearly a feature of the information age and the social media revolution, they are also quite hard to keep on top of."

Islamist terror groups such as Islamic State and Al Qaida have previously used so-called "lone actor" terrorism as a tactic.

Now, disenfranchised far-right extremists have picked up on this, judging that such attacks will have a greater chance of success.

Dr Wilson said: "One of the truly huge shifts of the last 10 years or so is the rise of the extreme right. In Western countries, such as the UK, Islamist violence is going to attract a tiny, tiny proportion of a fringe of a fringe, mostly from communities of diaspora Muslim cultural origin.

"It is a pretty small recruiting pool. What we are really struggling to get our heads around is how big the potential recruitment pool is for the extreme right."

Hate-peddling far-right extremists have flocked to the Telegram messaging service, which allows huge encrypted chat groups.

Samuel Howitt, a former

friend of Connor Ward, who was jailed for extremist threats, has severed ties with neo-Nazi groups and told how they recruit.

He said: "They get round you at a point where you are lonely. They look for people that have been bullied, abused. They are very, very good at grooming.

"They target rural areas. They'll not hit big demographics like Edinburgh and Glasgow - it's too diverse. They typically aim for impoverished rural areas to recruit people like that with damaged pasts."

The latest Police Scotland figures show 100 people were identified as potential terrorists.

They were referred to Prevent, part of the UK Government's Counter-Terrorist Strategy known as Contest.

In Scotland, Prevent aims to tackle all forms of violent extremism and terrorism, including right-wing extremism, Islamist extremism and Northern Ireland-related terrorism.

Police Scotland's figures, compiled up to March 31 last year, show the vast majority referred to Prevent were male (94%).

People aged 15-20 made up the largest proportion of referrals (44%).

There were 13 referrals to Prevent from the north region, which includes Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Angus, Dundee, Highland, Moray, Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles.

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