EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Understanding 21st-Century Militant Anti-Fascism

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INTRODUCTION

Anti-fascist militancy has existed for as long as fascism has, but militant anti-fascism is still largely neglected across both academic and policy-practitioner communities. A far more robust, evidence-based understanding is now needed, especially in a context where militant anti-fascist protest in the United States has been conflated with 'domestic terrorism'.

The militant anti-fascist movement, or Antifa, is a de-centralised, non-hierarchical social movement. It is loosely structured on dispersed networks of local groups. It has a distinctly anti-authoritarian orientation, consisting, for the most part, of anarchists; anarcho-communists; left-libertarians; and radical socialists. The movement is transnational, but it responds in local conditions.

This report presents evidence from six local case studies: three from the United States: Portland, New York City, Philadelphia; and three from Britain: Brighton, Liverpool, London. It adopts a multi-method approach, combining interviews with anti-fascist activists drawn from these six localities, as well as analysis of digital platforms used by local militant anti-fascist groups (Rose City Antifa; NYC Antifa; Philly Antifa; Brighton Antifascists; Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network; and London Antifascists).

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions are drawn:

- Militant anti-fascists are not wedded to a narrow definition of fascism, but they do believe that

fascism is qualitatively different from all other forms of politics in that it is exceptional in its threat and use of violence.

- Militant anti-fascists do not see 'fascism' everywhere and generally retain their focus on the political space which is commonly understood by the mainstream society as 'far right'.

- Militant anti-fascists share a common commitment to the principles of 'no platform', whereby individuals holding views regarded as 'fascist' or 'fascistic' should be prevented from contributing to public debate 'by whatever means necessary'.

- Militant anti-fascists also share a commitment to 'direct action', whereby anti-fascist actors use their own power to directly reach their goals rather than appeal to the authorities.

- While the willingness to use confrontational violence separates militant anti-fascism from non-militant forms, militant anti-fascists exercise restraint in their use of violence. This is significant. It clearly

challenges simplistic associations with terrorism and the planning of terrorist acts and/or mass violence that threatens life. The claim that fascism is defined by an ultra-violent credo imposes a value-based, prefigurative boundary on militant anti-fascists in both their use and rhetorical representation of violence. Strategic concerns factor too, such as the risk that violent escalation will lead either to group isolation from the wider anti-fascist coalition or dissolution as a result of increasing state repression. Internal cultures of decision-making and recruitment structures function as further dynamics of restraint (or 'internal brakes', as suggested in previous CREST-funded research (*https://crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/internal-brakes-on-violent-escalation/*).

- The aforementioned conclusions are borne out with regards to not only the street activism of militant anti-fascist groups but also their digital activism. On their websites, blogs and social media accounts, the form of 'direct action' most commonly engaged in by anti-fascist groups is 'doxing': publicising information about far-right activists in the hope that this will result in legal or economic consequences for the individual. These digital platforms also offer the opportunity for different groups to forge networks. However, these networks are largely solidaristic rather than organisational in nature (both within their own national settings and trans-nationally).

- The respective histories of militant anti-fascism in both the US and Britain reveal a long-term trend towards promoting greater public participation at protest events. However, there remains an obvious tension between broadening the base of opposition to 'fascism' and retaining group coherence and militancy. Nonetheless, the direction of travel is not towards the formation of clandestine, underground cells. There is little evidence of a push towards the escalation of violence from non-lethal to lethal, or the adoption of a *modus operandi* that is more typically associated with terrorist groups.

- Anti-fascism is reactive, and its defensive response is shaped by the nature of the perceived threat. In terms of public order risk assessment, context is critical. In the US, following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, a conflict between anti-fascists and the far right attracted an international profile, and the demonisation of Antifa as 'domestic terrorists' bent on sowing chaos and disorder, encouraged each side to define one another in terms of an existential threat. During 2020, this polarisation further deepened with the pandemic, the killing of George Floyd, excessive use of law enforcement, and Trump's rejection of the presidential election result as fraudulent. The presence of armed individuals on protests is a further context-specific aggravating factor.

- In Britain, while society polarised over Brexit, the pandemic dampened down far-right street mobilisation, and while anti-fascists remain pessimistic regarding future developments, the far right is not currently considered an existential threat. Unlike the US, the militant anti-fascist movement is rarely discussed in this country in relation to public debates on 'violent extremism'. It is not subject to the same levels of disinformation, rumour, hysteria, and moral panic that could trigger vigilante action by the far right, and in turn, encourage more militant responses.

- On both sides of the Atlantic, the most likely risk in terms of the escalation of violence from the sub-lethal to lethal rests with impressionable individuals imbibed with anti-fascism's de-humanisation of the far right. This is the individual who might lack the framework of restraint, who might only loosely associate with a militant anti-fascist group, and who is motivated entirely by their hostile response to 'fascism' as an egregious and abhorrent injustice.

- This is a reactive mindset, which requires a stimulus, whether coming from the provocation of the far right directly through aggressive displays of force (e.g. a pro-Trump protest where paintballs are shot from the beds of pickups), or by government policies (e.g. immigration raids and detention centres). This threshold has been reached in the US. In Britain, however, for the moment such stimuli remain less likely. It will probably require a deeply polarising event, or series of events, to trigger an

impressionable individual to seek recourse to lethal violence as a way of venting their anger at perceived 'fascist' injustice.

The following matrix is a risk projection for the next two to three years. It is based on the assumption that Britain's far right will return to the streets in significant numbers following the end of the pandemic.

RISK MATRIX

SCENARIO	Low	Med	High
Antifa in the US will be formally classified as a domestic terrorist organisation	☑		
Antifa in the US will go underground and prepare for armed struggle	☑		
Antifa in the US will escalate from sub-lethal to lethal violence	☑		
Individuals loosely affiliated with militant anti-fascism in the US will escalate from sub-lethal to lethal violence			☑
Militant anti-fascists in Britain will become more clandestine and revert to para-military "squaddism"	☑		
Militant anti-fascists in Britain will reach a tipping point when groups (or individuals sympathetic to these groups) escalate to lethal violence	☑		

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This Exective Summary details the key findings of work conducted by the CREST commissioned project *Understanding Twenty-First Century Militant Anti-Fascism*. You can view all the outputs from this project at: *crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/twenty-first-century-militant-anti-fascism/*

The authors would like to express their appreciation to the project's external advisors: Professor Paul Thomas and Dr Graham Macklin.