

Controversial anti-Islamic group plans rally in Toronto

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TORONTO—A British right-wing group responsible for a wave of violent anti-Islamist street protests in the United Kingdom will attempt to spread its message to Canadians at a rally in Toronto next week.

A “support rally” for the controversial English Defence League is scheduled to take place at the Toronto Zionist Centre on Tuesday night. The event is being organized by the Jewish Defence League of Canada.

Tommy Robinson, the EDL leader, will speak at the rally through an on-line hookup. It is believed to be the first Canadian rally for the EDL, repeatedly linked to violence since it formed in 2009 to counter Islamist militancy in Britain.

“I am disappointed that the JDL would support an organization whose record in the U.K. is one of violence and extremism,” said Bernie Farber, CEO, of the Canadian Jewish Congress. “This is more than unwise and I sure hope they reconsider this decision.”

Dozens have been arrested at EDL protests, including Mr. Robinson, an alias used by Stephen Lennon. He was charged in November with assaulting a police officer at a confrontation with Islamists who burned poppies during a two-minute silence for veterans.

“The root cause of the problem is the Koran, it’s Islam,” he told the BBC on Nov. 19. “And no one has got the balls to admit it and say it and talk about it. We will. We’re not creating these divisions and this extremism. It’s already there. That’s why we formed. If there was no militant Islam there would be no EDL.”

Professor Matthew Goodwin said the EDL has links to football hooligan networks and draws most of its support from the young working class but unlike the traditional far right it is open to all races and faiths.

“It wants members of the Sikh community, similarly members of the Jewish community to become involved as a way of opposing what the EDL calls radical militant Islam, even though it’s actually just talking about Islam,” said Prof. Goodwin, a lecturer at the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham.

Over the past three to four months, the EDL has been trying to forge links internationally and has reached out to Dutch far right politician Geert Wilders and U.S. conservatives, he said. “This is part of that attempt to forge international links,” he said of the Toronto rally.

The EDL support rally is advertised on the JDL website. “JDL supports the EDL,” the announcement reads. “The EDL needs international support to help it support the values of freedom that Britain was once famous [for]. Now is the time to step forward and stop political Islam.”

Meir Weinstein, national director of JDL Canada, said he was visiting Israel when he met someone

connected to Mr. Lennon. The two later got acquainted on the phone. He said he was aware Mr. Robison had been arrested.

"I don't know everything about the leader of the EDL but from what we see they're on the streets and they're very vocal supporting Israel, supporting Israel's right to defend itself and standing up to political Islam, so that's about it."

Prof. Goodwin said he doubts the EDL message will resonate in Canada. He said it appeals primarily in working class districts of northern England that have little experience with multiculturalism.

"Your nation is on the whole at ease with ethnic cultural diversity," he said. "So I think the message itself may not resonate. What might be significant is whether this turns into some substantive links between groups in Toronto and the EDL, and whether there's any financial resources or logistical support that comes out of that because that is what the EDL is lacking."

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P.S.

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