

Far-right activists detained at UK border before Britain First rally

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Antisemitic Polish priest Jacek Międlar and head of Dutch branch of Islamophobic movement Pegida among those held.

Prominent far-right activists from Europe who were planning to attend an anti-Muslim rally in Birmingham have been detained at airports hours before they were due to speak.

Jacek Międlar, 28, an antisemitic priest, and his fellow activist Piotr Rybak were among three Polish nationals stopped on Saturday morning, according to Polish media and social media posts. They were due to speak at the rally organised by far-right group Britain First.

At around the same time, a Dutch national Edwin Wagenveld, who heads his country's branch of the Islamophobic movement Pegida, was held at Birmingham airport, Britain First said.

The detentions follow three terrorist attacks in Manchester and London. Muslims were targeted in Finsbury Park, north London, last week, in an attack during which one man was killed and dozens were injured.

Britain First describes itself as “committed to maintaining and strengthening Christianity as the foundation of our society and culture” and repeatedly tells its followers about a coming “civil war” with Islam.

Prominent figures in the organisation have claimed that the detentions by border authorities are illegal. The deputy leader of Britain First, Jayda Fransen, told IBTimes UK: “They have not committed any crime, it's completely ridiculous.”

Anti-racism campaigners said Międlar's scheduled appearance was further proof of the growing links between British extremists and nationalists abroad. Described as a “fanatical hate preacher” by campaigners in Poland, he attacks his critics as “leftists” opposed to “Polish patriotism”.

Międlar, from Wrocław in western Poland, has cultivated a sizeable following in his country. His local Catholic church has suspended him for the content of his nationalist sermons but he has addressed tens of thousands of people at rightwing rallies.

His speeches target the political left, “Islamic aggression” and immigration. They often invoke the “warriors of great Poland” and are accompanied by chants of “God, honour, fatherland”. Międlar was accused last year of calling Jews a “cancer” that had “swept Poland” during an address to a rally in Białystok.

Prosecutors later absolved him of alleged hate-speech offences. He was detained earlier this year and returned home after trying to enter the UK for another Britain First rally in Telford.

Rybak was indicted for inciting hatred last year after burning an effigy of an orthodox Jew during a protest against Muslim immigration.

During the event, he was heard saying: “Our duty and the duty of the newly elected government ... [is to say] we will not bring a single Muslim into Poland. Poland is for Poles”. He then set fire to the effigy, which was bearing an EU flag.

Wagensveld was arrested last year for failing to take off a child’s hat shaped like a pig while protesting against immigrant centres that were supposed to house refugees.

Anti-racism campaigners have said Międlar and his supporters could radicalise some of the 830,000 Poles living in the UK and called on British authorities to intervene before his arrival.

Rafał Pankowski, of the Never Again group in Poland, said the far right had been trying to mobilise members of the Polish community in the UK against their Muslim neighbours.

“Jacek Międlar and Piotr Rybak are well known as extreme hatemongers. They intended to promote their hateful message to the audiences in the UK. Unfortunately, there is a big surge in far-right nationalist activity among the UK Poles this year,” he said.

There was a heavy police presence in central London on Saturday as about 50 far-right English Defence League (EDL) demonstrators on a march were met by anti-fascist groups. Officers kept the two groups apart as they shouted slogans at each other.

EDL speakers made reference to the recent deadly terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, and one was greeted with cheers as he said that, if such attacks continued, “I’ll be the first white suicide bomber in England”.

Tensions died down as the EDL demonstrators talked among themselves in smaller groups while music played within a metal cordon surrounded by police.

Scotland Yard said on Friday that it was taking action to restrict both demonstrations under public order laws “due to concerns of serious public disorder and disruption to the community”. Another central London demonstration by a group known variously as Unite Against Extremism and the Football Lads’ Alliance was also the subject of police restrictions.

Saffiyah Khan, whose image went viral online in April after she was pictured smiling during a scuffle at an English Defence League march, attended Saturday’s protests as part of film crew documenting both sides of the event.

Speaking near where she was pictured defiantly facing off with an EDL leader, Ian Crossland, Khan said of Britain First: “I think, like with the EDL and every rightwing group that comes to Birmingham, they cause a bit of a scene, affect traffic, affect locals. They come in from all over the UK.

“While they have the right to be doing that, as part of freedom of speech ... If they march, they will be doing it on the police’s rules and, more importantly, the community’s rules – and they will be challenged by locals.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/24/far-right-activists-detained-at-uk-border-before-britain-first-rally>