

Is this retaliation for Lee Rigby's murder? EDL fanatics gloat after Islamic centre is burned to the ground in suspected arson

- Fire broke out in Muswell Hill, north London, at around 3am yesterday
- Police probe link to English Defence League after 'EDL' graffiti is found
- Dramatic rise in reported attacks on mosques since Lee Rigby killing

By Vanessa Allen, Ben Spencer and Ro Cooper

An Islamic centre was burned to the ground in a suspected arson attack yesterday. Counter-terrorism police are investigating if the building was targeted by the English Defence League in retaliation for the Woolwich murder, after 'EDL' was sprayed in foot-high letters on the wall. The far-Right group led a series of protests after serving soldier Lee Rigby was killed by two fanatical Muslim converts last month, and there has been a dramatic rise in the number of reported attacks on mosques since the outrage.



Blaze: Firefighters were called to the prayer centre in Muswell Hill in north London yesterday morning



Firefighters were called to tackle the blaze in Muswell Hill. So far there have been no arrests



Aftermath: The Metropolitan Police said an investigation had revealed the graffiti apparently linking the fire to the far-right English Defence League



Firefighters on the scene at the Bravanese Centre yesterday afternoon after it caught fire overnight



Devastation: A firefighter looks towards the fire-damaged Islamic centre

EDL leaders denied the group was behind the fire in Muswell Hill, north London, but supporters posted vile celebrations online, prompting fears of copycat attacks and increased racial tensions. Flames ripped through the empty brick building, which was home to a Somali welfare association and an after-school club, shortly after 3am.

The ferocity of the blaze suggested that an accelerant such as petrol was used to fuel it. Two neighbouring properties were evacuated and a woman was treated for minor injuries and shock. It is believed that one or more arsonists may have suffered serious injuries and hospitals have been asked to alert police about burns patients admitted in the hours after the attack.

Fire attack on mosque caught on film



'EDL graffiti' found on burned down Islamic centre



Destroyed: The Islamic Community Centre in Muswell Hill, North London which 'was set on fire by arsonists' in the early hours of yesterday



Wrecked: Counter-terror police are investigating the blaze after graffiti reading EDL was found



Hunt: Police look for evidence near the Islamic centre after it was revealed graffiti saying 'EDL' was daubed on the building



© David Gould / eye-line

Appealing for calm, community leaders said the centre was not a mosque and had no links to the Woolwich murder suspects.

But they revealed it was targeted by vandals after the July 7 London bombings in 2005, and again two years ago, and said they believed the arson was a racist attack. Young Muslims accused the far Right of 'trying to start a war' and warned of possible retaliatory attacks. The EDL denied responsibility. Leader Tommy Robinson said he would report any member found to be responsible.



© Twitter

Condemn? English Defence League leader Tommy Robinson says he is 'sceptical' about claims the EDL may have been involved



© Paul Wood

'Arson attack': Police are still investigating the cause of the blaze at the Somali Bravanese Welfare Association building, but it is thought to have been an arson attack



© Getty Images

A policeman walks with a mother and her daughter past the fire damaged centre yesterday afternoon



© David Gould / eyevine



Blaze: Around 35 firefighters were called to the Islamic centre after the fire started in the early hours

He said: 'They have put innocent people's lives in danger. It's disgusting. I've asked our members never to attack mosques or Muslims.'

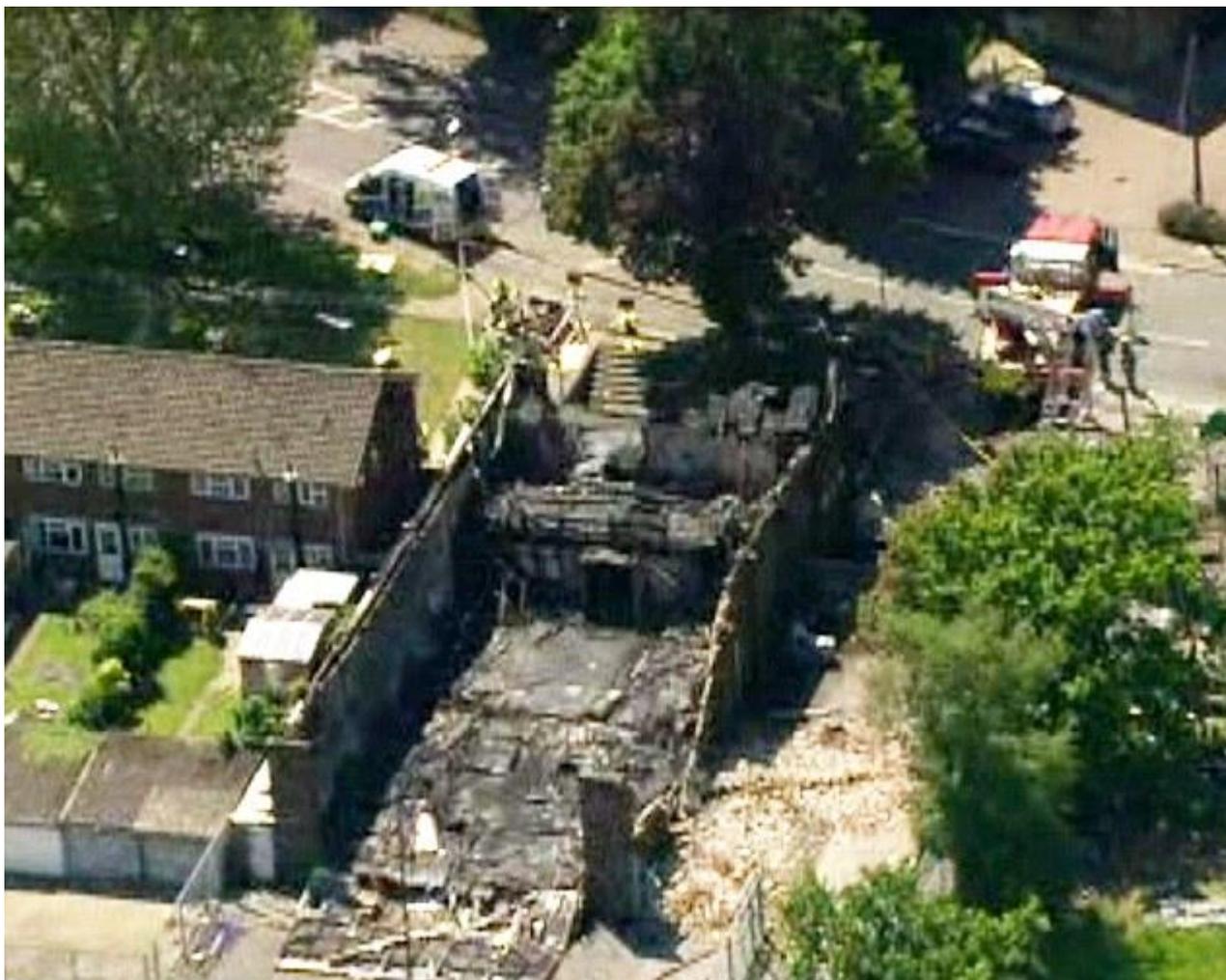
Mr Robinson, whose real name is Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, claimed there was a nationwide campaign to smear the group by linking it to firebomb attacks.

Ahmed Mohamed, a volunteer at the family-run centre, said he had seen the graffiti on the outside of the building after he was alerted about the fire. 'The letters EDL were sprayed in a dark colour, about a foot high,' he said.

Another volunteer claimed more graffiti was spotted inside the building, a former Scout hall, before it collapsed.



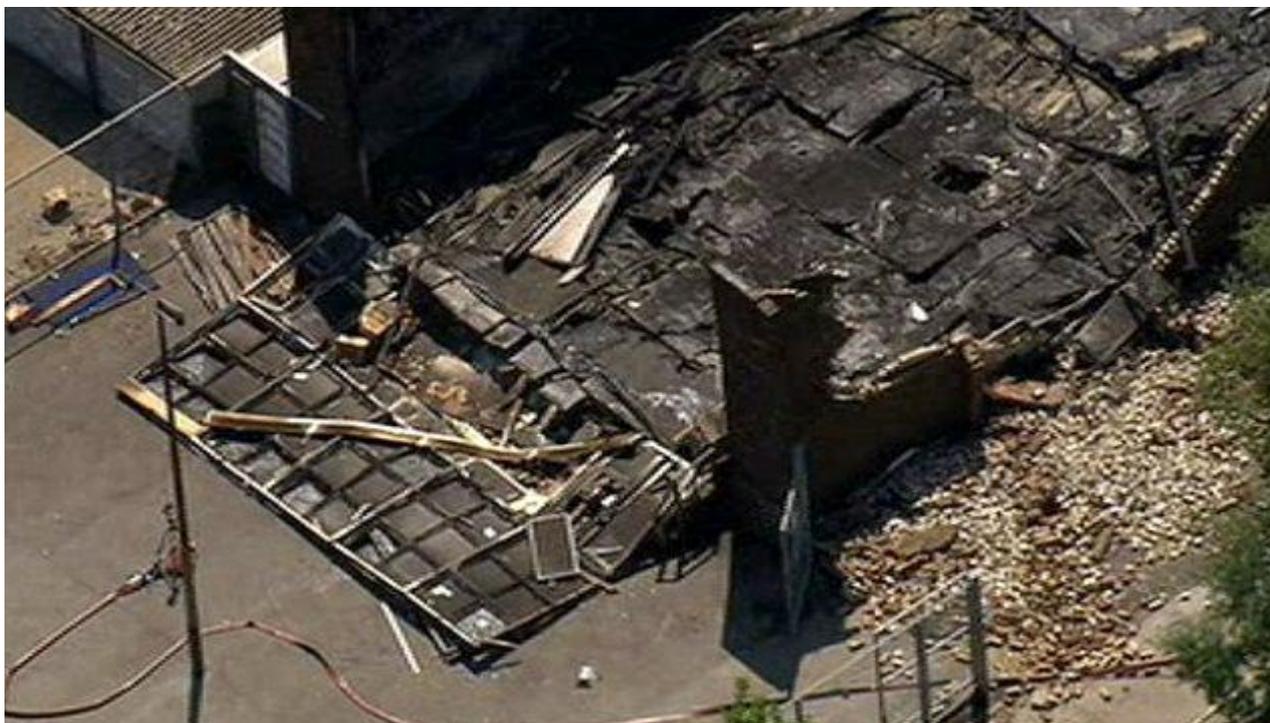
Destroyed: The remains of the community centre which burned to the ground in the early hours of yesterday



Completely destroyed: The building will have to be rebuilt after the fire as this picture shows



Wreckage: Forensics officers were searching for evidence to find out how the blaze started yesterday



Six fire engines and around 35 firefighters tackled the blaze which started in the early hours of yesterday

Chief Superintendent Adrian Usher said police had found no evidence that a bomb or explosive device was used to start the fire.

Resident Abdul Safer, 40, said the community was worried about security after the attack. He said: 'Of course we are worried. Anyone with children would be. It is nothing to do with religion – there are people on both sides who are using the name of religion for violence, but it is just madness.'

Local Tory MP Theresa Villiers said: 'This does look to be a hate crime and I think it's utterly disgusting. If it has a goal it will not achieve it. Attacks like this are designed to divide communities. I'm certain this will not happen in our community.'



Chief Superintendent Adrian Usher at the scene after a press conference. He confirmed that EDL had been scrawled in graffiti at the scene



Police search the scene on Coppetts Road for clues as to how the fire was started



Firefighters use a lift to view the damage caused by a fire in the Islamic center in Muswell Hill



The Somalian Islamic Bravanese Welfare Centre in Coppetts Road, Muswell Hill, which was on fire



Investigation: Police officers can be seen at the scene in Muswell Hill yesterday as an investigation begins



Wreckage: Firefighters damp down at the scene of the blaze after they were called out in the early hours of yesterday



Probe: The road is cordoned off as police and fire services investigate the blaze at the Islamic Centre

Meanwhile the Bomber Command memorial in Green Park has been defaced with graffiti for the second time in weeks. In the aftermath of the Woolwich murder the word 'Islam' was sprayed on it, and yesterday workers were attempting to remove the slogan 'Lee Rigby killers shud [sic] hang'. Jim Dooley, who led the fundraising effort for the monument, said veterans would be 'disgusted' by the vandalism. He said: 'The freedom that the heroes of Bomber Command secured included freedom of speech. It is terrible that this monument is being defaced in a warped mutation of that.' 'The memorial is nothing to do with the current tensions but whoever is vandalising it is too mindless to realise that.'

BOMBER COMMAND MEMORIAL ATTACKED BY VANDALS FOR SECOND TIME

A war memorial that was attacked by vandals in central London last week has been targeted for a second time.

The RAF Bomber Command War Memorial in Green Park has 'once again been subjected to vandalism', the RAF Benevolent Fund said.

A blog post on the fund's website said: 'We are extremely disappointed and saddened that the Bomber Command Memorial has once again been subjected to vandalism.'



Attack: Police deal with the latest lot of graffiti to be daubed on the Bomber Command Memorial in central London

'Work is currently under way to remove the graffiti.'

The post by Air Marshal Chris Nickols, controller, RAF Benevolent Fund, continued: 'The RAF Benevolent Fund exists to provide welfare for past and present RAF personnel and their dependants who are in need; this latest attack will once again divert much needed resources away from our primary purpose.'

A spokesman for the Metropolitan Police said: "At 4.43 this morning officers came across graffiti on the Bomber Command War Memorial in Green Park."

Although the spokesman would not confirm what the graffiti said, it is not thought to be of a similar nature to the graffiti daubed on the memorial last week.

The RAF Bomber Command War Memorial - and the Animals in War Memorial on Park Lane - were daubed with graffiti on May 27.

Although the words written on the two memorials were covered up quickly after police made the discovery at around 5am, it is thought 'Islam' was written on each of them.

The Bomber Command Memorial remembers the sacrifice and bravery of the 55,573 RAF crew who lost their lives in the Second World War and was unveiled by the Queen last summer.

A couple of weeks ago Dame Judi Dench described herself as being "very proud" to be the first patron of a new campaign to preserve it for generations to come.