



EXTREMIST RECRUITMENT AND EXTREMIST SENTIMENT NORMALIZATION

Date: November 23, 2022

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KEY EVENTS

On November 23, 2022, Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, Director of the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) at American University, presented on *Extremist Recruitment and Extremist Sentiment Normalization*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were conceptualisation and context of far-right extremism, the development and trends of the movement globally, and suggested directions for prevention.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Dr. Miller-Idriss presented an overview of the global far-right movement, highlighting the ambiguity, development, and trends therein. She also discussed emerging research from PERIL demonstrating the effectiveness of a public health model regarding the prevention and mitigation of the spread of far-right propaganda.

Question & Answer Period

During the question-and-answer period, Dr. Miller-Idriss highlighted the need for a more rigorous classification system of extremist movements that moves away from the left–right binary. She also spoke on the influence of the far-right on decreasing institutional trust in western democracies, as well as research-driven suggestions for effective intervention.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Miller-Idriss outlined the lack of consensus regarding the terminology used to describe the global far-right movement but stated that the general ideology consists of antigovernment and antidemocratic practices and ideals, exclusionary beliefs, existential threats and conspiracies, and apocalyptic fantasies. She emphasised that far-right groups rely on a supremacist construction of an inferior *other*, presented as an existential threat to be countered through violence—be it racial, gender-based, religious, or national in expression. She pointed to common drivers among far-right groups, stating that social and institutional changes are weaponised to foment grievances, creating a cognitive opening in which individuals are vulnerable to conspiratorial thinking and susceptible to propaganda.

Dr. Miller-Idriss addressed the comparatively low lethality of far-right terror globally since 9/11, noting that the majority of terror-related deaths occur outside of the West and within different contextual environments. She suggested that the data is difficult to track, however, given the ambiguity and variation in classification systems between and within nations. What is designated as far-right terror in one nation may be classified as a hate crime in another, for example.

In the five years prior to the pandemic, however, there was a 250% increase in far-right incidents globally, the majority of which occurred in the US—of the approximately 330 incidents of far-right terror and 300 deaths since 9/11, roughly half took place in the US. This outsized share is often attributed to ease of access to weapons, though Dr. Miller-Idriss pointed to the comparatively high volume of far-right propaganda produced in the US—generally white supremacist and conspiratorial in nature—as significant. The growth of far-right terror is not limited to nations with a marked presence of white supremacy, however; in 2020 the UN acknowledged the threat posed by the global far-right, signifying the increasing scope, scale, and pace of the problem.

A noteworthy observation regarding the rise in far-right activity is the prevalence of action by self-radicalised individuals, with only 7% of global far-right incidents being carried out by individuals with formal organisational ties, and 13–15% of incidents in the US. Dr. Miller-Idriss stated that she did not use the term “lone wolf” to describe these individuals, as they are not isolated but rather informal. Self-radicalisation can occur through the consumption of propaganda disseminated via online networks, resulting in mobilised independent actors.

Dr. Miller-Idriss further discussed the upward trend in the presence of the global far-right since 9/11, highlighting increased mainstreaming and normalisation of conspiratorial and hateful rhetoric in public discourse. The rise in the global far-right has manifested in various ways, with an observed increase in anti-government activity in response to public health initiatives, conspiratorial rhetoric surrounding the US electoral process, and a general nihilism regarding the ability of the democratic system. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a surge in conspiratorial extremist action in the US and EU, though this is an anomaly in the data and it is unclear whether it will persist post-pandemic. She noted that while these characteristics can be found in far-left rhetoric and action, it is not at the same pace and scale as the far-right.

Dr. Miller-Idriss closed by discussing the recent developments in Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), suggesting that a public health model has proven to be beneficial in reducing incidents. This model addresses the conditions in which far-right propaganda is allowed to thrive and seeks to engage individuals via increased digital and media literacy, civic education, and knowledge of history as a means of countering hateful rhetoric. She stated that, in order to be effective, a comprehensive public health approach should centre community needs, be holistic in its actions, seek an evidence-based decision making process, and foster a resilient system as opposed to countering individual actors.

Question & Answer Period

During the question-and-answer period, Dr. Miller-Idriss discussed the issues surrounding a right-left classification in extremism, as often there is a blurring of rhetoric and action between the two. For example, both far-right and far-left extremism has encompassed expressed gender-based, antisemitic, and anti-Asian sentiment in recent years. She stated that she uses the term far-right, deeming it the “best bad term,” but acknowledges the need for a better and more precise classification system.

Dr. Miller-Idriss then spoke to growing distrust in the West regarding validity of state institutions—not only within extremist movements, but also in the general population. She noted that the US was listed for the first time as a backsliding democracy, and that this points to the need for medium- and long-term solutions in order to rebuild popular trust in state operations. She suggested that the midterm elections in the US did reinstall some confidence in American democracy, as there was a rejection of some conspiratorial and antidemocratic individuals seeking election. The extent to which the Overton window has been

increased by far-right rhetoric is substantial, however, and the moral disengagement fostered along party lines must be addressed.

Lastly, intervention strategies were discussed, with an emphasis on the effectiveness of attitudinal inoculation and community education. Through short videos centred on the manipulation tactics involved in far-right disinformation campaigns, researchers have been able to engage individuals before they encounter propaganda, lessening its effects. Efforts to provide tools to parents and teachers have also been successful, as information on ways to locate behaviours associated with youth radicalisation can increase early detection in the community. PERIL is awaiting the results of longitudinal testing with parents, though they are optimistic regarding the results.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- There is no consensus on a term for the global far-right movement, but the general ideology contains antigovernment and antidemocratic practices and ideals, exclusionary beliefs, existential threats and conspiracies, and apocalyptic fantasies.
- Far-right terror has comparatively low lethality since 9/11, though the five years preceding the pandemic saw a marked increase of action and incidents driven by individuals self-radicalised via online networks.
- In 2020, the UN acknowledged the increasing scale, scope, and pace of the threat posed by the global far-right. Statistically, the US has an outsized share of far-right terror incidents, often attributed to ease of access to weapons and a higher volume of far-right propaganda production.
- The far-right has increased mainstreaming and normalisation of conspiratorial and hateful rhetoric in public discourse. This trend surged during the pandemic, though it is so far unclear whether the pattern will persist post-pandemic.
- A comprehensive public health model is an effective strategy for PVE, with emphasis on community needs, holistic responses, evidence-based decision making, and fostering a resilient system as opposed to countering individual actors.

Question & Answer Period

- There is an increasing need for a more precise classification system than the current left–right dichotomy, as often there is a blurring of rhetoric and action between the two.
- There is a growing distrust in the west regarding validity of state institutions—not only within extremist movements, but also in the general population. Though the recent US midterm elections restored confidence in the democratic process, the moral disengagement along party lines must be addressed.
- Attitudinal inoculation and community education are effective PVE strategies, engaging individuals before they encounter propaganda and providing community leaders—such as parents and teachers—with tools to locate youth radicalisation.



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