



RADICALIZATION CONVOY: CONCERNS OF DOMESTIC EXTREMISM IN CANADA

Date: January 24, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On January 20, 2023, Mubin Shaikh, Professor at Seneca College's School of Public Safety, presented *Radicalization Convoy: Concerns Of Domestic Extremism In Canada*. The key points discussed were the historical presence and evolution of extremism in Canada, the 2022 Freedom Convoy as a recent expression of a larger and interconnected history of extremism in the West, and recommendations as to how the security and intelligence community can address the extremist threat.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Shaikh framed his presentation on domestic extremism in Canada around the 2022 Freedom Convoy, highlighting the ways in which the event is the most recent event in a long lineage of extremism in the nation. He also discussed the interconnected nature of extremist movements globally, as well as the recent shift in focus from international to domestic terrorism within the security and intelligence community in Canada.

BACKGROUND

Mr. Shaikh asserted that radicalization is a process, not an end result, in which individuals become increasingly extreme in their views. The end state is extremism, which Mr. Shaikh defined as the belief that violence in the public space is acceptable in defense of one's ideology. He clarified the difference between extremism and violent extremism as the latter constituting the execution of violent action and the former as simply holding and advocating the belief. Mr. Shaikh stressed that radicalization does not equal extremism and that extremism is not necessarily violent. He stated that violent extremism is synonymous with terrorism, and that very few radicalized individuals reach this point in the process.

Mr. Shaikh discussed the recent change in focus in the security and intelligence community from international terrorism to domestic terrorism, noting that the former often refers to jihadist terrorism and the latter to non-jihadist terrorism, recently classified as ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE). He argued that this shift was partly informed by experiences in the US; however, to assume it is wholly a result is false as there is a strong lineage of domestic extremism in Canada. He pointed to the activity and prominence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in Canada throughout the 1900s—predominantly in the Central and Western provinces—as well as the Edmund Burke Society, Western Guard Party, and Nationalist Party, noting the white supremacist and anticommunist values espoused therein. Mr. Shaikh made special note of the Canadian Security and Intelligence Services (CSIS) investigation into the white supremacist group Heritage Front in the 1980s, which saw the implication of numerous Canadian politicians from the larger political ecosystem—an indication of the pervasive and historical presence of extremism in Canada.

Mr. Shaikh discussed the heightened attention of the security and intelligence community on jihadist terrorism following the attacks on September 11, 2001, noting that this mass casualty attack by an international terrorist group galvanized attention and resources—rightfully—away from domestic extremism. He stated that the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq triggered a slew of domestic jihadist plots in the West, and the Libyan civil war and NATO intervention continued to exacerbate tensions in the MENA region. Mr. Shaikh pointed to the prevalence of the ISIS threat from 2012-2018 as another significant factor drawing attention to international terrorism during the period.

Mr. Shaikh highlighted the 2016 election of Donald Trump as a catalyst for the rise in domestic extremism in the West, stating that the former President helped to normalize views of white supremacy and fringe theories such as the Great Replacement. He stated that white supremacist groups felt an affinity for Trump and that the former president did a poor job distancing himself from these extremist groups. Mr. Shaikh contended that, although Trump had a role in the mainstreaming of extremist content, domestic terrorism and IMVE had been on the rise in Canada prior to the 2016 election. He pointed to the terrorist action of Justin Bourque, an anti-government actor in 2014, as well as the rise of far-right extremist groups in 2015—namely, La Meute; The Three Percenters; Soldiers of Odin; and Pegida.

Mr. Shaikh suggested that the proliferation of social media factored heavily in the rise of extremist ideologies, as domestic extremist narratives infiltrated international spaces to a far greater extent than previously possible. He

highlighted the Canadian presence of the Great Replacement theory and groups such as the Yellow Vests—both of which originated in France—and high-profile anti-muslim attacks in Quebec and New Zealand as incidents in which social media was utilized as an international force multiplier for violent extremist rhetoric and action. To illustrate the Canadian role in radicalization, Mr. Shaikh discussed the 2020 report *An Online Environmental Scan Of Right-Wing Extremism In Canada* by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), which found that, averaged against other states, Canadians were producing the highest amount of extremist content.

Returning to US influence on Canadian violent extremism, Mr. Shaikh noted the similarities between the January 6 attack on the US Capitol and the emergence of the Freedom Convoy in 2022. Mr. Shaikh highlighted the presence of similar far-right narratives in both—specifically, anti-vaccination; anti-communist; and anti-globalist rhetoric—in addition to a significant amount of white supremacist rhetoric, support for Donald Trump, and theatrics similar to the January 6 insurrection. Mr. Shaikh asserted that, although the Freedom Convoy is often wrongly labeled a protest for individual rights; in reality, it was infiltrated by extremist actors. Furthermore, the event belongs to a larger history of extremism in Canada and is not simply a mimicry of the US Capitol attack.

Mr. Shaikh concluded by providing recommendations as to how to better counter the domestic extremist threat, focusing on policy, finances, and the responsibility of social media companies. He stated that terrorism must be understood in the societal context versus the legal context and that this must be applied equally across all actors and actions. For example, an incident may be designated as terrorist in the societal sense, but not necessarily prosecuted as such owing to the difficulty presented in the legal designation. Furthermore, he asserted that action must be the principal focus, as simply designating a group as terrorist can amount to little more than theater. Mr. Shaikh stated that the finances behind domestic extremism must be scrutinized on an equal level to international terrorism, pointing to allegations of US actor funding to the Freedom Convoy in support of agitation. Mr. Shaikh discussed the need to hold social media companies accountable for the proliferation of extremist narratives at the domestic and international level. He suggested that social media companies should use their extensive resources to increase monitoring and awareness of the threat of radicalization and extremism, notably among younger generations. He contended that security and intelligence must engage youth-dominant spaces and provide programs geared at off-ramping and preventing extremism.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Radicalization is a process in which individuals become increasingly extreme in their views, the end state of the process is extremism, or the belief that violence in the public space is acceptable. Violent extremism (terrorism) is the execution of violence versus simply holding the belief.
- The Canadian security and intelligence community has shifted focus recently from international terrorism to domestic terrorism. Though this is partially informed by the US experience, there is a pervasive and historical presence of extremism in Canada.
- The 2016 election of Donald Trump was a catalyst in the mainstreaming and proliferation of extremist content, but domestic terrorism had been on the rise in Canada prior to this event. Social media factored heavily in the rise of extremist ideologies, as domestic extremist narratives could infiltrate international spaces to a far greater extent than previously possible.
- The 2022 Freedom Convoy is often wrongly labeled a protest for individual rights or a Canadian mimicry of the US Capitol attack. In reality it was driven by domestic extremist actors and belongs to a larger history of extremism in Canada.
- To better counter the rise in the domestic extremist threat, there must be increased focus and clarity in policy, heightened attention on finances, and accountability within social media companies. Additionally, security and intelligence must engage youth-dominant spaces and provide programs geared at off-ramping and preventing extremism.



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