

Comment

The far right threat to government institutions and policy is systemic

Our government must be held accountable to ensure that far-right ideology is removed from policies and practices of institutions that exist to serve and protect Canadians.



Wael Haddara & Faisal Kutty

Opinion

Last month, 12 members of a German far-right group were arrested for allegedly plotting a large-scale attack on mosques similar to the ones carried out in New Zealand last year. At the same time, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's chosen successor resigned as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party leader because she could not stop party collaboration with the far-right, anti-Islam party, Alternative for Deutschland (AfD), to elect a state premier. The far-right ideological underpinnings of such hate groups now sit securely within many governments.

For years, the threat of right-wing groups has been seen by law enforcement as their ability to commit terrorist acts like the Québec City mosque shooting of 2017. Much research has also been published on how these groups have gained considerable influence by building an Islamophobia network of organizations and individuals who actively shape an anti-Muslim sentiment in national and international political discourse. There has also been significant exposure of their massive online disinformation campaigns. However, far less is known about the pervasiveness of far-right ideology in centers of authority and power—those which influence practices, policy, and direction of our government institutions. In Canada, the last several years have seen growing criticism of CSIS, RCMP, and CBSA for their discriminatory organizational cultures, and whether these are developed intentionally or not remains to be seen.

On one hand, it appears that the Government of Canada and its agencies recognize the far right threat and take it seriously. In August 2019, then-public safety minister Ralph Goodale declared that the presence of right-wing extremism in Canada is real and dangerous. CSIS director David Vigneault echoed that the agency is “more and more preoccupied” with the threat of violent right-wing extremism and white supremacists. On the other hand, a leaked public safety presentation by CSIS and the RCMP recently called for “bias-free terminology” and generalizing the naming of the right-wing threat to “violent extrem-



CSIS director David Vigneault, pictured at the House Public Safety and National Security Committee on May 13, 2019, has said that the agency is ‘more and more preoccupied’ with the threat of violent right-wing extremism and white supremacists. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

ist groups” in order to obfuscate the true nature of the threat.

This tacit approval is especially concerning because outside of Canada, the far-right has legitimated its ideology by gaining control of security-related portfolios such as national intelligence, law enforcement, and military forces, usually through electoral successes. Among liberal Western countries, Austria represents one of the clearest examples of this trend. In 2018, Austria's far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), then in charge of the interior, foreign, and defence ministries, ordered a police raid of the domestic intelligence service after it refused to provide the names of informants embedded within far-right circles. This unprecedented raid revealed years' worth of intelligence dossiers belonging to Austria and its allied nations. Similarly, Georg Maaßen, Germany's ex-spy chief, was forcibly removed from office after public outcry over his far-right views.

In the United States, far-right infiltration of government and security agencies has been playing out at the highest political levels. Steve Bannon, Stephen Miller, Sebastian Gorka and Trump himself have all given the far-right a national platform. These political actors and others have emboldened racist members of security agencies who openly espouse their hatred on social media. The subsequent presence of far-right proponents in police, security agencies, and the military should also come as no surprise. This unfortunate reality is well documented in the U.S., where extremist groups have infiltrated law enforcement and the military for training, experience, and access to weapons.

At home, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) recently launched an investigation into one of its combat engineers for ties to “The Base”—a sister organization to the American neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division. Similarly, a 2019 report by Canadian military intelligence revealed that since 2013, dozens of CAF members have had links to far-right groups including Atomwaffen, the Hammerskins Nation, Proud Boys, the Québécois nationalist group La Meute, the anti-immigrant Soldiers of Odin, and a paramilitary militia called the III%.

Unlike the CAF which has taken internal action, recent events demonstrate that other institutions continue to be home to racist, discriminatory and possibly

xenophobic attitudes and players. David Vigneault of CSIS vowed to take “concrete steps” to create a “healthy and respectful” workplace, only to have more complaints surface. When whistleblowers exposed the profiling of Muslim graduate students

last year, Vigneault rejected the claims and stressed that Canadians must trust CSIS.

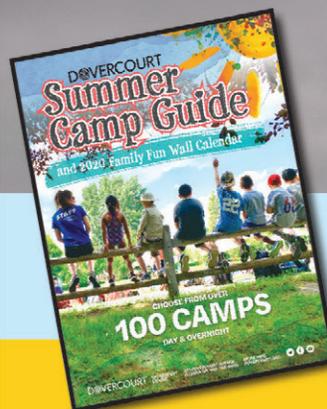
Existing attacks by far-right groups can no longer be seen as isolated events. Further, tepid security responses to violent far-right extremism can not simply be an issue of bureaucratic inertia. These groups continue to publicly operate in Canadian institutions with minimal restraint. The evidence is plain to see. Our government must be held accountable to ensure that far-right ideology is removed from policies and practices of institutions that exist to serve and protect Canadians.

Dr. Wael Haddara has published research with the New England Journal of Public Policy on violent extremism and the challenges it represents to open and democratic societies. He is a community activist, a Canadian political analyst, and serves on the board of the Muslim Association of Canada. You can follow him at @waelhaddara. Faisal Kutty is a lawyer and an assistant professor of law at the Dwayne O. Andreas School of Law, Barry University. You can follow him at @theMuslimLawyer.

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