



THE ALBERTA CLANN AND THE THREAT OF A UNITED RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST MOVEMENT

Date: February 21st, 2019

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Purpose Statement

This briefing note explores the threat posed by the potential merger of the Edmonton chapter of prominent right-wing extremist (RWE) groups — Soldiers of Odin, Wolves of Odin and Canadian Infidels — under a common banner called The Clann, and what repercussions this recent growth in numbers and activity — both online and offline — characterized by xenophobia and anti-Muslim bigotry, could have on other like-minded white supremacist groups operating on Canada's extreme right fringe.

Security Problem

What is it? Tyson Hunt, the previous leader of the Soldiers of Odin — denounced by critics as a racist hate group harbouring anti-Muslim and anti-immigration sentiments — who is now president of the Canadian Infidels and the northern Alberta Clann, has recently campaigned on social media for the consolidation of the Albertan capital's RWE groups, inviting people to "Join the Clann" in a bid to grow his community of sympathizers (Mosleh, 2019).

What is the sense of urgency? It is possible that the rise of the Alberta Clann could embolden some of the bigger names of Canada's far-right landscape — La Meute (The Wolf Pack), Soldiers of Odin, the III%,

Storm Alliance, and the Proud Boys — to actively build bridges between each other.

Key Events

The first key event was the disbandment of the Edmonton chapter of the Soldiers of Odin and the rebranding of the group under a new name and Facebook page, called “Canadian Infidels” and “Wolves of Odin.” The group’s decision to rebrand came days after being thrust into the spotlight when United Conservative Party candidates posed for photos with individuals wearing hoodies and hats marked with “S.O.O.” during a constituency meet and greet event in the Edmonton-West Henday riding on October 5, 2018. (Yousif, 2018). While the Soldiers of Odin ceased their activities, the collection of people who made up the group continued to operate within Edmonton (Lamoureux, 2018).

The second key event occurred on January 25, 2019, when two members of the Wolves of Odin/Canadian Infidels group, one being the aforementioned Hunt, entered and reportedly scout the premises of Canada’s oldest operating mosque, Al-Rashid Mosque in northeast Edmonton. The other unidentified man was wearing a toque printed with the Arabic word for “infidel.” The pair of suspicious men later joined three other individuals of their group in the building’s parking lot and verbally harassed community members streaming in for their Friday prayers. Police officers were called to respond to the trouble but no arrests were made. The mosque released security footage photos of the men who they say trespassed and surveilled the building, while a video of a conversation between the men and Muslim worshippers in the adjacent parking lot spread on social media. (Drinkwater, 2019).

The third key event happened on February 7, 2019, when a hate letter promoting white supremacy was dropped off at the Markaz-Ul-Islam mosque in southeast Edmonton. The letter wasn’t signed but bore the logo of the United Conservative Party and a symbol of the Alberta

Clann. A police spokesman has confirmed the hate crimes and violent extremism unit is investigating the racist letter (Maimann, 2019).

Background

In recent years, white nationalist and right-wing extremist groups have popped up in Alberta and some have even created paramilitary organizations with “potentially lethal cocktail of xenophobia and firepower”, e.g., the III% Albertan chapter, an offshoot of the American group (Lamoureux, 2017). While groups like the Soldiers of Odin — notorious for its vigilante street patrols — have denied being racist, anti-Islamic sentiment was omnipresent and made up the vast majority of posts in the group's old Facebook page. (Lamoureux, 2016). A 2017 Canada Border Services Agency Intelligence Bulletin reported that the group “adhered to extreme right-wing ideology,” “was not afraid to use violence to achieve its objectives” and “was setting up chapters in many provinces” (Bell, 2017). Nowadays, experts estimate there are at least 100 active right-wing extremist groups operating from coast to coast, with identified hotbeds in Alberta, Ontario, and Québec. (Perry and Scrivens, 2016) Internal documents from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service released in 2015 warned that lone wolf attacks from extreme right- wingers occurred more frequently than from Islamic extremists (Boutilier, 2015).

Furthermore, Statistics Canada found that police-reported hate crimes against Muslims in Canada grew 253 per cent from 2012 to 2015 (Minsky, 2017). That grim trend continued as a more recent report noted a disturbing increase of 151% in hate crimes targeting the Muslim population in 2017 following the Québec City mosque attack, the worst mass murder to take place in a house of worship in Canadian history. These numbers were largely driven by incidents in Ontario and Québec. (Ferrerias, 2018).

More importantly, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police has expressed its concerns that RWE groups in Canada have become enabled and empowered by the resurgent anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric coming from the United States and Europe. (Boutilier, 2018).

It should also be noted that the breeding grounds for those RWE groups are rife online. Their modus operandi often involves building online communities on social media platforms to recruit and radicalize others, which is achieved by sharing xenophobic materials, manipulating and utilizing Canadian media — capitalizing upon Canadians' fear of terrorism — in order to garner public support, and reinforce what they perceive are patriotically Canadian values. It can be argued that “the anonymity and in-group jargon associated with this kind of organizing gives it an air of informality.” (Zhou, 2018).

Implications

The first implication of bridge-building between far-right groups would mean a departure from the movement's at-times violent and fractious past, traditionally characterized by splinter groups and plagued with rampant infighting. RWE groups may be diverse, but they all have in common a denominator of exclusionist, ethno-nationalist notion of citizenship. Based on their nativist stance, if such mergers were to succeed, it would present a real challenge for Canadian law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

The second implication is that possible alliances between Canadian right-wing extremist groups could create an opportunity for RWE to inject their far-right views into mainstream politics; for instance, conservative provocateur Maxime Bernier is often accused of practising dog-whistle politics and deliberately fuelling prejudice against Muslims as part of his populist and xenophobic People's Party of Canada steadfast anti-immigration agenda. In a context of increasing racial tensions, grassroots activists and aspiring candidates may be tempted to

bend too far to the right on hot button immigration issues — and flirting with extremist groups online — to try to bring in more voters.

What is Not Known

It is not known how connected the Alberta Clann is with other prevalent right-wing extremist groups throughout Canada. However, as alliances seem to be building between groups in Canada's far-right ecosystem, it is not clear if Canada's law-enforcement and security agencies are mounting a concerted response to deal with the increasing collaboration of far-right activists; apart from a few exceptions, threat assessment reports published by federal agencies make little or no mention of the risk posed by right-wing extremists.

Next Steps

The increasing coordination of RWE groups in Alberta demands serious reconsideration of the far-right threat; the migrant crisis at the border spurring fears of massive unregulated immigration, statistics painting a pretty bleak job picture, growing disillusionment with the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau and a sense of lost national identity are all creating a “perfect storm” for the resurgence of xenophobic pogroms.

Canadian security officials and intelligence organizations should consider RWE a national security issue and bolster their policy toolkits with resources in order to detect and effectively counter radicalization; on that note, it is crucial that the public supports counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization efforts. Moreover, a broad proactive action plan from police and security agencies, liaising with each other to close the gaps in their understanding of the extreme right, should be created to keep better tabs and vigilantly monitor the recruitment, radicalization and activity of those within the extreme right-wing spectrum. Moreover, it is imperative that law enforcement agencies improve their awareness of the potential for violence and the incitement of hatred circulated in online communities, especially in the era of so-called “fake news.”

At the local level, non-profit groups should be doing prevention work with families, and trying to de-radicalize individuals entrenched in right-wing doctrine and extremist violence, as is done with those at risk of joining Islamist groups.

More importantly, steps should be taken to ensure that far-right groups are not infiltrating and co-opting mainstream institutions, particularly law enforcement and military, in a bid to gain access to training and weaponry.

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Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict and Warfare and Simon Fraser University, Volume 2, Issue 1.

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>