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Issue Brief

Far-Right Extremism in the West

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Summary

Far-right extremism, rooted in the Nazi and Fascist ideologies of the 20th century, has gained popularity across first world countries. Among factors that have propelled far-right extremism include Islamist terrorism, the 2008 financial crisis and European Union immigration policies—particularly after the outbreak of the Syrian war. The surge in disinformation, amidst the pandemic, has also made people susceptible to far-right indoctrination. The far-right exploits socio-economic grievances to further its cause. Effective steps must be taken to contain and roll back the far-right threat.

Introduction

Far-right extremism, rooted in the anti-Semitic, White supremacist Nazi and Fascist ideologies of the 20th century, has gained popularity across the first world countries due to a combination of factors. As per the Counter-Terrorism Committee of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), there has been a 320 per cent increase in far-right activities during 2015 and 2020, accounting for 82 per cent of global terrorist deaths.¹

The US and European countries have been most affected by this phenomenon. The January 2021 Capitol Hill riots in Washington D.C. killed six and injured at least 150, while the mass shooting in a New York supermarket store in May 2022 killed ten black people while three were wounded. The percentage of far-right prisoners in the United Kingdom during 2018 and 2020, increased from 33 to 44 per cent.² One of the significant far-right attacks outside of these geographies is the 2019 attack on a Christchurch mosque that killed 51 and injured 40.

Factors Fomenting Far-Right Extremism

Among factors that have fomented far-right extremism and propelled the movement forward is Islamist terrorism, beginning in the 1990s, which fomented fear, backlash and paranoia. The 2008 financial crisis created scepticism about the viability of the Bretton Woods framework. The period between 2015 and 2020 has proved equally consequential for the far-right movement. The immigration policies of the European Union, particularly after the outbreak of the war in Syria, the Paris terror attacks in November 2015, and the beheading of Samuel Paty, a schoolteacher, in October 2020, gave far-right extremists the mileage needed to advance their cause.

The Ukraine–Russia conflict has also brought to the fore issues associated with the threat of the far-right. In 2014 as well as in 2022, thousands of foreign fighters have flocked to Eastern Europe to fight on both sides of the divide. While ideology has presumably acted as the driving force for their temporary migration, the conflict has also provided an opportunity for these individuals to acquire combat and arms training in a real-world scenario.

Until the pandemic and the current phase of the conflict, Kyiv was also host to an annual far-right, hard-metal music festival. The event had long acted as the melting pot for far-right proponents to congregate and forge connections. Reports note that these individuals have also formed an association, called the Pact of Steel.³ A pact

¹ Cynthia Miller-Idriss, [“Strengthening Democracy is the Key to Preventing Far-Right Extremism”](#), Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 30 April 2021.

² Dan Sabbagh, [“Number of Far-Right Terrorist Prisoners in Britain Hits Record High”](#), *The Guardian*, 17 June 2020.

³ Yassin Musharbash, [“The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism: An Investigative Report”](#), *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Centre, July/August 2021.

with the similar name was signed by Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini in May 1939, formalising the Rome-Berlin Axis Agreement of 1936, which unified Germany and Italy, politically and militarily.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also exacerbated the crisis. The surge in disinformation, as people have become more active on social media and online forums amidst the pandemic lockdowns, has made people susceptible to far-right indoctrination. Anti-vax protestors also are often members of far-right movements, convinced that liberal elites plan to strip them of their freedoms.⁴ They hold immigrants responsible for spreading the virus worldwide.

Far-Right Ideologies

The growing popularity of far-right propaganda, at least over the past decade, has origins in the virulent rhetoric and theories spouted by extremist ideologies. These include, among others, The Great Replacement Theory, Accelerationism, and Eco-fascism. The Great Replacement Theory was popularised by Renaud Camus in 2011.⁵ It states that there is a conspiracy hatched by ‘replacist elites’ to replace White Christian societies with multi-religious and multi-ethnic states. These elites are those intentionally bringing in illegal immigrants into predominantly white European countries, thereby replacing the native white Europeans. This has taken on two names—White genocide in North America and ‘EurAbia’ in Europe, i.e., Europe transforming into an Arab-dominated Islamist entity.

Accelerationism is a belief that current liberal governments have become corrupt and inefficient and must be violently overthrown for a White-dominated order to emerge.⁶ For this to occur, it contends that Jews, liberal elites, ‘race traitors’ (those indulging in inter-racial relationships), and selected civilian and state personnel groups would need to be systematically targeted and eliminated. The Capitol Hill Riots are attributed to this fringe far-right ideology.

The attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in which 11 people were killed and seven wounded, including the perpetrator, Robert Bowers, was possibly one of the worst anti-Semitic attacks on American soil. Bowers believed that synagogues brought illegal immigrants from Latin America, and resettled them into the US, altering the country’s demography. A major narrative that supports these conspiracy theories is that George Soros, the influential Jewish businessman, is funding illegal migrant caravans bound for the US.⁷

⁴ [“German Call to Ban ‘Jewish Star’ At Covid Demos”](#), *BBC News*, 7 May 2021.

⁵ Lara Bullens, [“How France’s ‘Great Replacement’ Theory Conquered the Global Far-Right”](#), *France24*, 8 November 2021.

⁶ Bruce Hoffman, [“A Year after January 6, Is Accelerationism the New Terrorist Threat?”](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 5 January 2022.

⁷ Alistair Coleman, [“Fake Soros Scares Bid to Draw US Voters Ahead of Mid-terms”](#), *BBC News*, 2 November 2018.

Such ideas have inspired American neo-Nazis, such as Dylann Storm Roof, who murdered nine African-American worshippers in a church in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2015. Roof’s action was allegedly in retaliation for the “persecution” of Whites, especially White women, who he contended were being raped by African-Americans.⁸ Reports noted that he had prepared 38 bullets to be placed inside his handgun. According to White supremacist literature, 38 is a codeword for Heil (Hail) Hitler.

Eco-fascism links cultural and environmental degradation and is rooted in the belief that immigrants bear the sole responsibility for negative climatic repercussions in predominantly European societies.⁹ Therefore, they believe that immigration has to be permanently halted and homogenous White communities must be carved out from existing territories. Breton Tarrant, the Christchurch shooter, was inspired by such ideas. It is pertinent to note that the idea of *Lebensraum* (Breathing Space) was central to Hitler’s expansionist designs and was the pre-World War II version of eco-fascism.

The alleged legitimisation of far-right narratives by people in positions of authority and influence, such as US House of Representatives members Elise Stefanik and Matt Gaetz, Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson, political parties like the AfD in Germany and the National Rally in France, and commentators like Douglas Murray in the UK, have only worsened the situation. Notably, the National Rally increased its vote share from 8 to 89 per cent in the French parliamentary elections held in June 2022.¹⁰

Historical and Contemporary Trends

Far-right extremists use violence or threat of violence to advocate, among other things, ethno-White supremacy and violent overthrow of state authorities. They are both anti-feminist and anti-Semitic. Unlike Islamist radicals, far-right extremists generally do not claim responsibility for their actions in the attacks’ aftermath. They want to preserve the secrecy associated with their organisations, thereby preventing authorities from bringing the outfits onto their radar.

These outfits or individuals also prefer to operate in a decentralised manner. Louis Beam, in *Essays of a Klansman*, advocated for White supremacists to form leaderless and smaller groups, to create an 'intelligence nightmare' for security agencies.¹¹ James Mason, who advocated for the establishment of a successor state to Nazi Germany, called on his supporters (in his collection of newsletters, *Siege*) to

⁸ Jelani Cobb, [“Inside the Trial of Dylann Roof”](#), *The New Yorker*, 29 January 2017.

⁹ Alistair Walsh, [“Eco Fascism: The Greenwashing of the Far-right”](#), *DW*, 19 May 2022.

¹⁰ Jules Darmanin, [“Le Pen’s National Rally Wins Seats, Airtime and Money in French Vote”](#), *Politico*, 20 June 2022.

¹¹ J.M. Berger, [“The Strategy of Violent White Supremacy Is Evolving”](#), *The Atlantic*, 7 August 2019.

selectively target and eliminate people, while fomenting a White supremacist insurgency against the host state.¹²

The far-right draws inspiration from martyrdom tactics propounded by ISIS, and generally, while not always, convene online on platforms such as Telegram, Gab, Twitch, Discord, and Facebook. They also rely on social media and on seemingly innocuous posts to further their agenda.

Far-right extremists bestow titles such as ‘saints’ on White perpetrators carrying out acts of mass violence.¹³ They use channels like Telegram to praise these individuals and encourage others to follow suit. Adulation of mass violence, as indicated by hashtags such as #pleaseletitbewhite on several encrypted Telegram channels every time a shooting occurs, indicates the gravity of the situation. This occurs primarily in countries such as the US, where easy access to guns exacerbates the threat of far-right terrorism.

Such adulation, presumably, also stems from the notion, besides Great Replacement and White genocide, that violence faced by the white community is far more than what African-Americans experience frequently. The latter, referred to in derogatory terms by far-right supremacists, are opportune scapegoats to serve as targets in the impending race war, pitting the ‘superior’ White community against others.

Far-right extremism has emerged as a counter-response to what White supremacists consider acts of attrition against their culture, values, tradition and identity. Far-right ideologies are being rebranded to become more relevant by mainstreaming it worldwide. Some of the fundamental reasons why neo-liberal model has been declining in proportion to far-right’s resonance with ordinary people is due to the re-assertion of nationalist identities, lack of trust in liberal democratic governance and moderate media platforms, and the perceived ineptitude of governments to address worldwide socio-economic and health crises.

What ‘oppressed’ far-right find problematic is the demand for equitable rights by supporters of ‘Jewish Marxist’ elites and the latter’s attempts at replacing them from positions of authority, which they believe rightfully belongs to them. Unsurprisingly, President Barack Obama’s inauguration in 2008 sent a shock wave across the conservative Republicans, several of whom, by January 2021, tilted towards the extreme far-right.

Fictional novels and movies have inspired some deplorable, mass-casualty terrorist attacks. William Luther Pierce’s *The Turner Diaries* inspired the April 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing, a coordinated attack by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building which wounded more than 600, including children

¹² Zach Beauchamp, [“A Neo-Nazi Idea to Spark a Race War Inspired the Buffalo Killings”](#), Vox, 16 May 2022.

¹³ Will Carless, [“Online, Extremists Turn Shooters into ‘Saints.’ Experts Worry Others Aspire to Join the Ranks”](#), USA Today, 20 May 2022.

at a daycare centre and killed 168 people.¹⁴ Until 9/11, this was the deadliest attack on American soil and the first known significant act of violent domestic extremism.

Far-right forces have gradually infiltrated armed forces and police as serving or retired personnel, particularly in the US, Germany and the UK. In the US, Proud Boys and Oath Keepers—far-right, armed militias comprised of former and serving service officials, stormed the Capitol Hill. A grand jury charged several of them with seditious conspiracy in June 2022. Neo-Nazi inclinations within the German army continue to haunt that country’s armed forces. In July 2020, the second company of the Kommando Spezialkräfte (Special Forces Command, KSK) was dissolved.¹⁵ The charges against this company included indulging in extreme-right rock music and performing Nazi salutes. The trigger for the unit’s disbandment came when one of its Sergeant Majors, who had served in the company for 20 years, was found to have concealed stolen explosives and ammunition, alongside Nazi mementoes.

Counter-Strategies Adopted by the West

Governments, social media forums, and civil society organisations have adopted several measures to counter the surge in far-right extremism. Initiatives like Verlassen Sie Deutschland or Exit Germany have become successful.¹⁶ Since its inception in 2000, it has reported at least 800 successful cases and a mere 3 per cent recidivism rate. It counsels those willing to leave the far-right lifestyle behind. It also provides practical aid to those looking to disengage from extremist movements through measures such as police protection and a new identity.

In 2011, President Barack Obama instituted the Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention, with an annual budget of US\$ 21 million.¹⁷ After the 2016 elections—when Donald Trump took over, the budget of the office was reduced to \$3 million, and there was a near-complete shift in focus towards Islamist terrorism.¹⁸ Under President Joe Biden, the budget has again increased to US\$ 20 million in 2021.¹⁹

Additional steps that need to be taken to contain the far-right threat include the need to increase funding for research into such issues. Research centres should be set up

¹⁴ Aja Romano, “[How a Dystopian Neo-Nazi Novel Helped Fuel Decades of White Supremacist Terrorism](#)”, *Vox*, 28 January 2021; “[Oklahoma City Bombing](#)”, Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.

¹⁵ “[KSK: German Special Forces Company Dissolved due to Far-right Concerns](#)”, *DW*, 30 July 2020.

¹⁶ “[EXIT-Germany | We Provide Ways Out Of Extremism](#)”, *exit Deutschland*, n.d.

¹⁷ Eric Rosand and Stevan Weine, “[On CVE, the Trump Administration could have been Worse: But it’s Still Not Good Enough](#)”, *Brookings*, 7 April 2020.

¹⁸ Peter Beinart, “[Trump Shut Programs to Counter Violent Extremism](#)”, *The Atlantic*, 29 October 2018.

¹⁹ Jon Schuppe, “[DHS has a Program to Fight Domestic Extremism, but Critics Question How Effective It Really Is](#)”, *NBC News*, 18 May 2022.

to evaluate challenges through policy and academic prisms. There is also a need to create a mutually accessible database for affected countries and their intelligence agencies to draft global strategies to counter the far-right threat, focusing on overall profiles, logos, attacks and threat assessments of various neo-Nazi and neo-fascist groups. It is vital to boost digital literacy to counter misinformation and disinformation stemming from conspiracy theories. Finally, it is paramount to set up rehabilitation programmes based on the German format, tailor-made to suit each country, for those willing to leave such lifestyles behind.

Potential Impact on India

India must keep a close watch on these developments, especially if the far-right elements come to power. Even if they do not form governments, individuals professing such views could occupy important portfolios. The far-right agenda is seeped with protectionist, anti-globalist, and anti-immigration attitudes, which frequently have resulted in violence in these countries. Such worldviews can negatively undermine Indian interests.

India and other Asian countries also must no longer depend on the West, led by the US, to uphold the liberal democratic values that have sustained the post-World War II era. They must seek alternative arrangements to strengthen their guard against far-right ideologies permeating these countries. India is the world’s largest democracy and the most important bastion in regional affairs to lead this task.

Conclusion

The beginnings of the National Socialist Party or the Nazi Party in Germany, while initially appearing as benign, culminated in the horrors of the Holocaust and World War II. Although governments and societies now are cognizant of such nefarious tendencies, they still need to strengthen their efforts to counter this menace. Former German Interior Minister, Horst Seehofer, pointed to mounting evidence of “brutalisation” of German society on account of rising far-right crimes.²⁰ Extremism is a sociological challenge and must be treated as such. The far-right taps into the emotions of people and exploits their socio-economic grievances to further its cause. If not tackled effectively, at the societal and governmental level, such ideologies could lead to the collapse of the liberal and rules-based domestic and international orders.

²⁰ Kate Connolly, “[German Society Brutalized as Far-Right Crimes Hit Record Levels](#)”, *The Guardian*, 4 May 2021.

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