**The new far-right threat**

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Monday, May 06, 2024

Across North America and Europe, the far-right Active Clubs movement is expanding at an unprecedented pace, presenting new threats to democratic elections and minorities.

With a network of decentralised cells in most states in the United States and European Union member countries, the Active Clubs movement has blended far-right extremism with mixed martial arts (MMA). By presenting a more palatable image to the public and combining its extremist ideology with exercise, fitness and MMA training, Active Clubs have widened their appeal to reach a much broader audience than traditional white supremacist groups whose members are often derided for being “keyboard warriors”.

Unlike these traditional hate groups which are mocked for existing mostly in online echo chambers, Active Clubs put real-world engagement at the very core of their group. Whether through kickboxing, weightlifting, hiking, or organising demonstrations, Active Clubs focus on taking action in the here and now. While the ideology of Active Clubs remains similar to the tired and hateful ideologies of traditional white nationalist organisations, two unique factors – decentralised organisational structures and personal growth – have set the Active Clubs movement apart from others and fuelled its rapid growth.

Launched in 2021, the movement now includes more than 104 known cells across the US, Canada, and Europe, according to a recent Counter Extremism Project report. The unprecedented growth of the movement poses serious public safety risks as the US and many democratic countries approach elections in 2024. With a history of engaging in political violence and intimidation, there is a significant risk that the network’s cells could serve as a violent militia and “brownshirt” organisation interfering in elections and political events across the US over the coming year.

To understand the growth and dangers of Active Clubs, we need to examine how the movement started. First launched in January 2021, the network was the second project started by Robert Rundo, a white American nationalist who spent time in Europe learning from other far-right groups and founded the Rise Above Movement (RAM).

After the arrest of Rundo and three other group leaders during the 2019 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, the hierarchically organised RAM began to disintegrate. Recognising the danger that well-placed arrests could pose to vertically structured organisations, Rundo adopted the model of leaderless resistance, first developed by the white nationalist writer Louis Beam in 1983.

With this lesson learned, Rundo structured the Active Clubs movement as a decentralised network where each cell functions independently, yet stays connected to others on encrypted messaging platforms such as Telegram and Rocket.Chat. This more durable decentralised network approach ensures that even if one branch or cell leader is arrested, the overall network remains intact.

Beyond this more resilient organisational structure, the second factor behind the dramatic growth of the Active Clubs movement is its blending of far-right ideologies with personal growth and physical fitness.

By promoting healthy pastimes like weightlifting, kickboxing, and even hiking, the group centres itself around positive, shared activities. Active Clubs enthusiastically encourage their members to live healthier lifestyles, by avoiding tobacco and drug use, training daily, and even going for hikes. For many new members, Active Clubs initially serve as a vehicle for self-improvement where they can train and exercise amongst like-minded individuals.

Alongside this personal growth, the group gradually introduces its members to the movement’s ideology as their involvement deepens. Putting physical training at the centre of the organisation serves as a powerful tool to help build the self-confidence of its members, many of whom are disenfranchised or isolated with few other options. Beyond developing their self-confidence by orientating the movement around shared training, the network also helps its members build a strong sense of camaraderie.

These powerful social and psychological factors have helped the group to not only reach a wider audience of disaffected young people than similar organisations but also grow faster than any other far-right movement I have monitored.

Unlike most far-right extremist groups – which simply take time and funds from their members – Active Clubs are unique in claiming to provide some concrete social and psychological benefits to recruits. When these social and psychological benefits are combined with a sense of purpose and sacred values, they can become powerful catalysts for collective action that are likely to lead to further political violence and election interference.

Members of the Active Clubs movement have been involved in a wide range of political activity, including violent far-right rallies, political intimidation during campaign debates, and clashes with counter-protesters.

The Active Clubs openly praise their American founder Rundo, who was jailed in 2019 for inciting violent rallies in Virginia and California, and pursue the goals of his former organisation, RAM, within a more durable decentralised structure.

Active Clubs also maintain close affiliations with more traditional white nationalist and accelerationist groups like Patriot Front that have used violence in the past. In Canada, Active Clubs members are known to have simultaneously been members of designated terrorist groups, including the Atomwaffen Division.

The Active Clubs have recently also become more engaged in direct political interference. In late 2023, Active Clubs members in Franklin, Tennessee staged a show of force during a mayoral election debate, which disturbed some members of the public. While the Active Clubs involved claimed they were only providing protection for the candidate, their presence at debates, polling stations, and civic buildings can have a chilling effect, causing voters to feel unsafe and deterring them from attending events which are vital to the democratic system.

Excerpted: ‘Active Clubs: A new

far-right threat to democratic elections’.

Courtesy: Aljazeera.com