



EPISODE 3.6

MONEY, MISOGYNY AND MAHYEM

OREN SEGAL: Welcome to Extremely, a podcast from the ADL Center on Extremism. I'm Oren Segal.

JESSICA REAVES: And I'm Jessica Reaves.

OREN: So, Jessica, today we got a little something for everyone. We're going to talk about the Houthis, an Iranian-backed terror group in Yemen that everybody's talking about, Men's Rights Activists, a misogynist movement that many people may not know about.

JESSICA: Yeah, that almost no one is talking about.

OREN: And then we'll talk to our Center on Extremism financial investigator about our new report explaining the money flowing between extremists through cryptocurrency exchanges. And then the cherry on the top, we will then speak to Shannon Hiller, Executive Director of the Bridging Divides Initiative, which tracks and mitigates political violence in the United States. It's a full plate.

JESSICA: It sure is.

OREN: So, Jessica, I did not have this on my 2024 Bingo card, but anti-Israel activists in the U.S. and others around the world are praising, wait for it, an Iranian-backed U.S. designated terrorist group in Yemen. As if things weren't bad enough, they have been targeting international cargo ships in the Red Sea, shooting missiles towards southern Israel since mid-October after the massacre against Israel in the beginning of the Israel-Hamas War. They have a history of not only antisemitic and anti-Israel and anti-American ideology, they adopted a slogan that says, God is great, death to the U.S., death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam. So, they're pretty clear about what they're about, even if you just look at their flag and their main motto.

All that being said, since this has become a big part of not only the public discussion, but a lot of discussion amongst the extremists and antisemites and other bigots that we're looking at, what's the appeal here? Like, all of a sudden, this group is front and center, and why do you think people are willing to support this group in some really confusing ways?

JESSICA: Everything about this is confusing, I agree. And I guess at this point, you know, they've just moved on from praising Hamas –

OREN: Or only praising Hamas.

JESSICA: Right. So, they're now not only supporting Hamas, they're praising another Islamofascist terror group, because one was not enough. And as we know, as with Hamas, the Houthis would happily and gleefully kill every American on site. So that makes the support even more confusing. So, our analysts really dove into this issue this week and we have a new piece up on the website, which I encourage everyone to check out. We will add it to the show notes. But our analysts really smartly point out the Houthis are yet another proxy for what a lot of left-wing activists consider the quote, "global south" or the oppressed or colonized populations. This is ridiculous in a number of ways, including the fact that the Iranian regime, which backs the Houthis, is the opposite of oppressed. In fact, it's one of the most oppressive governments in the world. So again, I think we're just seeing a total breakdown and reasoning and thought across the board on this one.

OREN: You know, it's hard to ascribe a lot of deep thought into some of the folks who are, you know, expressing blatant support for terror, even before this. Like those who celebrated and justified Hamas's massacre. But it just seems like anybody, and I don't know if this is like a massive amount or a vocal minority, my sense it is a vocal minority, but not an insignificant one, to just elevate and promote blatant hatred and terrorism. Why am I acting like I'm surprised and yet I am, right? I mean, this is literally the job we've been doing for a long time, and I've been doing it for a long time. And yet, remember when there was the reporting of Osama Bin Laden's letter to America trending on TikTok and that people were supporting it? Like, that's completely bat-sh** crazy. This also seems to just be like the next level of, you could find a better group of people to ignore their hatred. I don't know. It's insane.

JESSICA: Well, and it shows a lack of understanding of like basic geopolitics, but it also underscores how badly the American education system has failed our students. If young people are believing that somehow in any way Osama Bin Laden had anything other than murder in his sights, murder and chaos and terror, then shame on us because we have not done a good job of explaining what happened 22 years ago and many years before that.

OREN: I think that's a fair comment to make. I do wonder whether the Bin Laden message to America trending on TikTok, what the actual volume was. I do wonder to what degree are people truly supporting, you know, let's just say far left spaces like the Houthis, like, I still think it's a minority, right? But it's there, right? It's not that hard to find. And if it's easier to find in some of these protests that we're seeing in some of the online spaces, that's a problem because a lot of people are learning about this conflict and other issues for the first time now. This is just going to confuse people and I'm just not so sure that there's enough counter messaging to help.

JESSICA: I'm sticking with my failure of the education system. I just think it's ridiculous. I know I sound old and grouchy there. You know, got to lean into it.

OREN: So, for those who want to learn a little bit more about how expressions and support of the Houthis are showing up online and in some of the sort of anti-Israel spaces, check out the show notes. There's some more information.

JESSICA: So, Oren, this week we expanded what I've decided to refer to as our library of terrible men and published an explainer on MRAs, otherwise known as men's rights activists. Those of us who cover

and are interested in misogyny are aware of these guys, but they're not an especially high-profile element of the online "manosphere". Again, a collection of misogynist groups and movements, ideologies that intersect and that take up a lot of space in online forums. And if you're a woman on the internet, you have almost doubtlessly encountered one of these groups at some point in your experience.

So MRAs are part of the manosphere. They emerged as part of the rejection of second wave feminism in the 1960s and 70s. So well before our time, Lauren. So, these men are very concerned that men are being denied their rightful legal protection and societal roles. And what this translates into is a bunch of men who like to file lawsuits against organizations and institutions that have the gall to elevate women to any position of power or refuse a man's application to a job or side with a mother in a custody case, and in extreme cases, the sense of grievance can bubble over into violence. And we saw that in the 2020 case of Roy Den Hollander, who is a self-described anti-feminist lawyer and a lifelong misogynist who had a pension for filing for discrimination suits. Hollander murdered the son of a female judge who was presiding over one of his cases.

So generally, MRAs are more of a nuisance to the legal system than a threat to women's lives. But I think Hollander, and others, show us why it's so important to include this group in our overview of violent misogyny. So, Oren, you've been a longtime advocate for this kind of coverage. And having these new resources on the manosphere on our website is kind of a victory for the vision you and I have been discussing for years now. Why do you feel it's important for us to cover this alongside other forms of hate?

OREN: Because you told me to. No. We've been talking about this for a while. And I know that in the past, over the years, people would come to me and be like, you guys are doing a great job tracking antisemitism and other forms of hate as key drivers of extremist movements or to understand their ideology. And people would say to me sometimes, like, well, what about sort of misogyny? Isn't that a gateway into these movements or is that something we ought to consider if we're trying to sort of identify what we need to pay attention to? And obviously we have talked about that. Unfortunately, and I don't need to tell you this, you've done a lot of work here, the violence associated with a lot of the misogyny has also increased over the past couple years. So, there was no way of looking at the domestic terror landscape without actually dealing with the most violent in this sort of broader misogynistic movement. And I think it's important, right, that people understand it and have those resources. So, I'm glad we're doing that. But for you, if I can ask, you know, where do you place the MRAs?

JESSICA: I mean, I think the incels, the involuntary celibates, are the most violent element of this grouping of men. They have perpetrated the most violence. The thing about misogyny—

OREN: And I'm sorry to interrupt, but can you just say maybe what are the involuntary celibates for those who may have heard this for the first time coming out of your mouth just now?

JESSICA: Okay, yes, sorry. Backtracking, involuntary celibates are men, generally heterosexual men, who blame women for their own lack of success in dating and the sexual arena and sometimes they have become violent. You may be familiar with Elliot Roger; he was sort of the proto incel for the modern

times. There have been incel attacks before him and many after him, but he is one of the key figureheads in the movement.

OREN: So involuntary celibates to your point, are most violent—have engaged in the most violence. OK, got it.

JESSICA: Yeah. So MRAs, Men's Rights Activists, along with some other groups that we're going to be covering in our ever-expanding library, the Pickup Artists, Men Going Their Own Way, these guys have a slightly different attitude and they're each distinct. MRAs, as I said, they focus on the legal system, they focus on how men are being taken advantage of, how they are not being treated fairly in the legal system, because women have gained too much power. So again, not violent in a sort of comprehensive way, the way the incels are. With so many of these misogynistic movements, it's impossible to totally and entirely detangle them from each other. They all kind of feed into each other in this really awful kind of like -- remember the King Rat?

OREN: King Rat? That's not a Disney movie, I presume.

JESSICA: It's this idea that all the rats, there's so many rats that they all, like their tails all get tangled up and they become like a giant ball of rat.

OREN: I get it. That's like the rat version of Voltron. OK, keep going.

JESSICA: So that's how I think of the manosphere as the King Rat. And all of the rats' tails are kind of interconnected. You really can't pull one rat out. They feed on each other. I know this is a totally disgusting analogy, I'm sorry if anyone's eating, or if you have pet rats, I'm also sorry. But they are very interconnected. So, an MRA will have elements of incel ideology and may have, in perhaps younger years, engaged in some of the Pickup Artists Activities. And we'll talk more about this as we publish more of these pieces. But I think it's just really important to remember that this is a landscape and it's not neat and clean in terms of separation.

OREN: Yeah, so when you say they're mostly active in like the legal arena, I mean, does that mean they're suing people? What does that look like?

JESSICA: Yeah, so they're filing these frivolous discrimination lawsuits, like this Roy Den Hollander did. He just would jam up the legal system with these lawsuits, claiming that men had been discriminated against. So, it's that sort of paper terrorism that we often associate with sovereign citizens and their ilk where people just file huge amounts of paperwork. Then the courts have a responsibility to deal with the paperwork. And that in and of itself is kind of a form of protest, they believe.

OREN: Now we're excited to have one of our colleagues join us. Mark Dwyer, who recently worked on our new report called Virtual Money, Hateful Reality. Huh? You like that? That report examines how thousands of dollars of cryptocurrency have been flowing between white supremacists, antisemites, and other extremists and their supporters via cryptocurrency exchanges. Now, if that sounds like a completely different language to some of you, even better reason for us to have Mark here. So welcome, Mark.

MARK DWYER: Hey, Oren. Thanks for having me.

OREN: What do you think is the significance of the findings that you worked on in this report?

MARK: Well, I think this brings to light some of the surprisingly centralized nature of cryptocurrency. I think when people think of cryptocurrency, they think that this is some anonymous, unstoppable financial force that is entirely decentralized, it can't be disrupted, and it scares people, and also, it's complex, and it's hard to understand. But I think this report shows that there's plenty of room for responsibility in the cryptocurrency space, especially on the part of cryptocurrency exchanges. There are extremists and their supporters that are actively using cryptocurrency exchanges to fund themselves and their activities. And these exchanges, which are companies, need to act responsibly in addressing this and disrupting extremist financing.

OREN: Can you say what were some of the main data points or takeaways, the findings of this report? Like, how much money are we talking about?

MARK: This report is a sample. It's not representative of the entire extremism landscape. We chose the extremists in this report because they're particularly concerning throughout 2023. So, we've tracked more than \$140,000 in cryptocurrency transfers between supporters and extremists and extremists and these exchanges. And we found 22 different cryptocurrency exchanges to be responsible for this money moving through the blockchain space.

JESSICA: When you say concerning, you mean, like, active and influential and very much embedded into the extremist landscape, is that right?

MARK: Yeah, it is. These extremists, they're predominantly white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and antisemites. As you said, they're notable because of the impact they've had, but they're also especially vitriolic. One of the largest recipients of cryptocurrency in the report, Counter-Currents, which is a white supremacist propaganda outlet, they just ran an article the other day titled, "Kabbalistic Jewminoid Underground Tunnelers". So, they These are not exactly nice people, and they have very high readership.

OREN: Yeah, I mean, what do you think would be most surprising to somebody about investigating and trying to understand the sort of crypto -extremist space?

MARK: I think most people would be surprised about the funding typologies, which is a fancy word for basically saying, how is money moving into the extremist financing space? Early last year, we released a report on how extremists using crowdfunding. Crowdfunding, by definition, is a collection of hundreds of small donations to accomplish a big task or a big financial hurdle. We see that a bit with cryptocurrency, but something that is a bit odd is the phenomenon of what we call an extremist financier. It's not uncommon to see one individual on the blockchain sends thousands or tens of thousands of dollars to not even just one extremist cause, but multiple extremist causes. They'll buy \$10,000 worth of cryptocurrency and then they'll send it to six or seven different extremist groups around the world. That's a dynamic that we don't really see in other areas of extremist financing.

JESSICA: So, somebody reads this report, what do you want them to come away with? What action, if any, do you want them to take?

MARK: One of the reasons this report is what it is, is because we want there to be an impact. We could say that extremists are using cryptocurrency until we're blue in the face. And it's true, they're using cryptocurrency, but right now there's intense interest in both the public and private sectors to regulate the cryptocurrency space. Some of the space is already regulated, some of it is currently the wild west, and federal and state level regulatory bodies are trying to really wrap their head around how to manage this new technology.

And one of the things that bipartisan partnerships and Congress are seeking to rein in is extremists and other illicit financing. So, what listeners can do is contact the representatives and express concern about these findings in the report. And then request that the representatives take action to stop extremist crypto financing. Something else you can do, this is for listeners that maybe invested in cryptocurrencies themselves because cryptocurrencies are not the evil harbingers of doom, they are a legitimate financial vessel that you can use as speculative markets. You should consider these findings for yourself and consider who you're trading crypto with. Perhaps the cryptocurrency exchange that you're using is in this report. And that doesn't necessarily mean you should stop trading with them, perhaps you should raise your concerns with the platform themselves and ask what they're doing and look at their policies. I think there's a lot that your listeners could do and the readers of the report could do to address this issue.

JESSICA: That's awesome. Thank you so much, Mark. I'm going to make sure that we add links to the Crypto Report as well as the Crowdfunding Report in our show notes so everyone can take a look at those pieces there. Mark gets very, very deep into this research. So, we're very happy that we've been able to publish two such impactful and interesting pieces from him. So, thank you so much, Mark. We really appreciate it.

OREN: Yeah, Mark, thanks so much. Thanks for speaking English on this topic too. It's not always easy when we're talking about this so that was super clear. And thanks so much for making time to join us.

MARK: Thanks for having me. Anytime.

OREN: We are going to now hear Shannon Hiller, Executive Director of the Bridging Divides Initiative. Well, we're really happy that you have made time to chat with us. We've been working together for a while. We operate in similar spaces. And when people think about how to deal with political violence, or support issues of democracy, or just be a generally good person, your name does pop up. So, it's awesome for you to actually finally be on the podcast.

You know, your background includes dealing with peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and different parts of the world. And for somebody who's dealing with political violence in this country, what have those experiences around the world, how has that been useful to you as you're assessing what you have been seeing in the United States over the past several years?

SHANNON HILLER: Thanks, Oren. Likewise, I'm glad to be here after working together for several years and for you to say such nice things about me on record. Always glad to hear that part. I used to get this question a lot more when BDI first started in 2019. People were feeling like it was a big jump from working on international peace building or conflict prevention to the U.S. at the time. I don't get that question as much anymore, not just because BDI has been around for four years, but I think it's a little more self-explanatory. And I think the actual experience of it, the kind of skill set and thinking about the type of terminology we'd use internationally is like conflict drivers. Understanding conflict drivers in any country is the same type of skill set we bring to our work at BDI. And I think I really benefited from living and working abroad in other countries to then come back to the U.S. and kind of see things with fresh eyes in a lot of ways. Seeing other people, other countries, navigate that, I think can be a big benefit in remaining hopeful, honestly, in looking at political violence and conflict in the U.S.

OREN: Do you feel that the work of organizations like yours, other NGOs, right, your whole thing is to prepare people and give them tools in order to be prepared when bad things may happen. Do you feel like we're in a good spot and ready to deal with what may come?

SHANNON: We were in some of those conversations together in 2020, right? We were not talking about a civil war before the election. I think we were also in some of those same conversations in 2022 when we were saying We are in a good spot to deal with some of these challenges. And I think that was born out in the midterms, but we're in a very different context now. The first thing I'd say is that the latent risk of political violence is still quite high. All the components of the fire, if you will, are there, but we might not see that manifest in, like, physical attacks or the scale of offline incidents that we saw in 2020.

OREN: That's hope. I just heard hope. We may not see terrible things. I think that's wonderful.

SHANNON: There's a "but" and I think that is a lot of what we've been focused in on trying to get our hands around together, which is threats and harassment can achieve the same outcome. The same anti-democratic or authoritarian outcomes. So, you don't have to use physical violence if threats and harassment are sufficient.

JESSICA: Because the goal is to silence political dissent. It's to silence opponents. So, you don't need force because you've already intimidated somebody into shutting up.

SHANNON: Right. If people don't feel safe to participate in all the different pieces of democracy, whether it's voting or going to your local council, you can use the system itself to enact some of those anti-democratic measures. So, from some of the survey data that we have already, unfortunately, what I think we're going to see when we re-release the latest data in March on the event data, Oren, that we've been working on together, we're already at a high baseline. So, we're already seeing the effects of some of those threats and harassment, is something like one in six local officials report being threatened in the last three months. And that's been consistent over the last year and a half. So, one in three report being harassed. And so that's not just like once in the last year, that's in any given three-month period, that's the percentage of mayors and council members who are reporting this type of hostile activity.

OREN: That is really alarming. We'll put in the show notes some links to some of the work on this. But one in three people, it shouldn't come as such a surprise, actually, because just the tactic of harassment, right? Whether it's a bomb threat or a personal threat or swatting or doxing or whatever is so cheap and easy and so effective, I guess. And we've talked about it on this podcast before, that of course more people are going to use that, but I don't think people have come to terms with the fact that there may be a generation of people who just say, I'd rather be safe than serve my community. And the fact that that's even an option that they have to balance is scary.

JESSICA: I think we're seeing that already. I know where I live every day in the paper, there's somebody else who's leaving City Council or leaving the County Board or leaving whatever because they're like the lack of civility, the lack of humanity here is too much to take and I'm not putting my family at risk. I mean, that's terrible.

SHANNON: And it's exactly what we hear, right? People might be willing to take the risk for themselves, but if it's starting to affect your family, there's that interplay between the actual incidents and the threat.

That's the other thing I'd say, and I'd be interested in how your team is thinking about it too, Oren, but just the realities of armed incidents, armed offline mobilization, remain really complex and volatile, even if we're not seeing the same level of mobilization as we did in 2020. When someone says, "I'm going to come shoot you and your family", it's pretty credible in this country. I use the word credible colloquially there, right? But you could see how unofficial would take that seriously because there are a lot of weapons in this country. People are putting bulletproof, like, podiums, they're getting bulletproof glass at election administration offices, people are doing active shooter trainings. There's a lot of fear and concern around this. And when people are using that language and are in some cases mobilizing with weapons around these kinds of issues, it kind of adds to that real interplay between the threats being effective and the risk of actual incidents happening.

JESSICA: And when public officials are essentially egging this behavior on, I think the psychology of all this is super interesting. I've been reading a lot about how, as a country, we are in a very weird place right now because none of us have had a chance, collectively, to sort of recover from the pandemic. And there's just so much PTSD and everyone's angry and everyone's on a short fuse. And I feel like that combined with the politics of grievance and the sort of boiling anger is such a volatile mix and probably makes your job that much harder. I hope we will look back in 20 years and say, "Oh, that was a weird but anomalous time."

SHANNON: I think that's the right timeline to be looking at. It's not a one- or two-year fix to create an actual positive peace. And I think Americans are really impatient by nature. And so, thinking about this as a decades-long process is a big piece of it.

To your point about individuals being really angry or how to break that cycle of these incidents driving fear, driving anxiety that you're identifying, we really haven't had a lot of time to process. A big part of our work too is what we think of as early warning, early action, early response kind of international terminology around interrupting conflict.

And one of the questions we get most often are around, like what's happening in my state or community around armed actors or armed incidents, people showing up with weapons. One of our hopes is by providing that information in a way that's more empowering to action or planning, you can interrupt that cycle of fear, right, and have folks thinking about ways that they can engage. And so, looking ahead to this year, we saw in 2020 just a few armed incidents like around ballot drop boxes drove so much fear of that happening around the country, but the civil society legal response to that was actually quite good. How do we interrupt that cycle this time where just a few bad actors could create that environment of fear?

OREN: Yeah, like disproportionate response to a legit fear, but, like, something that doesn't happen as much as people think.

That was kind of my next question for you, which is I know you've made a point of this in the past with certain, like, reports or products that come out, which is we want people to have this information, but especially during election time, we want to present the information in a way that doesn't make things worse. Can you talk a little bit about that balance of like, we got to tell you the truth and what we're seeing and hey, there's some bad stuff and threats are happening, the data that you just shared, but doing it in a way that doesn't do harm. How do you approach that?

SHANNON: Right, that's the challenge. We actually have some data coming out on those drop box incidents in 2022. A few of the reasons it's coming out just now, one is trying to be really accurate, kind of the just the facts approach in some sense. The other is asking that communities most impacted, how they're thinking about the problem. But then I think always considering the repercussions of the way you're framing information. I know those are some of the conversations you're referring to, Oren, over the last years. Do we need this to be a headline in this way or could we communicate this information in a way that doesn't just drive fear? I think we should always try.

JESSICA: So, one of the ways we've approached this issue of how do we talk about something without giving it extra weight or just more airtime in both general and midterm election cycles is by compiling these debunk pieces where we basically say there are all these stories about people being shot at drop boxes. I mean, let's just say, and in fact, that's not true. There have been threats at X number of drop boxes, but in general, ballot drop boxes are extremely safe. They're well monitored, yada, yada. So, the idea is to just allow for the fact that people are hearing these things, but also then kind of disassemble them. That is the hope that we are sort of both addressing and knocking down something that has become just part of the political reality, because now it's very hard to stay on top of the lies and disinformation around elections.

OREN: Shannon, you've been at this in different ways, right? You've been sort of contemplating these issues for years. You don't seem like a particularly negative person. How do you manage to sort of keep a, I'm not going to sunny disposition, but a general sort of positive outlook when there's just a lot of negativity that is at the foundation of what you're dealing with?

SHANNON: Nobody's ever accused me of having a sunny disposition, but I would love that to be the case. I do have hope though, right? And it's hard to do that even around some of the issues we work on.

And the first thing right now is that I get to work with a really incredible team who are willing to challenge each other. And when you're having a bad day, they can pull you up and just be excited about all of that. The other thing goes back to what you asked about at the beginning. I started my career working on a lot of like really dark and serious issues and understanding kind of the worst of humanity. And even in those stories, you see the ability of even a small decision or individuals to make the difference, and it's not enough by itself, but you see what it can do. So that's one thing I hold on to.

JESSICA: Thank you, Shannon. We appreciate it. We will be taking that moment of hope with us into the election year. We may circle back to you for additional advice slash commiseration as we get further down the rabbit hole here.

SHANNON: Thanks. I'd love to do that. I know we have some exciting data and projects to discuss together in the coming months.

OREN: Shannon, thanks so much for making the time. We look forward to continuing to work with you, relying on your data and your optimism, even as we're sort of clear eyed about what's to come, probably, through this election season. So, thanks for making the time and thanks for the work that you do.

JESSICA: Thanks, Shannon.

SHANNON: Thanks, Oren and Jessica.

JESSICA: So that concludes another episode of Extremely. Thank you, as always, Oren, for joining me, I guess.

OREN: Well, no, excuse me, thank you for joining me.

JESSICA: Okay, yeah, that's actually—

OREN: It's always a pleasure to join and be joined.

JESSICA: As always, you can reach out to us and we encourage any and all questions and comments, especially nice ones, to extremely@ADL.org, that is our email address, and we look forward to hearing from you. And we also will add links to everything we talked about today in our show notes so please visit the show notes for your reading for the next few days, light reading, bedtime reading. And Oren, as always, I just want to end with our life raft. What is keeping you afloat?

OREN: I have a lot of people in my house right now trying to fix things.

JESSICA: Okay, well, that's nice.

OREN: And they're very loud.

JESSICA: Okay, but you have people in your house trying to fix things. So, is that your life raft?

OREN: That's what I'm saying. That's kind of my life raft.

JESSICA: Totally.

OREN: Unfortunately, of the things that they're fixing, there is not one person of a very diverse set of people who are here doing a diverse set of things, no one's showing up with a key lime pie to stuff in my face, but that would be the only thing that would make the life raft perfect, but it's good because people are here to help. What about you? What's your life raft?

JESSICA: That's lovely. My life raft is that I took a vacation earlier in January and it had been a while, as you pointed out, since I had a quote unquote "successful vacation". So, I'm really just saying that that was a reminder that there is a world outside of work and we all need to take time to enjoy that world. Anyway, that's one of my resolutions for 2024. Hope to share it with everyone -- let's use our vacation.

OREN: Yes, we certainly support as an organization a healthy work-life balance, which is not always easy and you're modeling good behavior by taking vacation.

JESSICA: Yes, so everyone take vacation, that's my PSA.

OREN: Something that you've earned and deserve. Well, it sounds like nothing, it is like "well of course!" it sounds like nothing, but it really can be everything.