



EPISODE 3.5

## **2023: IT WAS A YEAR, AND WE HAVE THOUGHTS**

**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:** In this episode, Jessica and I spent about an hour and a half talking about the year and what we thought was important, where we think the landscape of extremism and hate is heading. We had some guests stop by. This is the highlight of that conversation.

**JESSICA:** Alright, so August, which feels like a million years ago, saw the publication of a COE piece written by one of our main researchers, talking about and assessing the uptick in harassment and trolling efforts by extremists and other bigots, targeting city council meetings and other public forums.

So a lot of these public forums have been opened up to the public to online comments around COVID because obviously people couldn't make it to meetings and they wanted to continue having them. So, they essentially said, "Come on in, here's our Zoom link." And extremists were really taking advantage of this and we were seeing this massive rise in these incidents. So, this was really troubling for a lot of people, a lot of organizations, a lot of city councils.

We laid it out pretty clearly in this piece, which we will link to in the show notes, as always. And then in December, we actually published an update. So, this is very timely, showing that there have been upwards of 100 additional incidents of this trolling and harassment of public forums since we published in August. So that's pretty remarkable. That's a rapid rate of hate. Oren, and I know you were particularly interested in this story. What does this tell us about the state of extremism or how extremists are attacking public spaces?

**OREN:** Yeah, this activity was particularly interesting to me, and, I know, several of our colleagues who are researching this because it was another way bad actors were bringing antisemitism and all forms of bigotry into public spaces on a local level.

There's like an entire effort to disrupt these city councils. What are they calling it? The death council? Or am I making that up?

**JESSICA:** Yeah, that's right. It's like the city council death squad or something stupid like that. And now they're raising money to go to the city council meetings in 2024. That's their big plan.

**OREN:** Right, because some city councils realized, okay, people are zooming in or calling in and disrupting, so we're going to limit that. And so now, again, it's kind of adjustment leads to another adjustment.

And in this case, particular group is going to start organizing people to show up in person to use those meetings to promote their hatred and to disrupt it. Right. I mean, I hate to say it, it's cheap and easy and we need to keep our eye on it because we're going to see more of it and it's going to influence what we see on the ground in these local communities.

**JESSICA:** Yeah.

**OREN:** You know.

**JESSICA:** I mean, put yourself in the headspace of somebody who's on City council in some town in California, and you open up the public comments section, and suddenly you're getting this barrage of hate. In Colorado, we're seeing a lot of local legislators dropping out of the legislature, just saying, "I'm not doing this anymore, it's too much." And they don't cite specifically extremist behaviors, but they do cite this sort of sense that nothing feels safe or civil anymore. And I just think it's indicative of some of the threads that are tearing around social and civil discourse.

**OREN:** So, we have, as part of the initial report that we released in August, we delivered a toolkit for cities and towns and counties to consider some options they have about the meetings that they hold. Now it's like, how do you create an expectation of just like public decency in the public discussion? I don't know how that actually is done if people inherently don't want to be decent in those spaces...without completely shutting down speech, right?

**JESSICA:** And to segue, our colleagues pointed out that this year we saw the arrest and extradition of Robert Rundo, who's a pretty well-known white supremacist figure, founder of the Rise Above Movement. He had spent the last several years in Europe trying to escape from U.S. law. That ended this year. He was returned back to the U.S. He's going to face charges for rioting. But, importantly, he spent a lot of the time that he was in Europe trying to figure out, "okay, how do I make sure that this Rise Above Movement and white nationalism," as he puts it, "more broadly is accessible and reaches as many people as possible?" and one of the ways he came to that was with active clubs. And these are these smaller groups, localized groups that train for what they consider to be an impending race war.

And that's a common thread among all white supremacists, but these guys are very focused on the physical training part so you can imagine what those events look like. Your hatred has to run pretty strong to get you out into the middle of a snowy field or whatever to crawl around on the ground and go under things.

**OREN:** I mean this is how I know that I am not a particularly hateful person. I will not work out as a result of these feelings.

**JESSICA:** You're not gonna work out so that you can guard yourself against the impending hordes?

**OREN:** I tell my doctor all the time, I would work out. I just feel like the more I do that, the more I may become an extremist and based on the work that I do, I don't wanna do that.

**JESSICA:** The active clubs are kind of a manifestation of this obsession that comes up a lot in white supremacist circles with physical fitness and white superiority and all of these things that the Aryan race, it's very reminiscent of the Hitler youth.

**OREN:** These guys dress in like various like tactical gear, right? Masks, etc. I mean, it's like many extremist movements, right? There is an element of like a subculture that's created that really is informed by the symbols, by the gear and all that.

We tend to have a light kind of approach to this podcast, but, I mean, clearly, it's a concern, right? I mean, the more you have people kind of working out together who are sharing these ideas, we're seeing more and more of these active clubs around the country and around the world. We mention this not because we wanna poke fun at it, but because it's actually like something we gotta keep an eye on. And, concerning, is people, again, find comfort and hatred by finding people who have those shared values.

**JESSICA:** We always come back to this, but this is the kernel that connects all extremists, this desperate need to belong to something. You know, this sense of being outcast or being different and wanting to find people like you.

**JESSICA:** And this just plays into that as do so many kind of group settings, especially for men, sorry, but can often lead to violence.

**OREN:** Many of our colleagues who look at a range of extremist movements have noticed, obviously, the ongoing targeting of the LGBTQ community, whether it's drag shows, gender-affirming care facilities, schools, Pride events, and so on.

We issued a report this year that we did in collaboration with our partners at GLAAD that looked at the role of anti-LGBTQ narratives and ideas within extremist movements more broadly. It also had some data around anti-LGBTQ activity on the ground over the sort of a year period.

And so, you know, again, as we head into an election season and this becomes even probably more politicized, I anticipate this type of hatred both on and offline is going to continue. I mean, it's really like part of almost every single extremist movement these days to some degree.

**JESSICA:** It is. It's part of pretty much every extremist movement, and it's also an extremist movement in and of itself. You know, we've seen these expressions of real vitriol and hate and exclusion. But we've also seen it directed at doctors and medical providers and hospitals. Protests have shut down, and bomb threats have shut down hospitals that provide gender-affirming care to people. I just think that we are in a state where people are not thinking logically. Maybe they're not thinking at all. I don't know. I just worry that we are at a point where people have become so kind of entranced with their own belief system around this particular topic that, much like our politics, things are becoming kind of ossified, and there's not space for conversation.

And that is kind of the definition of extremism, right? That, you know, you're not willing to consider other viewpoints. You're not willing to consider logic or reason or compassion or empathy. What I find really interesting about a lot of the bigotry targeting the LGBTQ+ community is that it's so firmly rooted in these really retrograde ideas about gender. That is something that we definitely see across the extremist spectrum, and that's getting into the space that I look at more closely – different manifestations of misogyny and sexism in extremist spaces.

But there is a lot of policing of gender expectations or gendered expectations that go into this type of bigotry, and I think that is particularly interesting. This goes again to this idea that people feel threatened. They feel the way that they perceive the world is being threatened. And, that means they

are expressing views that are hateful towards another group that they perceive as the threat. When, in fact, this is just a progression of society and acceptance that we've seen happening over the last 50 years.

**OREN:** We talked on one of our last podcasts about generative AI and just how we're seeing more of the overtly racist and sexist and antisemitic sort of content being produced easier than ever before.

**JESSICA:** Well, and that production and manipulation is only gonna get more and more sophisticated as we've seen even in the last six months. I mean, I'm always shocked when we measure, you know, June of 2023 GAI product to December of 2023. I mean, it's exponentially more sophisticated and super concerning as we head into the election year. Cause you can make people say, you know, or represent pretty much whatever you want.

Very rarely do we talk about wins on this podcast, but I just wanted to celebrate, albeit with caveats, as is always the case in our work. This year we saw Andrew Tate finally face charges for at least some of his most heinous alleged crimes. So, as you probably know, Oren, Tate and his brother were arrested and charged with rape and sex trafficking.

Now this happened in Europe, happened in Romania. This could lead to Tate and his brother getting up to 10 years in prison. That may not happen. The trial will not start for years. And in the meantime, Tate and his brother are still raking in tens of thousands of dollars for their really grotesque online courses that teach men how to manipulate women and much worse.

But I'm still counting this as a win because accountability for these guys is so critical. And this man has such a huge reach and is such a huge influence on so many young men, particularly. I really am anxious to see him face some type of justice.

I want people to think about misogyny in the same way we think about every other form of extremism. It is just as dangerous, just as important. And this is something where we have the potential to change opinions and views. And we have, more to the point, we have the ability to really inform people about something that has gone unrecognized or under-recognized for far too long. And we do have somebody on board now who is looking at this specifically and I hope that we will be able to interview him at some point in the new year for this podcast.

**OREN:** And what you're referring to for the listeners is we have an embed program that we hope to talk about maybe at a later podcast where other organizations embed researchers and analysts with our team to have access to our experts and our tools. And we're able to do some really important research and response to what we're seeing. And one of those organizations is Maura's Voice who has embedded one of their folks with us too. So, we benefit from the knowledge that we're getting from this analyst and we hope to be able to scale up our efforts in combating misogyny through that partnership.

**OREN:** Joining us now is Aryeh Tuchman, Director, Center on Extremism, long time listener, but, more importantly, long-time colleague of mine at the ADL Center on Extremism. Aryeh, thanks for joining us.

**ARYEH TUCHMAN:** It's good to be here, thanks.

**OREN:** So, we wanted to talk to you about, specifically, the role that the conflict between Israel and Hamas has had on antisemitism that we're seeing. Kind of the state of affairs as we sort of leave this year. This has been something that has been very intense now for several months. When you look at the

number of antisemitic incidents since October 7th and the massacre by Hamas there, it's almost, like, been a full year of antisemitic incidents in previous years. And we're talking about well over 2,000 in two and a half months or so. I don't remember a two-month period in the over 20 years that I've been doing this work in which just the raw numbers were so, so much. But have you seen a time before where conflict between Israel and Hamas, which we've seen many times, has resulted in such a sustained level of concern and antisemitism? And what is it that you're observing?

**ARYEH:** I think back to the conflict between Israel and Hamas in May of 2021, which was significantly shorter than what we're seeing now. And, during that time, we also saw increases in the number of antisemitic incidents. There was a sense, I think, in the Jewish community, at the time, that there was an unusual level of vulnerability. There were protests that featured very strong anti-Israel language, which, and we know that many people in the Jewish community in the United States identify with Israel in some way.

But I think that what we're seeing now is really of an order of magnitude greater. And I think that the sustained level of the violently anti-Israel rhetoric that we're seeing, the extended period of time in which we're seeing and hearing it, has really left many people in the Jewish community on edge and feeling besieged.

**JESSICA:** And in your personal experience, is this unlike anything you've encountered professionally, personally?

**ARYEH:** Professionally, the number of hours that we are working ever since October 7th, you know, myself, but really the team, who are doing incredible work day in and day out, monitoring, informing, explaining, responding to the level of antisemitism that we're seeing, that's really unprecedented. We've always had moments when we've had to sort of, you know, man the barricades and be on work long hours, but just the sustained level of this over the course of months at this point is really unusual.

I've never seen anything like it. And in my personal life as well. I've been working in this field for 20 years and things don't surprise me anymore. Certainly, on my personal level, like I am not affected by the things that I see at work, but I hear from my family about how the current environment is affecting them. They're genuinely scared. My parents, my father sees a doctor in the city. They live on Long Island. They come into the city. They didn't come in for his appointment last month because they were nervous as Jewish people. My father wears a kippah. They were nervous as Jewish people. They thought they would be harassed or even assaulted. One of my nephews, he goes to a Yeshiva, to a Jewish day school. He was standing outside the school with his friends and some kids from a local public school walked by and yelled, "Heil Hitler." So, in my own personal family life and certainly in the lives of my friends, we're seeing unprecedented personal experiences and fear of antisemitism that I have never seen before.

**OREN:** I saw this clip of people yelling, "long live Hamas, long live Hamas" at these Jewish couple in New York, which is just so like infuriating, it's repulsive. It's getting worse, it's been more than two months. What is the solution? We understand that people are concerned, they want to protest, that's not an issue that we have. We just want people to not, like, celebrate terrorist organizations, right? I mean, you're doing this work, you're collecting the information, but why aren't we able to actually make people stop doing the things that are most hurtful to the community? And I know that's like an impossible question to answer, but I want to ask it.

**ARYEH:** It's actually a great question. It underscores for me something that I've been feeling, but I haven't been able to quite crystallize it. In all of the years that I've been doing this work, I've always felt like there are things we can do, that the things that we're doing, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. There are interventions that we can do in order to change things. And one of the things that I've been feeling in the past couple of months is just the enormity of world events and the fact that we can be sort of swept over by this wave of hate and anger and fear that emanated in a completely different part of the world. And yet we in the United States, and we as the people who are working to fight hate and extremism, we are suddenly overwhelmed by this wave and it animates so many different sectors of society. And, so, in a certain way, it makes me feel very small at this moment. And it makes me question, in the face of such a tremendous wave of hate and fear and anger, what is it that we can actually do? And does our work actually make a difference? It has led me to question this, not generally, but in this particular moment.

I have to hold on to hope though, and I have to hold on to the fact that the work that we do, quantifying what we're seeing, the ability to report on it, the ability to educate the rest of the staff at ADL to make sure that they have solid information and nuanced analysis, the ability for us to share our knowledge with policymakers and other people in society, I have to hold on to the hope that in some small way, we are making a difference.

**JESSICA:** I'm sure I speak for the whole team when I say that the level of care and specificity and concerted effort that your team has put in has not gone unnoticed and it makes all of us feel good about, you know, as you said, the data that we're providing during this horrible time. So, thank you to you and your team for that.

**ARYEH:** Thank you. I've never been so impressed with the team as I have been over the past couple of months. They give me strength and inspire me. It's a privilege to work with them.

**OREN:** Now we have Carla Hill, Senior Director of our Investigative Research team, joining us. Carla has been helping lead the way on so much of our work, tracking and addressing the swatting that has kept the Jewish community on edge and quite busy in the last several months. We'd never really seen this level of swatting and, obviously, we were tracking it very closely, more closely than anybody else in many ways. What's kind of your biggest impression of maybe the summer, in particular, when we were 24 -7 tracking these particular swatters?

**JESSICA:** And Carla, just for folks who may not be familiar, if you just want to give a very quick overview of what swatting is.

**CARLA HILL:** Swatting is when someone is trolling someone or an institution or an event or something they want to disrupt by having police respond by somehow instigating a false claim or call to that location. The most successful ones would actually bring SWAT to the location to respond to something big, a bomb or a shooter, active shooter, or something would draw that police there and then unsuspecting people would be suddenly overwhelmed by police presence and afraid.

And, so, this summer, that began in July, part of a year of where we've seen technology be used to troll and harass all sorts of people, but, of course, we are focused on the Jewish community and this particular cell that we were tracking were focused on the Jewish community primarily.

We tracked over 70 incidents in which they trolled Jewish institutions by calling in fake calls. And, many of the times it was during services. And, I think that's what really drove me was the fact that people's right to practice their religion was being disrupted.

We were able to call ahead, in some cases, and let them know this was occurring and try to slow or calm down the police response because they're hearing a synagogue is under attack. It's gonna cause police to come. That would scare people who were in the middle of calm services. A lot of claims of having a bomb in the institution or claims that they were in the institution with a gun in the bathroom about to be suicidal or homicidal were a lot of the calls.

And, so, I think about the rest of the year how the attacks in Israel, that's a helplessness here that I feel helpless to help the Jewish community because we can't seem to stop this verbal hate, this lumping all the Jews in this basket of hate. And, in this case, there was a criminal element that we could push back on. We had a tool there, right? We had something we could use to try to stop them. And that's what I was really driven by during that time.

**OREN:** So, it's pretty remarkable, looking back at that time, just how much visibility we had, you know, without getting into too many details, you know, you had mentioned being able to almost warn congregations and law enforcement before something was happening is because we were kind of seeing what was happening in real time. That's pretty unusual. It was almost like, in some cases, we had a couple minutes before even a call was made that we had a hunch and some evidence that they may be called. I mean, do you recall, you know, you've been doing this for a long time, I mean, do you recall another period of time where having that visibility and putting that time and effort into getting that visibility resulted so obviously in being able to warn people?

**CARLA:** Well, I would say that this is one of the best inside looks of active extremism that I've ever been engaged in, especially for such an extended period of time. We're literally tracking this cell of trolls across multiple platforms.

It's interesting in working extremism and research when you get onto someone, you can follow them. You can follow them back and forth. They were getting removed from sites for their content and we would find them again. Some of it was skill. Some of it was luck. We were definitely onto the cell and we knew quite a bit of where they were engaging each other and how they would reconnect after they lost each other when they were deplatformed.

Part of that, you know, it's been maybe a single extremist up to something that we were onto or able to disrupt in some way, but a cell that's actively engaged in criminal activity and disrupting religious services at such an egregious manner, I think, it will go on the top of the list of our successes.

**OREN:** And indeed, a couple of weeks ago, there was an announcement that one of the apparent juveniles involved in this ring has been arrested. And in the FBI's announcement about that, they recognize the work of ADL in the Center on Extremism and providing information that helped lead to that arrest. I mean, so there's also a lot of stories like that over the years that we are not able to tell. Sometimes it's nice to be able to tell one. Do you feel that way?

**CARLA:** I mean, in this case, we really have to rely on law enforcement to brag on us because, you know, we don't want to jeopardize their work by saying anything that could hurt their cases. So, we try to help as much as we can day in and day out. sometimes they give us props. And, you know, the jurisdictions, it

was all over the country. It was really hard to get law enforcement all on the same page that this is all the same people engaging in this across the country and get one person focused on funneling that information in one direction to a success point.

**OREN:** Yeah. Sometimes it's when the work is most challenging or the impact is most disturbing, like people being concerned about going to services or having SWAT teams show up, where our work has the most success.

Carla, thanks so much for making the time to join us.

**CARLA:** Sure, thanks for having me.

**JESSICA:** So, Oren, we always end every episode with our life raft. I'm gonna go first with my life raft for 2023, which is the collection of folks that we work with on a daily basis. The COE team is undeniably the best in the business. We say that a lot. We mean it every single time. I am super grateful to work with really bright, inquisitive, dedicated, underline, underline, underline people who don't give up. They just keep going. And we have tried this year to talk a little bit more about mental health, about balance between life and work. And I want everyone to take that seriously, but I also know that when things get rough, there are no other people that I would want to be working with than the COE team. So, grateful to everybody for keeping me afloat this year.

**OREN:** That's awesome. Obviously, I agree and share that sentiment deeply about everybody on the team.

**JESSICA:** I should add that I think you and I shared a comment last week at some point where I informed you that I was halfway through a pint of ice cream and you informed me that you were eating a lot of bread. So, it's not just the team that keeps us afloat.

**OREN:** It is carbs and sugars.

**JESSICA:** Yes, carbs and sugar also play a critical role.

**OREN:** Yeah. I mean, obviously, you know, working with an incredible team, not only in COE. Other parts of ADL that support and elevate and amplify this work is important. Our partners from outside organizations, like, in this work, it's not just about the horrible things, it's about actually a lot of people who are dedicated to fighting it in different ways and from different angles. That is abundantly clear this year, as is some of the challenges that we've had in extremism and hate.

So, yeah, I mean, that's a life raft to know that for every terrible thing that happens, or that we anticipate, or that we're trying to deal with, there are people internally, externally, who we can turn to, to address the next thing.

And it's not totally rote, right? It's not like, OK, rinse and repeat.

**JESSICA:** Right. It's different groups come in at different times to do different things.

**OREN:** And it's a privilege to do it each time.

**JESSICA:** Yes, it's an image I come to frequently. We are little life rafts bobbing around in a giant ocean of extremism, but there are a lot of other life rafts. And when we all connect our life rafts, we are a little bit better suited to deal with the...



**OREN:** Yes, and I feel like this year you twice led the sending of key lime pies to me and I appreciate that very much. I mean both for not good reasons. I don't remember the first one all of a sudden

**JESSICA:** I think it had to do with some tooth issues.

**OREN:** Yes, I had two significant physical accidents and surgeries this year, in addition to all that other stuff. But thank you for the key lime pie.

**JESSICA:** You're very welcome. As I pointed out to you, you make it very clear what will help you. So that is, in a way, extremely useful for all of us who want to speed your healing and get you back on the life raft as it were.

So as always, thank you so much for listening. Please send us emails. We would love to answer your questions, field your compliments, and your real Key Lime Pie recipes. You can reach us at [extremely@adl.org](mailto:extremely@adl.org) and we look forward to hearing from you. And we will be back in 2024 with more guests and more insights into extremism and the work that goes into fighting it.

**OREN:** Yeah, it may not sound like much, but it can be everything.