



QANON: A RISING THREAT TO DEMOCRACY?

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KEY EVENTS

On November 27, 2020, Julien Bellaiche presented on *QAnon: A rising threat to democracy?* on the Security Ecosystem and New Norms panel, at the 2020 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. Primary discussion topics included QAnon, an overview of the movement, the aspects of human ideology that seem to be fundamentally at odds with democracy, as well as the main challenges QAnon possibly poses to democracy. This presentation was followed by a group panel for questions and answers, whereby conference attendees were provided with an opportunity to engage in discussion with Mr. Bellaiche and other panel presenters for that day.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

This presentation showed an overview of the QAnon movement, the potential threat to democracy, as well as the rising recognition and possible support for QAnon globally, such as in France and the UK. Examples of circumstances where QAnon was possibly involved were also provided, such as in Illinois and Nevada. The main challenges the movement potentially places on democracy were also discussed. Finally, the importance of educating younger generations and raising awareness about the group was discussed.

Question Period

During the question period, discussions surrounding the possible need to study QAnon in relation to early religions and mythology was discussed, and whether the possible issue is determining what good versus evil is or what violence is.

The presence of QAnon in the US and its changing nature pre and post US Presidential elections was also a topic of discussion.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

In this section, Mr. Bellaiche discussed the human potential impact on democracy. Hannah Arendt's analysis on systematic lying is possibly useful in this discourse. In her 1967 essay, *Truth and Politics*, she wrote

the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lie will now be accepted as truth and truth be defamed as a lie, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world—and the category of truth versus falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed.” (p. 15)

From this, Mr. Bellaiche made the possible inference that factual truths are contingent, and that it is easy to challenge them by opposing alternative facts. Therefore, it can possibly be gathered from Hannah Ahrens' 1967 essay, that the continuous propagation of lies may consequently lead to the creation of a fictional world, which could likely distort our perception of reality, and potentially endanger the society.

In many democratic countries we are seeing today various factors leading politicians to different extremist groups seeking to create alternative narratives, which are often generated through social media. Among these actors is QAnon, a possible assemblage of unfounded conspiracy theorists that often believe that past US President Donald Trump is waging a secret war against a globally active Deep State group, and that a satanic pedophile elite has potentially risen to prominence.

QAnon is a pro Donald Trump conspiracy theory that surfaced on the imageboard website, 4chan, in October 2017. It is said that Q could be an unknown user, or even a group of users; so far, this is unknown. Q alleges to be a high-ranking military officer with Q clearance or Q access, which is a top-secret clearance level given by the US Department of Energy. This would allegedly grant him access to classified information related to the US government. Additionally, Q claims that Mr. Trump is working to put an end to a group of elites that are embroiled in the deep state and is potentially attempting to go against them.

Q has, what appears to be, effective measures in place to ensure his anonymity, and it relies on support through shared vision. QAnon members may utilize the letter Q on their clothing and flags as well as specific terms and acronyms that may be associated with QAnon. Furthermore, QAnon supporters may be seen using specific language to gain followers and strengthen their movement. Over the past 3 years, the movement diversified and has possibly expanded by the thousands. Although the number is not certain, its base of support has absorbed other conspiracy theories that may support antigovernment movements.

To address this security concern, it is important for intelligence agencies to distinguish between potential conspiracies and violent extremist groups. This is also important because the movement appears to be adopting a more religious look – appearing more like a cult or religious-based type of a non-political movement. This may lay the ground for more violent trends to emerge within the movement.

A possible first threat from QAnon to democracy is potential violence. The FBI has documented a California man who was found with bomb making material in his car and allegedly planned to bomb the Illinois Capitol. Another case occurred whereby a man was charged with terrorism after blocking off the Hoover Dam bridge with an armored truck. The charged individual demanded the public release of the US inspector general's report on Hillary Clinton's email.

Another major security challenge from QAnon is that the movement could potentially influence the election processes in democratic countries. For example, in the last general election in the United States, they potentially endorsed anti-Congress content online on various social media platforms including Twitter and Facebook. Whether they are true followers or politicians possibly using QAnon as a tool to leverage support, electing these candidates will give them mandate to combat and subvert institutions that are allegedly corrupt.

Over the past year, the internet has potentially influenced the growth of the movement by using many different QAnon related hashtags through social media. Many local and national branches of the movement such as QAnon France, QAnon UK, and QAnon Germany have also been identified. The anti-vaccine demonstrations in Germany and the Save the Children rallies campaign in the UK are examples of potential QAnon movements. It is hard to evaluate the real scale of the movement's internationalization, but it is said to have spread to as many as 75 countries.

Conclusively, QAnon should be taken seriously as it may pose potential threats in the years to come. As discussed by Mr. Bellaiche, QAnon is a growing group that is potentially an inherently non-democratic movement capable of violence propelled by a religious space and baseless accusations, both within and beyond the borders of the United States. Therefore, to ensure security, it is important to engage in cross-platform efforts to reduce the potential rising threats of QAnon by educating the younger generations and raising awareness about the group.

Question Period

In this section, Mr. Bellaiche discussed the dichotomy between good and bad in relation to mentioning Arendt's quote in his presentation. He expressed his views on whether the real challenge is distinguishing what is violence or distinguishing what is good and evil. With this, he addressed the possible link to studying QAnon in the context of early religions and mythology. He also discussed his views of what would possibly happen with Donald Trump being out of the US Presidential Office and where he potentially thinks QAnon will focus their violence now (states or cities). Issues surrounding how QAnon adapts to culture was also considered. Final discourse surrounded whether Mr. Bellaiche has noticed possible changes in the tone and amount of QAnon presence online since the US presidential elections, and whether it has changed from what was being seen before the election.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- QAnon is a pro Donald Trump conspiracy theory that surfaced on the imageboard website, 4chan, in October 2017. Furthermore, many local and national branches of the movement have been identified and are potentially in as many as 75 countries.
- We are seeing politicians lead by extremist views or narratives that have originated through social media platforms.
- It is alleged that Q is a high-ranking military officer with Q clearance or Q access, which supposedly grants him access to classified information related to the US government.
- Over the past 3 years, the QAnon movement has diversified and possibly expanded by the thousands. QAnon base of support has absorbed other conspiracy theories that may support antigovernment movements.

- It is important for intelligence agencies to distinguish between potential conspiracies and violent extremist groups to address this security concern.

Question Period

- It is challenging to determine the impact that President Trump leaving office will have on QAnon, and whether the movement will focus their violence on states or cities.
- There is a possible link to studying QAnon in the context of early religions and mythology. Additionally, QAnon seems to adapt to culture.

References

Arendt, H. (1967, February 25). Truth and politics [PDF]. Originally published in *The New Yorker*.

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