

Are Incels Transnational Terrorists?

Written by Katherine E. Brown

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/11/30/are-incels-transnational-terrorists/>

KATHERINE E. BROWN, NOV 30 2023

This case study is an excerpt from McGlinchey, Stephen. 2022. *Foundations of International Relations* (London: Bloomsbury).

When Merger (2018) wrote 'when is terrorism not terrorism? when the political motivations are misogyny' she was reacting to the reluctance to label Alek Minassian a terrorist after he drove a van into a group of people, killing ten, in Toronto in 2018. He had posted a video on YouTube just minutes before his attack, referring to an InCel rebellion. Like Elliot Rodger before him, who killed seven of his fellow students in 2014 because he was repeatedly denied sex, Minassian was part of a broader community of like-minded individuals who hold misogynist views so extreme that they feel violence is advocated and justified. They have built their own world of online men's groups united in their belief that sex and level of attractiveness determine your place in society, which excludes men who are not regarded as good-looking enough to form any romantic or sexual relationship. Hence, they are 'involuntarily celibate' (InCel). They proclaim that feminism has ruined the world such that they are unable to get what they're entitled to – status and power through sexual relationships with women.

The InCel community claimed and celebrated Minassian's violence arguing that had women had sex with him, then lives would have been saved – something they think would have been possible prior to the sexual revolution of the 1960s. InCels consequently glorify mass violence. As one said, 'I'm happy to see a few normies die... We need to see a little bit of variety. I'm tired of the same ol' death count. How 'bout a rape count or an acid-in-her-fucking-face count?' InCels regularly use language like this to minimise the significance of their violence in comparison to the perceived injustices that they face – as, for example, there are high rates of InCel suicide (see Baele *et al* 2019).

Members of the InCel community tend to be men under the age of 30, self-identify as introverts and cover a range of socio-economic groups. Their numbers are hard to calculate, with reports ranging from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands. The movement is heavily inflected with white supremacy, with their ideal 'Alphas' exhibiting finely chiselled jaw lines, white skin, 'roman noses' and a toned physique. This worldview is justified through a distorted appropriation of evolutionary psychology and evolutionary biology, relying on eugenic theories that were most commonly associated with the Nazis. The globalisation of communications has facilitated the spread of this ideology and a minority of non-white men beyond North America also identify as InCels – accepting this presumed racial hierarchy and their place within it.

InCel attacks appeared to be confined to North America, with at least four mass-murders linked to InCel activities and six other associated killings. A January 2020 report by the Texas Department of Public Safety warned that InCels are an, 'emerging domestic terrorism threat'. In February 2020, a German man gunned down nine people near Frankfurt before killing himself and his mother and in doing so appeared to be the first InCel attacker outside of North America. He posted a manifesto online in which he called for the, 'complete extermination' of many 'races or cultures in our midst' and specifically targeted Muslims. He also wrote, 'for my whole life, I haven't had a wife or girlfriend, for the last 18 years exclusively because... I know I'm being surveilled.' Some terrorism experts linked him to the InCel movement, as have a few InCels – claims that British and American (but less so German) media have seized upon to glorify his violence and minimise his neo-Nazi links. However, he never identified as an InCel, and did not appear to blame women for his lack of intimacy – but blamed governments. This highlights that caution is needed before categorising these events – in the same way that it is important to remember not every public act of violence by a

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Muslim is an act of Islamist terrorism.

The ubiquity of misogyny and the persistence of sexism and domestic violence worldwide, make the label of 'terrorism' hard to stick to InCel violence. The violence is disorganised, not spectacular and rarely sustains media attention. Individual acts of violence lack a strategic purpose as there is not symbolic or material value in the locations of their attacks. Often those who die are not those they purport to hate, and to date there has been no disproportionate state response against young white men (the majority of InCels). Additionally, the lack of organisation or structure to InCels outside of the online space, makes their 'real world' justifications – 'martyrdom videos' and rambling manifestos – weak attempts to glorify their self-interested violence. The personal connections of these attacks to their life narratives blur the line between the public and the private, but also renders suspect their claim that they are seeking to change the world or sacrificing themselves for a grander cause. Instead the quest for significance and motive can be seen as a destructive manifestation of the quest for celebrity. The risk with labelling InCels as terrorists is that it gives more 'real world' power and credence to their ideology and online hatred than it may deserve.

Minassian certainly wants us to believe he belongs to a movement. But his actions raise more questions than answers. For example, is it possible to negotiate with InCels? Additionally, might identifying InCel violence as terrorism render the term 'terrorism' too elastic and subsequently empty of content and lacking utility? In other words, by doing so, it becomes impossible to differentiate between domestic violence, gang crimes, smuggling, and terrorism. As such the specifics of the forms of violence get missed and consequently overgeneralised (and therefore less effective) countermeasures are adopted.

For example, accepting InCels as terrorists instrumentalises violence against women. It suggests that violence against women only really matters, and is only taken seriously by governments and police, when it is given the status of 'terrorism', but also that such statements are symbolic yet not actioned, because the structure of counterterrorism is already hyper-securitised and hyper-masculine. We can see this in Australia, where the Victoria Police Department publicly declared it would treat domestic abusers as terrorists, and acknowledged the link between terrorism and domestic violence, yet when they opened up a \$30 million centre a few months later to combat terrorism, it lacked experts on violence against women (Diaz and Valji 2019).

About the author:

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