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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Plot to Kidnap Michigan's Governor

GRAHAM MACKLIN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Raffi Gregorian

DEPUTY TO THE UNDER-SECRETARY-
GENERAL AND DIRECTOR, UNITED
NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-
TERRORISM

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FROM THE EDITOR

Six months have now elapsed since the events of January 6. This issue of *CTC Sentinel* focuses in large part on the evolving threat of extreme far-right violence around the world. In the feature article, Graham Macklin examines in detail the thwarted October 2020 conspiracy to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. He writes that the plot “highlights how anti-government ‘militias’ have continued to adapt and evolve, exploiting conspiracy theories and deliberate disinformation surrounding the pandemic, to remold traditional grievances about the ‘tyranny’ of the U.S. government.”

In a wide-ranging interview, Deputy to the Under-Secretary-General Raffi Gregorian, the director of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), says the United Nations needs to counter extreme far-right violence around the world. “It’s worth reflecting about the origins of the United Nations as a group of allies fighting Nazis,” he states. “We ought to be doing this. We have a legal basis to do it. It would be nice to have a clear political signal to do it. I think we’ll get it. And I think we’ll get it because the countries that are most afflicted with it right now are ones that are also very interested in doing something about it.”

The reporting of Yassin Musharbash and a team of his colleagues at *Die Zeit* has shed significant light on the globalization of the violent far-right. In an article that outlines and elaborates on this reporting, Musharbash writes that “right-wing extremists today, in many cases, no longer subscribe to the narrow concept of nationalism but instead imagine themselves as participants in a global struggle against a global enemy.” Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis examine the Proud Boys, a violent far-right group alleged to have played a significant role in the U.S. Capitol siege. They write that the group has “continued to mobilize, sometimes armed and violently, in response to the continued disinformation narratives related to the ‘Stop the Steal’ movement, vaccines, and more, appearing at more than 20 events in 13 cities since January 6.” Milo Comerford, Jakob Guhl, and Elise Thomas profile Action Zealandia, outlining how the extreme far-right group fits into a “small but persistent far-right extremist ecosystem” in New Zealand and its “growing links with violent extreme far-right movements internationally.”

This September, to mark the 20th anniversary of 9/11, the Combating Terrorism Center will be publishing a special issue of *CTC Sentinel* on the evolution of the global jihadi threat.

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Cover: Michigan's State Capitol in Lansing is pictured on January 17, 2020. (Carlos Osorio/AP Photo)

The Conspiracy to Kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer

By Graham Macklin

On October 8, 2020, Michigan's Attorney General revealed that the FBI and other law enforcement agencies had thwarted a plot to kidnap Michigan's governor, Gretchen Whitmer. In the midst of the pandemic, in which Michigan had some of the highest infection rates in the United States, Whitmer, who had declared a state of emergency and instituted a "stay-at-home" order, became the focus of considerable ire from those opposed to her response to the unprecedented public health crisis. Former President Donald Trump publicly disparaged "the woman in Michigan" because her efforts to combat coronavirus contradicted his own desire to "open up" the United States, which helped fuel a wave of protest. This culminated in a group of armed men storming the Capitol building in Lansing, Michigan, on April 30, 2020, an event with clear parallels to the storming of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021. The alleged plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer—14 defendants are currently awaiting trial, though one has already pleaded guilty—which began in early 2020 and coalesced over that summer, took place within this wider polarized political context. The case itself highlights the continuing evolution and complexity of the domestic violent extremism (DVE) threat landscape as well as its decentralized and amorphous nature. It also underscores the importance of encrypted digital technology and operational security measures as an increasingly integrated part of DVE activity.

On October 8, 2020, Michigan's Attorney General Dana Nessel held a press conference with colleagues from the state's Eastern and Western Districts as well as state police and the FBI to announce that a "serious, credible threat to public safety" had been averted.¹ The previous evening, the FBI and Michigan State Police had arrested six men, five in Michigan and one in Delaware, who they had charged, in a federal complaint, with conspiring to kidnap Michigan's governor, Gretchen Whitmer.² Simultaneously, the State of Michigan had filed additional charges, pursuant with its Anti-Terrorism Act, against another seven men connected to

a The six men charged by the federal government are Adam Fox, 37; Ty Garbin, 24; Kaleb Franks, 26; Daniel Harris, 23; Brandon Caserta, 32—all from Michigan—and Barry Croft, 44, from Delaware.

a little known militia group called the Wolverine Watchmen.³ In addition to being involved in the conspiracy to kidnap Whitmer, this group was also alleged to have targeted local law enforcement officials, made threats of violence intended to instigate a civil war, and planned and trained for an operation to attack the Capitol building in Lansing, Michigan. An eighth alleged member of the Wolverine Watchmen was charged the following week, bringing the total number of individuals charged to 14.^{2c}

The following outline of the case against the 14 men and the allegations contained therein—derived from press reports, the criminal complaint, and court documents—remain to be tested in court at the time of writing (July 2021), and thus, all of those charged in connection to the plot referred to in this article are to be presumed innocent until proven otherwise. Defense attorneys for the men accused in the federal complaint of conspiring to kidnap

b The seven men charged by the State of Michigan are Paul Bellar, 21; Shawn Fix, 38; Eric Molitor, 36; Michael Null, 38; William Null, 38; Pete Musico, 42; and Joseph Morrison, 26. Brian Higgins, 51, from Wisconsin, was charged with similar offenses the following week. The threat of terrorism charges against Morrison and Musico were dropped on March 29, 2021, though they still face other charges, including providing material support for terrorist acts, gang membership, and using a firearm during a felony. See "Members of Wolverine Watchmen to Stand Trial," Michigan Department of the Attorney General, March 29, 2021.

c A 15th man connected to the group was charged with two felony weapons violations in March 2021. Maxwell Wyckoff, who had attended "multiple" field training exercises organized by the Wolverine Watchmen, was charged with one count of converting a semiautomatic weapon to an automatic weapon and one count of possessing a muffler or silencer device. See "Member of Wolverine Watchmen Faces Felony Weapons Charges," Michigan Department of the Attorney General, March 22, 2021. Wyckoff subsequently reached a plea deal with Michigan's Attorney General, pleading guilty to the weapons charges and co-operating in her ongoing investigation into the Wolverine Watchmen and those accused of plotting to kidnap the governor in exchange for a reduced sentence. See "Wolverine Watchmen Members Pleads Guilty to Weapons Charges," Michigan Department of the Attorney General, May 19, 2021.

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Governor Whitmer argue that their clients were prone to “big talk” and were just blowing off steam; that their plans were “outlandish” and “absurd.”³ The prosecution takes the diametrically opposed view. Assistant U.S. Attorney Nils Kessler argued in court that although these individuals “got caught because they’re amateurs and they hadn’t thought things through,” that did not mean that their plot, just because it failed, “wasn’t dangerous.”⁴

Indeed, a new indictment filed on April 26, 2021, saw a grand jury add three additional charges to the extant federal charge: conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction, possession of an unregistered destructive device, and possession of an unregistered short-barreled rifle. Prosecutors now allege that the group was “engaged in domestic terrorism” and intended “to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.”⁵

While there is no statutory penalty for “domestic terrorism” at a federal level in the United States, framing the case in this way will likely significantly increase the penalties for the defendants if a jury convicts them. In doing so, the prosecution of the alleged plotters signals an early indication of how the Justice Department might be moving to handle cases of anti-government extremism in the aftermath of the storming of the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021. Five of the accused plotters are due to stand trial on October 12, 2021.^{6d} A sixth defendant, also charged in the federal case, has already pleaded guilty and agreed to “fully cooperate” with prosecutors in exchange for leniency.⁷ His former confederates face life in prison if convicted.⁸

This article gives an overview of the broader political context in which the plot began to coalesce followed by an overview of the Wolverine Watchmen militia group and the other key individuals involved. It details how the plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer evolved, the planning and training that the conspirators undertook in pursuit of this end, and how the FBI and law enforcement compromised this conspiracy. The final section discusses the parallels between this case and the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6 and what the Michigan plot reveals about the broader evolution of, and the present threat from, domestic violent extremism in the United States.

d This case represents the second time in a decade that the authorities have pursued a major prosecution involving a militia group in Michigan. In March 2010, law enforcement arrested nine members of the Hutaree militia, a small millenarian group operating in Lenawee County. They were charged with “seditious conspiracy” for allegedly plotting to kill a police officer and then target other officers in the funeral procession motorcade “with weapons of mass destruction” as a means of drawing the authorities into violent conflict. This, they believed, would provide the catalyst for a “wide-spread uprising” against the government. See *United States of America vs. David Brian Stone et al*, Case no: 2:10-cr-2023, March 23, 2010, and Amy Cooter, “The Hutaree: Who They Are, How They Differ from Other Michigan Militias, and Warning Signs of Problematic Behavior.” Before the case came to trial, however, the judge dismissed all of the most serious charges against the defendants because prosecutors had failed to prove the group had a specific plan, beyond their violent utterances. See James B. Kelleher and Rachele Damico, “Hutaree militia walk from jail after charges dismissed,” Reuters, March 29, 2012. This was a major setback and presumably one that the FBI would have been mindful of while pursuing charges against those involved in the alleged conspiracy to kidnap Governor Whitmer.

The Political Context to the Plot

Before charting the genesis of the plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer, it is necessary to outline the broader political context in which it occurred to fully comprehend how she came to be viewed with such venom by certain groups of people. On March 10, 2020, Whitmer declared a state of emergency in response to the coronavirus pandemic, which included a “stay-at-home” order until April 30 that year. These measures were unable to curtail the spread of the virus, however, and in a little over two weeks, Michigan had the fifth-largest number of COVID-19 cases in the country.^{9 e} Her response to the pandemic was not universally popular, and Michigan experienced some of the earliest and largest ‘anti-lockdown’ protests in the United States.¹⁰

Governor Whitmer quickly became embroiled in a very public war of words with then President Donald Trump after challenging his response to the pandemic. She was one of several governors who implored Trump to invoke the Defense Production Act, which would enable the government to compel private companies to switch their production to the manufacture of medical supplies, including masks and ventilators. When Whitmer publicly criticized the federal government’s lack of preparedness in an MSNBC interview on March 17, 2020,¹¹ Trump responded on Twitter within minutes: “Failing Michigan Governor must work harder and be much more proactive. We are pushing her to get the job done. I stand with Michigan!”¹²

On March 27, 2020, Trump invoked the Defense Production Act. During the course of a White House briefing that day, he assailed Whitmer once more, seemingly because he considered her, and several other governors, insufficiently “appreciative” of his efforts. He revealed to journalists that he had instructed Vice President Mike Pence not to call those who depreciated his administration’s efforts. “I say, ‘Mike, don’t call the governor in Washington, you’re wasting your time with him. Don’t call the woman in Michigan ... You know what I say? If they don’t treat you right, I don’t call.”¹³ He continued to publicly denigrate Whitmer during a Fox News interview later that day. “We’ve had a big problem with the young, a woman governor, you know who I am talking about, from Michigan. [...] I mean, she’s not stepping up,” he told host Sean Hannity. “I don’t know if she knows what’s going on, but all she does is sit there and blame the federal government. She doesn’t get it done. We send her a lot.”¹⁴

“Hi, my name is Gretchen Whitmer, and that governor is me,” Michigan’s governor responded. “I’ve asked repeatedly and respectfully for help. We need it. No more political attacks, just PPEs, ventilators, N95 masks, test kits. You said you stand with Michigan – prove it.”¹⁵ Trump responded instead with a barrage of personal insults: “I love Michigan, one of the reasons we are doing such a GREAT job for them during this horrible Pandemic. Yet your Governor, Gretchen ‘Half’ Whitmer is way in over her head, she doesn’t have a clue. Likes blaming everyone for her own ineptitude! #MAGA.”¹⁶ Following a week of online feuding with Whitmer on Twitter and Fox News, Trump finally approved Michigan’s request for an emergency declaration, which Whitmer had asked for on

e By April 30, 2020, Michigan had recorded 3,789 deaths and 41,379 confirmed cases of coronavirus. See Darcie Moran, “Michigan coronavirus death toll hits 3,789, more than 41,000 cases confirmed,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 30, 2020.



The State Capitol building in Lansing, Michigan, on January 17, 2020 (Carlos Osorio/AP Photo)

March 26, 2020.¹⁷

As the Trump administration increased its demands for “opening up” the United States again, the Michigan Freedom Fund and the Michigan Conservative Coalition helped organize a demonstration outside the statehouse in Lansing on April 15, 2020. “Operation Gridlock” created a ring of traffic around the statehouse while, on the capitol’s lawn, protestors railed against Whitmer, including one holding a placard that read “Trump, lock up the Nazi woman from Michigan.” The demonstration was, noted one journalist, “half protest, half Trump rally.”¹⁸ The following day, the White House unveiled its guidelines for “Opening Up America Again.”¹⁹ Trump remained fixated upon Michigan, however. On April 17, he tweeted two words: “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!”²⁰ Though the FBI would later state that the plot to kidnap Whitmer predated Trump’s tweet, the majority of the group’s meetings took place afterward.²¹

Following Trump’s tweet, anti-lockdown protests gathered momentum in Michigan. On April 29, 2020, three women associated with Michigan United for Liberty entered the gallery of the state’s House of Representatives, previously closed due to the lockdown, and began chanting “open Michigan now.” The House sergeant-at-arms asked them to leave and, when they refused, had them forcibly removed.²² The following day, on April 30, 2020, a large “American Patriot Rally” took place outside the Michigan Capitol building. During the course of the rally, dozens of armed protestors entered the building, demanding entry to the Senate floor where lawmakers were to debate extending Michigan’s state

of emergency until May 28, 2020.²³ “Directly above me, men with rifles yelling at us,” tweeted Senator Dayna Polehanki as gun-toting agitators stood on a balcony above the legislators. “Some of my colleagues who own bullet proof vests are wearing them. I have never appreciated our Sergeant-at-Arms more than today.”²⁴ Two of the agitators Polehanki photographed that day—the twin brothers Michael and William Null—were later charged with support for terrorist acts and weapons violations as part of the wider investigation into the plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer.^f Rather than denouncing the incursion into Michigan’s statehouse, Trump stated that Whitmer needed to compromise. “The Governor of Michigan should give a little, and put out the fire,” he tweeted the following day. “These are very good people, but they are angry. They want their lives back again, safely. See them, talk to them, make a deal.”²⁵

The Wolverine Watchmen

Three others who entered the Michigan Capitol building on April 30, 2020, were later charged with plotting to abduct the state’s

^f Michael and William Null, twin brothers who are charged in the Michigan complaint, were the men depicted in Senator Polehanki’s photograph, according to the journalist Heather Catalo in “Authorities: Some suspects charged in the kidnapping plot were inside the Capitol during anti-shut down protests,” ABC 7 Detroit, October 9, 2020. Other sources identify only one of the brothers as being in the photograph, but not which one.

governor. The individuals in question—Joseph Morrison, Pete Musico, and Paul Bellar—had attended the rally to recruit people to their new group, the Wolverine Watchmen, efforts previously confined to Facebook.²⁶ Morrison, a former Marine Corps reservist, and Musico, his father-in-law, had only recently founded their militia group immediately after Morrison had “concluded a weapons violation charge.”²⁷ He and Musico lived together in rural Michigan on a 2.5-acre property in Munith where they regularly hosted militia-training exercises.²⁸ “They were the kind of neighbors you stayed away from,” a local resident told *The Daily Beast*. “They were mean. You knew they were involved with the militia. That was obvious from the constant shooting.”²⁹ Bellar, a former soldier³⁰ who utilized his medical and firearms skills to design tactical training exercises for the group,³¹ had recently been dismissed from work at a local gun range, where he had shown up wearing “a LOT of tactical gear,” according to his former employer.³²

A fourth ‘militiaman,’ who in reality was working as an FBI informant, joined the trio at the April 30, 2020, rally. He grew so concerned about their behavior during the course of the day that he addressed the FBI agents listening directly through his wire. The three men, armed with AR-15s, talked about storming the Michigan Capitol building. According to the FBI informant, Musico believed Governor Whitmer was actually in the building and informed his colleagues he “was going to go out to the opposite side of the building and catch that bitch as she was coming out of the emergency exit.”³³ The group soon discovered, however, that there was no need to “bum rush the Capitol” because Michigan was one of the few states to allow open carry within the precincts of the building, rendering talk of breaching the doors redundant. “We couldn’t take signs, but we could bring our firearms,” the informant later testified. Once inside, the group joined the throng demanding access to the chamber but then began roaming the building searching for Whitmer’s office. Pounding on the door “in a show of force,” they realized she was not there, however, and so posed for photos instead.³⁴

Adam Fox, another of the alleged co-conspirators in the plot to kidnap Whitmer, was present, as were the Null brothers and Paul Bellar, at a smaller anti-lockdown protest that took place outside the Michigan Capitol building two weeks later on May 14. Organized by Michigan United for Liberty, which had branded the protest “Judgement Day,” Facebook removed one of the pages associated with the event (“People of Michigan vs. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer”) before it took place as people began leaving comments calling for Whitmer to be shot, beaten, hanged, or beheaded. Michigan State Police closed the Capitol and legislators canceled their planned sessions.³⁵

Online, Morrison called himself “Boogaloo Bunyan,”³⁶ and the Wolverine Watchmen’s Facebook page had stated “Boojahidden only,”³⁷ indicating its broader adherence to the Boogaloo movement, “a decentralized, anti-authority movement composed of a diverse range of actors mobilized in part by adherents’ belief that they are following in the footsteps of the United States’ founders and participating in a revolution against tyranny.”³⁸ At least one of the other members of the Wolverine Watchmen, Brandon Caserta, also identified with this ideological tendency. Caserta, one of the alleged co-conspirators in the plot against Whitmer, posted a series of anti-

government videos online.³⁹ While several Wolverine Watchmen clearly identified with the “Boogaloo” movement, their social media profiles indicate a degree of ideological diversity, however. Musico was avowedly pro-Trump; Caserta regarded him as a “tyrant.”⁴⁰

The Wolverine Watchmen were not a white supremacist group. Indeed, as one of the FBI’s sources within the group subsequently testified, “The group was open for all walks of life. They would support BLM [Black Lives Matter] when they were at protests ... It was open for anyone and everyone suppressed by the government.”⁴¹ The accused’s personal profiles also highlight differing pathways to violence: several had a long history of involvement with armed groups while others, like Caserta, were relatively new to the scene, their radicalization accelerated by their reaction to Michigan’s lockdown.⁴²

The Plot to Kidnap Governor Whitmer

The criminal complaint highlights that Adam Fox, 37, was the driving force behind the plot. He lived an itinerant life, dwelling in the basement—located under a trap door—of Vac Shack Vacuums in Wyoming, Michigan, just outside of Grand Rapids. Court records relating to his marriage “depict an angry, belligerent man who had trouble handling his liquor and his temper.”⁴³ Fox had gotten involved with “militia-types” in the Owosso-Corunna area in early 2019, which “gave him a sense of belonging” he had previously lacked, according to his uncle.⁴⁴ In December 2020, he had joined the Michigan Home Guard, which claims to be the largest, most active militia group in the state,⁴⁵ but he was kicked out shortly after passing his three-month probation period because of “rage issues,” stated Rick Foreman, the group’s co-founder. Shortly after becoming a full member, “all of the sudden he’s all anti-government, he wants to start a war, he wants to take people out,” Foreman claimed.⁴⁶ Fox was subsequently associated with the Wolverine Watchmen, though whether he formally joined the group is unknown. Court documents indicate that Fox was, however, listed as the leader or president of the “Michigan Patriot Three Percenters” on its Facebook page.⁴⁷ⁱ

The Three Percenters (also known as III%ers, 3%ers, and

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- g Details released during a detention hearing after Caserta’s arrest highlight his animus toward the police following a recent traffic stop. “The end times are approaching for these piece-of-shit cops. I mean that with every cell in my body. Our time is coming soon, boys, and it’s going to be satisfying,” he told fellow members of the group on September 19, 2020. Believing he was being “enslaved” by the state, Caserta also boasted of having obtained the addresses of the police officers who had pulled him over. “I could easily tap them and dip and no one would know a thing,” he stated during a conversation that also included him talking about obtaining weapons and a silencer. See “Transcript of Detention Hearing [Brandon Caserta] Before United States Magistrate Judge Sally J. Berens,” October 13, 2020, Docket No. 1:20-mj-416. Prosecutors alleged that this, and other such talk, was evidence the group was planning to wrap up loose ends before kidnapping Whitmer, which they believed might energize the “Boogaloo.” See “Transcript Vol. 1.”
- h On June 6, 2020, two of the accused in connection to the conspiracy against Whitmer, Daniel Harris and Paul Bellar, attended a racial justice protest in Lake Orion, Michigan, to protest the murder of George Floyd. Bellar was pictured holding a placard reading “B.L.M. – A Badge is not a license to murder.” See Aaron C. Davis, Dalton Bennett, Sarah Cahlan, and Meg Kelly, “Alleged Michigan plotters attended multiple anti-lockdown protests, photos and videos show,” *Washington Post*, November 1, 2020.
- i Ben Collins, Brandy Zadrozny, Tom Winter, and Corky Siemaszko in “Whitmer conspiracy allegations tied to ‘boogaloo’ movement,” NBC News, October 9, 2020, report that Fox’s Facebook avatar was a skull and crossbones with a Three Percenter label and the phrase “Liberty or Death.”

Threepers)⁴⁸ derive their name from the belief that only three percent of American colonists actually fought the British during the War of Independence. The Southern Poverty Law Center describes the group as a “core component” of the modern militia movement, alongside the Oath Keepers and the traditional militias, though these tendencies often overlap.⁴⁹ The Three Percenters are not an “organization” but, as Sam Jackson observes, “a broad movement of unaffiliated groups that have adopted the rhetoric or the language of Three Percenters into their name or into their group iconography or something like that.”⁵⁰

Barry G. Croft, Jr., a long-haul truck driver who lived in Delaware and is identified in the criminal complaint as a fellow ringleader, also affiliated himself with the Three Percenters movement, hosting meetings under that banner at Drury Inn in Dublin, Ohio.^j Fox and another of the accused, William Null, attended these meetings.^{51k} FBI special agent Richard Trask II testified at Croft’s subsequent bond hearing that he had been talked about as a national leader of the group. Croft denies this.⁵² At the same hearing, Assistant U.S. Attorney Nils Kessler claimed that, based on the threats that audio recordings had captured him making, Croft was “probably the most committed violent extremist of the entire group [of six charged in the federal complaint].”⁵³ He had a string of criminal convictions, including possessing a firearm during the commission of a felony for which he served three years from 1997. Delaware’s Governor John Carney granted him a pardon for his past convictions in 2019, the year before he became involved in the plot to kidnap Whitmer.⁵⁴ Following his release, Croft had exchanged Facebook messages with Kevin Massey, former leader of “Rusty’s Rangers,” an anti-immigrant group noted for detaining migrants at gunpoint on the border between Texas and Mexico, who was then in hiding after violating his parole while on probation for a federal weapons charge.^{55l}

Croft, Fox, and roughly 13 other individuals, representing multiple militias from different states, met in Dublin, Ohio, on June 6, 2020, to discuss creating a society “that followed the Bill of Rights and where they could be self-sufficient,” according to the criminal complaint.⁵⁶ Their ideas ranged from “peaceful endeavors” to “violent actions.” Several of those present ventilated their belief that numerous state governments were violating the U.S. Constitution. This led to talk of murdering “tyrants” or “taking” a sitting governor during the course of which Whitmer and Virginia’s Governor Ralph Northam, both Democrats, were explicitly mentioned. To increase their numbers, the group was encouraged to spread the message. Fox stated he would reach out to a “Michigan based militia group”—the Wolverine Watchmen. Eight days after the Ohio meeting, the

Wolverine Watchmen held a field training exercise on a private property in a remote area of Michigan during the course of which the FBI learned that Fox had indeed been in touch with the group.⁵⁷

The Wolverine Watchmen were then an emergent group within Michigan’s militia milieu, but remained relatively unknown. Michael Lackomar, a communications officer and team leader for the Southeast Michigan Volunteer Militia, recalled the appearance of a small number of individuals during the anti-lockdown protests who had “expressed frustration” that the militia groups were not “doing enough” to combat what they perceived as the infringement of their constitutional rights.⁵⁸ Fox appears to have offered such individuals the opportunity to do more.

At one meeting on June 14, 2020, the FBI informant within the Wolverine Watchmen recorded a telephone call with Fox who told him that he wanted “200 men” to storm the Capitol building and to take hostages, including the governor. Fox said she would be put on trial for “treason” at some point before the November 3, 2020, elections.⁵⁹

Four days later, on June 18, 2020, Fox met with the leadership of the Wolverine Watchmen at a large “American Patriot Rally: A Well-Regulated Militia,” which convened outside the Capitol building in Lansing shortly after the Capitol Commission voted down a measure to ban the carrying of firearms within the Capitol building. Seven weeks earlier, on April 30, another “American Patriot Rally” outside the Michigan State Capitol had resulted in, as already outlined, dozens of armed protestors, including several later charged with the plot, entering the building. The June 18 event was attended by several other militia groups besides the Wolverine Watchmen, including The Michigan Liberty Militia, who provided an armed “security detail” for it, and the Southeast Michigan Volunteer Militia. Roughly a dozen members of the Proud Boys, an extreme far-right “Western Chauvinist” group that engages in street brawling, were also observed.⁶⁰

Fox hardly kept a low profile. According to Rick Foreman of the Michigan Home Guard, whose group had expelled Fox, Fox tried to spark a physical confrontation with racial justice protestors from the “People of Lansing” group, who the militias had previously agreed to allow to pass through their own larger rally. According to media reports, Michael and William Null, twin brothers who attended the rally as part of the Michigan Liberty Militia, succeeded in calming Fox down; both men were subsequently charged for playing a role in the kidnap plot.⁶¹ In a calmer moment, footage captured by a local television reporter showed Fox, Morrison, and Musico talking to one another while wearing Hawaiian shirts,^m further highlighting their identification with the “Boogaloo” movement.⁶²

The criminal complaint records that Fox met the Wolverine Watchmen’s leadership outside the Michigan State Capitol that day (June 18, 2020) “to recruit more members” and reiterated his vague plan (first outlined four days earlier) to, at some point in the future, storm the building while the State Congress was in session. “Plan A” was to recruit 200 men and storm the Capitol building in Lansing while Congress was in session and “to take hostages, execute tyrants and have it televised. It would take about one week and that no one was coming out alive,” court documents record.⁶³ A secondary suggestion was to barricade the building’s exits and then set it on

j In a social media profile verified by NBC, Croft appeared wearing a tricorne hat and a sweatshirt bearing a Three Percenters insignia. See Collins, Zadrozny, Winter, and Siemaszko. Eric Molitor, another of the accused, also posted Three Percenter images on this Facebook page. See Tom Perkins, Kelly Weill, Will Sommer, and William Bredderman, “The ‘Wolverine Watchmen’ Accused of Targeting Michigan Gov Spooked Their Neighbors,” *Daily Beast*, October 8, 2020.

k Null’s twin brother, Michael, also flew a Three Percenters flag on his property. See Gus Burns, Roberto Acosta, and John Tunison, “The ties that bind the men behind the plot to kidnap Gov. Whitmer,” *Michigan Live*, October 21, 2020.

l Massey subsequently committed suicide. See Kevin Krause, “North Texas militia vigilante who rounded up immigrants at border found dead after months on the run,” *Dallas Morning News*, January 10, 2020.

m Hawaiian shirts are an “aesthetic” of the Boogaloo movement. See Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis, “The Evolution of the Boogaloo Movement,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:2 (2021).

fire so that those inside burned to death.⁶⁴ Fox told alleged fellow plotter Ty Garbin, a licensed aircraft mechanic previously employed by SkyWest Airlines,⁶⁵ and an FBI informant identified as “CHS-2” that he wanted to “combine forces” with the Wolverine Watchmen for such an endeavor.⁶⁶ Musico, one of the Wolverine Watchmen’s founders, had tactical objections to Fox’s idea, not least of which was that it was a “fishbowl”—a comment presumably referring to security arrangements around the Capitol building. Instead, he suggested that, since “everyone has addresses,” they might target politicians in their homes.⁶⁷

Planning and Training

From this point forward, the group appears to have narrowed its focus to Governor Whitmer, meeting regularly for “field training exercises” in remote parts of Michigan during which a more concrete plan to kidnap Whitmer began to coalesce. Numerous people attended these training exercises (which were legal), but it was only a “core group” of attendees who coalesced around Fox that were using them to advance a more nefarious purpose, argue prosecutors.⁶⁸

At a meeting in Fox’s basement in Grand Rapids on June 20, 2020, two days after the June 18 “American Patriot Rally,” this smaller group discussed plans for assaulting the Michigan State Capitol building; how to counter law enforcement first responders; and the use of “Molotov cocktails” to attack police vehicles. It was at this meeting that Fox first appears to have proposed kidnapping Governor Whitmer more seriously than theretofore.⁶⁹ During the course of a private livestream video with others on June 25, Fox appeared to be aggrieved that the State of Michigan had ordered the closure of its gyms and referred to Whitmer as “this tyrant bitch.” “I don’t know, boys, we gotta do something. You guys link me on our other location system, give me some ideas of what we can do,” he was recorded as saying.⁷⁰

Three days later, during a meeting at Morrison’s Munith property on June 28, the group undertook “tactical training” during which Musico told those present, “If you’re not up for kidnapping, you need to leave.”⁷¹ No one did so, according to the criminal complaint.⁷² At some point during the day, however, Musico (who as early as March 30, 2020, had advocated performing a citizen’s arrest on Whitmer and had expressed a desire to obtain her address) reiterated his doubts concerning Fox’s earlier suggestion to assault the Capitol building to another individual in the group. His preferred option—according to court documents—was to target the homes of politicians because the group had already practiced

tactical team door entries and room clearance.⁷³ Musico’s lawyer later stated that his client “got in a fight” with Fox as a result and “exited the group” at this point.⁷⁴

While the plot to kidnap Whitmer originated in Michigan, much of the group’s preparatory activity took place in neighboring Wisconsin, on a two-acre homestead in Cambria. At one such exercise, held over July 10-12, 2020, the group practiced combat tactics, including assaulting motor vehicles using semiautomatic rifles and live ammunition.⁷⁵ Alleged plotters Barry Croft, Daniel Harris, and Ty Garbin were also observed trying to construct two improvised explosive devices filled with shrapnel, though due to faulty construction neither would “detonate as planned.”⁷⁶ Harris, a Marine Corps infantry veteran, had previously advised the group he “can make things go boom if you give me what I need” and could use a timing detonation cord.⁷⁷ The group also constructed a “shoot house” from plywood, shipping pallets, and a door frame to help simulate assaulting the Michigan Capitol building, though by this juncture Fox appears to have realized that it would be a “difficult target,” and they began discussing assaulting Whitmer’s official summer residence on Mackinac Island or her private vacation home in northern Michigan.⁷⁸

Michael Jung owned the Cambria property, where this training occurred. He subsequently told a local journalist he was the “second in command” of the Wisconsin branch of the Three Percenters. “We have a militia that trains here,” Jung stated. “We train, we do rifle training, some exercise and training, it’s mostly militia training, do a lot of shooting and targeting.” When asked specifically if the men had worked on explosives while there, he stated, “I can’t answer that” and denied any connection with the kidnap plot.⁷⁹ No charges in relation to the plot have been filed against Jung.

Fox and other members of the group attended a meeting of “militia” representatives from several states in Peebles, Ohio, on July 18, 2020. At the meeting, Croft proposed firebombing a Michigan State Police facility to distract police from an assault on the State Capitol building while Fox told those present that the governor’s private vacation home in northern Michigan represented an “easier target.” Garbin suggested they shoot up the property, but from this point forth, the focus of the group increasingly coalesced around the idea of abducting the governor from either her official summer residence or her private vacation home.⁸⁰ By July 24, using their encrypted chat group on Wire (called “F[**]k Around Find Out”), Fox mused about sending a “cake” to Whitmer, which the FBI informant understood to mean a bomb.⁸¹ Two days later, Fox told the same informant that he had not heard back from the “baker,” which he (the informant) interpreted to mean an explosives manufacturer. The group’s recorded conversations also included Fox contemplating sending “a bunch of cupcakes” out to multiple targets, which the FBI interpreted as evidence of his willingness to engage in a more widespread bombing campaign.⁸²

On July 27, 2020, Fox told the FBI informant that their best opportunity to kidnap Whitmer was as she was leaving from or arriving at her official summer residence or her private vacation home, highlighting that he had given the matter further thought. “Snatch and grab, man,” he was recorded saying. “Grab the f[**]kin’

n The federal criminal complaint notes that one of the conspirators, Kaleb Franks, had previously indicated on July 7, 2020, that he was “not cool” with “offensive kidnapping” but had nonetheless “actively continued” to participate in the plot thereafter. The “Affidavit in Support of Complaint” states that Bellar was a “sergeant” in the Wolverine Watchmen and had “designed tactical exercises for training” them. He subsequently appears to have disengaged from the group plotting to kidnap Whitmer in July 2020 when he relocated to Columbia, South Carolina, to live with his father. See Joseph Cranney, “Former soldier accused in Michigan governor kidnap plot arrested in Columbia,” *Post and Courier*, October 9, 2020. The affidavit against him [cited above] appears to be concerned with his activities on behalf of the Wolverine Watchmen rather than the plot per se. It states that he “provided plans for tactical maneuvers at trainings, coded language for covert communication, hosted meetings at his residence, provided ammunition, and coordinated logistics for trainings contrary to MCL 750.543k.”

o One of the suspects, Daniel Harris, confirmed this interpretation to the FBI during a pre-trial interview. “Transcript of Volume I of Preliminary Hearing Before United States Magistrate Judge Sally J. Berens,” October 16, 2020, Case 1:20-mj-00416-SJB.



A confederate flag hangs from a porch on a property in Munith, Michigan, on October 9, 2020, where law enforcement officials said suspects accused in a plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer met to train and make plans. Officials said Pete Musico and Joseph Morrison lived at the Munith property. (Ann Arbor News via AP/Nicole Hester)

Governor. Just grab the bitch. Because at that point, we do that, dude... it's over."⁸³ Having done that, Fox outlined a plan to remove Whitmer to a "secure location"—Wisconsin was one of several locations suggested—and put her on "trial," the verdict presumably being a foregone conclusion. Later that same day, in an encrypted chat, Fox asked the group, which included alleged plotters Ty Garbin, Daniel Harris, Kaleb Franks, and the FBI informant, "OK, well how's everyone feel about kidnapping?" No one responded, nor did anyone object.⁸⁴

The following day, Fox told the FBI informant that he had narrowed the attack targets to Whitmer's private vacation home and the summer residence, later posting on a private Facebook page: "We about to be busy ladies and gentlemen ... This is where the Patriot shows up. Sacrifices his time, money, blood sweat and tears ... it starts now so get fu[**]ing prepared!!"⁸⁵ Following further training sessions, by the beginning of August 2020, the group was beginning to discuss reconnoitering Whitmer's properties. During the course of an encrypted chat on August 9, Harris, called for bolder action: "Have one person go to her house. Knock on the door and when she answers it just cap her ... at this point. F[**]k it."⁸⁶ Harris also suggested that they "mug the pizza guy and take his shirt" and use it as a disguise to get close enough to kill Whitmer. The suggestion rang alarm bells for the FBI since this was the method Roy Den Hollander, a misogynist lawyer, had used only the previous month to kill the son and wound the husband of New Jersey federal judge Esther Salas while posing as a FedEx employee.⁸⁷

When the group met again at Harris' parents' house in Lake Orion, Michigan, on August 23, 2020, they continued discussing surveilling Whitmer's home, at which point Franks stated that he

had spent nearly \$4,000 on a helmet and night vision goggles.⁸⁸ Fox "seemed preoccupied" with killing Whitmer at this meeting, recorded an FBI informant. "The blood of tyrants needs to be shed," Caserta had added.⁸⁹ On August 29, Fox, the FBI informant, and another alleged plotter involved with the Wolverine Watchmen, Eric Molitor, reconnoitered Whitmer's private vacation home during the day to figure out if it was a "feasible target," alleged the prosecution.⁹⁰ They took photos and video. Fox shared these in the conspirators' encrypted chat group the following day. The reconnaissance group also researched online the locations of the local police department and the Michigan State Police, using this information to estimate their response time. "We ain't gonna let them burn our f[**]kin' state down," Fox stated during this surveillance operation. "I don't give a f[**]k if there's only 20 or 30 or us, dude, we'll go out there and use deadly force."⁹¹

The critical juncture came over the weekend of September 12-13, 2020, when six of the men met at Garbin's property in Luther for another training exercise during which, in teams, they practiced assaulting another "shoot house" constructed to simulate Whitmer's private vacation home.⁹² Over the course of the weekend, they also discussed tactics for attacking Whitmer's security detail. Croft suggested that they mount an AR-15 with a 37-millimeter projectile launcher on the back of a pickup truck to use against the

p "Transcript of Detention Hearing [Kaleb Franks] Before United States Magistrate Judge Sally J. Berens, October 13, 2020," Docket No. 1: 20-mj-416 features the testimony of FBI agent Richard Trask who stated that Franks had also tried to persuade Garbin and the FBI informant to help him obtain a "ghost gun," a weapon with no serial number that the authorities could not trace, for a friend who was a drug dealer.

lead vehicle in the governor's convoy, stating that he had bought his "thirty-seven" for that purpose. He also advocated using incendiary devices and IEDs against the convoy.⁹³ Fox also told some of his co-conspirators that he wanted to take Whitmer out on a boat into the middle of Lake Michigan, remove the engine, and leave her stranded there as a "statement."⁹⁴

It was at this meeting that Fox briefed those present, which by now had allegedly grown to include the Null brothers, Eric Molitor, Shawn Fix, and others (including several FBI sources—see below), on his plan to kidnap Whitmer. Thereafter, this group conducted nighttime surveillance of Whitmer's private vacation home in preparation for the kidnapping. That night, the group took three separate vehicles,⁹⁵ driving the 90 minutes from Garbin's property in Luther to Whitmer's private vacation home. Fox gave each vehicle "mission tasks." One car drove to the public boat launch on the opposite side of the lake to the governor's private vacation home to see if they could see the lights of the second car as it drove past her residence. The third car circled around conducting "counter-surveillance" to ensure no one was following the other vehicles.⁹⁵ On their way, Fox and Croft discussed destroying the M-31 highway bridge to distract police once their kidnapping was in progress. They stopped so that Fox could photograph the bridge's support structure and find a place to mount an explosive charge, according to the indictment.⁹⁶

When they returned to Luther, the FBI informant asked the group: "Everybody down with what's going on?"⁹⁷ Not everyone was. The third car had contained several individuals "who had kind of just showed up, had not been part of the [kidnapping] discussions beforehand." Later that night, Molitor wrote in the encrypted chat "I'm not going to jail for this" and left the group.⁹⁸ Brian Higgins, a member of the Wisconsin Patriot Three-Percenter Militia, who the FBI later claimed was an "intel guy" for the group, also signaled that if this was what the Michigan militiamen were about, he wanted no further part of the scheme either.⁹⁹

The following day, September 13, 2020, there was a second explosives test. This time, Croft and Harris constructed a device containing shrapnel, which the group successfully detonated near human-shaped silhouette targets "to test its anti-personnel effectiveness" against Whitmer's security detail and responding law enforcement officers, court documents state.¹⁰⁰ Fox also asked those present to contribute toward the \$4,000 sum to cover the cost of the explosives required to destroy the bridge.¹⁰¹ He planned to purchase these from "Red," an expert in explosives and demolition who, unbeknownst to the conspirators, was actually an FBI undercover agent.¹⁰²

The group agreed to conduct a final training exercise in late October 2020, but Fox highlighted that he did not want it to take place in the last week of that month because that would leave them insufficient time to kidnap Whitmer before the U.S.

general election on November 3.⁷ Fox informed the encrypted chat group on September 17, 2020, that Peter Musico, the co-founder of the Wolverine Watchmen, was back in touch, inviting them to participate in an armed protest in Lansing.⁸ The group decided, however, in Garbin's words, to have "zero and I mean zero public interaction if we want to continue with our plans," a remark the FBI interpreted as further proof of the group's criminal intent.¹⁰³ This refusal to participate in public protest indicated a split within the Wolverine Watchmen between those like Musico who wanted to demonstrate publicly with their guns and Fox's smaller clique who were "more action orientated."¹⁰⁴

Fox's assertion on October 2, 2020, that he had purchased an 800,000-volt taser for use in the kidnapping (presumably to subdue Whitmer with), indicated to the FBI that the plot was reaching its final stages. Five days later, on October 7, four of the conspirators (Fox, Garbin, Harris, and Franks) and an FBI informant within the group traveled to meet with "Red" to pay him with "group cash" for explosives and tactical gear. "Red," the men were about to learn, was an FBI agent. Upon their arrival at the rendezvous point in Ypsilanti, the FBI arrested the group.¹⁰⁵ Law enforcement detained the other would-be kidnapers shortly thereafter. Following raids on related-properties, FBI agents seized over 70 firearms and more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition. They also seized bomb-making components including over 6,000 ball bearings, which, as one explosives expert told *The Detroit News* "are to hurt people. That's the only reason for the BBs."¹⁰⁶

How the FBI Compromised the Conspiracy

Extreme far-right groups are taking an increasing interest in operational security, using encrypted messaging services to obscure indicators that might otherwise signal that an act of violence is imminent.¹⁰⁷ The Wolverine Watchmen were no different, their behavior in this sphere regarded as "indicative of their intent" by prosecutors.¹⁰⁸ FBI Director Christopher Wray has testified that the plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer "was only disrupted by well-timed human source reporting and the resulting undercover operation."¹⁰⁹ Indeed, a combination of Confidential Human Sources (CHS) and Undercover Employees (UCE) proved integral to the FBI's ability to overcome the digital counter-measures the group put in place to avoid detection, though there was an element of happenstance in this.

In early 2020, "Dan," a U.S. Postal Service worker who had served in Iraq¹¹⁰ and held libertarian beliefs, was browsing Facebook when the platform's algorithm suggested to him that, due to his previous interactions with other pages that supported the Second Amendment and firearms training, he might be interested in a group called the Wolverine Watchmen as well. "I was scrolling through Facebook one day and they popped up as a suggestion post," he later testified. "I clicked on the page and it had

r While Fox allegedly wanted to enact his plan before November 3, 2020, fellow conspirator Ty Garbin suggested that they wait, anticipating that widespread civil unrest in the aftermath of the election would make it easier for the group to operate. See Ty Garbin, "Plea Agreement" Case no: 1:20-cr-00183-RJJ, January 26, 2020.

s It is not clear if this was a protest Musico was organizing himself or the "Boogaloo Bois" rally that took place in Lansing on October 17, 2020. See Craig Lyons, "Boogaloo Bois say 'unity is the mission' at Capitol rally," *Lansing State Journal*, October 17, 2020.

q Ty Garbin, "Plea Agreement" Case no: 1:20-cr-00183-RJJ, January 26, 2020, states that the group could not find Harris and Caserta when they came to depart, though Harris later expressed his regret to the group that he had not gone with them, Garbin later told prosecutors.

a few questions to answer.¹¹¹ Having answered these to the group's satisfaction, "Dan" joined the militia group, and gained access to their encrypted chats. He quickly became "alarmed" after seeing a post from Musico concerning how to find the home addresses of police officers, interpreting this as a threat to "kill them."¹¹² Dan informed a friend in the police who relayed the information to the FBI who in turn recruited him to become a confidential informant, referred to as "CHS-2" in the criminal complaint.¹¹³

Thus, even before the Wolverine Watchmen had become embroiled in the kidnap plot, the FBI had a source at the heart of the group enabling them to document every step in the conspiracy's evolution and to interdict it when they perceived the would-be kidnappers were moving from words to action. By the time they arrested the conspirators, the FBI had "multiple" sources within the group, including two UCEs. Indeed, the FBI appears to have had a CHS or a UCE, or both, present at nearly every group meeting, which collectively it either recorded or reported on in one way or another.¹¹⁴ Evidence from these sources (there appear to have been at least four) amounted to "hundreds of hours" of audio recordings and over 13,000 pages of encrypted chat messages, not to mention data recovered from mobile phones and computers as well as firearms and explosive device components that were seized when the men were arrested.¹¹⁵

Other sources of evidence include four separate Facebook accounts set up by Barry Croft, which the FBI had gained access to through a federal warrant from April 2020 onward, including one account, opened on September 26, 2020, through which he and Fox interacted.¹¹⁶ The FBI also gained a warrant for Croft's two mobile phones, giving them access to the apps and social media accounts that he used to communicate with the group and which now form part of the case against the conspirators.¹¹⁷

Having a human source at the heart of the Wolverine Watchmen before anyone broached the idea of kidnapping Whitmer enabled the FBI to compromise the plotter's subsequent operational security measures from the outset. During the course of one meeting on June 20, 2020, held in the basement of the shop that Fox was living in, which was only accessible through a trap door hidden under the carpet, all the plotters had to leave their mobile phones upstairs to prevent monitoring. It mattered little. CHS-2 was already wearing a wire and recorded the proceedings. As the plot progressed, the conspirators became increasingly paranoid about the prospect of infiltration by law enforcement and, at a subsequent meeting held in Lake Orion, all attendees were required to bring personal documents that confirmed their identities.¹¹⁸

Since he was a trusted member of the group, CHS-2 had access to their encrypted text messages, their private Facebook group, and recorded the phone calls and conversations he had with the other plotters. Rightly, as it transpired, Franks became worried that the "Feds" had access to their encrypted communications.¹¹⁹ At Harris' suggestion, the conspirators ditched Wire on August 18, 2020, and then stayed offline until August 23 when they met at his home and adopted a new encrypted messaging service, Threema, which had the virtue of allowing the instantaneous deletion of their messages in the event of contact with law enforcement.¹²⁰

In this instance, the FBI easily overcame these enhanced operational security measures because they retained access to the group's encrypted communications through CHS-2, whom the other conspirators continued to trust.¹²¹ As previously mentioned, the group regularly employed "code words" in their communications

to obfuscate their true intentions, which CHS-2 interpreted for his handlers based on the context of the conversations. When the group attempted to construct an IED while training in Wisconsin, CHS-2 provided the FBI with video of the event together with other photos and videos of their exercises shared in the group's private Facebook discussions.¹²²

On August 29, 2020, as the plotters' activities were intensifying, CHS-2 accompanied Fox and another Wolverine Watchman, Eric Molitor, to conduct daytime surveillance of Whitmer's private vacation home, and later supplied his handlers with an audio recording of the operation. Such was the FBI's penetration of the group that by the time that Fox briefed eight members of the group about this surveillance effort and his plans to kidnap the governor (during a training exercise staged in Luther, Michigan, over the weekend of September 12-13, 2020), the FBI had a CHS and two UCEs present.¹²³

As already outlined, on the evening of September 12, 2020, the group conducted a nighttime reconnaissance of the governor's home, making the 80-mile trip from Ty Garbin's property in Luther to Whitmer's private vacation home in three vehicles. Several of the men were armed, according to the criminal complaint. Before they left, Fox had another member of the group scan each of the participants with a radio frequency interference device to detect any potential recording or transmitting devices, though this security measure failed to detect any FBI devices.¹²⁴ The FBI had human sources in two of the cars. In the first car, Fox and Croft were joined by CHS-2, "Red" (an FBI UCE whom CHS-2 had introduced into the group), and "an individual from Wisconsin"¹²⁵ who was also working for the FBI. This individual's relationship with the FBI subsequently soured, however, and he currently faces weapons charges.¹²⁶

When on that September night Fox stopped to inspect the underside of a bridge, which the group had discussed destroying with explosives to divert police away from Whitmer's home, "Red" accompanied him. Fox discussed where best to place explosive charges before taking a picture of the bridge's support structure, which he subsequently shared with CHS-2. "Red" told Fox he would need \$4,000 worth of explosives to blow up the bridge. Even in the second vehicle, in which the FBI had no human source, the FBI still obtained the digital dash camera footage and its GPS data, which placed the vehicle right at the end of Whitmer's drive, since one of occupants, Brian Higgins, shared this with CHS-2 who passed it on.¹²⁷

The FBI moved to shut things down as the group began talking about enacting its plans before the November election but also in response to the "potential compromise" of one of its confidential sources.¹²⁸ To end things, the FBI had CHS-2 inform the conspirators that "Red" was passing through and would do a "show and tell" for them to pick out the explosives and tactical gear they wanted.¹²⁹ The journey to meet "Red" on October 7, 2020, was tense. Enroute to the rendezvous point, CHS-2 drove one of the vehicles. Harris sat in the seat behind him, repeatedly loading and unloading a semiautomatic pistol before pointing it at CHS-2's head leading to an angry exchange of words.¹³⁰ When Fox and his colleagues arrived to make a "good faith" payment for the equipment, the FBI arrested them.¹³¹ Fox had a meager \$275 on him when detained.¹³²

As it prepared to make the arrests, the FBI appears to have been concerned about how some in the wider Boogaloo milieu would react. On October 2, 2020, five days prior to the arrest of those now

accused of plotting to kidnap Governor Whitmer, FBI agents had attempted to detain a man called Eric Allport on firearms charges. He was killed in the subsequent shootout in the parking lot of a Madison Heights restaurant. Allport had a violent past, having previously served an 11-year prison sentence for shooting at two police officers. Growing up, he and his family had lived next door to, and been friends with, Randy Weaver whose home in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, was subject to an 11-day siege by the FBI that ended in the death of Weaver's wife and son and a deputy U.S. Marshall in 1992.¹³³ Following his death, Boogaloo adherents hailed Allport as a hero online. Allport's own Instagram account, since deleted, had included references to the Boogaloo movement, too. He had also posted memes on Facebook including vague threats about what would happen if someone tried to take his weapons.¹³⁴

While Allport was unconnected to the kidnap plot, *The Detroit Free Press*, quoting unnamed sources, reported that the FBI had tried to arrest him after becoming aware of his "threatening comments" about the police on social media. Fearing that the arrest of Governor Whitmer's would-be kidnappers "was just the kind of event that may set Allport off," according to *The Detroit Free Press*, "The FBI figured it would have Allport behind bars by the time they arrested the kidnapping suspects and he couldn't hurt any police officers."¹³⁵

The Michigan Plot, January 6, and the Evolution of Domestic Violent Extremism

In hindsight, the storming of the Capitol building in Lansing, which spurred the plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer, has been interpreted as a prelude to the storming of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021, during which four people died.¹ One journalist present reported having heard at least three different rioters express a desire to execute then Vice President Pence.¹³⁶ In another echo of the Wolverine Watchmen's plan to kidnap Whitmer, several of those who stormed the U.S. Capitol building also appeared prepared to take hostages.¹³⁷

Asked for her thoughts on the violence in the U.S. Capitol, Governor Whitmer saw clear parallels between it and the entry of armed protestors into the Michigan statehouse in April 2020:

*I think the worst part is, though, how many people were saying they can't believe this can happen in the United States of America? All I can think was – were they not paying attention to what happened eight months ago?*²¹³⁸

To date, 529 people have been charged federally in relation to the U.S. Capitol insurrection.¹³⁹ The majority of the Trump supporters involved in storming the U.S. Capitol were unconnected with the organized far-right, though there is evidence of "militant networks, organized clusters, and inspired believers" taking part.¹⁴⁰ FBI Director Wray testified that "almost none" of the 500 people charged with participating in the attack had previously been under FBI investigation.¹⁴¹

Among those charged, however, were notable clusters of arrestees from the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and the Three Percenters, the latter group, as noted above, being one with which several of the

Wolverine Watchmen had identified.¹⁴² In June 2021, six alleged Three Percenters were subsequently indicted on conspiracy charges in relation to the assault on the U.S. Capitol.¹⁴³ In the wake of the attack, there have been indications that despite the fissiparous nature of the extreme far-right, many of these groups, emboldened by the violence, were, online at least, increasingly cohering around the objective of overthrowing the prevailing political order.¹⁴⁴

Highlighting the diffuse geographical distribution of arrestees, at least eight of those arrested for their role in the January 6 violence hailed from Michigan.¹⁴⁵ Also among those who stormed the U.S. Capitol was an individual who a photographer had captured yelling at police officers during the anti-lockdown protest in Lansing in April 2020 when armed protestors, including several of those subsequently arrested for plotting to kidnap Whitmer, entered the statehouse building and intimidated lawmakers. This image went viral, helping to define that event visually.¹⁴⁶ Another of those subsequently arrested (for assaulting a police officer during the January 6 riot) was a New York man who had searched online for "Gretchen Whitmer" together with the location of gun stores in the days prior to the U.S. Capitol insurrection,¹⁴⁷ highlighting the extent of the animosity among these circles toward her. On January 6, 2021, a peaceful "Stop the Steal" rally took place in Lansing, though a bomb threat saw the Michigan State Capitol building closed for several hours the following day.^{148 u}

While it is too simplistic to draw a straight line from Lansing to Washington, D.C., it is evident that what happened in Michigan was not an isolated incident either. Armed groups and individuals have been increasingly willing to target government buildings and intimidate politicians through incursions. This was seen at statehouses in Boise, Idaho, in August 2020,¹⁴⁹ and Salem, Oregon, in December 2020,^{150 v} both of which sought to disrupt pandemic-related legislative sessions. There were other ugly incidents prior to this as well. During a "Patriot Day Rally" rally in May 2020 in Frankfort, Kentucky, a group of Three Percenters breached barriers to reach the front porch of Governor Andy Beshear's Mansion House, heckling its occupants over his pandemic restrictions. The group then hoisted an effigy of the governor on a nearby tree, accompanied by the slogan "sic semper tyrannis" ("thus always to tyrants") in a performative lynching.¹⁵¹

The conspiracy to kidnap Governor Whitmer illustrates several points about the ongoing evolution of the threat from domestic extremism and terrorism in the United States. The plot to kidnap rather than simply murder Gretchen Whitmer, a high-profile female Democrat who during the Trump administration became a magnet for vitriol, was itself an unusual proposition given the wider practices of violence enacted by domestic extremists. Even allowing for its amateurish nature, the conspiracy itself was complex and

t A fifth person, Capitol Police Officer Brian D. Sicknick, died the following day having suffered a series of strokes. This was the ruling of the Washington, D.C., medical examiner. See Bart Jansen, "US Capitol Officer Brian Sicknick died of strokes the day after riot, medical examiner rules," *USA Today*, April 19, 2021.

u The perpetrator, who police arrested later that day, was also charged over death threats he had previously made to Detroit Democrat Cynthia Johnson on December 12, 2020. See Michael Chad Varrone, "Affidavit of Probable Cause," January 8, 2021.

v In June 2021, State Representative Mike Nearman (R) was expelled from the Oregon Legislature for intentionally (and with premeditation) letting the armed protestors into the locked building, which was then in special session. Nearman is the first person ever to be expelled from the Oregon House. See Dirk Vanderhart, "Oregon House expels state Rep. Mike Nearman, plotter of the Capitol incursion," OPB, June 11, 2021, and Rebecca Ellis, Dirk Vanderhart, and Sam Stites, "'OPD Politics Now': New evidence and the latest fallout in the saga of Rep. Mike Nearman," OPB, June 11, 2021.

involved an array of would-be perpetrators, some involved in established groups, others not. The plot also touches upon several 'hot button' issues, including the involvement and role of military veterans in radical "militia" groups (Morrison, Harris, and Bellar all had military backgrounds) and the increasing integration of digital technology into DVE activities.

More broadly, the Michigan plot also highlights how anti-government "militias" have continued to adapt and evolve, exploiting conspiracy theories and deliberate disinformation surrounding the pandemic, to remold traditional grievances about the "tyranny" of the U.S. government. While the plotters' schemed clandestinely to kidnap Whitmer, a wider view of their activities highlights that several members of the group operated in plain sight, regularly attending armed demonstrations against Michigan's lockdown measures, as they moved from anti-lockdown to anti-state activity. While the kidnap plot was an extreme act, arguably it cannot be fully comprehended without a broader appreciation of the wider mainstream political context in which it unfolded.

A prescient warning concerning the trajectory that some domestic extremists were following, from anti-lockdown to anti-state, appeared on October 6, 2020, the day before law enforcement arrested the plotters. On that date, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) released its first-ever "Homeland Threat Assessment," highlighting almost all the elements discussed in this overview of the plot to kidnap Michigan's governor. Its evaluation of the wider Domestic Violent Extremism (DVE) threat landscape (a category that excludes extremists inspired by the Islamic State, al-Qa`ida, and other foreign terrorist organizations)^w observed how DVE actors were driving "lawful protests to incite violence, intimidate targets, and promote their violent extremist ideologies" by exploiting fears and grievances surrounding the pandemic. The report also presciently predicted how such activists "might target events related to the 2020 presidential election campaigns, the election itself, election results, or the post-election period," though it did not reckon with the role that the then president himself would play in this context. "Such actors could mobilize quickly to threaten or engage in violence," the report continued. "Violence related to government efforts to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst otherwise ongoing lawful protests has exacerbated the typical election-season threat environment."¹⁵²

Pointedly, the "Homeland Threat Assessment" also highlighted the rise in domestic terrorism plots since 2018 "targeting individuals based on their actual or perceived political affiliations." Also relevant to some of the dynamics in the Michigan plot, the report predicted

that DVEs, likely emboldened by their success at exploiting otherwise peaceful protests as a cover for their own violent agendas, were "increasingly taking advantage of large protest crowds to conduct violence against government officials, facilities, and counter-protestors." DHS remained "particularly concerned" that one of the impacts of the pandemic could be that DVEs might be motivated to use violence "in response to perceived infringement of liberties and government overreach" as the government attempted to limit the spread of coronavirus.¹⁵³

DVE is not a uniform phenomenon. It represents a dynamic and multifaceted threat, consisting of a broad constellation of groups and ideological tendencies, each of which poses different types of risk. While these might overlap on occasion, they are distinguishable from one another based on differing goals, strategies, targets, and ideas.¹⁵⁴ While the focus of U.S. counterterrorism in recent years has understandably concentrated upon lone actors (both DVE and HVE, homegrown violent extremists inspired by foreign terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida) who continue to represent "the greatest terrorism threat to the United States,"¹⁵⁵ the plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer was a reminder that groups still matter, as do the amorphous radical milieu from which they emerge. Many of the would-be kidnapers self-identified with radical networks like the Three Percenters, whose activities received wider attention following the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6. These decentralized networks operate with fungible boundaries, enabling them to accommodate a loose constellation of actors and fluid ideas that are often only united through a shared anti-government animus—thereby highlighting the nebulous and liminal nature of the wider radical milieu from which such loosely organized "groups" emerge in the first place.

The Michigan plot and the events of January 6 cemented concerns over the extreme far-right threat in the United States. Within the DVE category, racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE), specifically white supremacists, represent, according to the October 2020 DHS threat assessment, "the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland."¹⁵⁶ Together with Militia Violent Extremists (MVE), a bracket into which the Michigan plotters fit, REMVE represents the "most lethal" part of the DVE landscape, but here too the threat that these categories present differs, particularly with regard to its targets. REMVE militants are more likely to perpetrate mass-casualty attacks against civilians while MVE actors are more likely to target law enforcement, government personnel, and property.¹⁵⁷

While the pandemic and lockdown energized those involved in the conspiracy to kidnap Governor Whitmer, paradoxically the same period also witnessed a decline in the number of DVE-related murders. The Anti-Defamation League documented 17 murders as being perpetrated by "people associated with a variety of domestic extremist movements" during 2020. All but one of these were committed by right-wing DVE actors.¹⁵⁸ Nine were committed by white supremacists, while five of these homicides were connected to anti-government extremists, including two killings committed by "Boogaloo" adherents.¹⁵⁹ The 17 murders committed during 2020 represent a "significant decrease" from the 45 murders committed by domestic extremists that the Anti-Defamation League documented in 2019 and the 54 such killings identified for 2018. It is also the lowest annual total it had recorded since 2004.¹⁶⁰

This lull is likely temporary, however. Mass violence by extreme far-right lone-actors will almost certainly re-emerge

w DHS defines a Domestic Violent Extremist (DVE) as "an individual based and operating primarily within the United States or its territories without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power who seeks to further political or social goals wholly or in part through unlawful acts of force or violence."

It defines a Homegrown Violent Extremist (HVE) as "a person of any citizenship who has lived and/or operated primarily in the United States or its territories who advocates, is engaged in, or is preparing to engage in ideologically-motivated terrorist activities (including providing support to terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization (FTO), but is acting independently of direction by an FTO. HVEs are distinct from traditional domestic terrorists who engage in unlawful acts of violence to intimidate civilian populations or attempt to influence domestic policy without direction from or influence from a foreign actor." "Homeland Threat Assessment – October 2020," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, p. 17.

as the pandemic subsides and people gather in public in greater numbers. Indeed, this downward trend in murders committed by domestic extremist actors during 2020 is at odds with the broader arc of right-wing extremist violence, which has included 267 terror plots or attacks and at least 91 deaths since 2015, according to a *Washington Post* analysis of data compiled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Indeed, though mass-casualty, right-wing extremist violence—of the scale seen in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (2018) and El Paso, Texas (2019)—ceased during 2020, other forms of violence did not.¹⁶¹ According to CSIS, “In 2020, the number of domestic terrorist attacks and plots [across all perpetrator ideologies] increased to its highest level since at least 1994,” but despite “this sharp increase in terrorist activity, the number of fatalities from domestic terrorist attacks was at its lowest level since 2013.”¹⁶²

FBI Director Wray testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee in March 2021, highlighting that arrests of REMVE actors have almost tripled since 2017 and that REMVE extremism accounted for the “biggest chunk” of his agency’s domestic terrorism portfolio, which he stated currently entailed some 2,000 investigations.¹⁶³ REMVE extremists were the “primary source” of lethal incidents in 2018 and 2019, though, as Wray highlighted, there has also been “an increase in lethal DVE attacks perpetrated by anti-government or anti-authority extremists,” which includes those involved with militias, who were responsible for three of the four lethal attacks in 2020.¹⁶⁴ The pandemic, lockdown, widespread civil unrest, and political change have all served to transform the DVE landscape, ensuring that it assumed a “significantly larger role” in 2020 than HVE as compared to previous years, according to one intelligence assessment.¹⁶⁵

The conspiracy to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer and more broadly the involvement of far-right “militias” in the assault on the U.S. Capitol also beg a more analytical question concerning the extent to which such groups continue to be designated as “anti-government.” As Sam Jackson highlights in relation to the Oath Keepers, Trump’s election was an “inflection point” for this anti-government group, which, for the first time in years, could imagine government not as an existential threat to life and liberty but as a “force for good.”¹⁶⁶ Indeed, the threat from such militias that are increasingly politically

partisan and continue to believe the lie that the election was “stolen” from Trump increases the likelihood that segments of the movement will become more rather than less hostile toward Democrats.^{167 x}

The plot to kidnap Michigan’s governor was a further example, perhaps one of the starkest in recent years, of the type of threat that armed groups of men self-identifying as a “militia” can pose. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence stated in March 2021 that the MVE threat “increased” during 2020 and will likely remain “elevated” throughout the remainder of this year.¹⁶⁸ Other agencies concur. For FBI Director Wray, DVE is his agency’s “top concern,”¹⁶⁹ while DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas regards it as the “greatest” terrorist threat now facing the United States.¹⁷⁰

The Biden administration’s approach to confronting domestic violent extremism represents “a sea change”¹⁷¹ in comparison to its predecessor, signaled most recently by the publication of the “National Strategy for Countering Domestic Extremism” in June 2021, the implementation of which is already “well underway.”¹⁷² The strategy, which articulates an overarching, government-wide framework for combating this multifaceted phenomenon as it evolves over the short- and long-term, reiterates the “elevated” threat posed by REMVE and MVE actors. While the strategy does not propose new domestic terrorism legislation, the document does indicate that the White House is also exploring ways to convene non-federal partners to have “open, robust exchanges of ideas” on issues such as how to make better use of laws that already exist across all 50 states to prohibit certain private “militia” activity, including state constitutional provisions requiring the subordination of the military to civil authorities, statutes prohibiting such activity without authorization from the state government, and state statutes criminalizing certain forms of paramilitary activity.¹⁷³

Ultimately, only time will tell whether this new strategy is successful or not, though one thing is already apparent: there are likely no quick solutions in the months or indeed years ahead. **CTC**

x Though not a militiaman, Cesar Sayoc, who in October 2018 sent 13 explosive devices through the mail, targeting primarily though not exclusively leading Democrat politicians (including the current president and vice president), might be viewed as an early example of this shift. See *United States of America v. Cesar Altieri Sayoc*.

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Deputy to the Under-Secretary-General Raffi Gregorian, Director, United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism

By Don Rassler and Paul Cruickshank

Dr. Raffi Gregorian brings to the United Nations over 33 years of academic, diplomatic, and military experience in counterterrorism and international peace and security. As Deputy to the Under-Secretary-General and Director of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), Dr. Gregorian directs the 150-person office headquartered in New York, chairing its Programme Review Board and representing the office in the Secretary-General's Deputies Committee. Prior to his appointment by the Secretary-General in September 2019, Dr. Gregorian was Director of Multilateral Affairs in the Bureau of Counterterrorism of the U.S. Department of State as well as Acting Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism (2017-2018) and Director for the Office of Peace Operations, Sanctions, and Counterterrorism (2012-2015). In this latter capacity, he initiated the first new U.S. peacekeeping policy in 25 years, led a number of important peacekeeping reforms, and helped secure full funding for the U.N. peacekeeping budget. Dr. Gregorian's field experience includes leading two multinational missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as well as military service in BiH, Kosovo, and the Joint Staff in Washington, D.C. In BiH he was Supervisor of Brčko District (2006-2010), Principal Deputy High Representative (2007-2010) and for several months also Acting High Representative, having first served as Political Advisor for NATO Headquarters Sarajevo and Co-Chairman of the BiH Defense Reform Commission (2004-2006). His previous State Department service included serving as chief of staff to the Special Adviser to the President and Secretary of State for Kosovo and Dayton Implementation and Acting Director for Kosovo Implementation. Dr. Gregorian also worked on the official history of the Vietnam War for the U.S. Army. Dr. Gregorian holds a Doctorate in International Relations and Strategic Studies from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

Editor's Note: *This interview was conducted ahead of the adoption on June 30, 2021, by consensus of the United Nations General Assembly of Resolution 75/291 for the seventh review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. This resolution is described in further detail at the bottom of the interview.*

CTC: Over the course of your distinguished career, you've worked in key roles that have given you a front-row seat to the on-the-ground and strategic level intricacies and challenges related to peace processes, peacekeeping operations, defense reform, capacity building, and the practice of counterterrorism. Given the positions you've held in the Balkans, at the U.S. State Department, and in your current role as the Deputy to the Under-Secretary-General at the United Nations Office of Counterterrorism, you are uniquely positioned to provide an informed view about how the institutions you have been a part of have organizationally evolved and responded [in order] to

combat and grapple with the broad mix of security challenges. From terrorism to the difficult business of building partner capacity, when you look back over the arc of your career, what are some of the key aspects that stand out to you about how the organizational effort to combat terrorism has evolved or not evolved?

Gregorian: I have a background as an historian so I try to think of things that way, and when I was working in the Counterterrorism Bureau at the State Department—when I first joined there in January 2015—I started to reflect on what is the nature of terrorism at that point and today, and how much it's actually evolved, and therefore, as a consequence of that, what are the tools and the responses that governments have done to respond to it. It's actually quite interesting when it comes to terrorism: Terrorism is fundamentally a technique. It's a tactic. But, in 2015, we were confronted with the eruption of ISIL and the conquest [the previous year] of Mosul, and one of the first questions I asked when I got there was, "well, is this an insurgency, or are we fighting a terrorist group?" I look backward, and you see the evolution of ... let's call it modern terrorism, post-World War II terrorism. I did work for the U.S. Army on the Center for Military History. I worked on the official history of the Vietnam War. The Viet Cong used terror tactics in South Vietnam. Were they a terrorist group? Well, maybe today we might call them that, but back then, we didn't. It was an insurgency. Same thing with the communist terrorists in Malaya. That was an insurgency; they used terror.

The conventional view of terrorism in the '60s and '70s was associated with the sorts of small radical groups; they might have been tied to national liberation movements or they were fringe elements that would carry out acts that were meant to attract attention and advance a political goal to raise their profile. This is pre-social media and everything else. So how do you get the world's attention if you're a group of 10 crazy people? You do something spectacular: you take hostages, you set off a bomb in a plane, you hijack something. Back in the '60s and '70s, that was the milieu that terrorism operated [in], and the international responses to those typically were international conventions or treaties designed to address those problems. So you have the first couple international conventions under U.N. auspices that are about prevention of hijacking of aircraft or conventions against use of explosives against aircraft and that sort of thing. Then you get a horrible event like the Munich Olympics massacre, and that takes it to a new level, at least in terms of public consciousness. In the United States, it led to the creation of the Office of the Special Coordinator for Counterterrorism in the State Department, what was known for the longest time as S/CT because the counterterrorism coordinator reported directly to the Secretary of State, and it was meant to help work with foreign governments around the world on these kinds of groups, like those at the Munich Olympics or the Baader-Meinhof

gang^a or November 17^b and these, again, relatively small groups.

Of course, that all really starts to change in the early '90s, with the expansion and evolution of al-Qa`ida, and then probably most significantly with the Africa embassy bombings. And you can see that things are starting to change on the U.S. side. S/CT gets bigger. At the U.N., we still have these conventions and so on, but when you get to the point of, it was the Africa bombings, in fact, that led to the creation of UNSCR [United Nations Security Council Resolution] 1267, which is sanctions against al-Qa`ida, that's pre-9/11. So you see the beginning of a more operational configuration by Member States at the international level and also the national level. There's greater cooperation among states to track down what are now clearly transnational groups. That's one of the other defining features of what happened over the '80s and into the '90s. And then of course 9/11 comes, and that's clearly a watershed moment. It's a watershed moment for everybody, but here in the U.N., there was a Security Council resolution, 1373—[which] obliges all Member States to criminalize terrorist activity, including preparation and financing of it, prevention of safe havens, and so on—but it didn't create an apparatus in the U.N. Secretariat for dealing with that, although it established a committee in the Security Council and then an executive directorate that was initially intended to go around and assess how countries were doing in terms of comporting themselves with these [UNSCR] obligations under Chapter VII of the U.N. [Charter].^c

And then on the U.S. side, over the course of the decade, there are again changes—creation of Department of Homeland Security and in the State Department, the one I'm most familiar with, S/CT, became a full-fledged bureau within the State Department with its own programming office and specialized offices and so on, including the Office of Multilateral Affairs, which is what I was brought over to develop there—in lockstep, of course, with the emergence of ISIL, which takes it again to another level. Now you have a territory-holding group that uses extreme terror tactics. The institutional responses to that track with them. They don't get ahead of them; they track with them. So Security Council Resolution 2178 of September 2014 is in response to [the Islamic State seizure of] Mosul and the huge increase in the foreign terrorist fighter phenomenon that was associated with that.

All these things existed in one form or another before that, but accelerated with social media, to help with recruiting, alienation brought on by the 2007 financial crisis, a whole bunch of post-Cold War trends are kind of converging at that point, and then you have just a qualitatively and quantitatively different problem. There *were*



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foreign terrorist fighters that went to go fight in Afghanistan against Soviet troops, but if my memory serves me, the numbers were like 10,000 people over the course of 10 years. Well, it was like 40,000-50,000 people going to ISIS in the space of 18 months. It's just so much [of a] bigger problem. And from over 100 different countries. So it was really a global problem, and that is actually what led to the creation of the U.N. Office of Counterterrorism.

I was a driving force behind its creation because you could see a greater need for coordination and cooperation, not on operations, which the [Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS] was able to do at least with respect to ISIS in the core, but facilitation of international cooperation—setting of norms, standards, certain kinds of capacity building, which really the U.N. is perhaps better suited for in some instances. And Member States were clamoring for that; they needed help. So it didn't take much of a push to get Member States to say, "Yes, absolutely, we should have an office of counterterrorism at the level of an under-secretary-general," and the U.S. was a big supporter of that. But you were pushing on an open door. Everyone saw the obviousness of it, to elevate the very small counterterrorism apparatus that we had in the U.N. before that time—which it started back in about 2010, 2011, the U.N. Counter-Terrorism Centre, which was buried deep in the bowels of the Department of Political Affairs—and lifting that up and bringing it into the U.N. Office of Counter-Terrorism as the capacity-building engine of this organization. And then we went from there. That's just in the last four years; UNOCT was created in the middle of 2017. The

a Editor's Note: The Baader-Meinhof Gang (also known as the Red Army Faction) carried out a campaign of terrorist violence in West Germany in the 1970s. For more, see "Who were the Baader-Meinhof gang?" BBC, February 12, 2007.

b Editor's Note: November 17 was an extreme far-left Greek terrorist group that "killed the CIA Athens station chief, Richard Welch, in 1975, and over the next three decades claimed responsibility for 23 murders in attacks on US, British, Turkish and Greek targets." In 2015, the U.S. State Department assessed that the group no longer posed an active threat. "Greek leftist group November 17 removed from US terror list," AFP via *Guardian*, September 4, 2015.

c Editor's Note: Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter outlines "action with respect to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression." See "United Nations Charter, Chapter VII," United Nations website.

evolution of terrorism is matched by these organizational changes and conventions and eventually Security Council resolutions.

CTC: You have spoken about why UNOCT was created. Can you elaborate a bit more on the role it plays within the U.N. system and its core focus areas?

Gregorian: It's supposed to, first of all, bring policy coherence to what the U.N. system does in the counterterrorism space. And [the way] it does that, and the mechanism by which it does that, other than being a focal point for policy, is to help coordinate U.N. entities that play some part in counterterrorism in its broadest sense. And it turned out to be massive. Under the [current] Secretary-General's leadership, we set up the Global Counterterrorism Coordination Compact,^d which replaced something that had been there before called the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, but it was somewhat lackluster for a number of reasons. No one did anything wrong; it didn't have the [necessary gravity] to move itself forward at the time. [But in 2017] all the stars were aligning. Plus a little bit of money helps, right? It encourages people if you have some money. And we did. We had a little bit of seed money to help grow this global coordination compact, which now has 43 U.N. entities in it and eight working groups. It's a much more well-regulated and structured and organized enterprise.

We have here in UNOCT a Global Compact Secretariat that makes it all run. We have funds for the working groups to provide seed money for studies and projects. We have an online platform that we launched last year, just as the pandemic was happening, locking us all down. So we had a vehicle for continuing to coordinate and cooperate online. To my surprise, it's actually been very successful, because coordination is hard. Nobody likes to be coordinated at the U.N., as they say; everyone wants to be the coordinator. It's actually an unhappy role to have, but we're actually mandated by the General Assembly to do that. And in concrete ways, it shows up as something that I like and support a lot, which are these joint programs. This is where we'll have multiple U.N. entities working together on one joined-up program: counterterrorism travel is one of them, for example.

Each entity brings its own expertise and mandate to a particular problem set, and we pull it all together and manage that and get—I know it sounds trite—a synergistic effect in a way that wasn't possible before the global compact [was] agreed. So it does that, and I would say the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Member States really gravitate towards this office. We're getting very high interest in it. We have good access to senior leaders. They want to come see us when they're here in town. They easily agree to meetings when we travel overseas. They come to our briefings. We're extremely active in that regard. We're one of the most active U.N. entities reaching out to Member States and engaging with them, especially

^d Editor's Note: "The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact is the largest coordination framework across the three pillars of work of the United Nations: peace and security, sustainable development, human rights and humanitarian affairs. It aims to strengthen a common UN action approach to support Member States, at their request, in the balanced implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and other relevant United Nations resolutions and mandates." "UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact," United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism website.

the missions here in New York. They really appreciate that.

So we are the face of counterterrorism at the U.N. We're not operational, though. We're not involved in running the military aspects of anything. We typically focus our efforts on capacity building of [the] civilian side of things, whether it be law enforcement, prosecutors, policymakers, and so on. And that's the other big part of what we do, is capacity building. We have been, in the 18-20 months or so I've been here, moving towards much more comprehensive, consolidated programs [that] have applicability around the world, but we implement them locally on whatever the problem might be, but it's part of a larger, global program. Counterterrorism travel is probably the best example of that, but we have them also on victims of terrorism and countering the financing of terrorism, a whole range of things. Strategic communications for countering violent extremism and the like.

So that's a rough description of what we do. We are plugged into the U.N. system. We're headed by an under-secretary-general, which is like mainline management here. He takes part in the Executive Committee of the Secretary-General, which is very much like the [White House's] National Security Council Principals Committee, except this one is always chaired by the Secretary-General. And then there's a Deputies Committee, which I take part in [at] the assistant secretary-general level, and these work on the whole variety of issues confronting the U.N., not just counterterrorism; it's everything from climate change to food insecurity to technology, development, counterterrorism, peace operations, whatever. It all gets deliberated in these bodies and then decided at the Executive Committee level, and we're all part of that.

We've managed to accomplish a lot actually in the few years we've been here. We've grown from about 60, 70 people to now about 150. We have a few program offices that we've established overseas at the request of member states, and that brings us closer now to the beneficiaries that are asking for our help, because everything we do is on the basis of request. We can't force ourselves on anybody.

CTC: I think that's a helpful segue to one core aspect of the UNOCT mission, which you mentioned, which is capacity building. The terrorism studies community has spent a considerable amount of emphasis and energy on studying the actions of groups and organizations on the threat side, which is understandable. Much less attention has been given to the practice of counterterrorism and looking at dynamics like capacity building or the work of partners and counterterrorism campaigns. And this is a big focus area for UNOCT. What are some of the challenges that your office faces when it comes to capacity building? How do you ensure accountability? What are some of the metrics that UNOCT has found helpful to think through that might be helpful to the broader community about how we measure outcomes and performance of counterterrorism entities?

Gregorian: I think this is one of those areas where my previous experience has proven to be very, very useful, because I did a lot of capacity building work in the Balkans—not specifically on counterterrorism, but on a whole range of things, including integration of the three former warring factions into one state armed force. That was really a multifaceted undertaking, and it makes you think about, what is the effect you're trying to have? What is the outcome you want, the impact you're trying to have? In

my experience in the State Department looking at State Department programs, but also U.N. and other programs, NATO and so on, how do you know something is actually working? It's very difficult, of course, to prove a negative. If you give people training on border security and they never find any terrorists coming into the country, is that because the terrorists aren't trying to come in, or because [the border guards are] so good—who knows?

So we need to be able to have some sense of [how] what we're doing is having an impact. One of the things that we've pushed really hard for here in my time is to move away from two different things: one was a New York-centric model where people were based here in New York and would fly overseas, conduct some training, and fly back. And who knew what happened after that. Then people started saying, "Well, we need to track that in some way, so we'll do surveys of people before and after the training to see if they actually found it useful." But you don't really know how sustainable that is, which is one of the reasons why we want to have these program offices in other parts of the world, to be closer to and have a more sustained engagement for less money and so on.

But what I've been really pushing for here is a sense of what I call graduation from capacity building. We should be able to impart training to people on whatever it is we're trying to do to the point where they can carry it on themselves afterwards. And that implies that a country adopts its own national systems for doing that. They have to have the personnel systems in place. They have to have the development of staff and training in place for long-term replication of something or [a] train-the-trainers program. There will be many countries that are resource-strapped and may not be able to do that at a national level, to have a very specialized course on counterterrorism law enforcement investigations, for example. But that's why we're setting up a training center in Rabat,^e to help countries in West Africa that just don't have the resources or the population density to have that level of specialization. We're building up [the Rabat] regional center to do that, where we either bring them to train the trainers or they can have both introductory and then advanced level training later on as people progress in their careers. So I really want to push to get a sense that people are graduating; they're moving up and taking over for themselves. They can do it on their own or in conjunction with other countries.

The thing, of course, is to find better ways of measuring whether or not what we've taught them is actually having any impact. I prefer programs like the Countering Terrorist Travel Programme because as countries come online with those systems, you can actually generate data—like how many people did you screen, and out of those, how many were on a terrorist watchlist or an INTERPOL alert? We'll be able to see that, and then we'll be able to calibrate. So that kind of stuff is very useful, and I push hard to configure programs along those lines. And then, we work in parts of the world where countries are tempted to behave in ways that are not actually very helpful in terms of effective counterterrorism. Or they're desperate, and they're just lashing out, they don't know what

^e Editor's Note: In October 2020, UNOCT and Morocco reached an agreement on the establishment of a UNOCT program office in the Moroccan capital of Rabat to build counterterrorism capabilities in Africa. "UNOCT and the Kingdom of Morocco conclude Agreement on the establishment of a UNOCT Programme Office in Rabat to build counterterrorism capacities and cooperation in Africa," press release by the Kingdom of Morocco and UNOCT, October 6, 2020.

to do. [I'm referring to] these large sweep operations [in which] they round up all the civilians, they harass them, maybe they kill a few of them, and now you've just made the problem worse. So we also focus quite heavily on the human rights aspect, and by human rights, I mean real basic stuff, like observe due process and don't conduct extrajudicial killings. That's why we build in safeguards to our programs. If we have to, we will stop engagements if we are unable to keep things moving in the right direction or stop bad things from happening.

Increasingly, we also focus on the gender aspects of all the programming, which is very easy for, at least people of my generation, to kind of sneer at, like "oh, gender." But it's actually really interesting when you start delving into it. You look at the way ISIL has used women as recruiters and financiers. I can remember reading Frantz Fanon's book about Algeria^a and how the Algerians, during the Algerian War for independence, were using women in specific ways in order to take advantage of gender blinders. ISIL has been doing the same thing. Even now, when we're looking at neo-Nazi and other groups that are tipping towards more violence and possibly internationally coordinating their activities, the role that women play in those groups is noteworthy.^f These groups are aware of the role they can play, and they're taking advantage of it.

I'll give you an example of where [focusing on gender aspects] can be really interesting. As part of the CT Travel Program, we have helped countries set up what are called passenger information units—basically the analytical unit that is looking at all the advanced passenger information, passenger name record data—but they're also developing the algorithms that tell the data systems what to look for, like people between age 20 and 25 traveling from Mogadishu to Nairobi and then on to Frankfurt, if that happens to be a travel pattern of interest. But when you add women into that mix, you start to get a different perspective and you can pick up different things that you may have been missing all along. So it's to everyone's advantage to focus on that. I think the term gender turns some practitioners off. They're not thinking about what that means, and that's the failure of us—us collectively, not just the U.N.—of explaining it in a way that gives you that 'aha' moment, with someone pointing [out], like "oh, that's why it matters. Yeah, I really want to know that. That's really interesting information."

So we're taking this very broad approach to stuff to make it relevant, keeping up with what's actually going on, trying to have maximum impact, and trying to make it sustainable. We don't actually have that much money that we get here from donor countries to effect these programs. We typically spend about \$35 million a year in capacity building. That's a drop in the bucket compared to just the [U.S. State Department] Counterterrorism Bureau that I came from. So we have to be very, very judicious about where we apply our resources to have the maximum impact. I think we really are getting much, much better at that and have been

^f Editor's Note: For more on the role of women in extreme far-right groups, see Audrey Alexander ed., *How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far Right* (Washington, D.C.: Program on Extremism at George Washington University, 2019); Kristy Campion, "Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications," *Soc. Sci.* 9:9 (2020): p. 149; and Julia Santucci, Regina Waugh, and Hallie Schneur, "Gender and Right-Wing Extremism in America: Why Understanding Women's Roles is Key to Preventing Future Acts of Domestic Terrorism," *Just Security*, March 5, 2021.

thinking about that for a while. And we've had some really great cooperation and assistance from the European Union [which] is doing a lot of work in monitoring and evaluation work. We've had a number of workshops with them to really hone our skills and share good practices on that. It's a lot of additional paperwork, the programming log frames and stuff that go with that are massive, time consuming, but I think we're working towards much better outcomes as a result.

CTC: The COVID-19 pandemic has renewed concern about bioterror. In the August 2020 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, West Point scientists assessed that advances in synthetic biology and widening access to the technologies involved is “leading to a revolution in science affecting the threat landscape that can be rivaled only by the development of the atomic bomb.”² Synthetic biology is obviously a great force for good, but as the 2018 U.S. National Strategy for Countering WMD Terrorism noted, “advances in biotechnology could theoretically allow even a single individual working in a laboratory to engineer pathogens that could have catastrophic effects.”³ The U.N. states that UNCCT (the U.N. Counter-Terrorism Centre, one of the five organizational units of UNOCT) and other parts of the United Nations “are working together to understand the risks posed by new technologies for misuse in chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear terrorism as well as the scientific and technological solutions that Member States could use to address these threats.”⁴ And the UNOCT website contains a video that warns of “viruses that, in the wrong hands, could be manipulated to unleash the next global pandemic. Only this time, it would be worse than anything we've ever seen before.”⁵ What is your office doing to create a global effort to prevent, but also to mitigate a potential future engineered pandemic?

Gregorian: It's potentially very scary. *Potentially*. But it's been almost 20 years since U.S. and allied forces went into Afghanistan and found al-Qa`ida laboratories where they were experimenting with ricin. And we've seen [other] people dabbling with ricin. I mean, ricin is kind of low tech and could be potentially very serious. And there have been foiled plots of people [trying] to do that. So it doesn't take a big leap of imagination to think that they're going to keep trying to do that. What you described is pretty close to where we assess the situation to be. I personally wouldn't assign a probability to it happening, but it's so high-risk if it does, we have to be prepared to deal with it.

Synthetic biology, DNA splicers, and stuff like that, is it realistic or is it a higher threat that a terrorist group will develop its own capability to exploit that? Or is it more likely that an insider threat in a laboratory will be the more likely vector for terrorists to gain access to that? Could be both. I'm not as conversant with the development in the technology to really weigh in on that, but on the flip side of all this, all this technology—artificial intelligence and so on—also can help the good guys in terms of detecting people. Blockchain technology⁶ sounds like it's impenetrable, but in fact, it has many advantages in terms of audit trails and stuff like that

“Advances in technology [are] putting certain kinds of technology in the reach of a lot more people that in the past, they wouldn't have had, including terrorists, and the threshold of knowledge and education and wherewithal to be able to abuse that is therefore consequently dropping, too, which would suggest that the threat of someone using it for terrorist purposes may go up in all kinds of areas.”

can be used for good as well, depending on how the regulatory landscape plays out over the next few years. So it's a mixed bag like everything else, but the stakes are so much higher, of course, if someone gets ahold of [and can produce and weaponize highly lethal biological material]. On the other hand, you look at fears that we had about nuclear terrorism going back to the breakup of the Soviet Union. And that's what, 30 years now? There were all the red mercury scares⁶ and stuff like that. But in terms of real, honest-to-goodness, like a warhead being stolen or something like that, I'm not aware of anything like that, which suggests a lot of the measures we've put in place as an international community, as Member States *have actually worked*. Now, we should absolutely not be complacent about that because the bad guys are always going to be looking for vulnerabilities to exploit. This is a long way of saying, yes, it's a problem; we're not really sure exactly how *much* of a problem, but we may have some time here to shore up the defenses in terms of infrastructure protection, detection of terrorists, and also the control of some of these technologies as they become more widespread.

CTC: One of the pilot studies run by UNCCT's Programme on Preventing and Responding to WMD/CBRN was a project slated to run from March 2019 to October 2020, which focused on “enhancing knowledge about advances in science and technology to combat WMD terrorism” and analyzing how “advances in science and technology could augment or enhance terrorist capabilities to acquire and/or deploy WMD.”⁷ To the degree you are able to publicly discuss it, what were the key takeaways?

Gregorian: The report that you mentioned is just in the final stages of validation and internal checks. There's no surprises in it, in the sense that it says advances in technology [are] putting certain kinds of technology in the reach of a lot more people that in the past, they wouldn't have had, including terrorists, and the threshold of knowledge and education and wherewithal to be able to abuse that is therefore consequently dropping, too, which would suggest that the threat of someone using it for terrorist purposes may go up in all kinds of areas—everything from use of drones and attaching devices to them; we've already seen that in Iraq and Syria where ISIL had tried to put on some chemical weapons, small stuff attached to a

g Editor's Note: “Blockchain is a shared, immutable ledger that facilitates the process of recording transactions and tracking assets in a business network.” Bitcoin, for example, “uses blockchain technology as its transaction ledger.” For more, see “What is blockchain technology?” IBM website.

drone, but even so, it's going to continue to evolve along those lines.

The pilot study is being done together with UNICRI [United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute]. Now, we do have a related program that does capacity building on protection of critical infrastructure. So there's an overlap between that program that protects vulnerable targets, like soft targets, as well as critical infrastructure. And this study will help inform that work going forward, so that if there are obvious observations or recommendations [that] come out, we'll adjust the programming to take that into consideration.

CTC: There's been a variety of reporting about the U.N. Trust Fund for Counter-Terrorism and the U.N.'s efforts to diversify funding for the trust fund. According to UNOCT's published materials, donations provided by Saudi Arabia, including \$100,000,000 in support offered in 2014, accounted for 78 percent of contributions provided to the U.N. Trust Fund for Counter-Terrorism since it was created.⁸ What is UNOCT doing to encourage and incentivize other nations to make contributions as generous as the support Saudi Arabia has provided?

Gregorian: We are encouraging and incentivizing other states to donate. The numbers are all trending in the right way, and first of all, I want to say the Saudis are big supporters of diversification, too. They don't want to be the only contributor to the U.N. Counter-Terrorism Centre, which was the original beneficiary of their considerable contribution. It's clear that the creation of UNOCT has helped attract donations from a much wider donor base. So even the figure you cited of 78 percent, it's now down to I think 71 percent because we continue to get more donations, and that's also a vote of confidence in the quality of the programming we have. Success breeds success, and if people see that this stuff is actually having an effect, they want to get on board, they want to fund a winner, and so we're attracting more donors. We're developing a resource mobilization strategy that will be much more focused and should increase the percentage provided by other donors by quite a lot. Yeah, there has been some stuff written in the press, and I, frankly, having worked here now for 18-20 months, people *suppose* a lot of stuff about this funding, but they haven't asked me, because I can tell them what goes on here. You know, there was someone who wrote an article, and they clearly had a particular angle they were pursuing, and I offered myself up for an interview. I gave them all the hard data, and they chose not to print any of it.

The fact of the matter is the funds from the Saudis went into a trust fund, which has other donors to it, and those funds are used to pay for these global programs, which have benefited people from over 175 countries. At no point have the Saudis ever told us which programs, in which countries, or which people. They're not involved in the design of the programs. They don't ask to be involved. I chair something called the Programme Review Board that reviews all the programs for everything from human rights compliance to "is it in accordance with our strategy, and are we going to get a useful output or outcome from this?" At no point are they involved in any of that. The Saudi Ambassador [serves as the] Chair [of] an advisory board to UNOCT's UNCCT that is made up of 21 countries, including the permanent five members of the Security Council. And it's just that: it's advisory, at really the strategic level. I think the first time they ever got briefed on a specific program was the last meeting we had, late last year, which was my suggestion. Like "let's brief them on one

of these programs so they can see what we're doing with the money." So it's a hands-off contribution. It's not earmarked, and we've been able to use it for the purposes of the United Nations. It's controlled by us and decided by our under-secretary-general. I'm surprised the Saudis—or any country, frankly—would give a contribution like that with so little in the way of earmarks. But they have.

UNOCT's other major contributor is the State of Qatar, generously giving us about \$15 million a year over five years. And that's really interesting because, again, they specified certain areas in which to fund it, but they're very general, like for coordination of U.N. activities and supporting victims of terrorism, and that's kind of the extent of it. By the way, they also give additional funds for specific programs, as do many other donors.

But the irony is—and what we're struggling with right now in the General Assembly—there's a proposal in this year's resolution that Member States endorse giving us a share of the regular budget of the United Nations, by which is meant the budget that comes from the assessed dues of all Member States. So think about the numbers I mentioned to you: 175 countries have benefited from the work we do, but there are two countries that pay for most of UNOCT's staff—Qatar and Saudi Arabia—and Qatar's contribution to the trust fund is used for these coordination purposes and for staff and stuff like that, but it's going to run out in about two and a half years. Then what? Why is it fair that all these countries get to benefit from UNOCT and Qatar is carrying the burden for that? That is why it's been proposed that we put staff working on the core functions of UNOCT on the regular budget instead of being dependent on the benevolence of two states. That's just not sustainable. It's not responsible either, and it's not fair. So I think it would help spread the burden and make everyone's programming dollars go further if we have the core functions put on the regular budget. The programming activity, the capacity building will continue to be done by donors who want to contribute to a particular type of program. But even there, we don't get told how to do something. If someone wants to fund an activity in Burkina Faso and they're willing to give you funds, we'll say, "well, we have a program for that. You can contribute to it."

CTC: Turning to human rights, there's long been concern about the potential of counterterrorism to infringe human rights, concerns that human rights violations complicate counterterrorism capacity building in certain parts of the world. What have been the challenges for the U.N. in this area, and how important do you see it to hardwire human rights protections into capacity building?

Gregorian: First of all, I like to go back to basics here at the U.N. The U.N. Charter [is] pretty explicit about human rights, and then there's the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and so on, which most of the countries we deal with are signatories to. But it's amazing how forgetful they are about [what] they signed on to. Things like gender equality, it's built right into [the U.N. Charter], you can't miss it. It's like missing "We the people" in the [U.S.] Constitution. It says men and women are equal. Same thing on human rights. Even so, there is a problem with a trend around the world of illiberal democracies and increasing authoritarianism, even before the pandemic but especially since the pandemic. We've seen a number of countries either expand the remit of their counterterrorism legislation or exploit it in a way that is used to

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There has been, I think, a specious and somewhat tendentious argument made that somehow the creation of the U.N. Office of Counter-Terrorism has contributed to all this. I’m not sure what the data is, if any, upon which people make such claims, because these trends were in place before this office was created, and we are obliged as a United Nations entity to uphold and preserve human rights and promote them. All of our programming has to have a human rights component to it and a risk matrix and stuff associated with it. We follow the dictum of ‘first, do no harm.’ We’re not going to want to operate in a place where we think we’re somehow contributing to a problem. And we have fail-safes; we will stop programs if we see abuses going on that we can’t stop. On the other hand, we are a Member State organization. We have 193 shareholders called the Member States, but if we’re not in a place [to help] with human rights in a country, then who is? There are not many countries that can do what we do.

Our biggest challenge to mainstreaming human rights into our programming has been funding, because we’re not on the regular budget. I don’t have funding for staff positions for human rights officers. So I’ve had to scrape money off of other things in order to fund two temporary positions. And yet, we have a number of Member States who are very vocal about human rights and the need to mainstream human rights, but then we get no funding for it. So I hope if nothing else that the biennial counterterrorism resolution currently being negotiated by the General Assembly will at least fund a couple of human rights positions, which will allow us to then develop a more robust program. But in the first instance, we need to be able to make sure we are fully implementing the U.N.’s human rights and due diligence policy, which is sort of like some of the legislation the U.S. has in terms of the Leahy Amendment^h and so on. These are common sense provisions, that you’re not going to contribute to the abuse of human rights or the violation of human

^h Editor’s Note: The term Leahy Amendment (also referred to as the Leahy Law) “refers to two statutory provisions prohibiting the U.S. Government from using funds for assistance to units of foreign security forces where there is credible information implicating that unit in the commission of gross violations of human rights.” “About the Leahy Law, Fact Sheet,” U.S. State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, January 20, 2021.

rights, and [it] governs who we can work with and how. But it’s a challenge when you don’t have adequate resources to do it. It’s super important to us, and so we try to find creative ways to address it.

We have very good relations with the Special Rapporteur for countering terrorism while maintaining human rights, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin.ⁱ We need to maintain a focus on this and not let people avoid the spotlight. But we do get put into some uncomfortable positions. And then one last thing to note, we see victims of terrorism as a critical human rights issue, and we have a very robust program on that. We’re a leader on that in the world, at the international level, and promoting the human rights of victims of terrorism at all stages. That’s a big component of some of the human rights work we do.

CTC: Human rights protections are an absolutely vital end in and of themselves, but they also mean that you can improve CT because you can bolster the ability of different countries to cooperate more comfortably in the counterterrorism sphere if those human rights protections are becoming more widespread, right?

Gregorian: You put your finger on something that I’m struggling with: how to do that. We’ve looked at a couple different proposals to have a human rights program, as opposed to just including human rights in our programming. And I think it’s super important, so I don’t accept ideas that just say, “Oh, we need to have a series of workshops around the world or seminars to train people on human rights or make them aware of it.” These are obligations [the Member States] have. I think part of the dialogue about human rights has gotten off track in the sense that some people here, in the same way I mentioned about gender, they hear the word gender, and they’re instantly in a different place, and they’re not listening. Same thing on human rights. “Human rights, you just want to tie our hands in terms of how we do stuff.” How about if I explained to you which human rights I’m talking to you about and why if you don’t observe them, you’re going to make the situation worse and you’re going to get your troops and law enforcement officers killed as a result of that? Now that’s a different discussion.

It’s the same thing with how we refer to certain bodies of international law. There’s a very interesting dialogue I’ve just had with our Office of Legal Affairs here. My question to them was, is international humanitarian law the same thing as the law of armed conflict? Short answer—my answer, not their answer—is “Yeah, they’re pretty much the same thing.” There’s an overlap with issues about neutrality at the international level, which is [a] separate body of law, but essentially the law of armed conflict *is* international humanitarian law. So depending on who you’re talking to, if you talk to them about the law of armed conflict, they get that “Oh yeah, you’re not supposed to shell mosques or churches, right? Unless they’re being used for military purposes.” “Yeah, that’s what we’re talking about.” Then it’s a different discussion, and so I think we need to meet the practitioners at their level of understanding and use their vocabulary so we get past the stereotypes or false assumptions people have about terms like human rights and

ⁱ Editor’s Note: “The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism is an independent expert appointed by the UN Human Rights Council.” United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner website.

international humanitarian law. That makes for a much more interesting dialogue, and then people get it. Pertinent here is a study the UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] did on the journey to extremism in Africa. According to their dataset, 70 percent of people who took the final step to violence from being radicalized or disaffected cited the behavior or the actions of government security forces as the thing that tipped them over. They saw what they did either to themselves or to a family member, a friend, and they decided, “that’s enough.”^j If you present that kind of information to practitioners, they’re like, “Oh, maybe we shouldn’t do that.” So I’m kind of busting at the seams to try to figure out how to make that conversation universal and to get people to have a common vocabulary on these things, and then we’re in different territory and we can do a lot more on that subject. Incredibly important stuff.

CTC: It certainly seems like you are on to something in framing it in terms that are more familiar to the practitioner community, to the operational community in ways that overlap with their equities, in ways that they think about issues that really matter to them. Things like close air support or precision strike activity packaged around the limiting of civilian casualties also are about avoiding handing terrorist groups recruitment opportunities.

Gregorian: I was part of this discussion in the State Department as acting deputy coordinator that first year of the Trump administration when they revised the guidelines for strikes, and it was very much along those kinds of issues: what is the most effective balance between being able to carry out a strike and not creating consequences that make the problem worse? And finding that balance is hard, but I think it was done. Now, that’s on paper; execution is a different matter. But that’s the kind of thing that if we can bring that level of explanation, understanding, description to operators and policymakers, then we can have a useful conversation about it. We can demonstrate with data why it’s better to do it *this* way rather than that way.

CTC: The type of terrorism the international community has focused on most in the last 20 years has obviously been jihadi terrorism, the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida and their sympathizers. But there is now concern that not only is the threat from far-right terrorism growing in some countries, but it is also becoming increasingly internationally interconnected. Under current U.N. resolutions, to what degree is the U.N. able to engage in this area? And in your view, what sort of thinking needs to be done within the United Nations so that it

is best positioned to counter and prevent far-right terrorism if international concern continues to grow in this area?

Gregorian: Great question. It’s super topical. It’s being debated right now in terms of the resolution for the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy review. We’ve been sensitive to and tracking this issue for a couple of years here. In fact, when I when I first arrived in September of 2019, it was the week before high-level week was starting and I remember predicting to Mr. [Vladimir] Voronkov [UNOCT Under-Secretary-General], “You’re going to see a lot of talk about so-called right-wing terrorism”—because you know there’s a big issue about the nomenclature—because we just had the El Paso shooting, the Dayton shooting, and so on. It turned out to be the dog that didn’t bark; no one mentioned it. I was blown away. Not even the U.S., which in the 2018 U.S. national counterterrorism strategy, had emphasized for the first time [in such a strategy document] this kind of terrorism.^k The only person who raised it with us was the Mexican foreign minister who came in to see Mr. Voronkov and said, “An act of terror was committed against our citizens in Texas.” But we had to make clear to the foreign minister that there were limits in what we could do. This gets to your issue about the mandate. The U.N. Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the majority of the Security Council resolutions that deal with counterterrorism as a single subject always refer to terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. So in a purely legal, technical sense, we can do work in this area. The challenge is that in the absence of a clear demand signal from a preponderance or the majority of Member States, what exactly we can do in that area is limited, and in the case of UNOCT specifically, we’re reliant on extra budgetary funds from donors to be able to do projects. So far, no one has come to us to say, “We want to give you some money to work on this issue.” But I’ve been working in multilateral affairs long enough to know that there’s a coalescing process that goes on, and a lot of that starts with debating, talking, scoping the problem, understanding the problem, and then it gets to the point where there’s enough of a consensus or center of gravity on something that then stuff can start happening at the U.N. level.

But we’ve been leaning forward in the saddle on all this stuff. We’ve done some work within the U.N. and the Global CT Compact Working Group on PCVE [preventing and countering violent extremism conducive to terrorism], for example; we’ve done some studies on the nature of the problem, what’s feeding it, what are its characteristics, in anticipation of being asked to do something on this. [The] Secretary-General feels pretty strongly about it. He mentioned it in a speech earlier this year,⁹ where he referred to neo-Nazi, white supremacist, and other hate groups that use terrorism.

Furthermore, it’s worth reflecting about the origins of the United Nations as a group of allies fighting Nazis; it’s like we’re kind of back in our original business, right? We ought to be doing this. We have a legal basis to do it. It would be nice to have a clear political signal to do it. I think we’ll get it. And I think we’ll get it because the countries that are most afflicted with it right now are ones that

^j Editor’s Note: According to the UNDP report, “The idea of a ‘transformative trigger’ that pushes individuals decisively from the ‘at-risk’ category to actually taking the step of joining is substantiated by the Journey to Extremism dataset. Among the voluntary group respondents, 71 percent pointed to ‘government action’, including ‘killing of a family member or friend’ or ‘arrest of a family member or friend’, as the immediate incident that prompted them to join. The fact that the conduct of state security actors can serve as an accelerator of recruitment to this extent throws the urgency of the question of how CT and wider security functions of governments in at-risk environments conduct themselves with regard to human rights and due process into stark relief.” “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment,” United Nations Development Programme, 2017, p. 80.

^k Editor’s Note: The 2018 U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism stated: “The United States has long faced a persistent security threat from domestic terrorists who are not motivated by a radical Islamist ideology but are instead motivated by other forms of violent extremism, such as racially motivated extremism, animal rights extremism, environmental extremism, sovereign citizen extremism, and militia extremism.” “National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America,” October 2018, p. 10.

are also very interested in doing something about it: Australia, United States, Canada, U.K., Germany, Norway. These countries that have been most affected by it are the ones that are also willing to do something about it and drive the conversation at the level of the U.N. I would expect a number of Islamic countries to also support it because they expressed concern in the heyday of ISIL that terrorism can't just seem to be about Islam—and U.N. documents are very clear about that, too; we refuse to accept terrorist claims to represent any religious community—and this kind of proves [Islamic countries'] point. Like “Hey, it's not just us, right? You guys have a problem, too.” So I think there's some common ground to be found there in the negotiations on this point.

If Member States can agree on the terminology for these groups and individuals, many of whose ideas are a mish-mash of far-right and far-left ideologies, then we anticipate some kind of signal from the General Assembly saying, “this is an issue we want you to look at.” And then I think donor funds will come to us because we can design programs to address it. In my view, we already have tools through these global programs that can be tweaked to address this problem—strategic communications, for example; countering the financing of terrorism; the countering terrorism travel program, the system that puts someone on a watchlist, is already in place. What would be new, I think, is an effort by whatever parts of the U.N. might be able to take it on to address the transnational aspects of these groups.

My memory of looking at the far-right terror problem set when I was in the State Department CT Bureau before coming to the U.N. was we actually back then—this is like two years ago—didn't know a lot about it because we weren't collecting on it. So people are saying, “Oh, we don't have any data on it;” we don't have data because we're not collecting any. Now it's all shifting. And we're beginning to understand, and the U.N. is beginning to have a better understanding of what's involved. For example, the role that online gaming plays in recruitment and messaging and communications by so-called far-right groups, it's massive. It's bigger than social media, right? Because the industry's bigger than film and music together put together; it's huge. So we need better understanding of that. But then we need to do something about it, and I think it's those transnational aspects, if you're thinking of the United Nations, that's probably where our comparative advantage is going to be biggest. I don't know if the Security Council will ever do something about it or if they would ever design a sanctions regime or a travel ban regime or something—it strikes me as a bit of a way off—but that could be a natural consequence of what you do once you learn more about the transnational linkages.

CTC: As you look forward, are there other areas that you're concerned about and also that UNOCT is considering as future areas of emphasis?

Gregorian: I think we've kind of covered them because I'm really thinking about now to five years from now, but there are broader trends at work in society around the world. Pressures caused by climate change and irregular migration flows that come about as a consequence of that may generate modern versions of Luddites who are concerned about technology, such as we've seen with those who attack 5G infrastructure. Could we see popular reactions to the use of facial recognition technology? Might those with grievances created by the kind of pressures I've just discussed use terrorist tactics in order to achieve their political goals? Could be. The

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fraying of the social contract in many countries around the world and the pressures on democracy to adapt and deliver for people, I think these are long-term trends that I dare not predict what the consequences might be, and they go far beyond the issue of terrorism given their potential to generate political conflict and the violence that might flow from that, but the world is constantly changing. We may find new cheaper sources of energy that don't pollute, and then it can lead to a new technological revolution and growth and lift people out of poverty.

As we talked before about technology, there could be new health technologies that cure all kinds of medical problems, and food production goes up, hunger goes down. There's a lot of good things that can also happen. But the tensions along those fault lines as they happen can lead to political violence. What I still see in Africa and what concerns me is that the trajectory of groups that use terrorism there, insurgent groups that use terrorism are on the advance, and there doesn't seem to be an effective response to them yet. We can provide certain kinds of capacity building, but the problems are strategic in Nigeria. In Mozambique, the government has to figure out how they want to tackle this problem and what kind of assistance, if any, they want in doing it. But until they do, there's going to continue to be a problem. You couple that with climate change and irregular migration and poverty, and it's a witch's brew. But they have to be tackled *ensemble*. It can't be dealt with in isolation. We had one meeting on the Sahel, for example, where I mentioned that there are over 23 strategies for solving the problems of the Sahel. OK, well, none of them seem to have worked so far, so how are we going to address that? How are we going to solve that problem? It can help by first stabilizing Libya, but these are long-term problems and we're not going to solve them instantly. And terrorism is, in that case, more of a symptom than it is a cause. So I can't really see beyond five years, but what I know for sure is terrorists will continue to adapt and evolve and exploit openings that they get. The question is whether or not we can reduce popular support for them and get them back to where they were in the '60s and '70s, usually a handful of whack jobs that are really fringe political ideologies that don't have popular support, and then they're much more easily dealt with. But right now, we still have these huge insurgencies that use terror techniques, and that requires a different kind of response.

CTC: Is there anything more you want to add that you haven't had a chance to speak to so far?

Gregorian: I would just, maybe on a closing point, say as an American who worked for the U.S. government and the military, I

hope that your American readers understand and view the United Nations as a great asset for the United States. I could go into great length about why, but it is a huge, massive return on investment—both in soft and hard power. I came here because I believe in that. I've spent the bulk of my life serving the United States, but I have always believed in the United Nations and what it can do and what it represents, and how the values of the U.N. Charter track so closely with U.S. values. **CTC**

Editor's Note: On June 30, 2021, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 75/291 for the seventh review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. According to a press release by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, the resolution “notably calls on Member States to take appropriate measures to address the rise in terrorist attacks on the basis of xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief. It further stresses the need to prevent and counter

terrorists' use of information and communications technologies and other new and emerging technologies ... [and] calls for increased attention and action to ensure that all counter-terrorism measures, including those using new technologies, comply with the rule of law and international law, including international human rights law, international humanitarian law and international refugee law.” The press release adds that “Recalling, the need to ensure that the Office of Counter-Terrorism is provided with adequate capacity and other resources for the implementation of its mandate, the General Assembly invited the Secretary-General to assess the financing of the Office, which receives 97 percent of its resources from Member State voluntary contributions, and to provide budgetary recommendations, if necessary, in 2022.” For further details, see “Seventh review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy,” press release by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, June 30, 2021.

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Pride & Prejudice: The Violent Evolution of the Proud Boys

By Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis

The Proud Boys have emerged as both a manifestation of and driver for polarization and political violence in the United States since their inception in 2016. Characterized by their use of political violence in defense of what they perceive to be Western values and society, the evolution of the Proud Boys has seemingly culminated in the central role members of the group allegedly played in the storming of the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to disrupt the certification of the 2020 presidential election. Accelerationist factions of the Proud Boys have been pushing violence within the organization, as well as networking with neo-Nazi terrorist organizations. Looking ahead, despite enhanced scrutiny from law enforcement on individual members of the group in the wake of their activity on January 6, the Proud Boys appear galvanized, participating in numerous events in recent months that have descended into violence. Emboldened by the relative impunity with which they seemingly continue to operate, the group appears to be using the flashpoint of January 6 as an opportunity to further position themselves as the tip of the spear for extreme far-right political mobilization.

On January 6, 2021, videos and images broadcast worldwide showed an individual—later identified by the U.S. government as Proud Boys member Dominic Pezzola—using a stolen U.S. Capitol Police riot shield to shatter windows of the U.S. Capitol and leading fellow rioters into the building.¹ A month later, the Canadian government proscribed the Proud Boys as a terrorist organization, citing an “escalation towards violence for this group” since 2018.² Allegations set forth by federal prosecutors identify members of the Proud Boys as having played a central role in the degeneration of the January 6 “Stop the Steal” rally into a riot intended to prevent the certification of the 2020 U.S. general election. As federal investigations continue into the various individuals, networks, and movements alleged to have been present, this article assesses the scope of the Proud Boys’ involvement in the planning, organization,

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and execution of the January 6 Capitol Hill siege and examines its history of instigating and perpetrating politically motivated street violence.

This article will begin with a brief overview of the Proud Boys and how the political context in which it emerged impacted the group’s identity formation. It will then explain how its leadership and organizational features have contributed to the radicalization of its members and their use of violence. Through an analysis of both primary and secondary sources including court records, as well as insights shared by Proud Boys expert and ethnographic researcher Samantha Kutner, the article will explore the history of political violence by some Proud Boys members, assess the role of Proud Boys in the January 6 Capitol Hill siege, and discuss the group’s evolution in the aftermath of January 6.

Who Are the Proud Boys?

Gavin McInnes, a Canadian-American extreme far-right commentator, founded the Proud Boys in New York City in 2016.³ McInnes announced the group’s formation in *Taki’s Magazine*, a self-described libertarian webzine that previously employed white nationalist Richard Spencer as its managing editor.⁴ According to McInnes, the group’s existence was necessary due to the inability for society to let men^b be proud of Western culture.^c Since that publication, the Proud Boys have continued to describe themselves as “Western chauvinists^d who refuse to apologize for creating the modern world”⁴ and claim to be primarily a libertarian-oriented fraternal drinking club. In reality, the Proud Boys serve as a

a At the time of the Proud Boys announcement article, the coiner of the term “alt-right,” Richard Spencer, was the managing editor of *Taki’s Magazine*.

b Women are not permitted to be members of the Proud Boys. However, this has not stopped women from being involved with the organization. A parallel initiative called Proud Boys Girls was established in 2016, though its dynamic with the main Proud Boys apparatus has been fraught at times. See Brandy Zadrozny and Corky Siemaszko, “The Boys and Girls of white nationalism: ‘Proud’ groups labeled ‘extremist’ in newly revealed FBI files,” *NBC News*, November 20, 2018, and Alexander Reid Ross, “Proud Boys Are at War With Their Female Extremist Wing,” *Daily Beast*, December 30, 2020.

c The name of the group comes from the song “Proud of Your Boy” from the Broadway stage production of *Aladdin*. EJ Dickson, “The Rise and Fall of the Proud Boys,” *Rolling Stone*, June 15, 2021.

d Western Chauvinism is defined by the perception that ‘Western European culture’ is superior.

radicalization to violence vector that seeks to ‘red pill’^e recruits and sympathizers from mainstream conservatism. The group’s narratives amplify latent anti-Marxist and anti-communist sentiment in certain ideographs of American patriotism, and distorts those sentiments by mixing in misogynistic, fascistic, and ethno-nationalist worldviews.⁵ The group has long held a “permeable barrier”^f with white supremacist groups like Identity Evropa^g and the Rise Above Movement,^h as well as neo-Nazi accelerationist terror groups like Atomwaffen Division and the Base, fighting alongside them at protests and sharing members.⁶

The political climate in which the Proud Boys was forged has played a crucial role in its outgroup formation and adoption of

violent tactics as a solution to these motivating topics.¹ Since its formation in 2016, the Proud Boys have acted as a physical wedge for societal polarization in America, engaging in politically motivated street fighting to purportedly defend Western society from forces the group views as degenerate and threatening Western values, such as Islam and immigration into the West.⁷ Doggedly focused on opposing what the group perceives as far-left movements, the Proud Boys have regularly stood in opposition to immigration, feminism, social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), LGBTQ+ movements, and most notoriously anti-fascist (herein referred to as antifa) mobilization.^j Proud Boys and their leadership have vilified each of these spaces as “cultural Marxism” or communism, and regularly leverage conspiracy theories that view Democrats and liberals as evil and corrupt.⁸ Members of the group have engaged in targeted acts of violence, predominantly against left-wing protesters and protest movements and Democrat-heavy municipalities like Portland, Oregon.^k Strategically, these targets represent symbolic and physical manifestations of the existential threats purportedly facing Western culture. Practically, these actions provide a visceral mechanism for radicalization to violence that tie the group’s successes and survival to the diminishment of its adversaries via hostile actions.⁹

True to their overt championing of ‘traditional’ Western society and ‘conservative’ values, the Proud Boys are deeply supportive of former President Trump and his Make America Great Again (MAGA) political agenda, routinely wearing red MAGA hats and carrying Trump flags in their street-level activities.¹⁰ The group was heavily galvanized by President Trump’s stated desire to label

e Proud Boy members are frequently the target of intentional efforts to “red pill” (a process of generating an awakening within the targeted subject about a fundamentally unjust or broken system of which they are an alleged victim). According to Samantha Kutner, an expert on the Proud Boys who has conducted extensive ethnographic research and interviews with members of the Proud Boys organization, “members are repeatedly exposed to memes, videos, podcasts, and other content that systematically desensitizes them to targeted violence.” Additionally, Kutner has defined the term ‘taking the red pill’ in context of the group’s radicalization efforts as men opening their eyes to the perceived reality of male subjugation by women. See Samantha Kutner, “Swiping Right: The Allure of Hyper Masculinity and Cryptofascism for Men Who Join the Proud Boys,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2020.

f Individual members of the Proud Boys have regularly held membership or transitioned to the Proud Boys en route to joining groups like Atomwaffen Division and The Base. Additionally, the Proud Boys have regularly co-attended and co-organized events with explicitly white supremacist and accelerationist groups like the Rise Above Movement. Combined, these factors create a permeable barrier between the Proud Boys and the broader extreme far-right that is explicitly racist. See Ben Makuch and Mack Lamoureux, “A Proud Boys Lawyer Wanted to Be a Nazi Terrorist,” *Vice*, December 8, 2020; Ben Makuch and Mack Lamoureux, “For Some, Joining the Proud Boys Was a Stop on the Way to Neo-Nazi Terror,” *Vice*, November 18, 2020; Hannah Allam and Razzan Nakhlawi, “Black, Brown and extremist: Across the far-right spectrum, people of color play a more visible role,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 2021.

g Identity Evropa is a white supremacist organization founded in 2016 that styles itself after the Identitarian aesthetic, which is a far-right pan-European belief system that holds white European identity is superior. The group played a central role in organizing the Unite the Right rally in 2017. See “Identity Evropa/American Identity Movement,” Southern Poverty Law Center.

h The Rise Above Movement (RAM) is a neo-Nazi organization dedicated to fighting political enemies in the streets. Four members of the group were prosecuted federally for their roles in instigating riots at the so-called “Battle of Berkeley” (a string of “alt-right” demonstrations that degraded into riots with counter-protestors) throughout 2017. Leader Robert Rundo is currently wanted by the FBI and is allegedly in hiding in Eastern Europe with neo-Nazi organizations. See “Rise Above Movement,” Southern Poverty Law Center.

i McInnes has long held professional relationships with figures and publications that are situated solidly within the American extreme-right political community, including figures such as Richard Spencer who embrace openly racist and xenophobic beliefs that align with European Identitarian views. The Proud Boys act as a radicalization pathway for more mainstream political organizing into harder white supremacist and white nationalist spaces. For example, McInnes himself has echoed conspiracy theories and racist narratives related to so-called “white genocide” (a narrative that motivated Charleston church shooter Dylann Roof) and regularly uses derogatory language championed by white supremacists and misogynists in the extreme far-right. See “Do You Want Bigots, Gavin? Because This Is How You Get Bigots,” Southern Poverty Law Center, August 10, 2017, and Jordan Green, “‘The mask slips’: Proud Boys joining white supremacists in ‘White Lives Matter’ rallies across the US,” *Raw Story*, March 31, 2021.

j The authors recognize that not all anti-fascist mobilization and political campaigns are associated with the antifa movement. However, in the context of this article, they refer to this mobilization space as antifa for two main reasons: 1) anti-fascist activists frequently organize counter-protest activities in localities targeted by Proud Boys violence under individual antifa chapters, which have acted as the primary opposition to the Proud Boys (e.g., Rose City Antifa in Portland, Oregon); and 2) the Proud Boys heuristically refer to this opposition as “antifa,” which deeply informs its outgroup framing of political opposition to its presence.

k The threat of violence stemming from Proud Boys’ demonstrations and antagonism toward counter-demonstrators has led to large-scale law enforcement mobilization ahead of events in Portland and other cities. In September 2020, ahead of the so-called ‘End Domestic Terrorism’ demonstration planned by the Proud Boys to encourage designating antifa as a domestic terrorist entity, Oregon Governor Kate Brown declared a state of emergency for the city of Portland over fears of violence stemming from Proud Boys and white supremacists. Andrew Hay, “Oregon governor ‘incredibly worried’ about violence at Proud Boys rally,” *Reuters*, September 25, 2020.

antifa as a domestic terror organization and his “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by” comments during the first presidential debate before the 2020 general election, with many members viewing it as an endorsement by the president of their actions and beliefs.¹¹ Throughout its existence, the Proud Boys have latched onto conservative movement narratives, iconography, and campaigns, corrupting them to their own purposes and using them to recruit and mainstream their radical views. For years, the organization heavily promoted the “Blue Lives Matter” narrative and movement, framing itself as pro-police and as standing side-by-side against their perceived shared adversary (antifa and Marxism) only to turn on police just before the January 6 rally in Washington, D.C., stating “the police are starting to become a problem,” even though “we’ve had their back for years.”¹²

Despite assertions to the contrary by McInnes, the group’s violence and its views are inextricably linked with emergence of the so-called alt-right movement¹ and so-called ‘men’s rights’^m narratives that gained notoriety leading into the 2016 election cycle. In a similar way to the European Identitarian movement, which was deeply influenced by the 2015 immigration crisis, American “alt-right” views on immigration, socialism, and other culturally divisive topics deeply informed the Proud Boys’ hyper-masculine and xenophobic aesthetic, as well as its intrinsic belief in the utility of violence as a means to a political end. To that end, the so-called alt-right movement served as a mechanism to radicalize and organize within a new generation of men, as well as a convenient obfuscation of the Proud Boys’ deeper connections to extreme far-right organizing. This dynamic is best illustrated by the presence of Proud Boys members at numerous “alt-right” organized protests and violent street clashes throughout 2017, which was capped off

by the Unite the Right event in August of that year.ⁿ The event was organized in large part by Jason Kessler, a former member of the Proud Boys, and a leader of the so-called alt-right movement.¹³ After the murder of Heather Heyer at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, the Proud Boys leadership attempted to publicly distance the group from the “alt-right” movement and made concerted efforts to diminish the perception of the group as racist.¹⁴ Yet, despite the distancing efforts from Charlottesville’s fallout and the alt-right label, members and chapters continued to engage in street-level provocations, politically motivated violence against leftist demonstrators, and persisted in utilizing narratives that heavily overlap with “alt-right” principles and views.¹⁵

Like the “alt-right,” the Boogaloo movement, and other contemporary extreme far-right hate movements born of the internet’s troll factories and echo chambers, social media has played a crucial role in the organizing and evolution of the Proud Boys brand.¹⁶ The Proud Boys have leveraged evolutions in digital culture to generate iconography and narratives, often through memes, that can have multiple meanings and manifest offline in the form of apparel, flags, and more.^o Online, the group’s racist, fascist, and misogynistic beliefs are often hidden behind a veneer of irony and trolling in its larger forums and social media groups.¹⁷ This has allowed the group latitude in their attempts to reframe negative reporting and coverage of their activities as biased expressions of a corrupt media and the product of a leftist agenda seeking to undermine them as patriots.¹⁸

l The alt-right was defined by white nationalist Richard Spencer, who coined the term, as “an ideology around identity, European identity.” In the context of the Proud Boys, the alt-right presented a rebranding opportunity for pre-existing extreme far-right beliefs (e.g., white supremacy, chauvinism, anti-Communism, and more) that coincided with an upswell of right-wing populist demagoguery associated with the 2016 presidential election. The Southern Poverty Law Center defines the alt-right as “a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization.” Benjamin Wallace-Wells, “Is the Alt-Right for Real?” *New Yorker*, May 5, 2016; “Alt-Right,” Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021.

m According to Samantha Kutner, “Proud Boys hide in plain sight by reframing their extremism as an assertion of their masculinity. The violence they advocate for, the structural violence they support through policies and protests, and the way they treat other members highlights the culture of violence that has been with the group since its inception.” The “men’s rights movement,” from which the Proud Boys couches its version of masculinity, is a wide-ranging political movement that predominantly focuses on perceived discrimination against males, with feminism typically blamed. Authors interview, Samantha Kutner, June 2021. For more on the “men’s rights movement,” see Alex DiBranco, “Male Supremacist Terrorism as a Rising Threat,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, February 10, 2020, and “Male Supremacy,” Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020.

n Many individuals who attended and engaged in violence at the Unite the Right rally held associations with or membership in violent extremist organizations. Individuals with reported links to Atomwaffen Division, the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), and Rise Above Movement (RAM) were also present and reported to have played central roles in the violence that day. The Russian Imperial Movement has been designated by the United States as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity, while Atomwaffen Division was proscribed as a terrorist organization by the British and Canadian governments. In the aftermath of the Unite the Right rally, RAM was significantly affected by federal law enforcement investigations for its political violence. See “Two Years Ago, They Marched in Charlottesville. Where Are They Now?” Anti-Defamation League, August 8, 2019; Glenn Kessler, “The ‘very fine people’ at Charlottesville: Who were they?” *Washington Post*, May 8, 2020; A.C. Thompson, Ali Winston, and Jake Hanrahan, “Ranks of Notorious Hate Group Include Active-Duty Military,” *ProPublica*, May 3, 2018; Hayley Evans, “All You Need to Know About the U.K. Proscribing the Neo-Nazi Group Atomwaffen Division,” *Lawfare*, May 17, 2021; “Riot Charges reinstated against California white supremacist,” *Associated Press*, March 4, 2021; A.C. Thompson, *ProPublica*, Ali Winston, and Darwin BondGraham, “Racist, Violent, Unpunished: A White Hate Group’s Campaign of Menace,” *ProPublica*, October 19, 2017; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Samuel Hodgson, and Colin P. Clarke, “The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and its Links to the Transnational White Supremacist Extremist Movement,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, April 24, 2020; Elizabeth Grimm Arsenault and Joseph Stabile, “Confronting Russia’s Role in Transnational White Supremacist Extremism,” *Just Security*, February 6, 2020; Jon Lewis and Mary McCord, “The State Department Should Designate the Russian Imperial Movement as a Foreign Terrorist Organization,” *Lawfare*, April 14, 2020.

o Notably, the Proud Boys community and its sympathizers range far beyond its low-level initiates. According to Samantha Kutner, engagement with the group “ranges from passive online consumption to overt offline action.” See Kutner, “Swiping Right.” See also Alex Newhouse, Adel Arletta, and Leela McClintock, “Proud Boys Amplify Anti-Vax and Coronavirus Disinformation Following Support for Anti-Quarantine Protests,” *Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism*, May 1, 2020, and Tom Dreisbach, “How Extremists Weaponize Irony to Spread Hate,” *NPR’s All Things Considered*, April 26, 2021.

Following their ban from mainstream social media sites—Facebook, Instagram,¹⁹ and Twitter²⁰—the Proud Boys embraced Telegram and alternative platforms such as Gab and Parler. On Telegram, the group's more explicitly white supremacist and accelerationist factions increasingly took center stage.²⁰ In some Telegram channels, the group's deep-seated hate mongering, racism, and fascist proclivities are on full display with memes and references frequently overlapping with content found in deeper neo-Nazi accelerationist communities.⁴ In recent years, the QAnon movement and other conspiracy theories have increased influence in the Proud Boys' ideological pantheon, as evidenced by the Proud Boys' central role in promoting and aiding the "Stop the Steal" campaign, which culminated in the January 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol.⁷

Leadership

The leadership of the Proud Boys has been instrumental in driving the group's embrace of political violence. Despite explicit calls for violence as a tool to push a political agenda, the group's leadership, particularly at the national level (sometimes referred to as the Elders Council), has stopped short of embracing terrorism.²¹ Instead, national leadership has assumed a loose command and control position for overseeing demonstrations and mobilization against perceived enemies, while simultaneously making veiled overtures to, and allowing dual membership in, explicitly violent

terrorist groups such as the Atomwaffen Division.⁵

This tone was set by Gavin McInnes, who spent the first two years of the Proud Boys' existence as its chairman, overseeing the initial formulation of the group's hyper political and violent engagement tactics within society. McInnes resigned from the role in 2018 to distance himself from the group in the face of growing legal challenges stemming from a violent assault conducted by Proud Boys members in Manhattan in October 2018.¹ McInnes was succeeded by Enrique Tarrío, the current chairman of the organization. Tarrío, a Cuban-American from Miami, Florida, first engaged with the group in 2017 and attended the Unite the Right rally.²² He quickly rose to become the Miami chapter leader. Tarrío's reign as chairman has seen the group take on a larger role within the extreme far-right at the national level, as well as an overt pro-Trump stance.¹¹ Tarrío has used his ethnicity, as well as other non-white members' ethnicities, as supposed evidence that the Proud Boys are not white supremacists, an approach that has helped the group push back against critiques of its racism and hew to the party line of being a "group of guys that hang out and drink beer together and just have a good time."²³ Yet, Tarrío has been present at many Proud Boys rallies and has himself engaged in antagonistic and alleged unlawful behavior. Two days before the January 6 Capitol Hill

p Prior to the second Unite the Right rally, Twitter suspended the Proud Boys' primary account, Gavin McInnes' account, seven other regional chapters' accounts, and the accounts for the Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights, the groups' violent paramilitary offshoot. According to Twitter, the takedowns were associated with violating policies related to violent extremist groups. Ryan Mac and Blake Montgomery, "Twitter Suspended Proud Boys' And Founder Gavin McInnes' Accounts Ahead Of The 'Unite The Right' Rally," Buzzfeed News, August 11, 2018.

q The Proud Boys: Uncensored Telegram channel, featuring a profile picture of the same Italian fascist iconography (the Roman Legion eagle and fasces surrounded by laurel wreath) found on the 6MWE shirt (6MWE refers to the phrase 'Six Million Wasn't Enough'—used frequently by neo-Nazis claiming that not enough Jewish people died in the Holocaust) is one of the most brazen and publicly reported examples of explicit accelerationist and fascist activity related to the Proud Boys. The channel, among the most extreme associated with the group and deeply associated with pushing accelerationist narratives decrying the viability of electoral politics, has previously been the center of attention over alleged internal disputes within the Proud Boys. For example, the channel's administrator, Kyle Chapman, used the forum to launch an ill-fated coup for the leadership of the organization. Additionally, the channel publicly cheered on the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. See Marissa J. Lang, "As fractures emerge among Proud Boys, experts warn of a shift toward extremist violence," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2021, and "Extremists Engage in Political Violence During Pro-Trump Rallies," Anti-Defamation League, January 6, 2021.

r Some individuals arrested and charged for their roles in the events of January 6 have since claimed in court that they were only acting on orders of President Trump and now feel betrayed by his failure to support their actions that day. See, for example, Sebastian Murdock, "Proud Boys Leader Charged In Capitol Attack Feels Betrayed By Trump: 'You Left Us,'" *Huffington Post*, May 14, 2021; Sheera Frenkel and Alan Feuer, "'A Total Failure': The Proud Boys Now Mock Trump," *New York Times*, January 20, 2021; *USA v. Ethan Nordean*, "Defendant Nordean's Reply in Support of Motion to Compel the Production of Evidence and For a Bill of Particulars, Exhibit 1," District of Columbia, 2021.

s The Proud Boys leadership has often taken an approach of at first denying allegations made against members accused of acts of violence, blatant white supremacy, or ties to groups like Atomwaffen, and then distancing itself from these individuals. Frequently, despite copious evidence to the contrary, Proud Boys leaders claim that such individuals are not 'true' members or had already been expelled from the group. One such case related to acts of violence is that of Robert Alan Swinney, who was arrested and indicted "for pointing a firearm and firing a paintball gun at anti-racism protesters in Portland." Proud Boys leaders and other members claimed Swinney was not associated with the group, but Swinney had attained at least the third rank of membership and likely the fourth, given his routine presence at and role in organizing violent clashes between Proud Boys and leftists at demonstrations. "Proud Boys member, who pointed gun, arrested in Portland," Reuters, September 30, 2020.

t According to McInnes, his departure from leadership was meant to illustrate the Proud Boys were not a gang (despite previous descriptions of the group as such by McInnes on the Joe Rogan podcast). See "Gavin McInnes describes proud boys to Joe Rogan," video on YouTube, October 16, 2018. Ultimately, two members of the Proud Boys, Maxwell Hare and John Kinsman, were convicted of attempted gang assault, attempted assault, and riot charges related to the so-called Metropolitan Republican Club incident in October 2018 in Manhattan where a group of Proud Boys violently beat four antifa counter-protestors. Hare and Kinsman were each sentenced to four years in prison for their roles in the assault. The assault followed an event where Gavin McInnes re-enacted the televised 1960 political assassination of the Japanese socialist party leader by a Japanese ultra-nationalist. "Proud Boys Convicted Of Attempted Assault Following NYC Street Brawl With Antifa Activists," CBS New York, August 19, 2019; Theo Wayt, "Proud Boys members sentenced to four years in prison for violent clash with antifa," NBC News, October 22, 2019; "Proud Boys," Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021; Carol Schaeffer, "Inside the Proud Boy Event That Sparked Violence Outside of Uptown GOP Club," *Bedford Bowery*, October 13, 2018; Colin Moynihan, "Far-Right Proud Boys' Founder Called 'Hatemonger,'" *New York Times*, August 14, 2019.

u Tarrío has been extremely vocal of his support for President Trump and the MAGA movement. He has served as the chief of staff and Florida state director of Latinos for Trump and has deep ties to long-time Republican operative Roger Stone, President Trump's one-time political advisor. See Tim Elfrink, "The chairman of the far-right Proud Boys sat behind Trump at his latest speech," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2019, and Will Carless, "How a Trump booster group helped the head of extremist Proud Boys gain access to the White House," *USA Today*, December 19, 2020.

siege, Tarrío was arrested in Washington, D.C., on charges related to his own admission of responsibility for destruction of property stemming from the burning of a local church's Black Lives Matter banner during the December 12, 2020, Proud Boys demonstrations in Washington, D.C.^v Reports that surfaced after his arrest that he was a "prolific" informant for local and federal law enforcement may complicate his ability to continue to lead the group.²⁴ Recent reports suggest that Tarrío plans to step down as national chairman in September, in order to "focus on his chapter in Florida."²⁵

Ethan Nordean and Joseph Biggs, both under criminal investigation related to January 6, are illustrative of two distinct leadership features in the Proud Boys. Nordean, aka Rufio Panman, is from Washington state and gained prominence within the Proud Boys due to a video depicting him "fending off two baton blows from a masked counter-protester. He then flattened his assailant."²⁶ The incident earned Nordean the accolade of "Proud Boy of the Week" in the Proud Boys magazine and catapulted his persona into the forefront of Proud Boys across the nation. In an interview with conspiracy website Infowars' Alex Jones after the incident, Nordean responded to a question about the incident saying, "Like Gavin McInnes says, violence isn't great, but justified violence is amazing."²⁷ Nordean's ascent to national prominence and eventually to the inner circle of leadership on January 6, 2021 (detailed later in the article), highlights how regional chapters effectively serve as proving grounds for higher leadership and how violence plays a key role in what motivates the Proud Boys.

Joseph Biggs, who claims he spent time in the U.S. Army, has led numerous marches and organized events for the Proud Boys across the country.²⁸ Biggs' alleged military background is not atypical for the Proud Boys, and he has used it to shape the group's discipline on the ground at demonstrations and clashes. Biggs has consistently used war-like references when speaking of engaging counter-protestors and preparing for demonstrations he has helped organize:

When we set out to do an event, we go, OK, what is our main objective? That's the first thing we discuss. We take three months to plan an event. It's like, you're literally planning to go into a combat zone. It's not just like, "Hey man, we're going

to D.C., we're going to Portland." It's like, "Alright, we're going to Portland. I need satellite imagery. I need to talk to people on the ground. I need them to scout out these alleyways ... when we have an escape route, we have four or five ways in and out, in case police close things off or whatever."²⁹

Biggs' leadership position and the calculated approach he demonstrates highlights how intentional and carefully Proud Boys activity is planned in advance.

Organizational Features

Organizational Structure

Organizationally, the Proud Boys have a national apparatus with local chapters that operate on a semi-autonomous level. The relationship between the national leadership and local chapters is dynamic and diffuse, which has provided latitude to members in determining the activities of their local factions, as well as facilitated the creation of offshoot or splinter groups. In recent years, the level of involvement from national leadership into local chapters' jurisdictions has often been dependent on the location and focal point of a given activity or campaign. As the group has expanded, oversight into chapter creation was minimal, leading to a wide variance in chapter characteristics that was affected by geography, underlying cultural trends of the region or locale, and the local pool of recruits.^w Some chapters and members, particularly on the West Coast, are far more involved with traveling to engage in street brawls or staging armed political protests.^x Others are more confined geographically, limiting their activities to local endeavors and drinking parties.³⁰

Throughout the history of the Proud Boys, three geographic regions have held primacy in the groups' organizational activities. The chapters in the Pacific Northwest, Miami, and New York have been the most actively involved in street fighting (particularly in Portland, Oregon) and getting involved in political activism (particularly the Miami chapter due to Enrique Tarrío's connections

v Enrique Tarrío publicly admitted responsibility (though he has pleaded not guilty and continues to defend himself in the ongoing civil lawsuit brought against Proud Boys L.L.C. and Tarrío personally), both on the social media platform Parler and a podcast, for the burning of the banner. Additionally, at the time of his arrest, he was found in possession of two Proud Boys-branded, high-capacity firearm magazines, which are prohibited under D.C. law with possession carrying the weight of felony charges. Tarrío claims he was simply carrying them to give to another individual who had legally purchased the magazines and planned to take possession of the magazines when the two met prior to the January 6 "Stop the Steal" rally. Additionally, the FBI stated that Tarrío's January 4, 2021, arrest was in part an attempt to preempt possible violence ahead of the Capitol insurrection: "We developed some intelligence that a number of individuals were planning to travel to the D.C. area with intentions to cause violence. We immediately shared that information and action was taken, as demonstrated by the arrest of Enrique Tarrío by the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia ... Other individuals were identified in other parts of the country and their travel subsequently disrupted." See Christina Carrega, Evan Perez, and Paul LeBlanc, "Proud Boys leader arrested for allegedly burning Black Lives Matter banner at DC church," CNN, January 5, 2021; "FBI Assistant Director in Charge Steven M. D'Antuono's Remarks at Press Briefing Regarding Violence at U.S. Capitol," Office of Public Affairs FBI Washington Field Office, January 12, 2021; and Greg Walters, "Proud Boys Leader Enrique Tarrío Is Representing Himself in Court," Vice, May 4, 2021.

w This structure also contributed to a growth in the Proud Boys' international presence, with like-minded individuals in Canada and Australia formally establishing their own chapters and adopting the group's initiation rituals and iconographic style. Michael McGowan, "Australian Proud Boys sought combat-trained supporters to 'arrest' police at Covid lockdown protests," *Guardian*, February 15, 2021.

x Since its inception, Proud Boys members have traveled nationally to engage in activism and attend events. West Coast chapters often stage events and appearances in Portland and Salem, Oregon, with members traveling in from around the region to partake. See Sergio Olmos, "Proud Boys clash with anti-fascists in Salem," Oregon Public Broadcasting, March 28, 2021; Tess Owen, "The Giant Proud Boy Rally That Wasn't," *Vice*, September 27, 2020; and "Patriot Prayer, Proud Boys Organizing Potentially Combustible Portland Event," Anti-Defamation League, August 2, 2018.

to Roger Stone^y and failed attempts to run for Congress). Others, like the Michigan chapter, have taken on the characteristics of the far-right extremists who have historically operated in the local area, styling themselves more like a militia and engaging in activity long associated with militia-type activism.³¹ Like the Boogaloo movement, what an individual or local clique brings to the Proud Boys is often just as important as what the movement provides to the individual.

The minimal oversight of expansion and individual chapter autonomy has contributed to varying degrees of radicalization and commitment to violence within the ranks of broader group membership.³² Additionally, rank-and-file members frequently display symbols and espouse rhetoric that is more extreme than those of the leadership. Proud Boys members frequently display racist and fascist iconography on apparel (e.g., “Right-Wing Death Squad”^z images, “6 million was not enough,” swastikas, and more), and several members and chapters have openly shown affinity for overt fascist organizations.

Initiation and Climbing Levels

To gain membership and rank in the Proud Boys, a man must perform four rituals from a hierarchical initiatic system that functionally serves to promote adherence to the group’s identity and is central to the radicalization to violence within the group.³³ First, to become an initiate of the group, an individual must publicly declare his desire to be a Proud Boy and Western chauvinist, often through repeating a phrase like “I’m a Proud Boy. I’m a Western chauvinist. I refuse to apologize for creating the modern world.”³⁴

y In 2018, a video surfaced of Roger Stone conducting the first-degree level ritual for Proud Boys’ membership wherein he recited the following: “Hi, I’m Roger Stone. I’m a Western chauvinist. I refuse to apologize for creating the modern world.” Despite his denial of the video and its significance, Stone and the Tarrío-led Proud Boys have a long history, with Stone using the group as security at times and the group rallying behind Stone following his arrest related to lying to the Mueller investigation about Wikileaks and Russian interference in the 2016 election. Proud Boys members coined the phrase “Roger Stone did nothing wrong.” See Kelly Weill and Will Sommer, “Republicans Are Adopting the Proud Boys,” *Daily Beast*, October 17, 2018, and Kelly Weill, “How the Proud Boys Became Roger Stone’s Personal Army,” *Daily Beast*, January 29, 2019. For more on the relationship between Proud Boys and Republican Party officials, see Tess Owen, “Nevada’s GOP Has a Proud Boy Problem,” *Vice*, May 24, 2021; Brendan O’Connor, “Trump’s useful thugs: how the Republican party offered a home to the Proud Boys,” *Guardian*, January 21, 2021; and Jeffrey Cook, “GOP candidate’s former campaign chief: Thank God for Proud Boys,” *ABC News*, October 15, 2020. In 2020, Tarrío was a Republican candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in the 27th Congressional District of Florida. Ultimately, Tarrío withdrew from the race prior to the primary election. See “Enrique Tarrío,” ballotpedia.org.

z “Right Wing Death Squad” is a meme allusion to incidents of extrajudicial executions of political opponents by the Chilean fascist regime of Augusto Pinochet. Dissidents, particularly leftists, socialists, and supporters of the previous government, were dropped to their death from helicopters by Pinochet’s regime. Today, the reference often features an image of a helicopter and is often accompanied by slogans such as “Right Wing Death Squad,” “Free Helicopter Rides,” and other iterations. See Christopher Ketcham, “What the Far-Right Fascination with Pinochet’s Death Squads Should Tell Us,” *Intercept*, February 4, 2021. “6 million was not enough” is an anti-Semitic reference to the Holocaust that suggests more Jewish people should have been murdered by the Nazi regime. Until late 2020, shirts adorned with the slogan’s shorthand reference (6MWE) and Italian fascist iconography (the Roman Legion eagle and fasces surrounded by laurel wreath) were readily available on Amazon’s marketplace. See Ewan Palmer, “Neo-Nazi Shirts Worn by Proud Boys Supporters Sold on Amazon,” *Newsweek*, December 16, 2020.

The explicit purpose of this ritual is to instill pride in both the Proud Boys and Western culture. To ascend to the second rank, an initiate must submit to a ritualistic assault-by-punching from at least five members. The punching only ends once the initiate has named five breakfast cereals.^{aa} Once this ritual is complete, an initiate can become an official member. Founder Gavin McInnes made clear that the purpose of this ritual is to weed out unsuitable initiates and mentally harden members for future fights.^{ab} To get to the third rank, a man in good standing (e.g., having remained committed to the first two rank requirements) must tattoo “Proud Boy” on their body.^{ac} The fourth and final rank is achieved when a member has engaged in intentional violence on behalf of the Proud Boys.^{ad}

The initiation ritual illustrates how political violence is an inherent characteristic of the Proud Boys identity, as every step of the way is steeped in socio-political world views in need of physical defense against degenerate forces. In a Newsmax appearance, Gavin McInnes stated bluntly, “And I cannot recommend violence enough. It is a really effective way to solve problems.”³⁵ The initiation also serves as a pro-social radicalization mechanism that justifies an increasing commitment, willingness, and necessity to both the Proud Boys as an adopted identity and the use of violence against the groups’ adversaries. With each ascendance to the next rank, expectations among peers grow for increased dedication to the Proud Boys as a defining identity. Ultimately, each phase is designed to diminish an individual’s natural empathy toward others, while simultaneously increasing the belief that violence is the only true solution to effecting political change.³⁶

Size

It is not clear how many men are members of the Proud Boys or how many have climbed to the highest ranks. Some researchers have estimated between 3,000-8,000 members in the United States, while the Proud Boys leadership has previously suggested upwards of 22,000 globally, with Tarrío claiming that the aftermath of then President Trump’s election loss and the subsequent embrace of the “Stop the Steal” narrative by the mainstream right “was the moment we really united everybody under one banner.” Tarrío asserted that the Proud Boys recruited over 20,000 new members

aa Videos of initiations to the first and second ranks are frequently conducted at Proud Boys’ protests and posted to social media. Individuals have been inducted into the first rank via highly performative recitations of the oath led by high-ranking Proud Boys such as Enrique Tarrío.

ab A second component of the ritual to accede to the second rank is the commitment to abstinence from masturbation. According to McInnes, such abstinence spiritually reinvigorates men and encourages what McInnes viewed as more traditional male behavior. Will Sommer, “New Proud Boys Rules: Less Fighting, Less Wanking,” *Daily Beast*, November 27, 2018; “White Haze,” transcript, *This American Life* podcast episode 626, September 22, 2017; Joy Pullmann, “The Proud Boys Are What Happens When Boys In A Sexual Wasteland Try To Become Men,” *Federalist*, October 6, 2017.

ac As noted by the Anti-Defamation League, “Common variations are ‘Proud Boy,’ ‘POYB’ (acronym for Proud of Your Boy) and ‘Uhuru,’ a Swahili word for ‘freedom’ that the Proud Boys have appropriated as their battle cry.” See “Proud Boys,” *Anti-Defamation League*, 2021.

ad At times, McInnes has defended the actions necessary to attain the highest rank as a purely defensive activity. “Conspiracy Charges Bring Proud Boys’ History Of Violence Into Spotlight,” *NPR*, April 9, 2021.

in the time period between November 2020 and January 2021.^{ae} Despite the variance in membership estimations, the group's hard-core members have shown a willingness and capability to punch above their weight by traveling around the United States to maximize perceptions of the group's operational reach. It is also unclear just how many individuals sympathize with the Proud Boys, but do not hold formal membership. However, as is the case with other extremist movements, there is a risk in overemphasizing the importance of known, formal membership at the expense of recognizing the ability of the Proud Boys (and the narratives the underpin the group) to inspire mobilization and incite violence in the name of their causes.

The Violent Road to January 6

The Proud Boys may be best known for their street-level activities that border on gang-like or paramilitary mobilization.^{af} Adorned in their customary coopted black and yellow Fred Perry shirts^{ag} and often shouting "uhuru" (a Swahili word for freedom) in unison, the group is a frequent staple at right-wing political events and protests that center on hot-button political topics (e.g., freedom of speech on campuses, social media content moderation, immigration, and more). From 2016 to early 2021, Khalifa Ilher Research Fellow Samantha Kutner has verified that the Proud Boys have engaged in approximately 135 incidents where the group targeted, co-attended, or organized offline activity.^{ah} The group's repertoire is largely comprised of violent acts of antagonism toward political opponents, though it has also acted as "security" for conservative political figures and rallies, and some members launched ill-fated political campaigns.³⁷ Since its emergence in 2016, the Proud Boys group has regularly deployed as counter-protestors and agitators at demonstrations.^{ai}

The goals of their engagement style appear to be designed to draw media attention, frame media perception, generate recruitment, manifest narratives, initiate members into higher ranks, and shift what is palatable within American political discourse. And, according to Kutner, their offline tactics also exhibit "a pattern of

staging multiple rallies in different cities that may be designed to maintain the illusion of larger presence."³⁸ The Proud Boys' tactical engagements resemble hooligan and far-right street movements in the United Kingdom and Europe, which have relied on physical intimidation and brawling to assert their political agendas. These tactics have made the Proud Boys a frequent destination for accelerationists as they share doctrinal goals of generating friction within society that can lead to widespread violence.

Early domestic offline activity related to the Proud Boys included incursions and patrols into what the group claimed to be sharia zones, such as the 2017 'March Against Sharia' event that featured Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, and Soldiers of Odin.³⁹ ^{aj} The persistent offline mobilization of Proud Boys members continued unabated, with violent clashes occurring in such places as Berkeley, California; Portland, Oregon; New York City; and Washington, D.C.⁴⁰

For a period of time, a key vehicle for the Proud Boys' violence and links to extreme-right terrorist groups was its paramilitary, accelerationist offshoot the Fraternal Order of the Alt-Knights (FOAK), which allegedly counted Enrique Tarrío among its ranks. In April 2017, Gavin McInnes announced the formation of the FOAK via Twitter, calling the new group the "military division of the Proud Boys" and said it would be headed by Proud Boys member Kyle "Based Stickman" Chapman.⁴¹ FOAK acted as a pathway to the most extreme elements of the far-right, with members of the FOAK overlapping in groups like the Vinlanders Social Club, the Wotan network, as well as partnering with neo-Nazi accelerationists at demonstrations such as the Unite the Right rally.⁴¹ For example, the FOAK's second-in-command, Augustus Sol Invictus, is a self-

ae Membership is difficult to measure as membership can be fluid, fleeting, and unreported. The autonomy enjoyed by local chapters, efforts to intentionally manipulate the media, and desires to appear larger and more intimidating than the group actually is, make it challenging for researchers to track membership. Joshua Kaplan and Joaquin Sapient, "New Details Suggest Senior Trump Aides Knew Jan. 6 Rally Could Get Chaotic," ProPublica, June 25, 2021; Rachel E. Greenspan and Haven Orecchio-Egresitz, "The Cuban-American leader of the Proud Boys has said the group isn't explicitly for white supremacists, but a previously ousted underling tried to stage an unhinged, anti-Semitic, racist coup," Insider, November 12, 2020; Kutner, "Swiping Right."

af Former white supremacist and neo-Nazi skinhead Christian Picciolini has stated that this style of offline engagement by the Proud Boys most closely resembles that of the Skinhead movement he once led. See Dreisbach, "Conspiracy Charges Bring Proud Boys' History of Violence into Spotlight."

ag In September 2020, British clothing manufacturer Fred Perry declared a halt to sales of their "Black/Yellow/Yellow twin tipped shirt" until such time as that version was no longer associated with the Proud Boys organization. "Proud Boys Statement," Fred Perry, September 24, 2020.

ah This is an approximation as verification for incidents in 2021 are still undergoing review by Samantha Kutner and the Khalifa Ilher Institute. For more details and methodology, see "Hate Map," The Khalifa Ilher Institute, 2021. Authors interview, Samantha Kutner, June 2021.

ai Street violence reinforces the lessons of the initiation rituals at the individual level.

aj This activity mirrored the actions of similar xenophobic and ethno-nationalist street movements that emerged in the mid-2010s. For more on the continued conspiracy-driven efforts related to allegations of 'Sharia' zones in the United States, see "'No-Go Zones': The Myth That Just Won't Quit," Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015; Jordan Green, "Far-Right Groups Converge on Raleigh to Protest Sharia Law, Are Outnumbered," *IndyWeek*, June 14, 2017.

ak Kyle Chapman gained internet notoriety, and the attention of Gavin McInnes, over his use of a stick to beat counter protesters during a clash. Chapman has explicitly expressed white supremacist and accelerationist views. He attempted to wrest leadership of the Proud Boys from Enrique Tarrío in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, criticizing Tarrío for his ineffectual tactics and using denigrating racial epithets in reference to Tarrío, stating: "We will no longer cuck to the left by appointing token negroes as our leaders. We will no longer allow homosexuals or other 'undesirables' into our ranks. We will confront the Zionist criminals who wish to destroy our civilization. We recognize that the West was built by the White Race alone and we owe nothing to any other race." "Proud Boy Announcement" attributed to Kyle Chapman, posted in the 'Proud Goys' Telegram channel and forwarded to the 'Proud Boys' Telegram channel, November 9, 2020; Dickson, "The Rise and Fall of the Proud Boys;" Kelly Weill, "The Post-Election Proud Boys Meltdown Is Here, and It's Ugly," *Daily Beast*, November 11, 2020; Emilie Raguso, "'Based Stickman' in custody, ordered to stay away from Civic Center Park," *Berkeleyside*, August 25, 2017; Paul Bazile, "The Kids Are Alt-Knights Based Stick Man Organizes Offic[i]al Mil[itary] Arm of the Proud Boys," Proud Boys Website, April 23, 2017; "Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights," Southern Poverty Law Center; Michael Harriot, "Meet the New Military Division of White Nationalism," *Root*, April 26, 2017.



A Proud Boy supporter listens to speeches at a Second Amendment rally in Salem, Oregon, on May 1, 2021. (Paula Bronstein/AP Photo)

professed accelerationist^{al} and has provided legal services for white supremacist and American Front leader Marcus Faella. Eventually, the FOAK crumbled in 2018 under the weight of infighting and Chapman's continued legal battles.⁴²

Despite being short-lived, the Proud Boys' merger with the FOAK allowed the Proud Boys to embrace the overtly violent extremist elements of the "alt-right" and accelerationist communities while simultaneously maintaining a mainstream pool of support. The Proud Boys has acted as a 'gateway' for even more extreme groups. Former Proud Boys lawyer Jason Van Dyke sought, but was denied, membership in the neo-Nazi terrorist group The Base.⁴³ Multiple individuals, including Base members Yusef O. Barasneh⁴⁴ and Chris Hood,^{am} are reported to have considered joining the Proud

Boys prior to joining groups such as The Base and the Nationalist Social Club (aka NSC131).⁴⁵

Within the MAGA movement, the revival of the "Stop the Steal" narrative quickly became a focused rallying cry for Proud Boys mobilization.⁴⁶ The skirmishes that had characterized the group since its inception intensified throughout the 2020 presidential election cycle. On December 12, 2020, hundreds of Proud Boys descended on Washington, D.C., to demonstrate against the 2020 presidential election results and antagonize local antifa activists into conflict.⁴⁷ Drawing on the tactical playbook the group had perfected in Portland, the Proud Boys marched across the city, drinking and seeking conflict with counter-protestors.⁴⁸ The group's activity culminated that night in clashes in Washington, D.C.,

^{al} In a manifesto announcing his renunciation of modernity and the secular nature of society, August Invictus stated "that if I did not witness the coming of the Second American Civil War I would begin it myself." Invictus, who has since been embroiled in personal legal battles, also has a long-reported history of violence against women, as well as reported ties to Atomwaffen Division and James Mason. See Jeff Weiner, "Goat blood-drinking ex-Senate candidate, recently released from jail due to coronavirus concerns, accused of stalking wife," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 21, 2020; "The Kids Are Alt-Knights," Proud Boys website, April 24, 2017; "Augustus Sol Invictus," Southern Poverty Law Center.

^{am} Hood is credited with the formation of the Nationalist Social Club (AKA, NSC131). Prior to his leadership of NSC, Hood was a member of the white supremacist group Patriot Front and the neo-Nazi terrorist organization The Base. "Nationalist Social Club," Anti-Defamation League.

wherein four people were stabbed.^{an} The day's events serve as both a reminder of the group's long-tenured role as drivers of politically motivated violence and a harbinger for the principal role they would assume in the alleged instigation of violence on January 6 at the U.S. Capitol.

In the aftermath of the December 2020 street violence in Washington, D.C., the Proud Boys reportedly received more than \$100,000 in donations via the 'Christian' crowdfunding site GiveSendGo.⁴⁹ As Proud Boys members made their final preparations to be in Washington, D.C., on January 6, more than \$113,000 was reportedly raised for the 'Enrique Tarrío Defense Fund' in response to his January 4 arrest. In addition to the Tarrío fund, a review by *The Washington Post* found that "at least \$247,000 has been raised for 24 people — including at least eight members of the Proud Boys — who claimed online that the money was intended for travel, medical or legal expenses connected to 'Stop the Steal' events, including the January 6 rally."^{50 ao} By then, the group was using livestream and vlogging to drive brand development, grow their audience, and raise funds. Ironically, these streams have taken center stage in investigations surrounding the extent to which Proud Boys leaders Ethan Nordean (aka Rufio Panman) and Joseph Biggs were planning the January 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol in advance.⁵¹

The Proud Boys and January 6

"I want to see thousands of normies burn that city to ash today," expressed one user in a group chat used by the Proud Boys'

an In November 2020, clashes in Washington, D.C., between individuals—including Proud Boys—participating in several related events (Million MAGA March, the March for Trump, and Stop the Steal DC) and counter-protestors had resulted in two officer injuries and at least 20 arrests. In December 2020, four individuals were stabbed in clashes near the Proud Boys gathering point during running skirmishes in Washington, D.C., between protestors and counter-protestors throughout the night. Some reports, based on witness statements and video from the incident, suggest that Proud Boys were responsible for the stabbings. However, verification is difficult as no police report was filed and no arrests were made connected to the incident. See Jason Slotkin and Suzanne Nuyen, "Trump Supporters, Counterprotesters Clash At D.C. Rally Contesting Biden's Victory," NPR, November 14, 2020; Colleen Grablick and Daniella Cheslow, "Here's What We Know About The MAGA Rallies Planned In D.C. This Weekend," DCist, November 11, 2020; Marissa J. Lang, Michael E. Miller, Peter Jamison, Justin Wm. Moyer, Clarence Williams, Peter Hermann, Fredrick Kunkle, and John Woodrow Cox, "After thousands of Trump supporters rally in D.C., violence erupts when night falls," *Washington Post*, November 15, 2020; Emily Davies, Rachel Weiner, Clarence Williams, Marissa J. Lang, and Jessica Contrera, "Multiple people stabbed after thousands gather for pro-Trump demonstrations in Washington," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2020; James Crowley, "Videos Show Scuffles Between Proud Boys and Others During 2nd Million MAGA March in D.C.," *Newsweek*, December 12, 2020.

ao The government additionally alleges that Zachary Rehl, president of the Philadelphia Chapter of the Proud Boys, "posted a link to an online fundraiser with the campaign name of 'Travel Expenses for upcoming patriot events.'" By January 4, 2021, the campaign had "generated over \$5,500 in donations." Another online fundraising campaign by Nordean allegedly sought "donations for 'protective gear and communications' to be used by the Proud Boys on January 6, 2021." Jeremy Roebuck, "Prosecutors put Philly Proud Boys president Zach Rehl at heart of Jan. 6 planning in new Capitol riot filing," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 14, 2021; *USA v. Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zachary Rehl and Charles Donohoe*, "First Superseding Indictment," District of Columbia, 2021.

leadership on January 6, 2021.^{ap}

Six months on from the events of January 6, 2021, the scope of the Proud Boys' role in the insurrection continues to slowly come into view.⁵² While the federal investigation continues into the 529 individuals federally charged in relation to their alleged criminal activity at the U.S. Capitol and hundreds of individuals remain unidentified, Proud Boys members are alleged to have played a central role in the vanguard of the Capitol Hill rioters, with preliminary research by the Program on Extremism identifying more than 30 individuals charged in connection to the Capitol riot with links to the Proud Boys.⁵³

According to court records, Proud Boys organizers are alleged to have issued orders or directives to members of their groups, encouraging them to travel to Washington, D.C., in advance of January 6.⁵⁴ These hierarchical networks are alleged to have conspired to attend protests on that day with specific advance plans to breach the Capitol.⁵⁴ The allegations set forth by the U.S. government suggest that the conspiracy to disrupt the certification of the electoral ballots for the 2020 presidential election began long before January 6.⁵⁵ The group's extensive history with using violence in furtherance of political views, described above, would seem to support the government's assertion.

In December 2020, Proud Boys leadership is alleged to have created a private, encrypted messaging channel known as Ministry of Self Defense (MOSD).⁵⁶ This smaller, private channel, which was allegedly restricted to several core members of Proud Boys leadership, including Enrique Tarrío, Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zachary Rehl, and Charles Donohoe. The members of this smaller private channel reportedly "had an established chain-of-command" and held "video planning conferences prior to January 6."⁵⁷ As alleged by the government, the MOSD was to act as a "special chapter" within the organization dedicated to the planning for January 6, which "was not to have any interaction with other Proud Boys attending the event"—seemingly in an attempt to sequester this leadership core and ensure operational security in the lead-up to planned Proud Boys activity at the Capitol.⁵⁸ According to government filings, following Tarrío's arrest on January 4, 2021, the four Proud Boys leaders created a new encrypted channel (New MOSD) and took steps to destroy the earlier MOSD channel.⁵⁹

The government alleges that, in furtherance of the conspiracy,

ap This statement is attributed by prosecutors to an unspecified member (UCC-1) of the Ministry of Self-Defense (MOSD) group chat alleged to have been utilized by Proud Boys leadership in the days leading up to January 6, 2021. See *USA v. Ethan Nordean*, "The United States' Response to Nordean's Notice of Government's Alleged Violation of the Due Process Protections Act and Local Criminal Rule 5.1," District of Columbia, 2021.

aq See, for example, the civil lawsuit by Representative Bennie G. Thompson, which opens by stating that "On and before January 6, 2021, the Defendants Donald J. Trump, Rudolph W. Giuliani, Proud Boys, and Oath Keepers conspired to incite an assembled crowd to march upon and enter the Capitol of the United States for the common purpose of disrupting, by the use of force, intimidation and threat, the approval by Congress of the count of votes cast by members of the Electoral College as required by Article II, Section 1 of the United States Constitution." See *Bennie G. Thompson vs. Donald J. Trump, Enrique Tarrío, Oath Keepers, Proud Boys International, L.L.C., Rudolph W. Giuliani, Warboys LLC*, "Complaint," District of Columbia, 2021. These claims are buttressed by the allegations set forth by the U.S. government in its prosecution of Proud Boys leaders and organizers present at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, alleging a sweeping conspiracy to obstruct the congressional certification of the Electoral College vote. See, for example, *USA v. Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zachary Rehl and Charles Donohoe*, "First Superseding Indictment."

Proud Boys leadership instructed Proud Boys members not to wear their distinctive and recognizable uniforms on January 6 in Washington, D.C.⁶⁰ On December 29, 2020, Tarrío posted a message on social media claiming the Proud Boys planned to “turn out in record numbers on Jan 6th but this time with a twist . . . We will not be wearing our traditional Black and Yellow. We will be incognito and we will spread across downtown DC in smaller teams . . . we might dress in all BLACK for the occasion.”^{ar} Prosecutors noted that it was in late December 2020 that Tarrío first began encouraging the Proud Boys to go to Washington, D.C., for the “Stop the Steal” march, when he posted a message on the social media app Parler announcing that members of the group would “turn out in record numbers.”⁶¹

Finally, the government alleges that on the eve of January 6, Proud Boys members created an encrypted messaging channel called “Boots on the Ground” to enable communication between members of the group present in Washington, D.C.—more than 60 in total.⁶² According to prosecutors, internal communications between Proud Boys members provide clear evidence of a pre-planned conspiracy.⁶³ Specifically, encrypted Telegram messages obtained from Nordean’s cell phone released by the government included these comments from Joseph Biggs on the evening of January 5: “Just trying to get our numbers. So we can plan accordingly for tonight and go over tomorrow’s plan.”⁶⁴ According to prosecutors, several hours later, Biggs posted that, “We just had a meeting with [sic] a lot of guys. Info should be coming out . . . We have a plan. I’m with [coconspirator Nordean].”⁶⁵ The government alleges that Nordean was nominated from within to have “war powers” and assumed “ultimate leadership of the Proud Boys’ activities” on January 6. The government further alleges that he organized and led the Proud Boys in executing their plan: to “split up into groups, attempt to break into the Capitol building from as many different points as possible, and prevent the Joint Session of Congress from Certifying the Electoral College results.”⁶⁶

On the morning of January 6, the Proud Boys contingent assembled on the east side of the U.S. Capitol and posed for photos, with many members wearing black as called for by Proud Boys Chairman Enrique Tarrío.⁶⁷ From this location, the group marched in formation to a staging point along Pennsylvania Avenue just south and east of President Trump’s rally. This staging point was almost directly in the eventual route rally-goers-turned-rioters would take from President Trump’s rally to the Capitol.⁶⁸ Footage from the day shows Proud Boys at the forefront of clashes that overwhelmed law enforcement and the barriers around the Capitol.⁶⁹ What remains unclear is to what extent this staging was pre-planned by the Proud Boys.

However, a superseding indictment against three Proud Boys members—Dominic Pezzola, William Pepe, and Matthew Greene—alleges that at numerous flashpoints between the crowd and law enforcement, the trio “assisted the crowd’s efforts . . . by positioning themselves near the front of the line between Capitol Police and

rioters.”^{70 as} The affidavit charging Florida Proud Boys member Paul Rae in relation to the Capitol riot notes that Proud Boys organizer Joseph Biggs “and other identified leaders of the Proud Boys” led a group of Proud Boys “toward a pedestrian gate and overwhelmed law enforcement.”⁷¹ Government filings note that numerous Proud Boys were operating incognito and “leading the walk to the next barrier,” including Dominic Pezzola and William Pepe.⁷²

Charging documents also assert pre-planned efforts by Proud Boys leadership, including Ethan Nordean, to incite “normies”^{at} present at the U.S. Capitol to “smash some pigs to dust.”⁷³ In furtherance of this plan, the government alleges, Nordean “had a brief exchange with Robert Gieswein” before conferring with both Gieswein and Pezzola at approximately 2:00 PM, at which point the pair took up positions at the front of the rioters who “began forcing their way through, up, and over the barricades, and officers of the U.S. Capitol Police.” Indeed, according to prosecutors, following his conversation with Nordean, Robert Gieswein took up position side by side with Proud Boys member Dominic Pezzola as he shattered the window on the west side of the U.S. Capitol Building at approximately 2:13 PM on January 6.⁷⁴ Following this action, evidence presented by the government presents Gieswein as one of the first rioters to enter the building, climbing through the broken window, followed closely by Pezzola and others, who then “entered the building through the window . . . and opened an adjacent door.”⁷⁵ Within two minutes of the door being opened, the government alleges, Proud Boys members William Pepe, Paul Rae, Gilbert Garcia, Joshua Pruitt, and Joseph Biggs entered the building, followed by dozens of rioters.^{76 au}

The Evolving Threat

In the aftermath of January 6, Proud Boys members “celebrated their collective accomplishment . . . and the decision to forego colors at the rally.”⁷⁷ According to internal messages released by the government, Proud Boys leader Charles Donohoe stated, “Thank God we were not wearing colors. We should never wear colors ever again for any event.”⁷⁸

as On May 11, 2021, William Pepe filed a motion to sever himself from his two co-defendants. In the memorandum supporting this motion, he states that he met Dominic Pezzola at a December 5, 2020, protest, and on the morning of January 6, 2021, he arrived at a hotel room with the intention of meeting an unnamed friend. Upon arrival, he claims “it turned out this friend had a hotel room with approximately seven people in it, including Mr. Pezzola and Mr. Greene.” Despite this, Pepe argues that he was not in communication with Pezzola or Pepe during the events at the U.S. Capitol, and while he carried a radio with him, he claims that “he did not and could not communicate” with his co-conspirators because “he did not even know what radio channel they were on.” See *USA v. William Joseph Pepe*, “Defendant’s Memorandum of Law and Fact in Support of His Motion for Relief from Prejudicial Joinder,” District of Columbia, 2021.

at Per the government documents, “This appears to be a reference to Trump supporters who are not otherwise affiliated with the Proud Boys or a militia group.” See *USA v. Ethan Nordean*, “Opposition to Defendant’s Motion to Lift Stay on Release Order,” District of Columbia, 2021.

au The government further alleges that “About 30 minutes after he first entered the Capitol Building on the west side, Biggs and two other Proud Boys members, in addition to others, forcibly reentered the building through the Columbus Doors on the east side . . . They pushed past at least one law enforcement officer in doing so. Biggs and another Proud Boys member then traveled to the Senate chamber.” See *USA v. Joseph R. Biggs and Ethan Nordean*, “Appellee’s Consolidated Memorandum of Law and Fact,” United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, 2021.

ar This information was broadcast publicly on Parler, and widely reported on in the days before January 6, 2021. See, for example, Joshua Zitser, “Far-right group Proud Boys claim they will attend January 6 DC rally ‘incognito’ and wear all-black to blend in with antifa protesters,” *Business Insider*, January 3, 2021; Andrew Beaujon, “Proud Boys Say They’ll ‘Be Incognito’ During January 6 Trump Rallies in DC,” *Washingtonian*, December 31, 2020.

It is likely that the events of January 6 represent an inflection point for the trajectory and future of the Proud Boys as a movement.⁷⁹ In the weeks following the Capitol Hill siege, the organization was proscribed as a terror organization by Canada, and at least one Canadian chapter of the group reportedly shut down.⁸⁰ In February 2021, several American Proud Boys chapters disavowed the authority of national leadership. In posts on Telegram, chapters in Alabama, Indiana, and Oklahoma distanced themselves from the national chapter, with the Alabama Proud Boys chapter stating: “We do not recognize the assumed authority of any national Proud Boy leadership including the Chairman, the Elders, or any subsequent governing body that is formed to replace them until such a time we may choose to consent to join those bodies of government.”⁸¹ Daniel Arellano, who replaced Nordean as the president of the Proud Boys Seattle Chapter in February 2021,⁸² recently claimed that “The Proud Boys Pacific Northwest Region (Proud Boys PNW), including PBSC, are now autonomous of, and have no connection to any national group.”^{av} As with the self-serving dissolution claims of other extremist organizations like Atomwaffen Division, any reported or rumored disbandment of or disaffiliation with the national Proud Boys group should be viewed with circumspection.⁸³ So too should claims by various Proud Boys chapters that they are now suddenly disassociated from the ideas and actions of the national leadership.

As detailed by the U.S. government, many Proud Boys members allegedly present at the Capitol on January 6 have demonstrated a lack of contrition, which is potentially illustrative of a continued desire by Proud Boys members to engage in violent acts in furtherance of their goals.^{aw} Nordean, for example, is alleged to have taken steps “to meet with other members of the Proud Boys in the Pacific Northwest to discuss future plans,” including bulk purchase of gear and the establishment of regional training.⁸⁴ According to government-filed court documents, Joseph Biggs and Ethan Nordean celebrated what happened that day, and have not expressed regret or remorse for what they did or what happened.⁸⁵ In ruling in favor of pre-trial detention for Proud Boys member Christopher Worrell, a federal judge found that his “participation in the mob was planned, calculated and intentional,” and that upon being arrested, Worrell allegedly stated to FBI agents that “if he were to find out the name of the Twitter user who exposed

his identity online, the FBI ‘would be coming for [him] again.’”^{86 ax} Indeed, in the absence of contrition, self-serving attempts by Proud Boys members like William Chrestman to renounce association with the group and its goals should be viewed plainly, as it is by the government, as merely a “prophylactic effort to distance himself from others with whom he joined that day.”⁸⁷

In response to media questions about the future of the Proud Boys, Chairman Tarrío stated that he believes “there’s a pretty big percentage of people who think like us” and that the group has a place in the mainstream of conservative politics.⁸⁸ Additionally, researcher Samantha Kutner says that based on her ethnographic research with individual members and Proud Boys Chairman Tarrío, “Even if Proud Boys fail to consolidate power within the mainstream conservative party, the tactics they’ve used to evade detection, advance their agenda, and maintain plausible deniability will outlive them.”⁸⁹

Looking forward, the organizational structure of the Proud Boys—which has provided latitude to members in creating offshoot or splinter groups in recent years—will present a considerable challenge for law enforcement. A number of organizations similar to the Proud Boys have proliferated in the periphery of individual Proud Boys chapters, often mimicking or building on the Proud Boys aesthetic and tactics.⁹⁰ Throughout the Proud Boys existence, the group and its membership have frequently inspired the creation of like-minded organizations. These Proud Boys-like entities echo the talking points of the Proud Boys related to patriotic, anti-communist, and anti-Marxist narratives, while also adapting the street fighter tactics and aesthetics of the Proud Boys. Notably, many of these Proud Boys-like organizations appear to be locally oriented, and frequently draw on familial and established networks of hate groups for recruitment. However, it is difficult to accurately gauge the total number of such splinters and imitators and their true level of autonomy from the Proud Boys.⁹¹ As the Proud Boys brand weathers the fallout from the January 6 U.S. Capitol Insurrection, these Proud Boys-like organizations will be crucial to monitor and evaluate, particularly if local chapters and national leadership of the Proud Boys seek to rebrand and continue their political violence under less scrutiny.

Despite the increased scrutiny from law enforcement and individual chapters shuttering after January 6, Proud Boys leadership has shown no intent to curb the activities of its rank and file. Instead, the group has continued to mobilize, sometimes armed and violently, in response to the continued disinformation narratives related to the “Stop the Steal” movement, vaccines, and more, appearing at more than 20 events in 13 cities since January 6.⁹¹ On April 11, 2021, Proud Boys attended a “White Lives Matter” demonstration in Huntington Beach, California, that turned

av Proud Boys PNW purports to include the Proud Boys chapters in the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. See *USA v. Ethan Nordean*, “Declaration of Daniel Arellano,” District of Columbia, 2021.

aw Some members of the Proud Boys arrested and charged for their roles in the events of January 6 have since claimed in court that they were deceived, or only acting on orders of President Trump and now assert they now feel betrayed by his failure to support their actions that day. However, many of these public statements in relation to ongoing criminal proceedings are at odds with private communications released by the government in the prosecution of Proud Boys members. See Sheera Frenkel and Alan Feuer, “‘A Total Failure’: The Proud Boys Now Mock Trump,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2021; *USA v. Ethan Nordean*, “Defendant Nordean’s Reply in Support of Motion to Compel the Production of Evidence and For a Bill of Particulars, Exhibit 1,” District of Columbia, 2021.

ax The government alleges that Worrell used pepper spray gel in clashes with law enforcement on the west side of the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6. The allegations set forth in the government’s Statement of Facts further indicate that Worrell was present in Washington, D.C., on December 12, 2020, with other individuals wearing clothing affiliated with the Proud Boys. Further, a tipster reported to the FBI that Worrell “is a Proud Boy and that he and the live-in girlfriend traveled to Washington D.C. to be there on January 6, 2021.” See *USA v. Christopher John Worrell*, “Statement of Facts,” District of Columbia, 2021.

ay Based on the authors’ research, there are likely dozens of such splinter and imitator groups in the United States.

violent.⁹² On May 1, 2021, Proud Boys, some wearing the skullmask favored by neo-Nazi accelerationists, acted as security for a Second Amendment rally in Salem, Oregon.⁹³ In Sacramento, California, on June 5, 2021, the Proud Boys rallied in support of Ashli Babbitt, the woman shot by police on January 6 for breaking into the Speaker's Lobby of the Capitol.⁹⁴ And on June 18, 2021, clashes between

Proud Boys and antifa counter protesters in Oregon City, Oregon, descended into a riot.⁹⁵

The tempo of the group's appearances after January 6 suggests that instead of instigating a standing down, the group may be positioning itself to serve as the violent tip of the post-Insurrection extreme far-right in the United States. **CTC**

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The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism: An Investigative Report

By Yassin Musharbash

The fact that right-wing extremists are cooperating internationally more than ever today is a reality recognized by most researchers and government officials. This article describes some of the mechanisms that are fueling this development. The main finding is that right-wing extremists today, in many cases, no longer subscribe to the narrow concept of nationalism but instead imagine themselves as participants in a global struggle against a global enemy. Consequently, networking and cooperating across borders is seen as a necessity. This process is further supported by shared ideological writings, technological advancement, and the conflict in Ukraine, which has served as a powerful accelerator.

In recent years, analysts and security institutions alike have pointed out that right-wing extremists are increasingly networking across borders and even continents. “Right-wing extremists maintain international links and mutual exchange and are influenced by key treatises and emblematic personalities worldwide,” Europol stated in its 2020 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report.¹ The Counter Extremism Project (CEP), in a study funded by Germany’s foreign office, concluded in November 2020 that “the 21st century, and the period after 2014 in particular, saw the emergence of a new leaderless, transnational and apocalyptic violent extreme right-wing (XRW) movement.”² The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) of the United Nations Security Council declared in April 2020 that

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it had been “alerted by Member States to their increasing concern at the growing and increasingly transnational threat posed by extreme right-wing terrorism” and that “ten of the 31 states in which CTED conducted assessment visits ... in 2018 and 2019 raised this threat as an issue of concern.”³

While terror plots, physical attacks in the real world, and arrests by the police can be easily counted, networks are somewhat harder to track, especially if they are clandestine and/or online-based. The same is true for personal connections and friendships. But they, too, are part of the phenomenon in question here.

This article seeks to shed light on how these connections occur and are fostered. In doing so, it does not focus solely on potential terrorist or even militant networks. Rather, the aim is to discover which factors have proven conducive to connecting right-wing extremists *across borders*. As will be shown, among these factors are shared ideas (old and new) as well as advancements in technology and occasions for physical get-togethers, ranging from seemingly harmless concerts to paramilitary training and actual fighting in a war zone.

This article is based on an eight-month investigation that was originally conducted by a team of journalists at *Die Zeit*, a German newsweekly. The investigation’s findings were published in February 2021 in a feature article in *Die Zeit*’s print edition, and an English translation was published simultaneously by Zeit Online.⁴ While the original article was adapted to meet the standards of this publication, the character of the investigation remains intact, and therefore, it is less of an academic enterprise aiming at the highest attainable degree of completeness, but rather tries to illustrate the issue at hand through case studies.⁴

This article will first explore how a very basic and by no means new idea—creating civil unrest in order to upend the current political order—has spread across the globe and taken on new importance as a galvanizing factor for the international extreme far-right. It will then go on to explore several case examples and factors that have contributed, or helped to facilitate, international cooperation among right-wing extremists. These examples and factors include the role of the conflict in Ukraine, the effectiveness of the recruitment drive of the American violent neo-Nazi group The Base, the nexus between online and offline radicalization, and the importance of the Russian extreme right-wing group Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) as a hub for the globalization. Unless otherwise indicated by citation, the information contained in this article is sourced from *Die Zeit*’s published investigative report.⁵

a This means, for example, that many groups, which without doubt play a role in the transnationalization of the movement like National Socialist Order or Sonnenkrieg Division, will not be explicitly considered here.



Fighters from the Azov volunteer battalion ignite flares during a march marking the 72nd anniversary of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Kiev, Ukraine, on October 14, 2014. (Sergei Chuzavkov/AP Photo)

Old and New Ideas

It is noteworthy that even as the global right-wing extremist movement is making more and more use of modern technology (e.g., the live-streaming of terror attacks by the perpetrators of the Christchurch attack in New Zealand and the Halle attack in Germany⁶), old ideas, concepts, and intellectual resources still play a major role. One of these ‘old’ concepts is that of “leaderless resistance” as originally propagated by Louis Beam.⁷ Another still-powerful source of inspiration is *Siege*, the infamous collection of essays authored by American neo-Nazi James Mason.

James Mason was just 14 when he joined the youth wing of the American Nazi Party, and he later went on to become one of the most influential right-wing extremists in the United States. In 1992, his essays were published in the form of a book called *Siege*.

It includes such sentences as: “Let us give some thought to what the next logical step might be toward opening the way to full, revolutionary conflagration in the United States.” Anything that contributes to “friction, chaos and anarchy” is helpful, he writes, from “random shootings” to “select and consecutive assassinations ... in different parts of the country.”

The classic fascist groups and parties of the 20th century were hierarchical, with a leader at the top, chains of command, and military structures. In *Siege*, though, James Mason presents a different concept: Ideally, people would organize in small cells. “We must view and realize that all of White America is our army,” Mason

writes, arguing that the right-wing extremist movement should try to bring about a state of unrest.^b

When looking at today’s right-wing extremist groups, echoes of Mason’s writings are omnipresent. One case in point is Atomwaffen Division. There is a photo from 2019 showing James Mason together with 12 male members of the group.^c Mason is sitting on a chair in the center wearing a brown shirt and a swastika armband. The men are kneeling or standing around him, all wearing camouflage and skull masks. The Atomwaffen Division (AWD) members are gathered for a meeting in Las Vegas, with Mason there as a kind of guest of honor. Founded in 2015, the neo-Nazi group is one of the most hardcore in the world, with AWD members in the United States suspected of having committed five murders.⁸ It is heavily influenced by the idea of “leaderless resistance” as well as by James Mason’s writings.⁹

Mason, who is nearly 70 years old, maintains that he is no longer politically active. But when a reporter from the *Die Zeit* reporting team visited him at his home in Denver, Colorado, in November 2020, he appeared to be very proud of the fact that he still is an inspiration to right-wing extremists across the globe. “A wonderful,

b In the United States, in particular, this idea is usually described as accelerationism, a term that is not very common in Europe.

c The picture was published by AWD online at the time.

wonderful association” was how Mason described Atomwaffen Division,¹⁰ calling the members “bravehearts.”¹¹ The idea behind AWD is to “take the fight to the enemy,” he explained—and not just in the United States. As a matter of fact, AWD now has offshoots in a number of countries, including Germany. “There was a lot of action in the Ukraine and ... clear across Europe, and certainly here,” Mason said. “That’s pretty impressive, I have to admit.”

In the spring of 2020, Mason announced that Atomwaffen Division was disbanding,¹² but that was likely just a tactical move to alleviate the pressure of FBI investigations. “One name may be disbanded, it may be outlawed,” Mason told the *Die Zeit* reporter. “You pick up another, like changing your underwear, and it means nothing.”

During the interview, Mason seemed to enjoy his role as one of the movement’s intellectual leaders—much as, perhaps, an old jihadi influencer might rejoice in the fact that his pamphlets and tracts from 20 years ago are still being read and put to use. At the same time, though, Mason seemed to choose his words with care to avoid saying anything that could be interpreted as an incitement to violence. Mason claimed to no longer believe in the idea of right-wing terror. But, he added, “so many just aren’t ready to give it up.”^d

That is clearly true. And during the course of *Die Zeit*’s investigation, *Siege* came up multiple times, making clear its importance to neo-fascists around the world seeking to collapse the established order through violence. Researchers have described these individuals as part of a violent global “neo-fascist accelerationist movement.”¹³ Accelerationism, as defined by one researcher, is an “ideologically agnostic doctrine of violent and non-violent actions taken to exploit contradictions intrinsic to a political system to ‘accelerate’ its destruction through the friction caused by its features.”¹⁴

One example of the salience of *Siege* was a hidden digital copy found when German police searched the house of right wing extremist Fabian D., who was later sentenced for planning an act of terrorism. Felix Oberhuber,^e another German national who used to be a right-wing extremist and for years tried to reach the battlefield in Ukraine as a foreign fighter, also studied *Siege* in the process of his radicalization. The American neo-Nazi group The Base, which is closely ideologically aligned with Atomwaffen, considered *Siege* compulsory reading for prospective members as did many other groups. Analyst Alex Newhouse has referred to a “Siegist” culture in this regard.¹⁵ The FBI, in a document *Die Zeit* was able to review, calls it a “Siege network,” describing it as a “subset of similar Neo-Nazi RMVE (racially motivated violent extremism) groups and

Telegram channels which advocate leaderless resistance strategy, the text *Siege*, and Neo-Nazi ideological aspirations such as the eradication of non-Whites.”^f

The fact that Mason’s writings are still so prominent in neo-fascist accelerationist circles is telling. While the concept of “leaderless resistance” serves a predominantly operative function in that it provides guidance for how to best plan an attack that is unlikely to be foiled, Mason’s vision of a revolutionary civil war-like accelerationism scenario actually helps to build bridges because the violent overthrow of the established order it calls for resonates across borders. Mason, at the time of *Siege*’s writing, only had the United States in mind; today, his followers understand his teachings to apply on a global scale. As the scholar Kathleen Belew puts it: “The nation at the heart of white nationalism is not the United States. It is the Aryan nation, imagined as a transnational white polity ...”¹⁶

In the past, explains extremism expert Alexander Ritzmann, right-wing extremists were focused on the fight for their own country. Today, though, the focus has shifted to the defense of the “white race.”¹⁷ So whether it is American neo-Nazis concerned about the growth of the non-white share of the population or European right-wing extremists who believe in the theory of “the great replacement”^g or Russian ultra-nationalists who feel that their traditional “white” culture is being threatened by Western multiculturalism, gay rights, and the like, many have come to the same conclusion: that they need to defend themselves, that it might be useful to cooperate in order to do so, and that the means by which this conflict will be resolved will be a civil war-like scenario just like the one Mason has been propagating, except that it is envisaged as a global, transnational conflict.

Mason is not the only ideologist who has had an impact on this broadening of the horizon of the right-wing extremist movement in recent years,^h but it seems fair to say that *Siege* in this sense provides an important component of the ideological glue that helps the movement connect across what used to be almost insurmountable borders.

The Role of the Conflict in Ukraine

It is no coincidence that the CEP mentions the year 2014 explicitly as an important date in the context of the globalization of the right-wing extremist movement. The conflict in Ukraine that started that year has had a tremendous mobilizing effect. In a September 2019 report, the Soufan Center called the country “a hub in the broader network of transnational white supremacy extremism, attracting

d In June 2021, Mason was listed as a terrorist entity by the Government of Canada. The Canadian listing states that “Mason’s collective works, published as a book called *Siege*, have served as the ideological grounding for neo-Nazi groups such as Atomwaffen Division (AWD), which is a listed terrorist entity in Canada, and serves as the backbone for the AWD’s worldview and training program. Mason has also provided tactical direction on how to operate a terrorist group and has met with members of AWD, where he coached them on propagandizing murder and genocide.” It adds that “Mason and *Siege* have also been cited as the ideological foundation of Feuerkrieg Division and Sonnenkrieg Division, groups that have been proscribed as terrorist entities in the United Kingdom.” “Government of Canada lists four new terrorist entities,” Public Safety Canada, June 25, 2021; “Currently Listed Entities,” Public Safety Canada.

e The name Felix Oberhuber is a pseudonym. His real name is known to the authors.

f The mentioned document was found in a Swedish investigation file. It goes on to mention by name the following groups: AWD, The Base, Green Brigade, Sonnenkrieg Division, “and many others.” The author possesses the document.

g The theory of “The Great Exchange” or “The Great Replacement” is a conspiracy myth propagated by French right-wing ideologue Renaud Camus, according to which “elitists” are planning to substitute white populations with immigrants. It plays a big role in right-wing extremist thinking particularly in Europe but was also referenced by the Christchurch attacker in his manifesto. See also Nellie Bowles, “‘Replacement Theory,’ a Racist, Sexist Doctrine, Spreads in Far-Right Circles,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2019.

h The role of the Iron March internet forum was crucial in this regard. See Alex Newhouse, “The Threat Is the Network: The Multi-Node Structure of Neo-Fascist Accelerationism,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:5 (2021) for details.

foreign recruits from all over the world” and put the number of these foreign recruits at “around 17,000” stemming from 50 countries.¹⁸

Most of these seem to have been young men of Russian (or Ukrainian) heritage or origin living away from the motherland.¹⁹ But hundreds, if not thousands of volunteers traveled to the area of conflict in Ukraine without any such emotional or personal ties to the region. Not all, but many of the foreign recruits were (and are) right-wing extremists.

Experts believe that from Germany alone, as many as 150 volunteers headed for Ukraine to fight in the war—on both sides of the front.²⁰ But it appears that information about them is scarce. When German parliamentarian Martina Renner of the Left Party filed an official query with the German government in 2020, the response noted that German officials can only identify by name “a number of people in the low two-figures.” Official investigations have only been launched into four volunteers.²¹

The *Die Zeit* investigation attempted to find out more about the pull-factors involved and to learn about the networks that facilitate the actual recruitment process.

Felix Oberhuber (not his real name), a 22-year-old German national from the southern part of the country, was one of those who tried to join the war in Ukraine. In several personal interviews, he shared his story with *Die Zeit*. The team of reporters were able to cross-check and verify most of the information he gave them and consider him reliable.²²ⁱ

Oberhuber used to be the leader of the German chapter of a neo-Nazi organization called Misanthropic Division (MD). He still wears a tattoo with the group’s name on his arm. MD is a paramilitary right-wing extremist group from Ukraine that follows the motto “Kill for Wotan,” a nod to Nordic mythology that is often invoked by neo-Nazis. Oberhuber recalls that as a teenager, he drank a lot and got high—and he developed an interest in documentaries about the Nazi era. By the time he turned 18, he was active in more than 35 right-wing extremist WhatsApp groups, where he received reading recommendations, like pamphlets about people who attacked foreigners as well as the aforementioned book *Siege* by James Mason. He radicalized further, beat up foreigners, and planned an attack on leftists with his comrades. “That was my first attempt to become active as a terrorist,” Oberhuber says. “I was fascinated by fighting.”

The planned attack did not pan out, largely because they were unable to obtain weapons. But Oberhuber continued to be fascinated by violence and stumbled across the Azov Battalion on the internet. Founded in 2014 in Ukraine, shortly after the war started on the country’s eastern border, the Azov Battalion was well known for accepting foreign mercenaries wanting to join the fight against the pro-Russian separatists. Using WhatsApp, Oberhuber contacted a German neo-Nazi who he hoped could bring him to the front. The German turned out to be a functionary with Misanthropic Division,

which tried to recruit fighters for the Azov Battalion in Ukraine^j in a number of countries. Oberhuber was electrified.

In 2018, Oberhuber moved to the town of Weissenfels, in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt, into the apartment of a Misanthropic Division functionary. Another man, from Belarus and wanted by the police, was already living there. The three established a cell and started selling T-shirts and flags with MD logos on them they got from Ukraine. Envoys from MD would frequently visit Weissenfels, and Oberhuber would join them on outings, one of them to a castle where Nazis had lived until 1945. Oberhuber had the feeling they were sizing him up.

When the MD functionary went to prison for armed robbery, the MD leadership in Kiev decided that Oberhuber should take over, according to his account. He developed a channel on Telegram and spray-painted MD graffiti, hoping to prove “that I’m a hard worker, and hopefully then end up in a training camp and then on the front.” The Ukrainians sent a tattoo artist who gave Oberhuber the MD logo on his arm, a distinction not unlike a military decoration—and one given to only very few activists. He now belonged to the inner circle.

In the end, Felix Oberhuber’s dream of joining the war in eastern Ukraine was never fulfilled. Perhaps Misanthropic Division did not think he was suitable, or perhaps he did not present himself correctly. It may also be the case that by the time Oberhuber became interested in fighting in around early 2018, the Ukrainian side was less in need for recruits as the fighting had somewhat abated.

But Oberhuber’s radicalization and his journey into the Ukrainian right-wing extremist orbit nonetheless offer a glimpse into the factors at work. It shows not only how comparatively easy it is to connect with relevant actors, but it also proves that until very recently (and perhaps still today, if somewhat restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic) international travel and networking, at least between Western and Eastern Europe, was (and is) possible for right-wing extremists.

One woman has played a crucial role in connecting far-right extremists in Germany with Ukraine. Activist Olena Semenyaka, a young woman from Kiev who at one point was a student of philosophy, is today associated with a political party that has its roots in the Azov movement. She has dark brown hair, a petite figure, and is frequently the only woman in pictures full of bearded, muscle-bound brutes. For Ukrainian right-wing extremists, Semenyaka essentially plays the role of ‘poster girl.’ In a leaked photo, she is shown giving the Hitler salute and posing with a swastika.²³

An entire movement has developed around the Azov Battalion in recent years. The goal is to establish a global coalition of right-wing extremist groups, Semenyaka said in a 2019 interview with *Time* magazine.²⁴

Semenyaka has been visiting right-wing extremist groups across Europe for years as a kind of marketing representative. According to *Die Zeit*’s reporting, she has visited Germany eight times—at the

i Oberhuber today considers himself a former right-wing extremist who is in the process of deradicalization.

j The Azov Battalion started as a volunteer militia in 2014 and was later incorporated into the Ukrainian Army. Among its founders were neo-Nazis. Out of its leadership grew the “National Corps” political party. Anton Shekhovtsov, “Why Azov should not be designated a foreign terrorist organization,” Atlantic Council, February 24, 2020. The Azov Battalion accepted foreign volunteers, “before the Azov Regiment was established and subsequently became the alleged epicentre of European neo-Nazi mobilisation.” Kacper Rekawek, “Career Break or a New Career? Extremist Foreign Fighters in Ukraine,” Counter Extremism Project, April 2020, p. 26.

invitation of the German right-wing political party Die Rechte, for example, or as a speaker to a group from the Identitarian Movement.^k At a festival organized by the neo-Nazi party “Der III. Weg” near Erfurt in 2018, she promoted an extreme right-wing rock festival in Ukraine called Asgardsrei. “All of you are explicitly invited to Kiev!”

Asgardsrei is one of the largest events of its kind, and it is sometimes even possible to see Atomwaffen Division flags waving in the audience.²⁵ Semenyaka has leveraged the black-metal festival to form a kind of congress, called Pact of Steel, enabling right-wing extremists from Norway, Italy, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere to get to know each other and exchange ideas.²⁶ It is at functions like these that the internationalization of the movement is being fostered, with the lines between politics and war, activism and militancy purposefully being blurred.

In February 2020, U.S. Congressman Max Rose and terrorism expert Ali Soufan published an op-ed in *The New York Times*.²⁷ The war in Ukraine, they wrote, had become for right-wing extremists what the war in Afghanistan had been for jihadis in the 1980s and 1990s. Back then, volunteers from many countries traveled to Afghanistan to fight against the country’s secular rulers and their Soviet backers. One of them, of course, was Usama bin Ladin, who created al-Qa`ida out of a group of hardcore fanatics. That war turned out to be a kind of Big Bang for 21st century Islamist terrorism.

Is it useful to look at the conflict in Ukraine through this lens? Yes and no: Yes, because the conflict has without question helped galvanize the right-wing extremist movement, and no, because the two cases cannot be easily compared. In Ukraine, to name only the most significant difference, right-wing extremist volunteers were recruited by both parties of the conflict, with a majority of foreign fighters joining the Russian side.²⁸ Ukraine was not a single *cause célèbre* that united the movement through the fight against one common enemy. Instead, it made visible different undercurrents within the larger movement.

However, what can safely be said is that some of those who met either on the battlefield or in training or at one of the functions that have grown out of the original far-right extremist mobilization effort in the Ukraine war have since created networks of peers and in some cases gained crucial know-how, whether military or ideological. Felix Oberhuber says he himself knows three German neo-Nazis who have returned from the front. And other former right-wing extremists told *Die Zeit* of neo-Nazis who joined the Azov Battalion primarily to receive weapons training.²⁹

The Recruitment Outreach of The Base

One American far-right extremist organization active in forging international connections among violent neo-fascist accelerationists was The Base. The Base is interesting for more than one reason. For one, its founder, Rinaldo Nazzaro, seems to have looked at jihadi groups for examples of best practices. This may have to do with the fact that Nazzaro, a U.S. citizen now based in Russia, at one time seems to have served as a contractor alongside U.S. forces

in Afghanistan and/or Iraq.³⁰ He may even have picked the name of his group from al-Qa`ida.¹ “Afghanistan is (a) good example of unifying ideology harnessed militarily,” read a tweet posted by a Base account.³¹ The Base, one member boasted, was better than al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State.³²

The Base seems to have been founded in order to serve as an umbrella group for right-wing extremists who are interested in a more global perspective. In an email exchange with this author, Nazzaro himself insisted The Base was neither a neo-Nazi nor a terrorist organization but “a social networking platform for individuals who are interested in survivalism and self-defense.”³³ But what appear to be his true reasons for promoting training can be discerned from his apparent cynicism in a leaked chat protocol from The Base: “It’s illegal if you’re training in order to cause civil unrest,” he wrote. “If you’re training for survivalism and self-defense, you’re good to go.”³⁴

Nazzaro became visible as a right-wing extremist only around 2018, when he transformed himself into a propagandist, appearing under the pseudonyms Roman Wolf and Norman Spear. In the summer of 2018, he started The Base, a group for which *Siege* was required reading.³⁵ The Base was formed following an appeal by Nazzaro in an online forum and quickly attracted around 50 members. Some soon met up in the real world, organizing camps, target practice, and producing propaganda videos.

According to U.S. prosecutors, The Base’s goal is to “unify militant white supremacists around the globe and provide them with paramilitary training in preparation for a ‘race war.’”³⁶ Three members of the organization were arrested because they were planning to murder antifa activists.³⁷ Investigators netted another three members after they discussed attacking a gun rights rally in Virginia, possibly with the goal of provoking an escalation of tensions at the event.³⁸

The Base showed a keen interest in recruiting members internationally, as demonstrated by a number of interviews the group recorded with prospective members from a number of countries. Experts today believe that there may still exist cells in South Africa, Canada, Great Britain, the Baltic states, and perhaps elsewhere.³⁹

In the *Die Zeit* investigation, the reporting team was able show that the group was very likely successful in recruiting members in Germany and the Netherlands. These cases are discussed in turn in the following paragraphs.

According to the reporting team’s research, in the summer of 2019, a young German national who went by the alias “Dekkit” joined The Base. Photos and chat messages that the reporting team was able to review show that the young man was traveling in the United States at the time in question, probably to Silver Creek, a remote village in the state of Georgia, where the family of a member of The Base owns a 40-acre property. According to U.S. prosecutors, the group held so-called hate camps there, where the men received weapons training and even decapitated a goat in a pagan ritual.⁴⁰

“Dekkit spotted in America,” an American neo-Nazi wrote in a chat on August 13, 2019, also posting a photo of the visitor. It shows a man in a military uniform half covered by a swastika flag.

Several entries are known to have been posted by Dekkit in The Base’s encrypted chat room. “Almost died going through the

k According to the ADL, “Identitarianism, a racist, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant movement that originated in France and spread to other countries in Europe and, eventually, the United States. Identitarianism is roughly analogous to the alt right segment of the white supremacist movement in the United States.” “Identitarian Lambda,” ADL website.

l It is not entirely clear why al-Qa`ida chose its name, and there are several explanations. But generally, it is assumed that it means “the base.”

Swamps today,” he reported in one. He wrote that his companion had sunk “straight up to the thighs in mud.” They even saw alligators and water snakes. It is unclear exactly what Dekkit did when with The Base.

It appears that Dekkit has since returned to Germany, with no obvious interference by the German police and intelligence agencies. Interestingly, upon his return, he added the letters “AW” to his alias, which is presumably a reference to the Atomwaffen Division, thus proving the point made by James Mason in his interview with *Die Zeit* that names do not matter: they are exchangeable, and overlapping membership in multiple groups is not a problem.^m

The Base was apparently also in touch with at least two individuals in the Netherlands who stand accused of joining the group. In January 2021, a detention hearing was held in a court in Rotterdam for two men in custody who have been charged with sedition and membership in a terrorist organization, specifically the Base.ⁿ Fabio I., 19, stands accused of sedition and membership in The Base. He is alleged of having posted hate messages on Telegram such as “kill all non white (sic).” His lawyer says he is not a member of The Base, and in an attempt to prove it, he cited a message his client received by a person using the alias “Dutrinas:” “You still haven’t been vetted and have no cell leader.” The message, though, could serve to prove that he was in contact with The Base, at the very least.

The second defendant is 20-year-old Steven V., who is alleged to have incited an attack against Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte. In a chat room that investigators believe belongs to The Base, they uncovered evidence that Steven V. had shared what he purported to be specific and detailed information about Rutte’s travel patterns to work. “I’m not a terrorist,” Steven V. said during the court hearing. “I left the chat group months ago.” The court ruled that Fabio I. and Steven V. should remain in pre-trial custody.⁴¹

It is unclear if Nazzaro has a plan in place for the group’s future apart from a renewed attempt at recruiting.⁴² But whatever it might be, at least for a while he managed, through a mixture of slick online recruitment and personal availability, to create an organization that some young men chose over local groups that would have been very easy to join.

It is unclear how many foreign recruits The Base was able to win over. But since *Die Zeit*’s original publication, new evidence has come to light that suggests at least one more German national joined the group.⁴³

From Online Chatting to Attack Plotting

The case of “Dekkit’s” involvement with The Base suggests that some extremists may be especially attracted to groups that offer personal, real-life connections in addition to online outreach. But this is not always so. In some instances, it seems that the online community can be almost as real and meaningful as an offline community. This appears to have been true in the case of Fabian D., a 23-year-old electronics technician from southern Germany.

Fabian D. has never been a formal member of an extreme

far-right organization.⁴⁴ According to what is known, he never harbored ambitions of fighting in Ukraine either. Rather, Fabian D. spent enormous amounts of time in front of his computer playing computer games. On the internet, he stumbled across neo-Nazi groups that embrace or are at least in part motivated by “Siegist” approaches such as Atomwaffen Division, The Base, and the Feuerkrieg Division, another right-wing terrorist network^o with around 40 members from 15 countries.^p

From his basement, Fabian D. watched Atomwaffen Division propaganda films he found online. He studied the manifestos of right-wing extremist terrorists. And before long, he was no longer content just being a spectator. In spring 2019, he finally gained access to the Feuerkrieg Division’s English-language international chat group.^q Fabian D. was a loner and struggled with his weight, and he was able to create a new version of himself online. *Die Zeit* reviewed more than 18,000 screenshots of the chats. In them, Fabian D. called himself “reinhard070304” or “Heydrich” after the Nazi war criminal and Holocaust organizer Reinhard Heydrich, who was born on March 7, 1904. As a kind of virtual Heydrich, Fabian D. posted a photo showing people of color in the Bavarian city of Sham. The caption read: “Hm, to kill or not to kill is the question.”

Fabian D. also pursued his digital fantasies in the analog world. He would walk around in German military clothing and apparently even made an attempt to obtain weapons. In July 2019, he applied for a small arms license, which he then received 14 days later. And he had weapon parts sent to his grandmother’s address: a “decorative replica” of a Kalashnikov, plus an original case. Milling and drilling marks indicate that he had hopes of turning it into a live weapon.

Fabian D. also downloaded bomb-making instruction from the internet and ordered the kind of skull masks online that he saw in the propaganda videos. A selfie taken at the time shows him wearing a mask and a camouflage outfit, holding *Mein Kampf* in one hand and the model of a Kalashnikov in the other.

In January 2020, Fabian D. wrote to his comrades that he wanted to become as famous as a “Saint.” In the Feuerkrieg Division chat group, “Saint” is code in the scene for those who commit terrorist attacks like the man alleged to have murdered German politician Walter Lübcke at his home in 2019, or the assassin in Christchurch, New Zealand, who perpetrated a terrorist attack against mosques in the city the same year.

In his chat group, Fabian D. actively solicited advice on what targets might be appropriate. He wrote that he believed “places of worship” would be a good choice and that he wanted to use “tools” and be “more up close and personal.” Shortly afterward, in February

m Newhouse also makes the point: “The [violent accelerationist neo-fascist] network is built on membership fluidity, frequent communications, and a shared goal of social destruction.” See Newhouse.

n According to the spokesperson for the prosecution, both individuals are believed to have been in contact with The Base over the internet. Phone interview conducted by author in July 2021.

o The U.K. government proscribed Feuerkrieg Division in July 2020 and described it as a terrorist organization. See “Priti Patel proscribes far-right terrorist group,” U.K. Home Office and The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, July 13, 2020.

p *Der Spiegel* puts the number of members even higher, at 70. Maik Baumgartner, Roman Höfner, and Roman Lehberger, “Mitgründer der ‘Feuerkrieg Division’ gefasst,” *Der Spiegel*, April 9, 2020. According to what the *Die Zeit* reporting team learned during various background briefings with judicial and intelligence sources in Germany, membership in far-right terrorist organizations is very difficult to determine and prove and that membership in specific chat rooms is sometimes all there is to go on.

q Alex Newhouse who also reviewed these or similar chats, speaks of “significant transnational communication.” See Newhouse.

2020, a SWAT team arrested Fabian D.^r They found a blank-firing pistol in the driver's door of his car that was loaded and ready to shoot, as well as a second one hidden under the passenger seat. He also had a camping knife, a hunting knife, and a hatchet in his backpack. In the basement apartment of his parents' home, police seized a steel helmet, a machete, a vest for carrying ammunition, and a lock-picking kit. There was a letter from the German armed forces in his mailbox. Fabian D. had applied for a job in the IT department, and the letter contained a job offer.

In November 2020 in front of the Nuremberg District Court, a psychiatrist brought in to review the case said the defendant posed a "considerable danger." The court sentenced Fabian D. to two years in prison for the preparation of a severe violent act that could or would have threatened the state, with no suspended sentence.^s

The case can be seen as a success. At the same time, it underscores the challenges for security authorities in keeping track of internationally networked right-wing extremists. Fabian D. was caught, but other German participants in the Feuerkrieg chat group are still at large.⁴⁵ In some instances, they cannot be identified; in others, they may be seen as dangerous, but cannot for legal reasons be made the subject of a criminal investigation unless they explicitly call for or announce criminal acts.

According to *Die Zeit's* reporting, Germany's Federal Prosecutor is currently investigating a network of neo-Nazis who are suspected of having either founded or supported yet another terrorist organization: the Atomwaffen Division Deutschland. The trail leads to Bavaria and Berlin, into student circles and to an extreme right-wing vigilante group.^t

Investigations are also underway into other possible plans to carry out attacks in Germany. In the aforementioned Feuerkrieg Division chat group, one participant boasted in the summer of 2019 that an "OP Walter Lübcke 2.0" was planned—a reference to the assassination of the conservative German politician. When Fabian D. saw that particular post, he responded with one of the Atomwaffen Division's slogans: "The knives are getting sharpened."

The Russian Hub

Most of the networks, groups, and organizations covered thus far are operating clandestinely and illegally. But the increase in international networking among right-wing extremists cannot be fully grasped without including groups that are entirely legal—at least in the country where they are based. The most significant example is the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), which serves as a hub for the larger movement of white supremacists but has not been confronted in any meaningful way by the Russian authorities.⁴⁶

The Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) calls RIM an "extreme-right, white supremacist militant

organization."⁴⁷ RIM seeks the re-establishment of the Russian Tzarist order. It also maintains a paramilitary outfit called the Imperial Legion and a paramilitary trainings facility. It has dispatched fighters to the Ukrainian battlefields in the past, and more recently, according to the head of the Imperial Legion, members of the Legion have been fighting alongside regular Russian forces in Libya and elsewhere.⁴⁸

The head of the Imperial Legion and the associated training program is Denis Gariev, a 42-year-old trained historian. In St. Petersburg, Gariev offers paramilitary training to Russian and foreign private citizens alike on a level unattainable in most other countries. When interviewed in early 2021, he said of his clientele: "They understand that they will need this something tomorrow because tomorrow it won't matter what kind of car you have or what kind of startup you have launched, because tomorrow they will come to kill everyone and what you are going to do, they will have to fight the enemy."⁴⁸

Gariev's customers are primarily Russian men between the ages of 20 and 45, but they also include French, Serbian, and German nationals. They all travel to him in St. Petersburg and take part in his various offerings, which include a course on war tactics, shooting, first aid, radio communications, and topography. The class lasts seven days and costs the equivalent of 280 euros. Gariev told *Die Zeit* he had 500 bookings for the class last year alone. "If people come with conservative, patriotic ideas, they are welcome," he said. Ten instructors work for him, Gariev says.

Gariev is very open about his beliefs. The enemy, in his view, is a global alliance of leftists, gays, and immigrants. He believes it will take a "last crusade" to save 'traditional' Christian values from them. This vision is entirely compatible with the ideas of most of the groups discussed in this article thus far. In fact, it is no coincidence that the right-wing extremist movement has, in its propaganda and at occasions like public protests, over the past years displayed an ever stronger pro-Russian sentiment.^v Many adherents of this movement see Russia as a bulwark against effeminacy and immigration.

In St. Petersburg, Gariev spoke to *Die Zeit* openly about his role as a networker. "We are the only organization that has strong and professional ties with the right-wing movements all over the world," he said. In Germany, Gariev claimed, RIM has contacts with members of the far-right National Democratic Party (NPD). In April 2017, representatives of RIM appeared at a march by right-wing extremists in Dortmund, Germany.⁴⁹

There have also been networking attempts between RIM and Matthew Heimbach, an American neo-Nazi who has since claimed to have left behind his neo-Nazi beliefs.⁵⁰ After having met some RIM cadres on a trip to Europe five years ago, a delegation from

^r It is unclear whether the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the German domestic intelligence agency responsible for monitoring terrorism and political extremism, was tracking those conversations or whether it received a tip from abroad. However, the agency contacted the police and informed them there was a threat of an attack, perhaps on a synagogue or a mosque, according to statements by police officers during the trial. Court documents seen by *Die Zeit*.

^s His defense attorney has filed an appeal. For details on the sentence, see Olaf Przybilla, "23-Jähriger plante Anschlag und muss zwei Jahre in Haft," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 4, 2020.

^t The Federal Prosecutor in Germany declined to discuss details.

^u According to several media reports, RIM fighters have even been deployed to Syria and Libya. See, for example, "The Kremlin Uses Radical Russian Imperial Movement to Destabilize the West," Warsaw Institute, July 17, 2021, and *Inside the Russian Imperial Movement: Practical Implications of U.S. Sanctions* (New York: Soufan Center, 2020). They also took part in the fighting in Ukraine. Gariev, a leading figure in RIM and the head of its Imperial Legion, confirmed to *Die Zeit* the deployment to Syria and Libya, stating that the men fought for private military companies or the Russian army.

^v Examples include The Base's Nazzaro wearing a Putin T-shirt; some pro-Russian posters held up in U.S. protests in Charlottesville, Virginia; and Matthew Heimbach's pro-Russia position.

Russia visited Heimbach in Tennessee in 2017.⁵¹ In an interview with *Die Zeit*, Heimbach claimed the visit was harmless. According to his account, it included roller coaster rides at an amusement park and discussions about an alliance over barbecue. He and his visitors also drove to Washington, D.C., together, where they planted a RIM flag in front of the White House, took pictures, and gloated over their propaganda coup.⁵²

In April 2020, the U.S. State Department classified RIM as “global terrorists,” a first for white supremacist terrorists.⁵³ It appears that the concerns over the potential for the group to build a bridgehead in the United States played a part in this decision.⁵⁴

Another reason for the designation was a series of attacks against asylum seekers in Sweden. These attacks were conducted by members of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) who had visited Denis Gariev’s facility in St. Petersburg before they started plotting.^w The Nordic Resistance Movement is an alliance of neo-Nazi groups active throughout Scandinavia with a total of around 300 members. The attacks in Sweden involved explosives and happened between November 2016 and January 2017. The targets included a leftist bookstore/cafe and a campground that also provided accommodations for refugees. The last bomb they planted was near another refugee shelter. A member of the cleaning staff was seriously injured in the explosion.⁵⁵ The perpetrators were arrested, and the investigators stumbled across a photo showing two of them in St. Petersburg with Kalashnikovs in their hands. Investigators believe the trip to Russia was “a key step in (their) radicalization.”⁵⁶

In his interview with *Die Zeit*, Gariev claimed that his Swedish visitors did not train at his facility and that they only discussed issues of Christianity together. But it is a fact that RIM and NRM have been networking for years now. Scandinavian security services suspect that RIM is actively promoting militancy among NRM cadres.⁵⁷ In early 2020, officials arrested an alleged RIM recruiter in Stockholm who had built up a cache of weapons.⁵⁸

With RIM, the global right-wing extremist movement has at its disposal a very well-established organization that can not only provide paramilitary training, but also has in its ranks actual veterans of armed conflicts and is led by leaders whose ideology interlocks smoothly with those within the movement—all the while acting legally and fully in the open inside Russia and being very willing to network. Gariev told *Die Zeit* that until the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the RIM used to organize several international conferences every year.

Now that the group has been designated in the United States, this networking effort has become somewhat more difficult. Gariev told *Die Zeit* that he knows exactly why the Europeans and Americans are afraid of him and his organization: “They understand very well that we are a threat ... because of our ideas.”

w This was confirmed through Swedish court documents that *Die Zeit* was able to review. RIM’s Denis Gariev confirmed in an interview conducted on behalf of *Die Zeit* in January 2021 that the NRM members in question visited him at the facility. He said they only came as visitors and that he discussed issues of Christianity with them. He said that these NRM visitors did not train at the facility.

Conclusion

The fact that right-wing extremists are cooperating internationally more than ever today is a reality recognized among researchers and government officials alike. This article has attempted to illustrate how some of these connections manifested. The methodology employed was journalistic rather than academic, focusing on individual cases rather than a quantitative or statistical approach. The results should therefore be taken for what they are: examples, illustrations, or in other words anecdotal evidence.

Nonetheless, it was possible to discern certain dynamics that appear to play important roles in this process of interactivity and transnational collaboration. For one, it is important to note that this development is not entirely based on new ideas or concepts. Rather, some old concepts and visions, probably most importantly the notion that it is necessary to start civil unrest, have been globalized by the movement. Regional focuses and traditions of course have not ceased to exist, but it is noteworthy that today, Russian and European neo-Nazis speak about the vision of a civil war in much the same way American neo-Nazis have for years.

Secondly, it is evident from many cases that technological advances have made this international networking effort much easier. The internet and more specifically encrypted tools for chatting are vital in this regard.

But it is not just a matter of technology. The case of “Dekkit,” a German recruit for The Base, suggests that meeting digital contacts in person might be particularly attractive to such extremists. And the case of Fabian D. suggests that the online community can be so tight-knit that it resembles a real-life connection for all practical purposes, including for the soliciting of advice for attack plotting.

Lastly, political developments in Eastern Europe have proven to be crucial for the transnationalization of right-wing extremism: Not only did the conflict provide far-right extremists with the opportunity to fight as a recruit on behalf of ultra-nationalist or openly right-wing extremist battalions and organizations, but a whole political-militant apparatus has grown from the events of 2014 that is still very active today and serves as a major connection between the large right-wing extremist scenes of Ukraine and that of Western Europe and beyond.⁵⁹

In addition, Russia serves as a hub for the movement because groups like the Russian Imperial Movement are allowed to operate freely. RIM not only provides paramilitary training but openly tries to take on a leadership role for a global white supremacist movement preparing for a global civil war.

At this point in time, there are only two factors that seem to somewhat work against the increasing internationalization of the movement: the global COVID-19 pandemic and the heightened awareness of Western security institutions. The first obstacle will likely soon cease to exist. The second may not be as much of an obstacle as it would ideally be. Or at least not yet. While it is true that many governments have learned to understand the challenge, they still have not developed all the necessary tools to track it or stay ahead of the problem. To give just one example: Germany’s police authorities only started in 2019 to adapt their matrix for analyzing the threat level posed by individual jihadis in order to identify equally dangerous right-wing extremists.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, there is little to suggest that global right-wing extremist networking activities will come to an end any time soon.

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In the Shadow of Christchurch: International Lessons from New Zealand's Extreme Far-Right

By Milo Comerford, Jakob Guhl, and Elise Thomas

After the March 2019 Christchurch attacks, the Dominion Movement, New Zealand's first major Identitarian-inspired far-right extremist group, went underground. Only a few months later, however, the remaining members re-emerged as part of a successor group, Action Zealandia. This article analyzes Action Zealandia, outlining how the group fits into a small but persistent far-right extremist ecosystem in New Zealand, and presenting its growing links with violent extreme far-right movements internationally. While the group toes a careful line in its advocacy of violence, the reported involvement of multiple individuals linked to the group in violent extremist threats—from aspiring to establish a 'terror cell' in New Zealand to alleged threats against one of the Christchurch mosques attacked in 2019—demonstrates a 'gray area' that exists between so-called non-violent and violent extremism, serving as an instructive case study of broader trends within extreme far-right movements internationally.

Following the far-right terrorist attacks on the Al Noor mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch in March 2019, which killed 51 Muslim worshippers and was livestreamed using modern communications technology and social media,¹ combating violent extremism and terrorism became priority issues in New Zealand. A Royal Commission was established to inquire into the attack and to identify institutional blind spots or specific failures in trying to prevent the massacre.² Additionally, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern launched the Christchurch Call to Action, a pledge by governments and tech companies to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content on the internet.³

This attack did not occur in a vacuum, taking place in the context of rising far-right attacks globally,⁴ fueled in part by an online ecosystem of platforms, networks, and alternative media outlets that disseminate violent extremist narratives, ideologies, visual styles, and memes across national borders.

However, the attack's relationship to domestic far-right extremism was ambiguous: while the attack profoundly impacted New Zealand—and in particular, the country's Muslim community—it was highly international in nature. The terrorist was an Australian who identified as European and who cited the actions of London's mayor Sadiq Khan and Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel (in particular, their attitude to migration) as well as Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan (whom he described as the leader of Muslim migrants in Europe) as part of his perverse

justification for his violence.⁵ And while Christchurch represents the most striking example of violent extremism in New Zealand, extremist groups in the country have attempted to mobilize their supporters for decades and have continued to do so since the events of March 2019.

In a recent Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) study into the New Zealand online extremist ecosystem, researchers found the extreme far-right to have by far the most numerous and active online extremist presence, comprising around half the total posts of a dataset of over 600,000 extremist posts—dwarfing the activities of Islamist, extreme far-left, and conspiracy-based extremists like QAnon.⁵ The research shed light on a constellation of far-right extremist groups, ranging from anti-Muslim groups to ethnonationalists and white supremacists, presenting themselves as protecting New Zealand's cultural, racial, and religious identity from perceived existential threats. While overall the online extremist ecosystem in New Zealand is quite small, on a per capita basis New Zealand fits an international pattern, and is broadly consistent with the relative size of equivalent communities in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia.⁶

In this context, one of the most notable extremist groups in New Zealand is Action Zealandia, which draws inspiration from international far-right extremist groups such as the Nouvelle

a These individuals were referenced in the terrorist's manifesto "The Great Replacement."

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Droite,^b Rise Above Movement (RAM),^c and the pan-Scandinavian Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). Established several months after the Christchurch attacks, and in many ways defined by it, Action Zealandia provides important insight into a far-right threat in New Zealand that can be alternately characterized as both violent and non-violent, group-based and post-organizational, as well as domestic and international in nature.⁷

In this article, the authors explore the specific challenges posed by Action Zealandia as a group, as well as unpack the limitations of explaining New Zealand's far-right extremism threat through a purely organizational lens. The authors outline Action Zealandia's ideology and its heavy emphasis on digital propaganda. It also looks at Action Zealandia's ambivalent relationship with violence, whereby, for example, an individual member was arrested in connection with suspected violent extremist activity even though the group itself publicly disavows the violence of the 2019 Christchurch attacker.

Analyzing Action Zealandia on its own terms, and as an instructive case study of a broader far-right extremist threat picture, the article will also examine the increasing internationalism of the far-right extremist movement, both in terms of organization and inspiration, and look at the emergent challenges New Zealand faces with issues like far-right extremism in the military and law enforcement, which are shared by its Five Eyes^d and European peers.⁸

Structurally, this article begins with an overview of far-right extremism in New Zealand, before examining the ideological influences on Action Zealandia and its output. It then analyzes Action Zealandia and the New Zealand extreme far-right's ambivalent relationship with violence, before outlining the movement's international connections with violent extremists overseas. This article draws on primary research conducted by ISD throughout 2020 on New Zealand's online extremist ecosystem, media reporting on the offline activities of New Zealand's extreme far-right, as well as the wider literature on international far-right extremist mobilization.⁹

Far-Right Extremism in New Zealand

Up until the 2010s, New Zealand's relatively sparse extreme far-right scene was characterized by a loose conflagration of neo-Nazi and skinhead groups, including Fourth Reich, a white supremacist

group that had cells across New Zealand's prisons from 1994.¹⁰ Limited efforts at pan-Australasian extreme far-right coordination are evident through stand-alone extremist websites like Stormfront's "Downunder" sub-forum,^e but there is little evidence of meaningful international exchange.

However, in February 2018, New Zealand saw its first Identitarian^f group emerge in the form of the Dominion Movement, modeled on the Patriot Front in the United States^g and the Australian Neo-Nazi group Antipodean Resistance.^{11 h} The Dominion Movement group grew rapidly until the Christchurch attacks, forming branches in Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, and Wellington on the North Island, as well as Nelson and Christchurch on the South Island. Its growth came primarily through poster and sticker runs across New Zealand, as well as organizing group nature walks and banner drops, and participating in "solidarity actions" such as posting photographs of their members holding signs in support of jailed members of the Rise Above Movement.¹²

The Christchurch attacks forced the group underground, though many of its members re-emerged as part of Action Zealandia, which formed in July 2019.¹³ Adopting a more polished image, Action Zealandia describes itself as "a community for European New Zealanders"¹⁴ and a "movement of young nationalists." The group appears to heavily monitor its public-facing image, including anonymizing its members and making efforts to promote publicly acceptable topics through its website and social media channels, such as environmental protection.

Action Zealandia's Ideas and Output

Drawing on the ideas of the French Nouvelle Droite (New Right), which advocates for a "right-wing Gramscianism,"¹⁵ contemporary extreme far-right movements such as the European Identitarians as well as the American "Alt-Right" aim at reconquering the perceived cultural hegemony from the liberal-left through what they call

b The Nouvelle Droite (New Right) is a French extreme far-right movement that emerged in the 1960s. The Nouvelle Droite tried to distance itself from the old fascist far-right while continuing to adhere to anti-liberal, anti-egalitarian, and anti-Enlightenment ideas. To counter what they perceived as the increasing cultural dominance of the New Left from the 1960s onward, the Nouvelle Droite emphasized the importance of shaping culture in order to make its ideas acceptable to the wider public discourse. See Massimiliano Capra Casadio, "The New Right and Metapolitics in France and Italy," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 8:1 (2014): pp. 45-86.

c "R.A.M. (Rise Above Movement) is a white supremacist group based in Southern California whose members believe they are fighting against a 'modern world' corrupted by the 'destructive cultural influences' of liberals, Jews, Muslims and non-white immigrants. They refer to themselves as the 'premier MMA (mixed martial arts) club of the Alt-Right.' Originally based in Southern California, today their membership is mostly online, and leader Robert Rundo is living in Eastern Europe." "Rise Above Movement (R.A.M.)," Anti-Defamation League.

d The Five Eyes is an intelligence-sharing partnership between New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

e Stormfront is described by the Anti-Defamation League as "the oldest and one of the largest white supremacist websites on the Internet." "Stormfront," Anti-Defamation League, accessed June 22, 2021. For details on Stormfront Downunder, see "Factsheet: Stormfront Downunder," Bridge Initiative Georgetown University, November 19, 2019.

f Identitarianism is an (originally) pan-European ethnonationalist movement that focuses on the preservation of European culture and identity, drawing inspiration from the French intellectual far-right movement Nouvelle Droite.

g Patriot Front is a Texas-based white supremacist group established in 2017. More information is available at "Patriot Front," Anti-Defamation League, accessed June 22, 2021.

h Antipodean Resistance is an Australian neo-Nazi group established in October 2016 by users of the now-defunct fascist chat forum Iron March. The group's overtly National Socialist ideology and symbols, as well as its praise for contemporary violent extremist groups like National Action and the Nordic Resistance Movement, raised concerns about the threat of violence. However, to date, the group's activities do not appear to have gone beyond poster and the publication of online propaganda. Julie Nathan, "Antipodean Resistance: The Rise and Goals of Australia's New Nazis," Australian Broadcasting Corporation, April 20, 2018.

i Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Marxist philosopher who argued that the communist revolution that Marx had predicated had failed to materialize because the working class had been shaped by culture and ideology to believe in the legitimacy of the capitalist order. While the Nouvelle Droite do not support Gramsci ideologically, they draw on his ideas about the importance of "cultural hegemony," which they believed had been captured by the liberal-left. Tamir Bar-On, "Transnationalism and the French nouvelle droite," *Patterns of Prejudice* 45:3 (2011): pp. 199-223.



The Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, is pictured on March 15, 2021, two years after the deadly attack there. (Adam Bradley/SOPA Images/Sipa USA)(Sipa via AP Images)

“metapolitics.”^j By attempting to extend the Overton window (the range of ideas considered acceptable in mainstream political discourse) toward the extreme far-right, they hope to lay the cultural and intellectual groundwork for an eventual authoritarian transformation of liberal democracies.¹⁵

Taking inspiration from the communications and culture-focused efforts of international extreme far-right movements, Action Zealandia’s official branded outputs focus on influencing discussions in the digital environment. The group activities Action Zealandia conducts in the physical realm, such as hiking trips, litter collection, gym sessions, visits to monuments, and extensive sticker and poster campaigns, appear to be ultimately designed to produce digital content.

Through this digital content, Action Zealandia seeks to simultaneously build a recognizable brand, outline its ethnonationalist ideology, take stances on specific political issues and events, as well as recruit new followers and supporters. (Notably, women are excluded from membership of the group.)

Postering themes include demands for a boycott of China, pro-white messages in the wake of unrest in the United States following the death of George Floyd,¹⁶ support for Kyle Rittenhouse who allegedly killed two Black Lives Matter protestors in August 2020 in Kenosha, Wisconsin,^k through “Kyle Was Right” posters,¹⁷ and other international themes such as “Boer Lives Matter” banner-drops in solidarity with the white South Africans supposedly under threat from targeted violence by Black South Africans, as well as the use of Rise Above Movement stickers.¹⁸ Additionally, Action Zealandia has targeted the offices of two National Party MPs in Auckland with anti-China posters, sending a “message directly to the traitors in parliament.”¹⁹

Action Zealandia’s physical activities and digital outputs appear to be designed to provoke a reaction from politicians, journalists, activists, and the wider public. For example, a coordinated nationwide sticker campaign in September 2019 targeting university

^j Extreme far-right groups like the Identitarians or the “Alt-Right” believe that before being able to take political power, they need to make their ideas and values acceptable to a wider audience through cultural outputs, publications, and art. This overall approach of attempting to shift what ideas and values are considered legitimate is referred to as “metapolitics.”

^k The then 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse allegedly shot three protestors (killing two) during the unrest in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the shooting of Jacob Blake by Kenosha police officers on August 23, 2020, which left Blake paralyzed. Rittenhouse, who claims to have acted in self-defense, was part of a group of armed civilians who stated they wanted to protect property from potential rioters. Paige Williams, “Kyle Rittenhouse, American Vigilante,” *New Yorker*, June 28, 2021.

campuses led to University of Auckland students staging protests against the university because of its alleged failure to remove the material, generating national media coverage. A post on the Action Zealanda website approvingly noted the “high profile media attention” the group received from the protests, and other poster activities throughout 2019.²⁰

Beyond the transformation of offline activities into digital content, Action Zealanda also provides ongoing digital commentary on social, political, and ideological issues, both through blogs and its “Voice of Zealanda” podcast, for which the group frequently invites guests to discuss current events, ideology, organization, and strategy. One regular guest is the notorious New Zealand ideologue Kerry Bolton. Bolton has been involved in extreme-right movements for decades, founding the Satanist neo-Nazi groups Order of the Left Hand Path and Black Order,²¹ and has published dozens of books, which are sold via the London-based publisher Black House Publishing Ltd.²²

While the visual and linguistic style used by Action Zealanda appears to be heavily influenced by international Identitarian and ethnonationalist groups, it is notable that Action Zealanda appears more transparently supportive of anti-Semitic ideas and ‘scientific racism’ than many other like-minded groups. In the context of the Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd in the United States, for example, Action Zealanda published an article alleging that “Jewish power” controls Black Lives Matter. In an article on its website, Action Zealanda argued that “Blacks don’t have the necessary intelligence and ability to spin seductive webs of high-sounding words. But Jews do. And it’s Jews who have been the most effective creators of and propagandists for the progressive dogma of absolute and unequivocal equality between all human groups.”²³

An Ambivalent Relationship to Violence

Despite its extremist ideology, the activities of Action Zealanda described above are not violent, and the group’s official output does not call for violence. The distinction between non-violent and violent extremism is, however, more difficult to draw than it appears. Individuals and groups often move fluidly back and forth between non-violent and violent means to an extremist end, and there is often a significant ideological overlap between non-violent and violent groups.²⁴ In the context of an increasingly digital extreme far-right, acts of violence may also be inspired by nominally non-violent extremist ideologies.²⁵ In the case of Action Zealanda, an ambivalent stance by nominally non-violent groups toward violence may provide the mood music for individuals to autonomously prepare violent acts.

The relationship between violent extremist individuals and groups is especially complex in the context of an increasingly ‘post organizational’ far-right.²⁶ As scholars Colin Clarke and Bruce Hoffman have noted in the U.S. domestic violent extremism context, organizational structure is becoming less relevant to violent radicalization as “a confluence of ideological affinities is [becoming] more powerful in inspiring and provoking violence than the hierarchical ... organizational structures of the past.”²⁷

The genesis of Action Zealanda is closely tied to the complex question of political violence in New Zealand’s white nationalist circles. The group formed out of the ashes of the Dominion Movement, which disintegrated as a direct consequence of the Christchurch terror attack and subsequent law enforcement

crackdown. If the Christchurch terror attack had not taken place, it seems probable that the specific organization Action Zealanda would not exist.

In a podcast interview, an Action Zealanda member described the Christchurch attacks and crackdown as having a “purging effect” in which the leaders of existing white nationalist groups (primarily the Dominion Movement) fell away, and lower-ranking members came together to form Action Zealanda.²⁸ A key lesson that the current Action Zealanda members appear to have taken from this is that publicly advocating for political violence is ineffective and likely to backfire. Its website carefully and explicitly states that Action Zealanda seeks to promote white nationalism through positive, peaceful means, and that the group rejects “violence and terrorism as being directly counter-productive to these aims, as well as immoral.”²⁹

In an interview with a European white nationalist group, Action Zealanda stated that the Christchurch attacker “has had a largely negative effect. Accelerationism doesn’t work ... Pointless violence emboldens the state to persecute people with a Nationalist worldview ... The effect [of the attack] within New Zealand was that the police went on a witch hunt against people with a pro-white, nationalist, or even civic nationalist worldview.”³⁰

However, this public disavowal of violence conceals a more complex reality. In March 2020, a selfie of a man wearing a skull mask and sunglasses outside the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch (which had been targeted in the March 2019 terrorist attacks), alongside death threats against its Muslim congregants, were reportedly posted to a far-right Telegram channel that glorified the Christchurch attacks.³¹ Nineteen-year-old alleged Action Zealanda member Sam Brittenden was arrested in a police raid reportedly related to the threat.³² Although Brittenden was ultimately not charged over the mosque threat, he was convicted for failing to assist with a search warrant after repeatedly providing an incorrect passcode for his phone.³³ He had previously been convicted of disorderly behavior after making anti-Muslim slurs on the day after the Christchurch attacks,³⁴ and sentenced to 125 hours of community service and six months supervision.³⁵

During the same month, March 2020, leaked Telegram chats obtained by New Zealand investigative journalists revealed an individual linked to Action Zealanda aspiring to organize a terror cell in New Zealand under the name “Southern Order.”³⁶ Posting under the name “Matt,” the user was reported by New Zealand media to have participated in online chat groups with members of Atomwaffen in the United States and members of the NRM in Finland, while also praising The Base.³⁷ He discussed tactics, cell structure organization, and acquiring weapons on the black market. His proximity to Action Zealanda was shown by his reported posting of footage of the vandalism of the National Party offices (referenced earlier), taken from angles not found in material officially released by the group.³⁸ While “Matt” was not arrested or charged with any criminal offenses, his previous service in the New Zealand military as a private between 2014 and 2016, and reported connections to another soldier with links to an extreme far-right group in New Zealand,³⁹ reinforced growing international concerns around a trend of ‘entryism’ of far-right extremists within military and law enforcement.⁴⁰

In June 2020, it was also reported that another former soldier and serving reservist with the New Zealand Defence Force had attended early Action Zealanda events.⁴¹ The soldier was found

to have participated in extreme far-right channels on the gaming chat platform Discord. It has since been reported that the soldier is no longer serving in the reserves since July 2020, though it has not been confirmed by the individual or the New Zealand military whether he was dismissed or left voluntarily.⁴² In November 2020, it was announced that another soldier, who led Action Zealanda's predecessor group Dominion Movement, would face 17 charges by the New Zealand Defence Force relating to espionage and sharing military information that threatened New Zealand's national security.⁴³ His name and job title as well as the exact details of what information he allegedly sought to share with a foreign entity have not been made public.⁴⁴

Beyond these reported actions of individuals associated with the group, Action Zealanda's attitudes toward the Christchurch attacker and his actions also appear to be more ambivalent than the flat rejection its members have espoused in some interviews. One example of such rejection was when in an online radio broadcast, an Action Zealanda spokesperson was asked about the group's position on the Christchurch attacker. He responded that "We think he was a vile person who killed 50 people for no reason, why would we care about that guy?" He then went on to claim that he had "never looked into" the Christchurch attacker's ideology, and said "we don't agree with just killing civilians, that's fl[***]ed."⁴⁵

But this distancing from the Christchurch attacker is somewhat at odds with comments on a 4chan thread from August 2019 announcing the formation of the group. A poster who claimed to be a member of Action Zealanda responded to a comment about the Christchurch attacker by saying "It's crazy that he resides 15min away from me, but I can't get any contact even through prison mail," implying this alleged member of Action Zealanda had tried to contact the Christchurch attacker, however unsuccessful the attempt may have been.⁴⁶ Other recent posts on 4chan¹ supportive of Action Zealanda have utilized memes lionizing the Christchurch attacker, a figure that has become part of a pantheon of "Saints" within an extremist subset of 'Chan' imageboard subculture.⁴⁷

Such insights highlight that the actions and beliefs of individual members of Action Zealanda, or those associated with the group and engaging with their content, may not necessarily align with Action Zealanda's stated organizational positions. While Action Zealanda may continue to espouse non-violent actions through its official communications, its actions and content may nonetheless provide the ideological context for individual radicalization toward violent extremism.

International Connections

Action Zealanda has been highly active in building connections with other white nationalist and white supremacist groups internationally. Additionally, the group has a highly international following on its social media accounts, and routinely promotes the activities of international peers on YouTube and Telegram.⁴⁸ (Having been removed from Facebook in 2020, the group's Twitter account was suspended in June 2021 after a Twitter representative was criticized about the group's presence on the platform at a Christchurch counterterrorism conference in June 2021.⁴⁹ Action

Zealanda's YouTube channel also appears to have been recently taken down.) International groups that Action Zealanda has connected with through its podcast include such international ethnonationalist and neo-Nazi groups as La Rete (Italy), Patriotic Alternative and the New British Union (United Kingdom), the pan-Scandinavian Nordic Resistance Movement, Australian Action, and the National Justice Party (United States).⁵⁰ Many of these extremist groups have similarly ambivalent relationships to violent mobilization.⁵¹

While remaining firmly tied to the New Zealand context, Action Zealanda's social media presence and wider online footprint paints a picture of a group that sees itself as being part of an international extreme far-right scene. Building such international connections and audiences appears to serve multiple purposes for the group, from sharing propaganda to gathering information and learning from other white nationalist movements abroad.

For example, Action Zealanda has invited a member of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) to speak on its podcast,⁵² and has cited the group as a key inspiration in a number of other instances.⁵³ NRM is a pan-Scandinavian neo-Nazi movement that was initially established as the Swedish Resistance Movement in 1997, but is now active in Norway, Finland, and Denmark as well.⁵⁴ In 2020, NRM was banned in Finland because of its support for violence and mobilization against ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities.⁵⁵ According to the Swedish anti-racist organization EXPO, a quarter of NRM's members were indicted or convicted for violent crimes in 2015 alone, when there was a rise in far-right violence during the refugee crisis.⁵⁶

Action Zealanda has also featured Robert Rundo on its podcast, the founder of the Rise Above Movement (RAM) who is currently believed to be located somewhere in Europe evading riot charges in the United States.⁵⁷ Action Zealanda members have often cited RAM as a source of inspiration for their group, and have participated in a number of acts of international solidarity (mostly photographing themselves with banners) for members of RAM who are incarcerated for their role in the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.⁵⁸ On a podcast with Rundo, an Action Zealanda member claimed that "[RAM's videos are] that standard, the bar that they set is a massive inspiration for us."⁵⁹

Revealingly, an Action Zealanda member also asked Rundo for advice on what to do if a "young nationalist gets entangled with the feds." Rundo replied that members of the white nationalist movement "need to become more criminally minded, and it's a hard thing to do because we want to be the good guys and the right guys in history and we are, but the system is against us so we need to think more criminally-minded."⁶⁰ Action Zealanda podcasts have also featured Denis Kapustin (better known as Denis Nikitin), the founder of the White Rex clothing brand, a mixed martial arts promoter, and prolific white nationalist networker. Nikitin and Rundo are frequent collaborators on a range of projects, and both reportedly have links to neo-Nazi armed groups such as the Azov Battalion in Ukraine.⁶¹

Meanwhile, an Action Zealanda podcast featuring Joseph Jordan—a neo-Nazi of Latin American heritage who goes by the moniker "Eric Striker" and heads the white nationalist National

¹ 4chan is an anonymous imageboard created in 2003 that has played a foundational role in the development of "chan culture." See, for example, Blyth Crawford, Florence Keen, and Guillermo Suarez de-Tangil, "Memetic Irony And The Promotion Of Violence Within Chan Cultures," Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, December 2020.

Justice Party, an American group^m—justified the January 6 Capitol attacks by arguing it was an act of self-defense against Jews and “Zionist worshiper” politicians.⁶² In addition, Action Zealanda called for violence against two prominent tech company executives, saying they should be “lined up against the wall,” before casually adding that there would need to be a trial first.⁶³

These and other relationships fostered by Action Zealanda with international extremist groups with their own degrees of ambivalence to violence reflect a broader trend among white nationalist groups of publicly disavowing violence in favor of ‘self-improvement,’ community building, and propaganda that emphasizes physical fitness and a healthy lifestyle. At the same time, however, these groups promote narratives that can provide ideological support for violence, for example, through the systematic demonization and dehumanization of non-white people.

Conclusion

In a number of ways, the New Zealand extreme far-right group Action Zealanda is an instructive case study of broader trends found within extreme far-right movements internationally. Founded in the aftermath of the March 2019 Christchurch attacks, the group has had an ambivalent relationship with violence since its inception, in which it has distanced itself from violent mobilization in its public output, but multiple individuals who were either members of or linked to Action Zealanda are reported to have prepared for or threatened violent extremist activity. Action Zealanda therefore illustrates a ‘gray area’ that often exists between so-called non-violent and violent extremism.

In this way, the group also demonstrates the limitations of analyzing violent extremism through a purely organizational frame; indeed, using the term ‘organization’ when considering the impact of the group and its associates provides an overly narrow analytical lens.

But in its celebrating of, networking with, and taking inspiration from violent extreme right movements outside of New Zealand,

^m Formed in August 2020, the National Justice Party grew out of the white nationalist podcast and website “The Right Stuff” (TRS). The key figure behind TRS is Mike Peinovich, who was one of the more visible figures behind the “Alt-Right” when the movement began to receive national attention between 2015 and 2017. Howard Graves and Michael Edison Hayden, “White Nationalist Organization Forms Racist, Antisemitic Political Party,” Southern Poverty Law Center, August 2020.

Action Zealanda exhibits a notable global trend that sees groups mobilizing around highly localized grievances, while simultaneously increasingly looking outward for inspiration and connecting with like-minded ideological fellow travelers across national borders.

It is important not to overstate the threat from Action Zealanda and make it appear more significant than it is. Significantly, it is much less developed than some of the groups it emulates and reveres, such as NRM and RAM, whose activism is considerably more street-based. Rather, the great majority of Action Zealanda’s ‘official’ activity is confined to the online space. Action Zealanda is comparatively small (with an estimated membership between 50 and 100⁶⁴) and has not engaged in activities on the scale of those groups. Nor have members committed any known acts of extremist violence. Instead, individuals affiliated with the group have been reportedly involved in threatening such acts or laying the groundwork for them by aspiring to create a terror cell.

However, there remains considerable potential for escalation and deterioration. The group has been relatively persistent compared to its predecessors and has demonstrated a concerning relationship to some of New Zealand’s most credible violent extremism threats since the Christchurch attacks. And its international networking into a global extreme far-right ecosystem has the potential to inspire and encourage violence, whether from formal group members, or those inspired by its world view—which presents a range of perceived demographic threats to New Zealand as existential in nature and requiring radical action to combat.

Arguably, the real concern emanating from Action Zealanda and other similar groups is that although they at least superficially disavow violence, they are actively seeking to introduce white nationalist or white supremacist ideologies to individuals who may be susceptible to violent radicalization, as well as presenting a bridge connecting New Zealanders with violent groups internationally. Action Zealanda may thus serve as a vehicle for driving individuals—whether those who are members of Action Zealanda or others who simply consume its content autonomously—down a path that leads to violence, even if Action Zealanda itself remains publicly committed to not saying the quiet part out loud. In this way, the threat from groups like Action Zealanda may lie not in their actions as a group but rather in their status as a symbol and as an extremist content producer and amplifier of similar groups’ content and ideas, which might help inspire individuals toward violent extremist actions. **CTC**

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