

Insider Attacks by Domestic Extremists: Identifying Threats to National Homeland Security

18 February 2020

Key Judgments

Insider attacks by domestic extremists is not a new threat to National Homeland Security but it is an issue that has been exponentially growing throughout the past few decades. Domestic extremist - a term that has been long debated and distinguished by various definitions - is classified by the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) task force as, and for the purpose of this assessment, “individuals or groups mobilizing towards violence and to mitigate recruitment, support, facilitation, or engagement in ideologically motivated terrorism by nonstate actors in furtherance of political objectives.”

- Domestic extremist activities are becoming more prevalent in America over recent years and the line between distinguishing “terrorists” and “homegrown violent extremists” is becoming more complex since the events of September 11th.
- Some individuals may be exposed to certain risk factors or characteristics that make them predisposed to adopting extremist ideology, as well as aid analysts in obtaining a better understanding of what type of people to look for in cases of domestic terrorism.
- There are levels in which analysts categorize mobilization indicators of domestic extremists based on severity of concern, the imminent danger of the situation, time sensitivity, network of followers/the number of people involved, and the familiarity/accessibility one has to firearms, explosives, and other weapons.
- Extremist ideologies in the United States are diverse, usually from the far-right and far-left extremists, but can be greatly influenced by factors such as historic time period, age of the individual, educational background, military experience, and involvement in previous criminal activity.
- Legislation concerning domestic extremists and acts of terrorism are constantly changing and provide a series of consequences for those involved in acts of violent extremism or domestic terrorism.
- Identifying violent extremists and domestic terrorism through research analysis and intelligence sharing can help improve response tactics when addressing an attack, as well as implement better prevention methodologies - taking into consideration not only reactive measures but proactive measures.

Introduction

Insider attacks by domestic extremists is an increasingly growing concern that has developed over the past few decades and poses as one of the greatest modern threats to national security. A native-born United States citizen with malicious intent has the power to carry out acts of crime and violence towards other civilians, organizations, and disrupt the overall presence of public safety.¹ Understanding the proper signals used to identify domestic extremists, as well as their potential motives, will further aid in preventing and recognizing threats to national security.

Background

After the 9/11 attacks, the threat of terrorism has grown into a more complex issue, often overlapping with the concept of “domestic terrorism” and how one may define or differentiate a “terrorist” from a “homegrown violent extremist” (HVEs).² Some domestic extremists may act out in violence due to racial motivations or to rebel against the government or other figures of authority. Domestic extremists are unique from terrorists, however, because their motives are not always as clear. Attacks sometimes seem spontaneous while others are premeditated and target specific settings like schools, the workplace, crowded buildings, or large public gatherings. The only thing that is certain about violent domestic attacks is the intention to cause destruction, mass injury/death, and instill fear. Domestic extremists can sometimes be found holding important positions at the local and state levels, which can prove to be problematic when it comes to recognizing and combating violent plans before they reach fruition. HVEs could even be anyone found in roles of leadership that contain a certain degree of public trust among the community, such as: police officers, fire fighters, ex-military veterans, etc.

Recent Cases of Domestic Extremist Violence

- **November 2009:** Major Nidal Hasan of Fort Hood, Texas, shot and killed 13 people and injured 30 more when he opened fire in a soldier readiness center where he worked.
- **December 2015:** Syed Farook, a public health inspector of San Bernardino County, along with his wife, Tashfeen Malik, shot and killed 14 people and injured 22 more at an Inland Regional Center holiday party.
- **October 2016:** Mevlut Mert, an Ankara police officer, used his special security clearance to enter an art exhibition and assassinate Andrey Karlov, the Russian Ambassador to Turkey.
- **December 2017:** Nicholas Young, a transit officer of Washington, D.C, was convicted for attempting to provide support for the foreign terrorist group ISIS. Although no actual attack was committed, he symbolized the potential threat Americans experience daily concerning public safety.

Source: MCGOVERN, Ryan. "The Manchurian Responder? how Military and Federal Government Practices can Help State and Local Public Safety Agencies Prevent Malicious Insider Attacks TACKS." *Homeland Security Affairs* (03, 2018).

¹ McGovern (2018) defines a domestic extremist or “malicious insider” as “the person who has privileged access to non-public or proprietary domains and who seeks to do harm to the organization or public in furtherance of a terrorist objective.”

² The Department of Justice notes that violent extremists can have “racially and ethnically motivated” prospects, like those involved in “white supremacy,” as well as other motivations concerning “anti-government and anti-authority.”

Many domestic extremists tend to contain a certain set of risk factors that enable them to follow a pattern in violent extremist activity. Research has shown that many extremists struggle with the inability to cope with changes or perceived failures in relationships, academics, or careers. Extremists also typically show an unstable mental state and a history of violence, usually situations of domestic violence or violence against animals. An additional factor is the likelihood that they fall into social isolation or are unable to join and relate with others in standard social contexts. Ultimately the most alarming characteristic of extremists are their familiarity with, accessibility to, and possession of weapons or explosives.³

Substantiation

There are several different indicators that have been used to determine if a U.S. citizen is a threat to national security, or is a risk for committing extreme acts of violence against the American people.

Mobilization indicators are ranked from either a high, moderate or minimal level of diagnosticity and are placed in categories of either imminent, near-term, or long-term concern when it comes to severity and time sensitivity. The six most highly ranked factors to take note of is if someone is: 1) preparing and disseminating a martyrdom (video of a last will or final statement); 2) seeking religious or political justification for a planned violent act; 3) attempting to mobilize others to violence, especially other family members and peers; 4) seeking help from family, peers, or authority figures to enable travel to join terrorist groups overseas; 5) preparing to travel to fight with or support terrorist groups; 6) communicating the intent to engage in violent extremist activity, like a threat with justification for action (usually found on social media).⁴ More moderate but still extensively monitored indicators are if someone is: 1) suspiciously obtaining or attempting to obtain explosive precursors through illegal means; 2) simulating an attack on local or real-world targets; 3) surveilling potential targets; 4) inquiring about jobs that provide sensitive access; 5) conducting research for target or tactic selection; 6) suspicious sending of financial resources, electronic equipment, or survivalist gear to people or groups overseas; 7) receiving unexplained monies from third parties overseas; 8) expressing acceptance of violence as a necessary means to achieve ideological goals; 9) attempting to radicalize others, especially family and peers; 10) creating or joining a group that promotes violence to address perceived social, political, or ideological grievances; 11) having an acknowledged or implied membership in or association with violent extremist groups; 12) participating in online sites or groups that promote violent extremism; 13) communicating directly with violent extremists online; 14) seeking or claiming relationships with incarcerated or infamous violent extremists; 15) encouraging or advocating violent toward individuals, military or government officials, law enforcement, or civilians; 16) outbursts or violent behavior that results in exclusion or rejection by family or community; 17) producing violent extremist videos and messaging on social media; 18) expressing a desire to travel to conflict zone to fight with or support a terrorist group or idealizing living among other violent extremist groups overseas; 19)

³ Director of National Security. *Homegrown Violent Extremist: Mobilization Indicators*. PDF file. 2019. https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NCTC-FBI-DHS-HVE-Mobilization-Indicators-Booklet-2019.pdf

⁴ Director of National Security. *Homegrown Violent Extremist: Mobilization Indicators*. PDF file. 2019. https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NCTC-FBI-DHS-HVE-Mobilization-Indicators-Booklet-2019.pdf

engaging in suspicious travel activity; 20) employing new or increased use of concealment behavior; 21) deleting/manipulating social media and other online accounts to misrepresent location or hide group membership, contacts, or activity of violent extremism. Lastly, the minimal category that is still subjected to close observation is the: 1) suspicious building and/or testing of explosives; 2) suspicious or illegal acquisition of weapons and ammunition; 3) unusual purchase of military-style tactical equipment other than weapons; 4) suspicious physical or weapons training/attempts to seek technical expertise; 5) conducting suspicious financial transactions; 6) disposing of personal assets and belongs in an unusual manner; 7) unusual goodbyes or post-death instructions to family and peers; 8) promoting violent extremist narratives; 9) engaging in fights with people while advocating violent extremist ideology; 10) isolating oneself from family and peers, particularly if it is associated with extremist ideology; 11) adopting more than one violent extremist ideology; 12) rejecting non-violent voices in favor of violent extremist ideologies; 13) praising past successful or attempted attacks; 14) condemning behavior of family and peers based on violent extremist doctrine; 15) changing vocabulary, style of speech, or behavior to reflect hardened point of view or new sense of purpose associated with violent extremist causes; 16) researching or discussing ways to evade law enforcement; 17) lying to law enforcement officers/obstructing investigations.⁵

Extremist ideologies in the United States are very diverse and more prevalent over certain periods of time and among certain age groups with various educational backgrounds. Domestic terrorism threats are typically classified into four main categories: racially motivated violent extremism, anti-government/anti-authority extremism, animal rights/environmental extremism, and abortion extremism.⁶ Many of the “far right” groups tend to value white supremacy and anti-government or anti-authority ideologies while the “far left” groups tend to value ideologies concerning animal rights, environmental protection, and social justice. Other groups to consider are extremists with single-issue ideologies and extremists with Islamist ideologies. Research shows that around the mid-1970s, there was a significant increase in far-right extremist activity and that those groups are still the most prevalent today. After the attacks of September 11th, the activity of Islamic extremists also rose but are still significantly smaller than their far-right counterparts. The approximate percentage distribution of extremists are as follows from least to greatest: 15% Islamist, 21% single issue, 21% far-left, 43% far-right. Far-right extremists tend to be older - around the average age of 38 - while far-left extremists tend to be younger - around the average age of 38. Islamists are most commonly active around age 30. Education and college experience has also played a factor in characterizing the types of people who fall within extremist categories. Approximately 45% far-right extremists had some college, while far-left extremists had 75%, and Islamist extremists had 59%. It is also notable that nearly 30% of far-right extremists had military experience and 63% engaged in criminal behaviors before they adopted their extremist views.⁷

⁵ Director of National Security. *Homegrown Violent Extremist: Mobilization Indicators*. PDF file. 2019. https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NCTC-FBI-DHS-HVE-Mobilization-Indicators-Booklet-2019.pdf

⁶ "Confronting the Rise of Domestic Terrorism in the Homeland." FBI. May 08, 2019.

<https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/confronting-the-rise-of-domestic-terrorism-in-the-homeland>

⁷ Forum on Medical and Public Health Preparedness for Disasters and Emergencies. *Countering Violent Extremism Through Public Health Practice: Proceedings of a Workshop*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2017 Feb 17. 2, Understanding Violent Extremism. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK537578/>

Known Violent Domestic Extremist Organizations

- Alpha 66
- Animal Liberation Front
- Army of God (USA)
- Aryan Nations
- Earth Liberation Front
- Jewish Defense League
- Ku Klux Klan
- Phineas Priesthood

Source: "Outline of Terrorism in the United States." Wikipedia. July 10, 2019.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_of_terrorism_in_the_United_States.

Scope of the Industry

The concept of “domestic terrorism” is constnatly being redefined by the public, law enforcement, intelligence analysts, and legislators, as well as provide serious consequences to those involved in domestic terrorism activities. The USA PATRIOT Act recently changed legislation stating that extremist organizations could face civil seizure of their assets by the government without a prior hearing, or without being convicted of a crime, if they are planning or supporting an attack against the United States. The government also has the power to request a judge to issue an order to disclose education records and information from the National Education Statistics Act (NESEA), if they believe the information is necessary for investigating domestic or international terrorism. Single-jurisdiction search warrants are also allowed in which the government can go before a Federal magistralge judge in any district in which any terrorism activities may have taken place, and can obtain a warrant to search a person or property within another district. This would force extremists from other states (who want to try and repeal the warrant) to appear before the court in the state the warrant was issued - sometimes being from a state on the other side of the country. Certain domestic terrorist incidents may also allow the IRS to disclose taxpayer information to specific federal law enforcement agencies. Individuals involved in domestic terrorist activities are also reported to the Department of Agriculture and are not permitted to access regulated biological agents and toxins.⁸

Outlook

Violence committed by domestic extremists continues to be one of the greatest threats faced by national security and can be more identifiable through research analysis and prevention methodologies. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has been working with organizations across the U.S. to try and combat extremists from gathering and recruiting in communities through increased exercises, workshops, and briefings among community leaders. DHS is also working more consistently with local and state authorities, as well as the private sector, to try and disseminate relevant

⁸ "How the USA PATRIOT Act Redefines "Domestic Terrorism"." American Civil Liberties Union.
<https://www.aclu.org/other/how-usa-patriot-act-redefines-domestic-terrorism>.

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intelligence to other agencies in a timely manner and keep ahead of new trends and tactics for quicker response. The Office for State and Local Law Enforcement (OSLLE) is being used to work directly with first responders to help them better prevent, prepare for, and respond to acts of domestic terrorism. Instituting greater public awareness programs for United States citizens is one of the biggest notable strategies that is being used by DHS to combat domestic terrorism. Some of the greatest signs of domestic terrorism can be seen by those living in the community and one of the most effective ways for it to be recognized is if someone is willing to report it. There are five major information sharing programs/organizations that help strengthen communication among the domestic security community: the National Network of Fusion Centers; the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative; the National Terrorism Advisory System; If You See Something, Say Something; the Homeland Security Information Network. Sharing information with each other is critical in the world of public safety and intelligence analysis.⁹

⁹ "Did You Know? Four Ways DHS Is Working to Prevent Terrorism at Home." Department of Homeland Security. December 13, 2019. <https://www.dhs.gov/blog/2017/08/16/did-you-know-four-ways-dhs-working-prevent-terrorism-home>.

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