Congressional Testimony

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Hearing

"THE DYNAMIC TERRORISM LANDSCAPE AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR AMERICA"

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Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko, and Members of the Committee: I would like to

thank you for your service to our country and for calling attention to the critical issue of

changing trends in global terrorism. I am honored to be here. My name is Cynthia Miller-Idriss,

and I am a Professor in the School of Public Affairs and the School of Education at the American

University in Washington, D.C., where I also direct the Polarization and Extremism Research

and Innovation Lab (PERIL). I have been studying the dynamics of violent extremism globally

for over twenty years. I am the author of *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right,*

along with two books focused on extremism in Germany (*Blood and Culture* and *The Extreme*

Gone Mainstream). I want to acknowledge the support of my research team at PERIL, whose

assistance was invaluable in preparing my testimony today.[1]

SCOPE AND SCALE

Today's terrorism landscape includes a diverse ideological range of international and domestic

movements and groups. There is no agreement– even across agencies within the U.S.

government, but also internationally– on terms or definitions across the terrorism and extremism

spectrum. Violent extremist movements that use terrorism (the use of violence in order to

intimidate or coerce civilians or influence the policy of a government) as a tactic are motivated

by a range of supremacist, anti-government, anti-establishment, and anti-democratic ideologies

that take a variety of organizational forms both within the U.S. and globally.[2] This includes

groups advocating for attacking Western governments and societies, overthrowing the U.S.

government, calling for race wars or a white ethnostate, and seeking to collapse economic and

social systems. In the domestic violent extremism (DVE) spectrum, the organizational forms of

these movements include unlawful militias, violent anarchists, sovereign citizens, white

supremacist extremists such as neo-Nazis, violent environmental and animal rights extremists, some single-issue extremist groups like violent anti-abortion groups, as well as violent male supremacists and violent involuntary celibates (incels). In this testimony, I follow the terminology from research and reports being cited, though it is important to note that these terms are not fully interchangeable. Domestic violent extremism (DVE), for example, includes extremism from across the ideological spectrum. I use the terms "far-left" or "far-right" to refer to parts of the DVE spectrum when citing sources that use those terms, like the Global Terrorism Index (GTI). I also use terms like racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE), right-wing extremism, and white supremacist extremism (WSE) when citing reports or studies from U.S. and global agencies and experts that use those terms.

Trends in the U.S. terrorism landscape have changed rapidly over the past several years. While Islamist terror has been the historical focus of U.S. and global counterterrorism efforts in the post-9/11 era, and continues to have the greatest lethality globally,[3] far-right terrorism has escalated rapidly across the West. Far-right terrorism now significantly outpaces other forms of terrorism in the United States, including terrorism from far-left movements and from individuals inspired by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, according to a recent report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). That report notes that "right-wing attacks and plots account for the majority of all terrorist incidents in the United States since 1994."[4] Within the DVE landscape, the most pressing threats to civilians and elected officials-- in terms of lethality, plots foiled, recruitment, and the circulation of propaganda, as documented in multiple threat assessments issued by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) over the past two years[5]-- comes from white supremacist extremist and antigovernment extremism movements and groups, which sometimes

overlap and mutually reinforce one another.[6] These trends are reflected in law enforcement investigations. As of September 2021, the FBI reported it had 2,700 open investigations into domestic violent extremism, which is more than double the number open in the summer of 2017.[7] Also in 2020, authorities nationwide arrested nearly three times as many white supremacists as they did in 2017.

This does not mean the threat from jihadi terrorism has fully abated, either in the U.S. or abroad. In Europe, jihadi terrorism still outpaces far-right terror as the most critical threat,[8] but far-right terrorism and extremism are growing rapidly there as well. The top British counterterrorism official, Neil Basu, recently described right-wing extremism as the United Kingdom's "fastest growing threat," and in Germany, violent crimes motivated by right-wing extremism rose by ten percent from 2019 to 2020.[9] Across the West (Australia, New Zealand, Western Europe, and North America), far-right terrorist incidents have increased globally by 250% over the past five years and were responsible for 82% of deaths from terror in 2019, according to the most recent Global Terrorism Index report.[10]

The U.S. has witnessed increases in the pace, scope, and scale of far-right violence and the normalization of the extremist ideas that drive it. 2019 was the most lethal year for domestic terrorism in the U.S. since 1995– 48 people were killed in attacks carried out by domestic violent extremists, 39 of which were carried out by white supremacists. In 2020, the number of domestic terrorist plots and attacks in the United States reached its highest level since 1994; two-thirds of those were attributable to white supremacists and other far-right extremists. And last year, reports to the Anti-Defamation League of white supremacist propaganda—in the form of fliers, posters, banners, and stickers posted in locations such as parks or college campuses—hit an all-time high of more than 5,000, nearly twice the number reported in the previous year. Traditional

counterterrorism tools in the U.S. foiled only 21 of the 110 known domestic terrorist attacks and plots[11] in 2020, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

TRENDS AND IDEOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE

Historically, counterterrorism officials across the world have organized their work around clearly identifiable groups and movements, which were considered ideologically distinct from one another. Today, however, there is growing convergence across previously disparate ideologies in online extremist networks,[12] including across far-right accelerationist and Salafi-Jihadi extremist groups.[13] A new report from the UK-based International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) traces convergence in common beliefs and frameworks between neo-fascist accelerationists and Salafi-Jihadists that includes shared support for antisemitism, belief in a natural hierarchy, racial and cultural supremacism, anti-modernism, heteronormativity and traditional family structures, and anti-government sentiment. There is cross-movement admiration, especially from far-right accelerationists toward Salafi-Jihadists, whose "militant successes" they see as clear evidence for the possibility of the success of committed traditional goals and violent tactics against Western governments.

Both DVE and international terrorist groups, in other words, are united by an overlapping set of beliefs involving supremacist hierarchies that falsely claim inferiority and superiority between groups of people and promote anti-democratic beliefs that support authoritarianism, refuse to protect minority rights, or reject other core tenets of democracy (like freedoms of speech and press or the rule of law). They share commitments to misogyny and male supremacism, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, xenophobia, and antigovernment beliefs. These extremist ideologies are also often rooted in conspiratorial and fantastical beliefs about calls for

restoration (of the Caliphate or a white ethnostate) and a desire for a post-apocalyptic, post-race-war civilization. This vision includes an obligation to use violence as a solution to accelerate the end times through the collapse of social, political, and economic systems that will precede the Phoenix-like rebirth of a new civilization.

The increasing blurriness of divisions across previously separate ideological movements–as well as actual coalitions that are emerging in spontaneous and planned ways across distinct groups and movements– challenge traditional counterterrorism approaches that that rely on distinct groups that can be infiltrated, surveilled, and monitored over time.[14] Ideologically, this kind of hybridization and blurriness is being revealed in many ways. For example, recently far-right extremists have simultaneously valorized the Unabomber[15] and praised the Taliban.[16] A re-launched white supremacist group announced a new "Bolshevik focus"[17] calling for the liquidation of the capitalist class. A burgeoning ecofascist youth subculture—spread largely through social media imageboard accounts and commercial merchandise—celebrates nature worship and rootedness within a physical homeland while calling for a white ethnostate. Some anti-government "boogaloo" (code for civil war) adherents who advocate a new civil war marched alongside 2020 racial injustice protesters because of shared anger at law enforcement.[18]

In many ways, the phenomenon is nothing new. Extremist scenes and movements have experienced internal fissures, infighting and fragmentation for years due to differences in beliefs about tactics (such as the use of violence), conflicting views on parts of their ideology (such as about Jews and whiteness) or restrictions on who can be members (such as women). Increasingly, this conflict is occurring not just across relatively bounded groups but among a broad muddling of ideological beliefs within domestic and international extremist scenes, movements and individuals.[19] These trends are different from previous iterations of extremist

fracture and reformation. We are seeing a fragmentation and reassembling of groups and movements that are willing to unite for specific reasons even when their overall objectives do not align. The transformation is taking place both organizationally and in ad hoc, or "post-organizational" forms.[20] On the organizational side, political violence is emerging from a loose new coalition that spans the extremist spectrum in ways that confuse the ideological basis typically understood to be at the root of terrorist and extremist violence. On the post-organizational side, exposure to extremist content online and radicalization to ideologies and violence outside the boundaries of organized groups is increasing.[21] Through online encounters with propaganda, disinformation and extremist ideas, individuals are increasingly able to access extremist content and become radicalized without needing group membership or interaction.

There are at least four reasons for the increased muddling of ideological rationales:

- the increasing ability of cross-ideological concepts to mobilize violence
- rising event-driven violence
- tactical convergence and cross-group learning around accelerationism, and
- transformations in communication infrastructure (e.g. online ecosystems)

Mobilizing concepts refer to ideas that have a simultaneous call to action.[22] They are different from traditional ideological frameworks, which are rooted in more clearly articulated beliefs or theories about how political or economic systems should work, such as anarchism, communism, or fascism. Mobilizing concepts, on the contrary, can be applied to a wide range of ideological frames or justifications. They include the notion of the "boogaloo" (a code word for a second civil war), the concept of the "three percenters" (based on the false claim that it took only three percent of colonists to rise up against the British), and the idea of a threat to "Western values." All three justifications have the potential to mobilize significant cross-ideological

support around a concept, rather than an ideology. These kinds of concepts can draw people together into violent action even when they do not agree on specific ideological beliefs.

Event-driven political violence and extremism refers to relatively spontaneous coalitions across ideological groups and movements that emerge around a common protest or demonstration. State and national protests related to coronavirus mandates or second Amendment protests are examples, as is the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Event-driven ideological coalitions emerge based on opportunities to assemble larger groups of people by focusing on the lowest common denominator that unites them, thereby creating a temporary convergence across different extremist ideologies and groups.

It's not only concepts and events that lead to cross-ideological muddiness and coalition-building. There has also been increasing strategic and tactical convergence across ideologies, especially around the idea of accelerationism.[23] Accelerationism is a goal and a tactic drawn on by a variety of movements that are united around the objective of overthrowing the country's prevailing political and social order.[24] Anarchists may promote the tactic to accelerate violence against capitalism or law enforcement, while anti-government extremists may use it to target elected officials or government buildings. Accelerationist objectives converge around the idea of inspiration; their promoters see their goals not as mere terrorist retaliation or intimidation but, rather, as focused on inspiring others to undertake similar violence and accelerate the collapse of systems that extremists believe must be demolished and reconstructed. As a strategic orientation, the tactic has been growing across the political and ideological spectrum.

Fourth and finally, the new information infrastructure has also helped muddle ideological rationales. Today, extremist content is readily available online, in the form of manifestos, memes, videos and audio that anyone can produce and share. Everyone is just a few clicks away

from an ever-expanding series of rabbit holes that offer up whole worlds of disinformation and hate. Digital media shapes how people encounter and share ideological content, propaganda, and disinformation that can mobilize to violence.[25] For example, the broad use of hyperlinks, algorithmic recommendation systems, and other features of online technology make it much easier for someone with a grievance to leapfrog from left-wing environmental extremism to conspiracy theories to anti-civilizational deep ecology[26] to far-right "national anarchism"[27] to the "boogaloo movement" and beyond. Increasingly, ideological motivations for terrorist and extremist violence follow a 'choose-your-own-adventure' approach in which individuals accumulate an ever-evolving set of fragmented ideological commitments, extremist identities and conspiracy beliefs.

In addition to these overarching trends, it is worth noting that global conflicts– as always– also play a role in these kinds of spontaneous and evolving mobilizations. The escalating conflict between Ukraine and Russia, for example, is being actively discussed in encrypted white supremacist extremist channels online in ways that raise concerns. Like other global geopolitical conflicts, the Ukraine-Russia situation creates an opportunity for extremists to leverage momentum to recruit white supremacist foreign fighters who seek training to use "back home." These foreign fighters want to meet one another and network, to mobilize and recruit others, and otherwise intensify their engagement to the cause. The looming conflict has created an opportunity for extremists to spread anti-Semitic conspiracies about a so-called Jewish plot against Russia or a "Jewish war" that pits whites against whites. We should be alert to other potential ripple effects for extremist groups, particularly given the transnational nature of online communication across white supremacist extremist groups.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The rapid transformations in online extremist communications and the ongoing fragmentation and blurriness across various ideologies challenge current counter-extremism approaches. As violence becomes more spontaneous, less organized, and more tied to online radicalization, terrorist acts become harder to prevent with strategies that rely on countering organized plots and identifying formal group hierarchies. Counterextremism tools designed to address threats from fringe groups - as they currently exist - cannot meaningfully confront the evolved threats we face today without a broader, multisectoral, whole-of-society commitment to prevention and early intervention.

Our country requires serious investment in strategies to reduce the fertile ground in which anti-democratic and violent extremist ideologies thrive– through what are known as public health approaches to preventing violent extremism.[28] In the medical world, experts have learned that it is not sufficient to only treat the symptoms of diseases like diabetes or cardiac disease once they appear—rather, communities work to educate everyone through public health classes and campaigns that teach the behavioral and attitudinal choices people can make about diet and exercise that can reduce their vulnerability to diseases. The same is true for prevention of terrorism. We can build more resilient communities that recognize and reject disinformation, propaganda, and reduce the fertile ground in which violent extremism thrives. To do this, Congress must take immediate steps to build multi-agency and multi-sectoral initiatives that work to prevent radicalization to violence and intervene by creating early off-ramps in radicalization processes. This includes investments in proven inoculation strategies that reduce people's vulnerability to both the ideologies and the persuasive tactics of extremist groups and movements. We need scalable interventions to reduce people's vulnerability to online

propaganda, antisemitic and other conspiracy theories, and other forms of online manipulation, including through digital and media literacy training. We also need to work to reduce high rates of polarization and the kinds of moral disengagement and dehumanization that are demonstrated precursors to political violence. Federal, state, and local governments should be funding serious and sustained educational and community prevention and intervention programming, along with a reinvestment in civic education and other efforts to strengthen democratic norms and values. We also need to commit to trans-Atlantic and global collaboration and mutual learning on these shared challenges, by regularly communicating not only about law enforcement and intelligence strategies, but also about prevention and intervention approaches. There are good lessons from the multi-agency, multi-sectoral, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches that our allies have taken, especially in New Zealand, Germany, and Norway, from which we can learn as we create and adapt strategies of our own.

These kinds of interventions are not an immediate fix to the growing problem of extremist violence and terrorism—rather, they reflect a need for investments across the short, medium, and longer terms. And it is important to note that these are not options that involve censorship or teaching ideological beliefs in any way—after all, no one wants the federal government to be engaged in policing people's beliefs. But the U.S. government's focus on using conventional counterterrorism tools alone fails to account for the current, unchecked spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, propaganda targeting racial and religious minorities and the increasing dehumanization of those with whom one disagrees.[29] Such precursors to violence need to be addressed by modernized counterterrorism tools and frameworks created specifically to address the threats to this nation laid out in this testimony.

CONCLUSION

In sum, there is clear convergence across the extremist and terrorist spectrum in supremacist and anti-government beliefs, along with cross-ideological commitments to antisemitism, misogyny, and xenophobia. These areas of convergence are part of what fuel increasingly blurry ideologies and the emergence of strange coalitions across previously distinct groups, as more and more people encounter fragmented bits of ideologies online and mobilize around common grievances and events where spontaneous and planned violence can occur.

Policymakers will not be able to solve today– or tomorrow's–extremism with the surveillance and securitized tools honed in yesterday's battles. We must refocus those tools and broaden our efforts to include early prevention of—and intervention in— pressing extremist threats, with direct investments that work to reduce such threats to democracy in the first place. Understanding the nature of the evolving problem is an essential first step toward those goals.

ENDNOTES

[1] With gratitude to researchers and staff at American University's Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) who helped prepare this written testimony: Sarah Bartholomew, Emily Caldwell, Meili Criezis, Pasha Dashtgard, Brian Hughes, Jacqueline Belletomasini Kosz, Emily Pressman, Wyatt Russell, Katie Spann, Sarah Ruth Thorne, JJ West, and Kesa White.

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