



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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Hearing Statement of Intelligence & Counterterrorism Subcommittee Chairwoman Elissa Slotkin (D-MI)

Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism: The Transnational Threat **April 29, 2021**

I want to thank our witnesses from the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State for being here today to discuss a complex and pressing topic that deals directly with our safety here at home. As the President said last night: “We won’t ignore what our intelligence agencies have determined to be the most lethal terrorist threat to the homeland today: white supremacy is terrorism.” With that in mind, our Subcommittee is meeting today to explore the threats posed by transnational racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, or RMVEs.

Our focus today is on the connections between individuals and groups here in the United States, who use violence to further their racially or ethnically-driven political goals; and the growing number of foreign groups who share their aims, ideologies, and violent designs. While the information our Intelligence Community has on some of these foreign groups is admittedly less than we’d like, the IC has assessed that domestic racially and ethnically motivated violent extremist groups which advocate for the superiority of the white race have “the most persistent and concerning transnational connections” of all US domestic violent extremists.

Through these connections, they spread propaganda, train, and attempt to collaborate in carrying out violent acts. Given their relative ease of travel and communication, labeling these groups, their leaders, and their supporters as what they are is all the more important to curb this threat at home and abroad. That said, it remains true that foreign groups with transnational ties span a broad range of ideologies, including everyone from white supremacists and radical Islamic terrorists. This isn’t a new or unfamiliar threat: it’s one we’ve confronted in various forms, for decades. But over the past few years, the United States and countries around the world have seen a surge in violence and terrorism perpetrated by these kinds of organizations. This isn’t just an American threat, it’s a global one.

Many of these foreign groups are downright eager to use deadly violence to advance their goals. They are often heavily armed, such as the Nordic Resistance Movement. They are trained in firearms and communications security tactics. They are often coordinated. And they are increasingly global. Another example: the Russian Imperial Movement’s leadership was finally named as Specially Designated Global Terrorists last year, by Secretary Pompeo, after recruiting and training followers for urban assaults — like the one its trainees carried out in Gothenburg, Sweden. Combat 18, which started in the UK, has similarly organized around neo-Nazi principles, and as recently as 2019 was linked to the assassination of a German politician.

In recent years, we’ve seen individual Americans reaching out to foreign groups, and connecting over common ideology, tactics, and training. A handful of Americans have even sought to travel overseas to take up arms and fight alongside these groups. We saw it, for instance, in September 2019, when a U.S. Army soldier at Fort Riley — who was planning to travel to Ukraine to fight with the Azov Battalion, a paramilitary militia — was arrested for distributing bomb-making instructions. We have seen this for twenty years, as individual Americans get radicalized online, seek out groups like Al-Qa’ida in Yemen,

and share tactics, ideology, and — in some cases — carry out deadly attacks in the United States. Just as we in the government have spent significant effort to root out all these individual Americans, so too should we care about American white supremacists sharing tactics and training across national lines. To that end, given the threats of violence from white supremacist extremists, we need to look at their links to foreign organizations — especially as the barriers to communicate, plan, recruit, and train internationally with their ideological sympathizers and partners have nearly disappeared.

My colleagues here this morning were also with me on January 6th, as we experienced a firsthand manifestation of the threat we are going to talk about today. We all saw the havoc domestic terrorists and other rioters caused as they tried to upend our democratic process, and we mourn the loss of life that resulted. As the dust settles from that attack — and hundreds of the insurrectionists have been charged with an assortment of crimes — we are beginning to see connections between some of the more organized groups connected to that attack, and sympathetic groups that have taken root in parts of Europe, Australia, and elsewhere. For example, The Proud Boys, which has had a number of its members indicted on conspiracy charges around January 6th, has spawned local chapters not just across the U.S. but also in Britain, Norway, and Australia. Canada is so concerned that they have made the decision to list the Proud Boys, as well as The Base and the Atomwaffen Division, as foreign terrorist organizations. That is something we will need to discuss here today.

I spent a significant amount of my career examining the connections between terrorists and their networks in the Middle East, and I've been surprised by the vast amount of publicly available information that demonstrates the international connections of some of these U.S.-based violent extremist groups, especially ones promoting a white supremacist ideology. We can see for ourselves that these domestic groups are generating — and, in many cases, are exporting — a unique brand of terrorism. And, they're learning lessons from plots, propaganda, and attacks that are similarly driven by hate and violence abroad.

The State Department's move last year to designate the Russian Imperial Movement as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (or SDGT) group was an unprecedented and important first step in beginning to address this threat, but it didn't go nearly far enough, and the time to take further action is now. Earlier this month, I sent a letter to Secretary of State Blinken asking him to use publicly available evidence, along with intelligence our government has, to determine whether certain foreign white supremacist groups should be labeled as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, under the Department of State's formal process and criteria. If they couldn't be labeled an FTO, I asked that they be labeled an SDGT. If designated as an FTO, the U.S. can limit a foreign group's financial, property, and travel interests. An SDGT designation allows for the blocking of the group's assets, as well as those of associated individuals or subgroups — but this designation does not restrict travel to the United States, though it likely flags those individuals in our numerous watch lists.

In the Department's response to me, which we received last week, the State Department emphasized that a lack of updated, credible information and intelligence about these foreign groups is one of the "important limitations" they face when considering groups for designation. This is an issue I'll be raising directly with the Intelligence Community this week. I had hoped to raise this issue with leadership from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence today, but unfortunately they were unable to participate in this hearing. Nonetheless, I'm eager to hear from our witnesses about the level and quality of the intelligence we've collected on these organizations thus far and how we can ensure the State Department has the information and tools it needs to make these designations, if they're deemed to meet the appropriate criteria.

The challenge of domestic violent extremism is one that we need to confront and take on here at home, within our communities, and with careful respect for our domestic laws, civil rights, and civil liberties. But any solution will require an understanding of these transnational ties and trends, as well as coordination with our allies. Additionally, we need to see a much more robust, coordinated effort between government and private sector companies to take on this challenge — particularly companies that operate social media platforms, which we know are abused to spread racially and ethnically motivated extremist ideology, worldwide.

For our government, this issue sits at the crossroads of two agencies, uniquely charged with keeping us safe at home, and encouraging peace, liberty, and prosperity abroad. Their different vantage points will shed important light on this topic, and help us understand how Congress can effectively confront the violent extremist threats that are rapidly taking root in communities large and small across the country, and across the world.

I look forward to hearing how your agencies are engaged in this fight and how we, as members of Congress, can help.

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