



JOINT INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN

7 April 2020

(U//FOUO) Domestic Violent Extremists Likely to Continue Exploiting COVID-19 Pandemic to Incite or Engage in Violence

(U) Scope

(U//FOUO) This *Joint Intelligence Bulletin (JIB)* is intended to provide information about the potential exploitation of the COVID-19 pandemic by domestic violent extremists (DVEs) for the purpose of committing hate crimes, acts of violence, or inciting others to commit violence.^a Among the broad category of DVEs, racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs), militia extremists, and others have called for intentionally spreading the virus or retaliating against perceived government overreach in response to the pandemic.^{b,c} This *JIB* is provided to assist federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial counterterrorism and law enforcement officials to effectively deter, prevent, preempt, or respond to incidents and terrorist attacks in the United States.

^a (U//FOUO) FBI and DHS define 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. The mere advocacy of political or social positions, political activism, use of strong rhetoric, or generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics may not constitute extremism, and may be constitutionally protected.

^b (U//FOUO) FBI, DHS, and NCTC define **racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism (RMVE)** as threats involving the potentially unlawful use or threat of force or violence, in furtherance of political and/or social agendas, which are deemed to derive from bias—often related to race or ethnicity—held by the actor against others, including a given population group.

^c (U//FOUO) FBI and DHS define **militia extremists** as individuals who seek, wholly or in part through unlawful acts of force or violence, based on their belief that the US government is purposely exceeding its Constitutional authority and is attempting to establish a totalitarian regime. Consequently, these individuals oppose many federal and state laws and regulations, particularly those related to firearms ownership. Militia extremists take overt steps to violently resist or facilitate the overthrow of the US Government. The mere advocacy of political or social positions, political activism, use of strong rhetoric, or generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics may not constitute extremism, and may be constitutionally protected.

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(U//FOUO) Domestic Violent Extremist Attacks and Plotting during COVID-19 Pandemic

(U//FOUO) In two incidents since March, DVEs have sought to conduct, or conducted attacks citing the COVID-19 pandemic as a factor in the timing or motivation of their attacks. A DVE in California cited online conspiracy theories and the potential for the imposition of martial law to justify his attack, while an RMVE in Missouri cited the potential increased media reaction as motivation for plotting an attack on a medical center.

- » (U//FOUO) On 31 March, a DVE, who was a train engineer, allegedly attempted to damage a naval hospital ship docked in the Port of Los Angeles by purposely derailing a train he was operating. According to statements he made to law enforcement after the derailment, the DVE shared conspiracy theories about the true purpose of the ship, discussed its purpose as “segregating us” and stated, “you only get this chance once... the whole world is watching.”
- » (U//FOUO) In March, an RMVE, who has since been disrupted, discussed an attack plan targeting a medical center in Missouri on 24 March using a time-delayed vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED). The subject cited the likely increased impact and media attention on the health sector during the coronavirus pandemic as a reason to accelerate the timing and selection of a healthcare facility.

(U//FOUO) Exploitation of COVID-19 Pandemic to Encourage Future Attacks and Hate Crimes by RMVEs

(U//FOUO) Some RMVEs who advocate for the superiority of the white race seek to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to bolster their narratives and encourage attacks and hate crimes against minorities, including Jewish and Asian Americans.^d Some RMVEs claim government responses to the pandemic could crash the global economy, hasten societal collapse, and lead to a race war. These claims dovetail with a version of accelerationist beliefs some RMVEs hold and could appeal to some individuals in the West experiencing economic hardship, job loss, political frustration, and social isolation, inciting them to commit acts of violence.^e

- » (U//FOUO) RMVEs have sought to incite others to conduct attacks against perceived enemies by calling for others to intentionally infect individuals at locations, such as law enforcement field offices, government buildings, public transportation, retail outlets, and other locations frequented by minority populations.

(U//FOUO) Potential Violent DVE Reactions Influenced by Online Conspiracy Theories Regarding COVID-19 Pandemic

(U//FOUO) Some DVEs are probably being influenced by online conspiracy theories describing the pandemic as a government-perpetrated hoax. Historically, some DVEs have reacted violently to misinformation they viewed as authentic. Militia extremists particularly have an enduring

^d (U//FOUO) The FBI defines a **hate crime** as a criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender's bias against a race, religion, ethnicity/national origin, disability, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation. For purposes of this JIB, domestic violent extremists and US persons who perpetrate hate crimes are referred to as domestic actors.

^e (U//FOUO) **Accelerationism** is a concept suggesting the existing social order should be pushed to such a degree that Western countries become failed states, giving rise to changes that would reshape the world in radical ways. Some RMVE adherents advocate for acts of social disruption up to and including violence, and taking violent action to prompt responses that would gain support from those advocating for the superiority of the white race.

concern about government overreach they believe could culminate in government-led mass firearm confiscations or the imposition of martial law. Additionally, conspiratorial narratives assigning blame for the pandemic to a Jewish conspiracy or China heightens the risk of retaliatory violence against Jewish Americans and Asian Americans. Other DVEs have shared statements that law enforcement will be unable to prevent DVE attacks on minorities or quell riots. Still other DVEs have called for like-minded individuals to prepare to use illegal force or violence to combat anticipated law enforcement abuses or prevent reproductive healthcare providers from operating during the pandemic.

- » (U//FOUO) Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have claimed Jews and Israel are responsible for manufacturing and spreading the virus to expand their alleged control of Western societies and benefit from the ongoing economic volatility. Some DVEs have also blamed China and individuals of Asian descent for the pandemic, and these accusations—in addition to recent incidents of COVID-19-related assaults on Asian Americans—highlight an existing threat of violence towards Asian individuals or potentially Asian-operated businesses.
- » (U//FOUO) Some social media users, including individuals prominent in the militia extremism movement, shared their concerns about possible US Government responses to the pandemic by calling for the disregarding of stay-at-home orders, and espousing conspiracy theories about a future government declaration of martial law and gun confiscation. Some militia extremists have discussed preparing their militias for a response, potentially using violence in retaliation against the perceived impending gun confiscations. Some past DVEs have been driven to commit criminal acts by a perceived impending declaration of martial law including three militia extremists, who in August 2015 were convicted of federal conspiracy and firearms violations after collecting materials commonly used to manufacture explosive devices.
- » (U//LES) Some DVEs claim state and local governments' recent release of prisoners in an effort to control COVID-19 outbreaks inside correctional facilities will lead to mass looting and rioting in society. DVEs have discussed this unrest as an opportunity to attack rioting minorities and claim self-defense. DVEs have also commented that as more law enforcement officers test positive for COVID-19 or are otherwise distracted by enforcing stay-home orders, DVEs can seek out minorities to attack without law enforcement consequences.
- » (U//LES) RMVEs motivated by a desire for retribution for perceived or actual racial injustices on the part of law enforcement have discussed disregarding stay-at-home orders and the need to prepare for law enforcement abuses potentially with illegal force or violence in response. Individuals espousing abortion-related violent extremism have also made threats of violence against reproductive health care providers who are still working during the pandemic.^f

(U) Outlook

(U//FOUO) As the number of Americans affected by the COVID-19 pandemic grows, the threat posed by DVEs and hate crime actors towards minorities and other targets of their violence will likely increase. The FBI, DHS, and NCTC assess that DVEs will likely continue to seek to exploit the pandemic by using violence themselves or encouraging others on social media and messaging applications to use violence. Additionally, hate crimes towards Asian

^f (U//FOUO) FBI and DHS define **abortion-related violent extremism** as encompassing the potentially unlawful use of threat of force or violence, in furtherance of political and/or social agendas related to abortion, including pro-life or pro-choice.

Americans and those of Asian descent will likely increase over the next two to three months causing an increase in reported hate crime incidents based on racial or ethnic biases. While some stay-at-home orders limit the mobility of some DVEs and mitigates some of the risk of mass attack violence in public places, racial and/or religious minorities and minority-operated businesses that remain open are likely at particular risk. Additionally, law enforcement personnel enforcing stay-at-home orders or interacting with citizens, as well as soft targets such as grocery stores, hospitals, and other essential businesses, will probably remain potential targets for DVEs during the course of the pandemic.

(U//FOUO) The FBI, DHS, and NCTC urge state and local authorities, to promptly report suspicious activities related to potential domestic violent extremism. We urge state and local authorities to continue to reach out to private sector partners who continue to operate during the pandemic, especially those operated by individuals identified as potential DVE and hate crime actors' targets. The FBI, DHS, and NCTC note that, due to the highly personal nature of radicalization to violence, it is difficult to assess specific indicators that are indicative of US-based violent extremists attempting to support violence at home or abroad.[§]

(U) Related Products

(U//FOUO) For additional information regarding threats from DVEs, please refer to the below JIBs:

- » (U//FOUO) "Five Members of Neo-Nazi Group Atomwaffen Division Arrested for Federal Violations Targeting Journalists, Activists," dated 28 February 2020.
- » (U//FOUO) "Arrests of Members of Domestic Violent Extremist Group "The Base" for Murder Plot Highlight Small Cell Violent Intent, Retaliatory Targeting," dated 17 January 2020.
- » (U//FOUO) "Continued Interest in Targeting Jewish Communities in the Homeland by Domestic Violent Extremists," dated 3 January 2020.

(U) Administrative Note: Law Enforcement Response

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(U) Tracked by: HSEC-8.1, HSEC-8.2, HSEC-8.3, HSEC-8.5, HSEC-8.6, HSEC-8.8.

[§] (U//FOUO) The FBI, DHS, and NCTC define **radicalization** as the process through which an individual changes from a nonviolent belief system to a belief system that includes the willingness to actively advocate, facilitate, or use unlawful violence as a method to affect societal or political change.