

Domestic Extremism in America:
Examining White Supremacist Violence in the Wake of Recent Attacks

**U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs**

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Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman, and Members of the Committee, it is a pleasure to appear before you today to discuss this important topic.

My name is Nathan Sales. I am the founder and principal of Fillmore Global Strategies LLC, a consultancy that provides legal and strategic advisory services on matters at the intersection of law, policy, and diplomacy. I am also a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a senior advisor at The Soufan Group.

From 2017 to 2021, I served at the U.S. Department of State as the Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism. Concurrently, I was the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights (acting) as well as the Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. I previously served at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, and at the U.S. Department of Justice as Senior Counsel in the Office of Legal Policy.

I am here as a private citizen, but my testimony today is informed by my past government service – particularly my time at the State Department, where I led the U.S. government’s diplomatic efforts to combat white supremacist terrorism around the globe. In my testimony, I will begin by surveying the rise of white supremacist terrorism in recent years, both in the United States and abroad. I will then discuss the ideological underpinnings that have inspired such attacks, as well as the manner in which global white supremacist networks are organized and operate. I will conclude by discussing a number of the key tools that can be used to combat the international dimensions of white supremacist terrorism, including information sharing, sanctions, counter-messaging, taking down terrorist content online, and enhancing border security.

I.

From Christchurch to Buffalo, from El Paso to Oslo and beyond, the world has seen a dramatic spike in white supremacist terrorism in recent years. The perpetrators have attacked mosques and synagogues, grocery stores and refugee centers and countless other soft targets, seeking to terrorize religious and minority communities. They have killed Jews, Muslims, members of other religious and racial groups, immigrants, and others they view as enemies. Many of these terrorists are motivated by a deep and visceral hatred of those they see as threats to their identity, and often are animated by virulent antisemitism.

White supremacist terrorism is a global – and growing – threat. It is the product of a loosely organized, transnational network of individuals and groups motivated by violent, intolerant, and ethno-supremacist ideologies. It is a particularly noxious subset of a broader phenomenon known as racially or ethnically motivated terrorism (“REMT”), or racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism (“REMVE”). And it poses a grave danger both to the U.S. homeland and to our foreign partners.

It’s clear that this threat is on the rise. From 2011 to 2017 there were approximately 350 white supremacist terrorist attacks in Europe, North America, and Australia, according to a *New York Times* analysis of data from the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database. In 2011, there were just nine such attacks. In 2013 the number increased slightly, to 16. In 2015 there was a dramatic jump, to 135 attacks, likely in reaction to large-scale migration from war zones in the Middle East to Europe. In 2016 the number of attacks dropped by more than half to 65 before rebounding somewhat in 2017 to 88.¹

The United States witnessed a particularly horrific example of white supremacist terrorism just last month, when a gunman opened fire at a grocery store in Buffalo, NY, killing ten people and injuring three others. The shooter targeted African-Americans, deliberately selecting the store because of the local area’s predominantly black population. His sickening 180-page manifesto, which he posted online immediately before the attack, promoted the so-called “great replacement theory” – the notion that an influx of non-whites is leading to the “extinction” of “the white race” – and cited as inspiration the notorious 2019 attack on Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand.²

Buffalo is only the most recent in a string of attacks afflicting our country.

In August 2019, in El Paso, TX, a gunman brutally killed 23 innocent people and wounded 22 more at a Walmart. His manifesto expressed support for the Christchurch attacker and made clear that he was targeting Mexican-Americans in response to what he called a “Hispanic invasion.”³ Earlier that year, in Poway, CA, a shooter opened fire at a synagogue in an attack motivated by a belief that Jews were carrying out a “meticulously planned genocide of the European race.”⁴ And in Pittsburgh, PA, in October 2018, a racist and antisemitic gunman slaughtered eleven innocent worshippers and wounded six others at the Tree of Life synagogue during Shabbat services.⁵

The same alarming trend has been seen overseas.

¹ Weiyi Cai & Simone Landon, *Attacks by White Extremists Are Growing. So Are Their Connections.*, N.Y. Times, Apr. 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/03/world/white-extremist-terrorism-christchurch.html>.

² Jonathan Franklin, *Parts of the Buffalo Shooter’s Alleged Screech Were Copied from Other Sources*, NPR, May 18, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/18/1099372659/parts-of-the-buffalo-shooters-alleged-screed-were-copied-from-other-sources>.

³ Julio-Cesar Chavez, *Gunman Kills 20, Wounds 26 at Walmart Store in El Paso, Texas*, Reuters, Aug. 3, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-texas-shooting-idUSKCN1UT0HQ>.

⁴ Yaron Steinbuch, *Accused Synagogue Gunman Claimed to Have Set Fire to Mosque*, N.Y. Post, Apr. 29, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/04/29/accused-synagogue-gunman-claimed-to-have-set-fire-to-mosque/>.

⁵ Campbell Robertson et al., *11 Killed in Synagogue Massacre; Suspect Charged With 29 Counts*, N.Y. Times, Oct. 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html>.

In March 2019, in Christchurch, New Zealand, an Australian named Brenton Tarrant gunned down 51 people in a terrorist attack on a pair of mosques – a horror that was livestreamed on the internet for the world to see. Before the attack, Tarrant posted online a lurid and deranged manifesto titled “The Great Replacement.” His writing reveals that he was motivated by a violent racist and white supremacist worldview, expressing rage that demographic changes are resulting in a so-called “replacement” of whites.⁶ Like other recent attackers, Tarrant was inspired by Anders Breivik, the white supremacist terrorist who in 2011 murdered nearly 80 people in Norway, many of them children.⁷

In Hanau, Germany, in February 2020, nine people were killed and five more were injured in a terrorist attack targeting two hookah bars. In his manifesto, the attacker called for the expulsion of non-Germans from the country and the annihilation of those he views as racially inferior.⁸ A few months earlier, in October 2019, a terrorist attempted to attack a synagogue in the German town of Halle while worshippers were observing Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. After posting his manifesto online and arming himself, the attacker failed in his attempts to enter the synagogue. He then killed a passer-by and drove to a Turkish cafe, where he shot a guest. After his arrest, he confessed to the police the antisemitic, anti-immigrant, and misogynist motives for his attack.⁹

In August 2019, a week after El Paso, a 21-year old Norwegian broke into the al-Noor Islamic Centre in a suburb outside of Oslo wielding multiple weapons. Thankfully, worshippers who were preparing to celebrate the Eid al-Adha holiday quickly overpowered and restrained him, preventing what could have been a bloodbath. In messages posted online earlier that day, the attacker claimed that he’d been “chosen” by “Saint Tarrant,” acknowledging the Christchurch killer as an inspiration. He also praised the El Paso killer for “fighting to reclaim his country.”¹⁰

⁶ Rick Noack, *Christchurch Endures as Extremist Touchstone, as Investigators Probe Suspected El Paso Manifesto*, Wash. Post, Aug. 6, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/08/06/christchurch-endures-extremist-touchstone-investigators-probe-suspected-el-paso-manifesto/>.

⁷ Colin P. Clarke, *The Cult of Breivik*, Slate, Mar. 18, 2019, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/03/anders-breivik-new-zealand-right-wing-terrorism-inspiration.html>.

⁸ Colin P. Clarke, *Far-Right Terror Rocks Germany*, Lawfare, Feb. 21, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/far-right-terror-rocks-germany>.

⁹ Ben Knight, *Germany: Synagogue Attacker Sentenced to Life in Prison*, Deutsche Welle, Dec. 21, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-synagogue-attacker-sentenced-to-life-in-prison/a-56004932>.

¹⁰ Jason Burke, *Norway Mosque Attack Suspect “Inspired by Christchurch and El Paso Shootings”*, The Guardian, Aug. 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/11/norway-mosque-attack-suspect-may-have-been-inspired-by-christchurch-and-el-paso-shootings>.

II.

To effectively tackle the threat posed by these terrorists, we need to understand their motivations and the ideologies that fuel the atrocities they commit.¹¹

White supremacist ideology encompasses vicious racism and often glorifies Adolf Hitler. Many of its adherents draw extensively from Nazi-era propaganda. For example, the group Blood and Honor takes its name from a Hitler Youth slogan. Combat 18 derives its name from Hitler's initials being the first and eighth letters of the alphabet.

In addition to an obsession with antisemitic conspiracy theories, white supremacist terrorists often express a hatred of Muslims in particular and immigrants in general, and a fear of what they call "white genocide." Many of these actors are heavily influenced by foundational texts that provide an ideological framework for their actions – works like *Siege*, *The Turner Diaries*, and *The Great Replacement*. They are also actively promoting "accelerationism," a fringe theory holding that terrorist attacks can "accelerate" a coming race war. For instance, after the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, one European neo-Nazi proclaimed online, "I hope it's time, boys," and another post told users to "buy ammo and get ready to rob the banks."¹²

A number of white supremacist terrorists – including the Christchurch, El Paso, and Buffalo killers – describe themselves as "eco-fascists." They blame immigrants and non-whites for environmental problems. And they want to, in Tarrant's words, "kill the invaders" in order to "save the environment."¹³

Let me speak plainly: This is not merely "violence," nor does the term "violent extremism" seem adequate. It's *terrorism*, plain and simple. These attackers seek to sow fear among their target communities – they don't just want to kill several Hispanics, they want to terrorize *all* Hispanics. They seek to intimidate and coerce populations and governments to advance their grotesque political goals. That is the textbook definition of terrorism.

In addition to understanding the ideological underpinnings of white supremacist terrorism, it is also important to focus on how these networks are organized and operate. In some ways they are similar to the Islamist and other terrorists with which we may be more familiar. But in other respects they are very different, and our policies for countering them need to take account of those differences.

¹¹ See generally The Soufan Center, *White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacy Extremist Movement*, Sept. 27, 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/white-supremacy-extremism-the-transnational-rise-of-the-violent-white-supremacist-movement/>.

¹² Ben Makuch, *Experts Say Neo-Nazi "Accelerationists" Discuss Taking Advantage of Coronavirus Crisis*, Vice, Mar. 18, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pkewgv/experts-say-neo-nazi-accelerationists-discuss-taking-advantage-of-coronavirus-crisis>.

¹³ Will Humphries et al., *New Zealand Shooting: Brenton Tarrant Targeted "Invader" Sadiq Khan in Manifesto*, The Times, Mar. 16, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/new-zealand-shooting-alleged-killer-called-for-attack-on-invader-sadiq-khan-6hpxw5k6w>.

First, like Islamist terrorists, many of these figures are part of a global and interconnected online community. Thanks to the internet and social media, it's easier than ever for them to contact and inspire one another across borders.

After Christchurch, hundreds of memes and other forms of “fan” art were shared online, exalting the killings and revering the attacker. In one hideous and quite literally sacrilegious example, the faces of the Christchurch perpetrator and five other white supremacist terrorists were transposed onto images of medieval saints under the slogan “Praise the Saints” and marketed as t-shirts, tote bags, and mugs.

Second, white supremacist terrorists are using the internet to radicalize new followers. It has become standard for these attackers to post manifestos online, creating twisted propaganda that provides ideological justification for their crimes and urges others to follow their examples. Perhaps their most potent – and revolting – recruiting tool is videos of their abhorrent crimes that they record and broadcast on the internet. The Christchurch shooter filmed his attack with a GoPro camera and live-streamed it on Facebook Live, while the Buffalo and Halle terrorists live-streamed their attacks on Twitch, a platform owned by Amazon.

These efforts to radicalize new followers online are having a major impact. A recent *New York Times* analysis found that at least a third of white supremacist killers since 2011 were inspired by others who perpetrated similar attacks, professed a reverence for them, or showed an interest in their tactics.¹⁴ This was certainly true of the Buffalo attacker.

In addition to online radicalization, person-to-person radicalization remains a serious concern. Like ISIS fighters, thousands of white supremacist actors are traveling across borders to meet, radicalize, train, raise money, and plot attacks. Neo-Nazi music festivals in Europe and Renaissance fairs have become key hubs for such networking. In 2020, the FBI arrested six suspected members of a neo-Nazi group called The Base who were traveling to a rally in Richmond, Virginia. One was a former Canadian army reservist.¹⁵

By the way, if the group's name sounds familiar, it should. “The Base” is the English translation of “al Qaeda.”

Third, white supremacist actors have a diffuse organizational structure. In this respect they're different from al Qaeda, ISIS, or Hezbollah – or, for that matter, terrorist groups from other ideological camps like the FARC in Colombia or Kahane Chai in Israel. Islamist terrorist groups typically are hierarchical and centralized; they have clear leadership cadres, physical headquarters or safe havens, and command-and-control structures that allow them to direct the activities of individual operatives or branches in other locations, including preparations for attacks. By contrast, these figures tend to use a “leaderless resistance” model, in which actors act largely independently

¹⁴ Cai & Landon, *supra* note 1.

¹⁵ Shane Harris & Devlin Barrett, *FBI Arrests 3 Alleged Members of White-Supremacist Group “the Base” Ahead of Virginia Gun Rally*, Wash. Post, Jan. 16, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/fbi-arrests-alleged-members-of-white-supremacist-group-the-base/2020/01/16/ae8c01d4-386b-11ea-bf30-ad313e4ec754_story.html.

of each other even as they operate within a larger ecosystem that equips individual perpetrators with the ideas and inspiration for their attacks. The movement’s decentralized nature can make it harder for adherents to organize or coordinate attacks. But it can also make them more resilient to some traditional forms of counterterrorism pressure.

III.

What can be done? As an initial matter, senior policymakers must begin by recognizing that white supremacist terrorism is a significant challenge and make countering it a priority. The previous administration’s national counterterrorism strategy was the first such strategy ever to specifically recognize this threat, calling out by name “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.”¹⁶ The Biden administration has built upon this foundation, issuing the first ever national strategy for countering domestic terrorism and devoting increased resources to the problem.¹⁷

While the threat landscape is complex and dynamic, the United States has a number of powerful tools at its disposal to counter white supremacist terrorism globally. During my time at the State Department, I approved a comprehensive strategy to guide the Counterterrorism Bureau’s efforts to combat the international aspects of white supremacist terrorism.¹⁸ Many of these measures are ideologically agnostic – they can be effective regardless of what worldview is motivating the group or individual in question. Others may need to be adapted to varying extents to account for important differences between white supremacist terrorism and other forms of terrorism.

First, coordination and information sharing. White supremacist terrorism is an international phenomenon and the United States therefore must work closely with international partners – particularly our European and Five Eyes allies, who are facing the same acute threat. Transnational engagement allows policymakers to synchronize measures to counter the threat. Just as importantly, it enables the sharing of information that can be used to investigate suspected terrorists, disrupt ongoing attack planning, take down fundraising and facilitation networks, and support prosecutions in courts of law.

¹⁶ The White House, National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America, Oct. 2018, https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NSCT.pdf.

¹⁷ The White House, National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf>.

¹⁸ Efforts to counter white supremacist terrorism worldwide are only one part of a larger U.S. strategy. Here at home, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security have the lead in preventing and investigating cases of domestic terrorism. At a recent Congressional hearing, FBI Director Chris Wray told lawmakers that his agency has elevated this issue to a “national threat” priority, placing it “on the same footing” as ISIS. Hannah Allam, *FBI Announces That Racist Violence Is now Equal Priority to Foreign Terrorism*, NPR, Feb. 10, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/10/804616715/fbi-announces-that-racist-violence-is-now-equal-priority-to-foreign-terrorism>. The State Department’s role begins at the water’s edge, with a focus on coordinating with international partners and countering the transnational elements of the threat.

Second, terrorist designations. One of the most effective weapons in our arsenal is sanctions to deprive terrorists of the resources they need to plot and execute attacks. In April 2020, the State Department named the Russian Imperial Movement (“RIM”), along with three of its leaders, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (“SDGTs”). It was the first time the United States ever imposed terrorism sanctions on white supremacist terrorists.

RIM operates two training camps in St. Petersburg, where it provides paramilitary-style training to neo-Nazis and white supremacists; the group also plays a prominent role in trying to rally Europeans and Americans into a common front against their perceived enemies. In 2016 and 2017, a pair of RIM-trained terrorists carried out a series of attacks in Gothenburg, Sweden against a refugee shelter and other soft targets. RIM also has had its eye on the United States. After the August 2017 rally in Charlottesville, VA, RIM reportedly contacted some of the event’s organizers and invited them to visit Russia for paramilitary training. (There’s no evidence that rally leaders accepted the invitation.) The following month several RIM leaders traveled to the United States to network with fellow white supremacists here; one of them was photographed posing with a Russian imperial flag in front of the White House.¹⁹

The RIM sanctions are a good start, but the United States should redouble its efforts to designate additional white supremacist terrorists. The Biden administration rightly has made countering such groups a priority, but, a year and a half into its term, it has yet to translate that policy into sanctions of its own. RIM was the first; it must not be the last. The administration also should look for groups that could be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (“FTOs”). An FTO designation is the gold standard of terrorism sanctions, imposing costs that other sanctions cannot match. Unlike an SDGT designation, an FTO designation makes it a federal crime to provide “material support” to a group that has been so named and automatically renders the members of such a group inadmissible to the United States.

Third, the United States should use public diplomacy and counter-messaging to delegitimize the ideologies that drive white supremacist terrorism. One particularly powerful tool is testimony from “formers”: People who were involved with this movement in the past, who have realized the errors of their ways, and who thus have unique credibility in dissuading others from going down the same misguided path. In late 2019, for example, the State Department sent a former neo-Nazi to Vienna and Brussels, where he spoke about his journey into and out of these networks, providing a first-hand account of their destructive nature.

State has also leveraged multilateral platforms like the Strong Cities Network and the two-way City Pair Partnership Program to link U.S. cities with counterparts facing similar challenges in Canada and Europe. In 2019 Anaheim and San Diego were connected with Bonn, Cologne, and Dusseldorf. Building on this momentum, the Strong Cities Network recently added member cities such as Derry, in Northern Ireland, and Pittsburgh.

Fourth, social media and other tech companies need to promptly identify and take down terrorist content that violates U.S. law or their own terms of service that forbid the use of their platforms

¹⁹ Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation, *Mapping Militant Organizations: Russian Imperial Movement*, Feb. 2021, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/russian-imperial-movement>.

for terrorist purposes, while maintaining full respect for freedom of speech. Under no circumstances should legitimate political discourse be subject to cancellation. But neither should graphic video footage of massacres remain available online for years, as remains the case with the Christchurch attack to this day.²⁰ Social media companies will need to refine their algorithms against evasion techniques that terrorist sympathizers use to keep content up on popular platforms, such as changing a video’s background color, cropping it, or inserting a watermark.²¹ Non-profit industry groups such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism and Tech Against Terrorism can help advance these efforts.

Terrorism sanctions have an important role to play here as well. Because tech companies can face legal risks if they provide services to designated groups or individuals, sanctions can prompt them to sever ties with those listed as terrorists. Notably, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter all shuttered RIM’s accounts in the immediate aftermath of the 2020 designations, which one of the group’s leaders admitted was “a major blow.”²²

Fifth, the United States needs to harden its borders against white supremacist terrorists who might seek to travel here to recruit new followers, raise money, or even carry out an attack. RIM’s leaders – and representatives of countless other similar foreign groups – must never be able to set foot in the United States again. One way to prevent such travel is to add the names of known white supremacist terrorists to national watchlists and international law enforcement databases such as INTERPOL, just as is done for Islamist groups like al Qaeda and ISIS.

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you again for inviting me to be here today. I look forward to your questions.

²⁰ Ryan Mac et al., *The Enduring Afterlife of a Mass Shooting’s Livestream Online*, N.Y. Times, May 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/technology/mass-shootings-livestream-online.html>.

²¹ Billy Perigo, *Social Media Companies Vowed to Stop Videos of Terror Attacks. Buffalo Showed They Have More Work to Do*, Time, May 17, 2022, <https://time.com/6177640/buffalo-shooting-twitch-social-media/>.

²² Robyn Dixon, *Inside White-Supremacist Russian Imperial Movement, Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization by U.S. State Department*, Wash. Post, Apr. 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-white-supremacist-terrorism-us/2020/04/11/255a9762-7a75-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html.