

ISSUE BRIEF

HOW FAR-RIGHT TERRORISTS CHOOSE THEIR ENEMIES

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KEY FINDINGS

- Salafi-jihadist groups have looked at terrorist targeting through the lens of the “near enemy” versus “far enemy” paradigm. Prominent jihadists, including Osama bin Laden, frequently debated over which enemy was a priority to attack.
- Unlike Salafi-jihadism, where the near/far distinction has a stronger geographic connotation, far-right targeting appears to be largely symbolic. The “far enemy” is often a more visible outgroup – African-Americans, immigrants, LGBTQ+ individuals — while the “near enemy” includes government, the political left, and so-called Jewish “elites,” who far-right extremists consider responsible for enabling or promoting the demographic and cultural replacement of white people.
- Far-right extremists who prioritize the “far enemy” are united by their adherence to the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory. As such, “far enemy” attackers couch their attacks in defensive language and attempt to portray themselves as martyrs sacrificing themselves for the sake of white civilization.
- For Western governments and their counterterrorism endeavors, the most important implication of this study is a deeper understanding of how certain factions of the violent far-right movement prioritize certain targets and how to allocate resources and protective measures.
- **Recommendations** include: Western governments should devote more resources to integrating and protecting minority communities; analyze how Salafi-jihadist targeting preferences evolved over time and seek to determine whether any patterns might be instructive to how far-right terrorists consider the ‘near enemy versus far enemy’ paradigm; and identify how counterterrorism practitioners might influence these debates to degrade cohesion of far-right extremists and their supporting networks.

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INTRODUCTION

The decision to attack two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019 was an odd targeting choice.¹

As part of a manifesto released shortly before the violence erupted, the gunman claimed that he “only really took true inspiration from Knight Justiciar Breivik,” the Norwegian white supremacist who killed 77 people – mostly children and youths – in twin attacks targeting the government and the Norwegian Labour Party eight years earlier. He even claimed he received “a blessing for [his] mission after contacting his brother knights.”² And yet, Brenton Tarrant had completely ignored one of Breivik’s cardinal rules, laid out in the latter’s own manifesto: “DO NOT for the love of God aim your rage and frustration at Muslims. [...] They want the indigenous Europeans to busy fighting Muslims as that will guarantee their positions. We will never have a chance at overthrowing the cultural Marxist if we waste our energy and efforts on fighting Muslims.”³ Tarrant, instead, pointed to the urgency of immigration. “Why attack immigrants when “x” are the issue?” he asked himself. “Because the “x” groups can be dealt with in time, but the high fertility immigrants will destroy us now, soon it is a matter of survival.”⁴

The fundamental disagreement on targeting between Tarrant and Breivik, the two deadliest far-right terrorists in the current wave of violence, which arguably began with Breivik’s July 2011 attack, was seemingly stark but was actually a regular feature of terrorist targeting choices across the ideological spectrum. Breivik’s attack stands out because it served as an inspiration for other far-right terrorists, catalyzing a spike occurring over the past four years that includes high-profile attacks such as the Tree of Life (Pittsburgh, October 2018); Christchurch (March 2019); and El Paso (August 2019). Before that wave of far-right terrorism and violent extremism, the primary threat emanated from Salafi-jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). Those groups also grappled with the targeting dilemma, arguing in correspondence that took place in both semi-public forums and secretive consultations that have now been made public, about how to prioritize their resources to achieve maximum impact. These debates were not merely academic. Rather, they reflected longstanding disagreements among jihadist ideologues and strategists, who jockeyed to advance their positions and argued endlessly about whether to target the “near enemy,” represented by so-called “apostate” regimes in the Middle East, including countries such as Egypt, Saudi

¹ This Issue Brief builds upon previous work by these authors: Jacob Ware and Colin P. Clarke, “How Far-Right Terrorists Choose Their Enemies,” *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/09/far-right-terrorism-extremism-target-selection-jihad-enemy/>.

² Brenton Tarrant, “The Great Replacement: Towards a New Society,” March 2019.

³ Andrew Berwick, “2083: A European Declaration of Independence,” 2011.

⁴ Brenton Tarrant, “The Great Replacement: Towards a New Society,” March 2019.

Arabia, or others in the crosshairs of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their respective affiliates, or instead prioritize the “far enemy,” represented by the United States, Israel, and other “imperialist” powers, as they see them.

The United States and its allies have spent the better part of the past two decades focusing almost exclusively on the threat posed by jihadi groups, even as far-right extremism metastasized in plain sight. As a result, there has been a steep learning curve in developing an understanding of the breadth of the far-right extremist movement and the important ideological differences within its various strands. This challenge has extended to accurately diagnosing the nature of the threat in order to develop effective mitigation strategies. Furthermore, looking at the threat through the lens of the “near enemy” and “far enemy” paradigm offers important insights into the target selection and operational tempo of far-right groups, and consequently assists counterterrorism forces’ allocation of resources and prioritization of defensive measures. To date, this phenomenon has elicited less attention from counterterrorism practitioners, and this Issue Brief aims to put it on the radar of law enforcement, security services, and intelligence practitioners, who may find it useful in devising counterterrorism approaches. The brief begins by looking at Salafi-jihadist groups, particularly as they initiated the trend of targeting by prioritizing the “near enemy” or “far enemy,” before shifting attention to how far-right strategies have

considered similar decisions. The brief concludes with recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

TERRORIST TARGETING THEORIES: A LOOK AT THE DEBATE AMONG SALAFI JIHADISTS

For Salafist-jihadist groups, the debate over the most effective way to jettison “imperialist” Western powers, such as the United States and Israel, from the Middle East has a long and storied history and shaped the targeting choices of these groups. These even pre-date the founding of al-Qaeda, dating back at least to the 1940s and ‘50s when Sayyid Qutb was in Egypt and, later on, to leaders of the group Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), who argued passionately about the proper strategy needed to reestablish the lost Islamic caliphate. Thus, the “near enemy” versus “far enemy” paradigm has been shaped and molded over time, with prominent leaders weighing in on both sides and dedicating considerable time and energy to this debate.

Egyptian Islamist theorist Mohammed Abd al-Salam Faraj was among the earliest thinkers on the subject. As the leader of the Cairo-branch of the group Tanzim al-Jihad, Faraj sought to convince fellow jihadis to prioritize overthrowing Arab despots before turning to “imperialist powers” like the United States and Israel. Faraj argued that

the regimes closer to home - the so-called “near enemy” - was a higher priority than the “far enemy,” which sought to manipulate and control pro-Western Arab rulers. To Faraj, Arab leaders were the most insidious threat because they had facilitated the intervention of external actors, “infidels” to be exact, in local affairs, which was not only an embarrassment to Islam but the source of local grievances too. The priority for jihadis, if they were to ever topple corrupt leaders and replace them with authentic Muslim rulers, would be to target the “near enemy.” Without this step, there would be no chance of ending imperialism and the interference of foreign powers in Middle Eastern countries.

Al Qaeda’s leader Osama bin Laden sought to shift the emphasis away from the “near enemy.” He argued instead that the “far enemy” was the real source of strife in the Arab and Islamic world and directly responsible for a cultural, religious, and economic crusade against his people.⁵ Bin Laden was particularly angered by the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, especially the participation of female soldiers in guarding the Kingdom. He believed that a foreign presence emasculated the ummah and deprived them of the benefits of the natural resources in their region. Further, he also thought it was futile to try to unseat local dictators while they enjoyed the backing

of powerful Western countries. He therefore countered that jihadis should prioritize attacking the United States, Europe, and Israel to convince them to withdraw that support. Once they did, the local regimes, bereft of grassroots support, would be much easier to overthrow.

The “near enemy” versus “far enemy” debate remained a significant source of tension among al-Qaeda’s top strategists. For al-Qaeda, the decision to pivot from targeting the “near enemy” to attacking the “far enemy” was primarily strategic, and not necessarily ideological. Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden’s eventual successor, tried to steer bin Laden toward focusing on targeting countries like Egypt, but eventually the al-Qaeda leader became convinced that attacking the United States should be the group’s main priority. Before bin Laden made a strong case to focus on the West, the conventional wisdom among jihadis held that the United States was too strong to attack, and thus not worth focusing on.⁶ In 1996, bin Laden issued a fatwa, Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites, which argued that the global jihadist movement should be focused on defeating the “Israeli-American alliance.”⁷ Yet at the time, jihadis were engaged in fierce battles with the “near enemy,” as evidenced by terror campaigns being waged by the

⁵ Dominic Tierney, “The Twenty Years’ War,” *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/08/twenty-years-war/496736/>

⁶ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Thomas Joscelyn, *Enemies Near & Far: How Jihadist Groups Strategize, Plot, and Learn*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2022, pp.41.

⁷ Kim Cragin, “Early History of Al-Qa’ida,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol.51, Iss.4, December 2008, pp.1064-1065.

Armed Islamic Group (GIA), Gama' al-Islamiyya, and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in Algeria, Egypt, and Libya, respectively.⁸

In 1998, in a statement titled “World Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders,” the al-Qaeda leader announced that it was “an individual duty of every Muslim” to “kill the Americans and their allies.”⁹ The 1996 and 1998 statements by bin Laden were merely the culmination of years of strategic internal debate in the organization and reflective of the competing strands within al-Qaeda. Some members likely saw a contradiction between focusing on the “far enemy” at the expense of repressive regimes ruling over Muslim lands, while others, including bin Laden, believed that al-Qaeda could pursue both goals in parallel, with one objective reinforcing the other.

Al-Qaeda soon made good on its threats. In August 1998, the group planned and executed simultaneous terror attacks against U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya. The attacks, which left 224 people dead, occurred just six months after bin Laden’s letter, which was published in the London paper *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, declared war on the United States. In October 2000, al-Qaeda attacked the United States again, bombing the USS Cole, a suicide

attack that killed seventeen U.S. sailors and injured an additional 40 other crew members. Al-Qaeda’s focus on attacking the U.S. did not progress linearly. Instead, it vacillated between the U.S. as the epitome of the “far enemy,” and “apostate” regimes in the Muslim world exemplifying the “near enemy,” particularly those governments in the Arabian Peninsula. In other words, there was “both forwards and backwards movement” in how valuable of a target al-Qaeda perceived the United States to be, with this movement culminating in planning that would lead to the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.¹⁰

Throughout the post-9/11 era, al-Qaeda central still played a major role in planning attacks, but there was also a tendency to let regional nodes implement the operations. Al-Qaeda was designed to be an organization that could function as a hybrid, displaying characteristics of both centralization and decentralization. The group’s leader, or emir, still maintained the ultimate say over strategic matters, but the group’s members were encouraged to function semi-autonomously at the operational and tactical levels. This model helped al-Qaeda balance the competing priorities of global versus local, affording regional commanders the necessary leverage to tailor the leadership’s

⁸ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Thomas Joscelyn, *Enemies Near & Far: How Jihadist Groups Strategize, Plot, and Learn*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2022, pp.44-45.

⁹ Bernard Lewis, “License to Kill: Usama bin Ladin’s Declaration of Jihad,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1998, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/1998-11-01/license-kill-usama-bin-ladins-declaration-jihad>

¹⁰ Kim Cragin, “Early History of Al-Qa’ida,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol.51, Iss.4, December 2008, pp.1066.

OVERVIEW OF POST 9/11 HIGH-PROFILE ATTACKS WITH LINKS TO AL-QAEDA

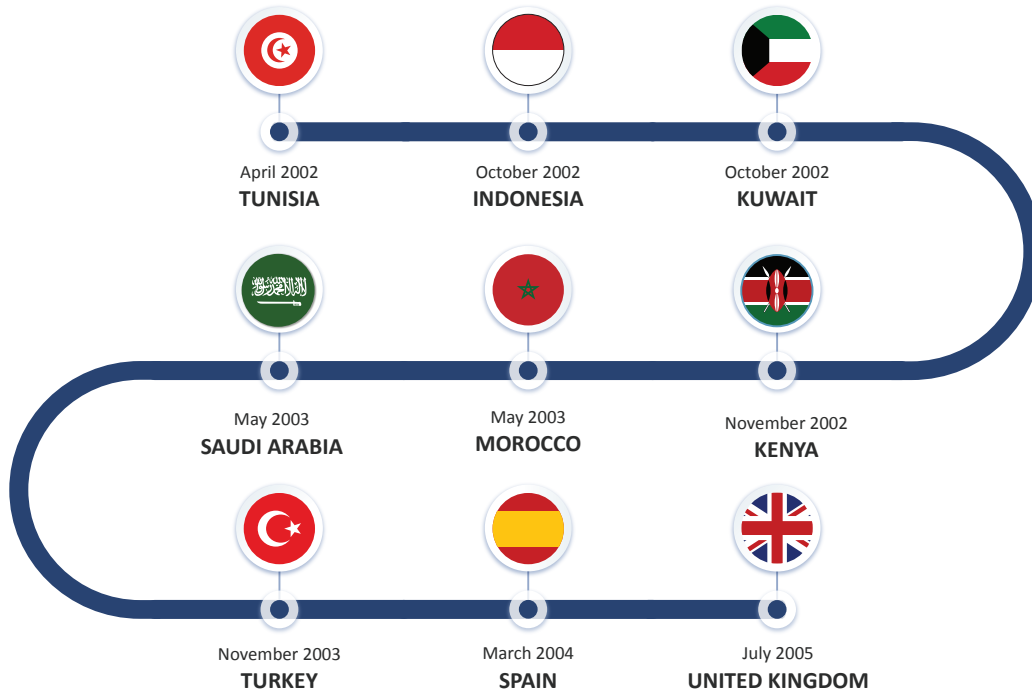


Figure 1 Overview of post- 9/11 high profile attacks with links to al-Qaeda

objectives to local conditions. As a result of a relentless and aggressive U.S.-led armed drone campaign, al-Qaeda core shifted to a franchising strategy as a means of survival.¹¹

There are pros and cons to establishing affiliates since, with different command-and-control issues shaped by their contexts, affiliates may seek to develop their own targeting strategies and priorities, deviating from the core group and presenting an inchoate approach that erodes organizational cohesion. Helping the network, franchise groups made al-Qaeda seem ubiquitous, as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in the

Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al-Shabaab conducted attacks in al-Qaeda’s name. The development of branches and regional affiliates helped maintain morale and provided al-Qaeda with a larger global footprint, as well as multiple opportunities to insert its fighters into civil wars, as it has done in the Levant and North Africa.

The franchising method also offers “strategic reach” and allows the group to ingratiate itself into new theaters. These local groups, naturally, primarily focus on the “near enemy,” employing more local grievances and knowledge to boost their jihad. But their services can also be utilized to attack the “far

¹¹ See Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

enemy,” per the wishes of the organization’s overall core leadership. Affiliates often possess the local intelligence required for high-profile attacks. While groups like AQAP can be preoccupied with tribal rivalries in Yemen, they can also serve to put together ambitious plots, as occurred with a series of aviation-related targets when the group was at its peak.¹²

There are, however, potential negative aspects to the franchising method, including the possibility an affiliate could damage the brand through its actions, as AQI did with its relentless sectarian attacks against Iraqi Shiites. AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi focused on takfirism, obsessed with attacking Shiites instead of focusing on U.S. troops in Iraq.¹³ Geographic expansion led to tensions in the ‘near-enemy versus far-enemy’ debate, as groups like al-Shabaab in Somalia and Jama’at Nusratul Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in West Africa were often more focused on local agendas. Issues that once energized Salafi-jihadist recruits, including Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, have faded in importance over time, supplanted by more tactical concerns in the countries and regions where affiliates operate.

Communication problems were likely responsible for the delay in the release of a document titled “General Guidelines for Jihad,” which was the group’s attempt to rein in and more closely manage the actions of its affiliates.¹⁴ Although al-Qaeda emphasized expansion during this period, “homegrown cells and regional affiliates of the ‘system of systems’” continued to look to the leadership for “overall theological inspiration and strategic guidance, along with tactical support, training, and resourcing.”¹⁵ While al-Qaeda affiliates might not always comply with the “expressed wishes” of core al-Qaeda, they continued to consult its leaders for “high-level direction.”¹⁶ Moreover, even while hiding in some of the most austere terrain on Earth, al-Qaeda’s leadership continued to operate a global logistics infrastructure. As proof, between 2004 and 2011, more than half of the most serious terrorist plots against the West had operational or training links to Pakistan, where al-Qaeda was based.¹⁷ It also shows that until bin Laden’s death, al-Qaeda continued to plot against the “far enemy,” though not exclusively as their affiliates allowed for a more dynamic and multi-layered approach.

¹² See, Gregory Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda, and America’s War in Arabia*, New York: Norton, 2014.

¹³ Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Blyth Crawford, and Valentin Wutke, “Rise of the Reactionaries: Comparing the Ideologies of Salafi-Jihadism and White Supremacist Extremism,” George Washington University Program on Extremism, December 2021, pp.22-23.

¹⁴ Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp.222.

¹⁵ Martin Rudner, “Al-Qaeda’s Twenty-Year Strategic Plan: The Current Phase of Global Terror,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol.36, Iss.12, 2013, pp.957.

¹⁶ William Rosenau, Alexander, Powell, and Pamela G. Faber, “Al-Qaeda Core: A Case Study,” Center for Naval Analyses, October 2017, pp.5.

¹⁷ Paul Cruickshank, “The Militant Pipeline,” New America Foundation, July 6, 2011, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/the-militant-pipeline/>

That al-Qaeda was not driven by purely ideological motivation was an important factor in the group's evolution, especially as it would go on to face major challenges over time. "The fact that the movement's enemy prioritization was dictated by pragmatic rather than ideological concerns later allowed a deprioritization of the far enemy when regional opportunities grew in the post-Arab Spring environment."¹⁸ Al-Qaeda might have been sidelined during the Arab Spring protests, but in the immediate aftermath of these revolutions, it dispersed militants into new locales and sought to take advantage of power vacuums wherever they appeared. Front groups were created through Ansar al-Sharia branches in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, while al-Qaeda-linked militants have sought to make themselves indistinguishable from rebel fighters in Yemen, Mali, and Syria. For al-Qaeda, the Arab Spring was a momentous challenge and one that required a delicate balancing act. Under the direction of Zawahiri, al-Qaeda attempted to pursue both local and global objectives. Its leadership focused on joining local insurgencies, not completely usurping them. Moreover, unlike ISIS, al-Qaeda was careful not to overreach by fighting too many enemies at once. Throughout the Arab Spring, al-Qaeda focused on parochial concerns in an attempt

to build political legitimacy and grassroots support. While in the earliest stages of the Arab Spring al-Qaeda appeared irrelevant, the group was vindicated in later stages. Particularly, it became apparent that Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi, and other autocrats could not be overthrown by organic revolutions and would either remain entrenched in power or only be removed by external entities, followed by chaos.

With the rise of ISIS, there was once again a shift in the prioritization of the near enemy over the far enemy within the global jihadist movement. ISIS was initially motivated by the sectarian nature of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, and beginning as far back as 2006, its predecessor organization the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) "refocused jihadism on prioritizing attacks against the near enemy."¹⁹ "The Islamic State argues that focus on the far enemy (the West) and ignoring the near enemy (Muslim enemies in the region, especially Shia) is ineffective," according to jihadism expert Hassan Hassan.²⁰ The list of ISIS' enemies is long, and initially included a focus on Iraqi Shia, Lebanese Hezbollah, rival opposition groups in Syria, and ethnic and religious minorities such as the Yazidi, against whom they perpetrated a genocide,

¹⁸ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Thomas Joscelyn, *Enemies Near & Far: How Jihadist Groups Strategize, Plot, and Learn*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2022, pp.44-45.

¹⁹ Mohamed Hafez, "The Crisis Within Jihadism: The Islamic State's Puritanism vs. al-Qa'ida's Populism," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.13, Iss.9, September 2020, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-crisis-within-jihadism-the-islamic-states-puritanism-vs-al-qaidas-populism/>

²⁰ Hassan Hassan, "The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 13, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/13/sectarianism-of-islamic-state-ideological-roots-and-political-context-pub-63746>

confirmed by UN investigative teams.²¹ But jihadist groups, especially highly capable groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, can adjust levels of violence, cooperate with other militant groups, and modify the selection of targets or audiences. Beginning in 2015, ISIS managed to balance its success in vanquishing the “near enemies” in Iraq and Syria to create its proto-state, with simultaneous external operations directed against the West. These included major attacks in Paris in November of that year, and another major attack in Brussels, Belgium in March 2016. For ISIS, the paradigm of ‘near versus far enemy’ was no longer either/or, but both.

Under the leadership of bin Laden and Zawahiri, al-Qaeda did not waver in its aspirations to attack the West, even if its capabilities did. In late September 2014, the U.S. government repeatedly voiced concerns about the so-called Khorasan Group, which was a small cadre of al-Qaeda operatives dispatched by Zawahiri from Pakistan to Syria with the explicit intention to attack the West.²² In a message from April 2017, Zawahiri reiterated the importance of al-Qaeda’s global struggle. The next month, Osama bin Laden’s son Hamza and AQAP

emir Qassim al-Raimi both released videos urging al-Qaeda’s followers to launch attacks in the West. Yet another speech from Zawahiri, entitled “America is the First Enemy of the Muslims” and released in March 2018, incited al-Qaeda’s followers to strike the U.S.²³ On the eighteenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11th, Zawahiri urged al-Qaeda supporters to launch attacks against the West. A few months later, an attacker linked to AQAP bucked his group’s usual targeting profile and attacked a Naval Air Station in Pensacola — still the only successful internationally-coordinated terrorist attack since 9/11.²⁴ According to the Biden administration, up until his death, Zawahiri was guiding al-Qaeda and “continually urging attacks on the United States and reinforcing the prioritization of the United States as al-Qaeda’s primary enemy.”²⁵

The next section of this Issue Brief will look at how these dynamics shape the targeting decisions of terrorists and violent extremists motivated by far-right ideology. Similar to Salafi-jihadism, far-right extremism is not monolithic but rather shaped by ongoing debates between and within the groups.

²¹ “UNITAD launches multimedia video demonstrating evidence of crimes against Yazidi community,” UNITAD, May 13, 2021, <https://www.unitad.un.org/news/unitad-launches-multimedia-video-demonstrating-evidence-crimes-against-yazidi-community>.

²² Clayton Thomas, “Al Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa,” Congressional Research Service (CRS), February 5, 2018, pp.11.

²³ Tore Refslund Hamming and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “The True Story of Al-Qaeda’s Demise and Resurgence in Syria,” Lawfare, April 8, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/true-story-al-qaedas-demise-and-resurgence-syria>

²⁴ Colin P. Clarke, “The Pensacola Terrorist Attack: The Enduring Influence of al-Qa’ida and its Affiliates,” CTC Sentinel, Vol.13, Iss.3, March 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/pensacola-terrorist-attack-enduring-influence-al-qaida-affiliates/>

²⁵ “Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on a U.S. Counterterrorism Operation,” The White House, August 1, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/08/01/background-press-call-by-a-senior-administration-official-on-a-u-s-counterterrorism-operation/>.

THE GREAT REPLACEMENT: HOW THE FAR-RIGHT CHOOSES ITS TARGETS

“Even if other non-immigrant targets would have a greater impact, I can’t bring myself to kill my fellow Americans,” the gunman wrote, justifying his choice of target. “Even the Americans that seem hell-bent on destroying our country.” In attacking the El Paso Walmart he knew would be full of the Central American immigrants he despised, Patrick Crusius purposefully targeted his “far enemy” — the “invaders,” in his words, whom he believed were replacing him, a White man soon to become a minority in his own community, according to the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory to which he subscribed.

Just as Salafi-jihadists have variously cast their eyes against the United States, Europe, and Israel, modern “far enemy” targeting in far-right terrorism can encompass a range of targets. The “far enemy” is often a more visible outgroup — even just visually through race and ethnicity. Tarrant, for instance, was clear about New Zealand’s Muslim community: “They were an obvious, visible and large group of invaders, from a culture with higher fertility rates, higher social trust

and strong, robust traditions that seek to occupy my peoples lands and ethnically replace my own people.” He elaborated, “one thing that can be said about the current state of the West is that we live in a target rich environment, traitors and enemies abound.”²⁶ Ironically, Tarrant had committed the attack outside his own homeland of Australia, but still viewed his attack as serving “his people,” which were whites of European origin. For far-right extremists, race always trumps nationality, especially when the victims are non-white. Asking himself in his manifesto why he targeted Buffalo’s Black community this May, shooter Payton Gendron, plagiarizing from Tarrant, similarly wrote, “They are an obvious, visible, and large group of replacers.” Likely due to this more visible element of this form of terrorist targeting, “far enemy” attackers couch their attacks in defensive language. “They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion,” Patrick Crusius explained, also calling his attack an “act of preservation.”²⁷ Dylann Roof, the perpetrator of the Charleston church shooting in 2015, similarly declared, “I have no choice.”²⁸ According to reports, Roof additionally told his victims during the rampage, “I have to do it. You rape our women and you’re taking over our country. And you have to go.”²⁹

²⁶ Brenton Tarrant, “The Great Replacement: Towards a New Society,” March 2019.

²⁷ Patrick Crusius, “The Inconvenient Truth,” August 2019.

²⁸ Dylann Roof, “rtf88,” June 2015.

²⁹ Lisa Wade, “How ‘benevolent sexism’ drove Dylann Roof’s racist massacre,” Washington Post, June 21, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/06/21/how-benevolent-sexism-drove-dylann-roofs-racist-massacre/>.

“Far enemy” targeting can be counterintuitive for the analyst. Far enemies would, for instance, include African Americans, despite the fact that they have lived in America for several centuries (the vast majority of which was widely under enslavement), as well as the LGBTQ+ community, despite the fact that many are white. Both groups are painted by the far-right as cultural and ethnic supplanters. The latter group has been increasingly targeted by far-right extremists in recent months and years. A gunman in Bratislava, Slovakia killed two people outside the Tepláreň gay bar in October 2022. In an extremely anti-Semitic manifesto, he claimed to be inspired by predecessors including Brenton Tarrant and Payton Gendron, but declared and then operationalized his intention to “Destroy the degenerates!” and “Target open out & proud sexual deviants who corrupt our society.”³⁰ The November 2022 mass shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs, Colorado, although not yet definitively linked to an extremist motive, also appears to conform to this emerging trend.

Far-right extremists who prioritize the “far enemy,” regardless of their ultimate targeting selection, are united by their adherence to the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which holds that a systematic and deliberate effort is underway to replace white people in Western lands.³¹ The exact ethnic or religious

group finding itself in the terrorist’s crosshairs is therefore somewhat irrelevant – they are all painted as an “other” that is threatening the white man’s perceived rightful position. “Far enemy” targeting has a long history, dating back to the emergence of the first Ku Klux Klan during the Reconstruction Era. The first iteration of this notorious terrorist organization sought to eliminate Black progress in the years after the Civil War, committing acts of violence against individual, newly-freed African Americans in order to protect the supremacy of the white race.

But Great Replacement thinking also moves beyond the exact minority group blamed for the apparent transition. Crucially, the conspiracy theory also blames a “near enemy” – whether government, the political left, or in more old-school white supremacist and anti-Semitic circles, Jewish “elites” – for allowing, and in some cases deliberately orchestrating, this apparent demographic and cultural replacement. According to a recent data analysis of terrorism in America conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “The government, military, and especially law enforcement were the primary targets of domestic terrorist attacks and plots in 2021, composing

³⁰ Juraj K., “A Call to Arms;” and Hannah Rose, “The Bratislava Attacks: Insights from the Shooter’s Manifesto,” Global Network on Extremism & Technology, October 14, 2022, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/14/the-bratislava-shooting-and-manifesto-initial-insights-and-learnings/>.

³¹ Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, “‘The Great Replacement’: The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Replacement-The-Violent-Consequences-of-Mainstreamed-Extremism-by-ISD.pdf>.

43 percent of all attacks.”³² This form of targeting also has a long history in America, dating back to anti-government militias in the late 20th century who targeted the federal government out of a fear that constitutional rights, particularly the Second Amendment, were under assault. Timothy McVeigh, who perpetrated the 1995 bombing at Oklahoma City’s Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building and killed 168 people, summarized this line of reasoning in a 2001 letter to Fox News written less than two months before his execution.

“Therefore, this bombing was also meant as a pre-emptive (or proactive) strike against these forces and their command-and-control centers within the federal building,” McVeigh articulated, explaining his decision to attack the institutions he felt were responsible for apparent tyranny against the American people and their values. “When an aggressor force continually launches attacks from a particular base of operation, it is sound military strategy to take the fight to the enemy.”³³

Unlike Salafi-jihadism, where the near/far distinction has a stronger (although not exclusively) geographic connotation, far-right targeting appears to be largely symbolic.

Perhaps the most notorious “near enemy” killer of the 21st century, Anders Breivik, followed in McVeigh’s footsteps, detonating a truck bomb in the government quarter in Oslo, Norway, killing eight people, before driving to the nearby youth camp of the Norwegian Labour Party on Utøya island. Against that idyllic backdrop, Breivik opened fire, killing 69, mostly children. As mentioned above, Breivik’s aim was to strike at the heart of the liberal elite he claimed were importing foreigners into Norway – therefore dealing a more lasting blow to the immigrants he loathed. His planning was meticulous, his manifesto outlining enemy categories A, B, and C, all domestic enemies across the political space.³⁴ As Breivik and McVeigh demonstrated to devastating effect, “near enemy” attacks, perhaps counterintuitively for those assessing the threat, are often more deadly.

The American Jewish community has also suffered gravely from the “near enemy” calculation. “Every Jew is responsible for the meticulously planned genocide of the European race,” John Earnest, who opened fire at the Chabad of Poway in California in April 2019, wrote online shortly before the attack. “They act as a unit, and every Jew plays his part to enslave the other races around him — whether consciously or

³² Catrina Doxsee, Seth G. Jones, Kateryna Halstead, Grace Hwang, and Jared Thompson, “Pushed to Extremes: Domestic Terrorism amid Polarization and Protest,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 17, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pushed-extremes-domestic-terrorism-amid-polarization-and-protest>.

³³ “McVeigh’s Apr. 26 Letter to Fox News,” Fox News, January 13, 2015, <https://www.foxnews.com/story/mcveighs-apr-26-letter-to-fox-news>.

³⁴ Andrew Berwick, “2083: A European Declaration of Independence,” 2011.

subconsciously.”³⁵ His manifesto was a particularly strong testament to Great Replacement conspiracy logic, often also referred to as “white genocide,” with frequent references to a systematic replacement of white people, culture, and religion. Other races, he argued, were just “useful puppets for the Jew in terms of replacing Whites. Of course, they aren’t intelligent enough to realize that the Jew is using them and they will be enslaved if Europeans are eliminated.” This thinking exists abroad too, with an instructive example provided by the aforementioned Bratislava shooter, who targeted a gay bar but ultimately blamed Jews. “You organize and spearhead everything related to ‘LGBT rights’, pushing degenerate propaganda onto our Race,” he wrote. “For this, you must die.”³⁶ Jews, in this space, are not treated just as a minoritized race or religion, but also the opposite — an omniscient elite that conspires with, if not controls, government through various nefarious machinations. As one former member of the Atomwaffen Division declared, “The Jews were the virus, the people of color and the homosexuals, they were the symptoms.”³⁷ Thus, the Jewish community has been painted as the “near enemy” by far-right extremists.

In certain cases, the very concept of Western liberal democracy can find itself under attack from the far-right — as displayed on January 6, 2021, when the mere prospect of an election defeat sufficed to inspire hundreds of Donald Trump’s supporters to launch an assault against the U.S. Capitol building, seeking to halt the certification of Joe Biden’s victory. The grievances that inspired January 6 have arguably only intensified in the years since, leading politicians to increasingly be targeted for assassination, as displayed by an unsuccessful attempt against the Speaker of the House in the weeks before the 2022 midterm election.³⁸ In a growing recent trend, public demonstrators — often representing more liberal causes — have also frequently found themselves targeted.³⁹ In more extreme cases, some far-right extremists opt for a so-called “accelerationist” strategy, which aims to commit acts of violence in order to accelerate the demise of the Western state system. Once the “near enemy” federal government is destroyed, accelerationists argue, a new system can be reconstructed in the aftermath.

Sometimes, Great Replacement thinking can lead to interchangeable justifications for violence and targeting choices. Perhaps the most notorious example of near- and far-

³⁵ John Earnest, “An open letter,” April 2019.

³⁶ Juraj K., “A Call to Arms;” and Hannah Rose, “The Bratislava Attacks: Insights from the Shooter’s Manifesto,” Global Network on Extremism & Technology, October 14, 2022, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/14/the-bratislava-shooting-and-manifesto-initial-insights-and-learnings/>.

³⁷ Frontline, “Documenting Hate: New American Nazis,” PBS, November 20, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/documenting-hate-new-american-nazis/>.

³⁸ For more, see Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “The Accelerating Threat of the Political Assassination,” War on the Rocks, August 24, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/the-accelerating-threat-of-the-political-assassination/>.

³⁹ Doxsee, Jones, Halstead, Hwang, and Thompson, “Pushed to Extremes.”

enemy crossover occurred in Pittsburgh in 2018, when a gunman opened fire in a synagogue, killing 11, inspired to action by rumors of a migrant caravan traveling north from Central America. “[Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] likes to bring invaders in that kill our people,” Robert Bowers wrote on the far-right social media app Gab, offering yet another nod to the Great Replacement theory. “I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I’m going in.”⁴⁰ “Cascading” violence throughout 2019 showed both sides still inspire each other – as Breivik did for Tarrant, and as Tarrant subsequently did for others (including John Earnest, who firebombed a mosque in Escondido prior to his synagogue shooting, writing “For Brenton Tarrant -t. /pol/” in the parking lot).⁴¹ Even Dylann Roof, seemingly a reincarnation of the old guard of deeply racist American far-right extremists, displayed overlap, lamenting “the Jewish agitation of the black race.”⁴² Far-right extremism expert Cynthia Miller-Idriss writes that the Great Replacement “conspiracy theory is powerful because it is remarkably flexible.”⁴³ Its versatility can be seen in the variability of the targeting it inspires.

Crucially, as with Salafi-jihadists, the question is not who deserves to be attacked, but

rather sequencing — who deserves to be attacked first. Daniel Byman, in *Spreading Hate*, writes that “Often the preferred target reflects the fears of the moment.”⁴⁴ This is largely a matter of prioritization. In the far-right extremist’s mind, all ultimately deserve to be attacked.

COUNTERTERRORISM IMPLICATIONS

For Western governments and their counterterrorism endeavors, the most important implication of this study is a deeper understanding of how certain factions of the violent far-right movement prioritize certain targets – and whether federal and local governments can therefore erect stronger defenses at certain locations depending on the national zeitgeist. During spikes in anti-government extremism, for instance, there is unlikely to be a subsequent rising threat against racial and most religious minority communities or the LGBTQ+ community – instead, the range of “near enemy” targets, including government and its institutions and Jewish community sites, will be more in danger. Conversely, xenophobes and anti-immigration extremists – despite their anger at the government – will be more

⁴⁰ Rita Katz, “How ‘Screw Your Optics’ Became a Far-Right Rallying Cry,” *Foreign Policy*, October 23, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/23/far-right-terrorism-white-supremacy-islamic-state/>.

⁴¹ John Earnest, “An open letter,” April 2019.

⁴² Dylann Roof, “rtf88,” June 2015.

⁴³ Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “From 9/11 to 1/6,” *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 5 (September/October 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/war-on-terror-911-jan6>.

⁴⁴ Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp.144.

	Far-Right	Salafi-jihadism
Near Enemy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western liberal democracy • Western militaries • “The Jews”/Israel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western-backed “apostate” regimes in the Middle East
Far Enemy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minority religious and racial groups • African Americans • LGBTQ+ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western liberal democracy • Western militaries • “The Jews”/Israel

Figure 2 Terrorist Targeting Across Ideologies

likely to conduct violence at places of worship or other sites attracting predominantly members of a certain minority group.

At present, the United States is suffering from a febrile political climate, where electoral grievances are providing the most persistent galvanizing energy to the extreme far-right movement. The white supremacist and neo-Nazi fervor that defined the late-2010s, meanwhile, appears to have slowly receded — though that may be because it appears to have been mainstreamed in government and the media.⁴⁵ This may indicate that the most serious far-right terrorism threat today targets the federal government, Democratic party and politicians, and election

infrastructure, including local election workers – and not, perhaps, racial and religious minorities. Precisely this hypothesis was underscored in the lead-up to the 2022 midterm elections in the United States, when a kidnapping attempt targeted U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and seriously injured her husband, Paul. Should white supremacist actors again rise to the fore – as occurred at Buffalo, which suffered the deadliest far-right terrorist attack in America in almost three years – the threat calculation may reverse. Interestingly, in both “near enemy” and “far enemy” targeting, terrorists often choose to attack multiple targets, as displayed by both Breivik and Tarrant.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See, for example, Nicholas Confessore and Karen Yourish, “A Fringe Conspiracy Theory, Fostered Online, Is Refashioned by the G.O.P.,” *Washington Post*, May 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/15/us/replacement-theory-shooting-tucker-carlson.html>; and Kieran Press-Reynolds, “A former leader of the KKK celebrated Tucker Carlson ‘finally’ sharing the white-supremacist ‘great replacement’ conspiracy theory,” *Insider*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.insider.com/tucker-carlson-replacement-theory-david-duke-kkk-trump-2021-10>.

⁴⁶ For more, see Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “The Public Should Be Warned When a Rampage Is Underway,” *CFR.org*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/article/public-should-be-warned-when-rampage-underway>.

An additional point raised by this analysis is whether differing targeting preferences are sufficiently strongly-held to cause fissures in the movement. Anders Breivik's attack particularly caused the movement to divide between those who felt the violence against so-called "cultural Marxists" was justified, and those who lamented the killing of white Scandinavian "Aryans" and felt that Breivik had violated a taboo that could not be overlooked. Stormfront, a website Breivik had frequented, banned posts "cheering this slaughter," while several prominent white nationalists derided him as a "Zionist puppet."⁴⁷ That said, individuals still inspire one another across this divide – as displayed by Tarrant in his following of the Breivik model. And, far-right terrorism is far more decentralized, so any actual disagreement might just inspire further violence as terrorists seek to "outbid" those who disagree, rather than spark any significant divide in the movement.⁴⁸ What's more, the taboo effect weakens over time – Lars Erik Berntzen and Jacob Aasland Ravndal write that "associations with specific incidents, perpetrators and their ideas become successively less likely to be perceived as a form of taboo violation" – meaning any actual attempt to split the movement after an attack would need to be implemented quickly.⁴⁹ This is further complicated by the aforementioned ongoing mainstreaming of

the movement, which has seen elements of its more nefarious conspiracy theories enter certain factions of the media and political debates.

The most important conclusion, sadly, might actually be drawn by extremist groups themselves. As seen in figure two, the far-right and Salafi-jihadists share an enemy, and the most vicious and aggressive government crackdowns, which sometimes serve the purpose of these groups, typically come when the U.S. government and its various institutions are directly and frontally attacked. In the far-right case, more serious criminal charges such as the "seditious conspiracy" charge have been levied at leaders of groups involved on January 6; and in the Salafi-jihadist case, attacks against the West catalyze leadership decapitations or even outright military invasions. In explaining his strategy and decision to take on the "near enemy" directly, Poway shooter John Earnest lamented political conservatism, declaring "They'll complain all they want but they won't take up arms and threaten their government with death (the only thing that works)." In his case, this meant attacking Jews. The U.S. government is akin to a hornet's nest – preferring to keep to itself, but ultimately prepared to respond with overwhelming force (and therefore often

⁴⁷ Lars Erik Berntzen and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Monster or Hero? Far-right Responses to Anders Behring Breivik and the July 22, 2011 Terrorist Attacks," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 3 (June 2021), pp.37-59.

⁴⁸ For more on "outbidding," see Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2006), pp.49-80.

⁴⁹ Berntzen and Ravndal, "Monster or Hero?"

boosting the extremist grievance) when irritated.

Far-right “near enemy” targeting, as pursued by Earnest, presents a very active threat to the state. Therefore, the crackdown is often harsher. Precisely that calculation was made by Patrick Crusius, who perpetrated the attack in El Paso: “it is not cowardly to pick low hanging fruit. AKA Don’t attack heavily guarded areas to fulfill your super soldier COD fantasy. Attack low security targets. Even though you might out gun a security guard or police man, they likely beat you in armor, training and numbers. Do not throw away your life on an unnecessarily dangerous target. If a target seems to hot, live to fight another day.” His attack proved the most lethal American far-right attack in over 20 years (its strategic success remains to be seen).

Far-right “far enemy” targeting against minoritized communities seemingly presents less resistance from the state and its counterterrorism forces. Therefore, it can cause more damage to targeted communities, yet create less immediate political impact. Instead, these attacks are more pernicious – building mistrust and hatred between communities now pitted against each other on racial and religious lines. This also indicates why governments need to take “far

enemy” threats more seriously – and find better ways to rally energy and national unity in their wake. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern offered an excellent model, declaring that, “Racism exists, but it is not welcome here. An assault on the freedom of any one of us who practices their faith or religion is not welcome here.”⁵⁰ The same has been seen in Norway. Breivik, in fact, may have deliberately selected his two “near enemy” targets precisely because he worried about backlash, and calculated there would be less anger about the attack he ultimately carried out. “He did initially consider attacking the external enemy, but decided against this, remembering the murder of Benjamin Hermansen in Oslo in 2001,” Cato Hemmingby and Tore Bjørgo, among the first scholars to discuss what they call the internal/external enemy paradigm, write. “The 15 year old, with a mother from Norway and father from Ghana, was killed by neo-Nazis, and the massive public condemnation following this killing, convinced Breivik that such an action was likely to be counter-productive for the movement.”⁵¹ He consequently shifted his target selection. Protecting minoritized communities from white supremacist violence, then, requires embracing them more fully as part of an image of national unity. As terrorism expert Daniel Byman notes, in deterring attacks

⁵⁰ Gigi Sukin, “Community gathers at Christchurch national memorial service,” *Axios*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/2019/03/29/community-gathers-christchurch-memorial-service>.

⁵¹ Cato Hemmingby and Tore Bjørgo, “Terrorist Target Selection: The Case of Anders Behring Breivik,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 6 (December 2018), pp.164-176.

against minority communities, “Ensuring that we really treat ‘them’ as ‘us’ is vital.”⁵²

This brief raises some interesting questions for academics, too. For instance, can this model be applied elsewhere to additional extremist movements? It would not apply to the far-left, at least in the post-Cold War era, because modern far-left ideology and extremism is actually defined by the absence of an outgroup “far enemy” – so all violence targets the “near enemy” (like recent assassination plots against the Republican party at a baseball practice and a conservative Supreme Court justice at his home). It would not apply to the nascent incel movement either, because incels themselves are their own “near enemy,” responsible for their own demise. Thus, all violence targets the “far enemy” (although incels also display high levels of suicide, showing they do seek harm against their perceived “near enemy”).

The theory is also complicated by developments in both the far-right ecosystem and the conspiracy theories that sustain it. The emergence of the QAnon conspiracy as a significant player on the U.S. extremism stage, for instance, led to a wild array of terrorist targets – ranging from a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. to the Hoover Dam.⁵³ These

targets were united only by their representation of various conspiratorial claims issued by QAnon, thus marking them, in their own bizarre way, as the “near enemy.” As QAnon takes root globally, the conspiracy manifests in different ways, evidenced by recent arrests of far-right extremists in Germany targeting the “near enemy” of the German government.⁵⁴ The pandemic also randomized terrorist targeting, as new enemies emerged. Pandemic-related violence targeted hospitals and health care facilities, Asian Americans, and even 5G technology, which was blamed for spreading COVID-19.⁵⁵ As Byman observes, “Conspiracy theories are a near-constant in the white supremacist ecosystem, often leading to odd reasons for the embrace of violence” – and therefore confusing terrorist targeting yet further.⁵⁶

Ultimately, the far-right “near enemy” versus “far enemy” paradigm is an interesting question to debate, but requires more study to understand whether it might present further recommendations for counterterrorism practitioners.

⁵² Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp.173.

⁵³ Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-André Argentino, “The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?” *CTC Sentinel*, 13, no. 7 (July 2020): <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-qanon-conspiracy-theory-a-security-threat-in-the-making/>.

⁵⁴ Frank Jordans, “Suspected German Coup Plot Spawns Dozens of Arrests,” *Associated Press*, December 8, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-germany-constitutions-d7e67cfefbd1f33e2909f9c2fe1a3d3d>

⁵⁵ For more, see Samantha Stern, Jacob Ware, and Nicholas Harrington, “Terrorist Targeting in the Age of Coronavirus,” *International Counter-Terrorism Review* 1, no. 3 (June 2020), https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2562/Terrorist_Targeting_in_the_Age_of_Coronavirus#gsc.tab=0.

⁵⁶ Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp.5.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Western governments should devote more resources to protecting minoritized communities and make concerted, actionable efforts to treat them as an integral part of their respective societies.** When far-right attacks against minority communities garner less resistance from the state and its counterterrorism forces, less immediate political impact, and muted outrage among non-minority groups, there is significant damage wrought on the targeted communities, with pernicious effects. One result can be growing distrust and hatred between communities who feel they are being pitted against each other on racial and religious lines.
2. **Counterterrorism analysts should look closely at how Salafi-jihadists' targeting preferences evolved over time and seek to determine whether any patterns might be instructive to how far-right terrorists are considering the 'near enemy versus far enemy' paradigm.** There may be important similarities and differences between how terrorist organizations motivated by different ideologies choose their targets which, in turn, could help law enforcement and intelligence agencies more efficiently allocate resources to thoroughly combat this threat.
3. **Public-private partnerships to protect vulnerable targets should be strengthened.** The private sector, communities, local government, and law enforcement should work together to enhance "soft target" protection, share information about threats and concerns, raise awareness of emergency response procedures, and train frontline or targeted groups in how to stay safe by following preventive measures that have been assessed and validated by security experts.
4. **More research is required on terrorist targeting preferencing, particularly on government and public responses to certain forms of targeting and their effectiveness.** An important research question is whether differing targeting preferences are sufficiently strongly-held to cause fissures in the movement, and, if so, how might counterterrorism practitioners influence these debates to degrade the cohesion of far-right extremists and their supporting networks.



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