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FEATURE ARTICLE

The El Paso Terrorist Attack

The chain reaction of global right-wing terror

GRAHAM MACKLIN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Lieutenant General John N.T. Shanahan

DIRECTOR, JOINT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE CENTER,
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

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FROM THE EDITOR

The final two years of this decade witnessed a wave of far-right terror attacks around the world, including the October 2018 synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; the March 2019 gun attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand; the April 2019 Poway, California, synagogue shooting; the August 2019 attack targeting the Hispanic community at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas; and the October 2019 Halle, Germany, shootings, in which a synagogue was targeted.

In our feature article, Graham Macklin examines the El Paso attack, which he assesses as “part of a chain reaction fomented within the violent sub-cultural online milieu of right-wing extremism.” He writes: “This digital ecosystem is fueling a cumulative momentum, which serves to lower ‘thresholds’ to violence for those engaged in this space, both in the United States and elsewhere, as one attack encourages and inspires another.”

The Halle shootings appear to have also been part of this chain reaction. In a case study, Daniel Koehler writes that the far-right extremist who carried out the shootings in the eastern German town “appears to be mainly a copycat attacker inspired by previous incidents” such as the shootings in Christchurch, Poway, and El Paso. Koehler writes: “The Halle attack reflects and evidences several trends, including the internationalization of right-wing terrorism and lone-actor terrorists fashioning their own weapons. The attack stood out because it was the first time a terrorist appears to have used homemade firearms.”

Our interview is with Lieutenant General John “Jack” Shanahan, the director of the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center at the U.S. Department of Defense. In that role, he is responsible for accelerating the delivery of artificial intelligence-enabled capabilities, scaling the department-wide impact of AI and synchronizing AI activities to expand joint force advantages.

Tore Hamming draws on court documents from a recently completed trial to examine the 2016 Copenhagen ‘Matchstick’ terror plot. The failed conspiracy saw an Islamic State ‘virtual planner’ based in Syria connect and direct two Syrian refugees living in Sweden and Germany. The case provides insights on the evolving jihadi terror threat in the West and its transnational dimension. Hamming writes: “The plot presented obvious challenges for Western security institutions. Central to its planning and execution were the virtual planner and the availability of instructions on how to construct explosives.”

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Cover: Flowers and candles are left at a memorial five days after the mass shooting at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, on August 8, 2019. (Callaghan O'Hare/Reuters)

The El Paso Terrorist Attack: The Chain Reaction of Global Right-Wing Terror

By Graham Macklin

The past two years have witnessed a wave of terrorist attacks perpetrated by right-wing extremists, most notably in Christchurch, New Zealand; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Poway, California; Halle, Germany; and in August 2019, El Paso, Texas. An in-depth study of the El Paso attack, the perpetrator's *modus operandi*, and the changing response of U.S. law enforcement to the scourge of extreme right-wing terrorism situates events in Texas within their broader context—as part of a chain reaction fomented within the violent sub-cultural online milieus of right-wing extremism. This digital ecosystem is fueling a cumulative momentum, which serves to lower ‘thresholds’ to violence for those engaged in this space, both in the United States and elsewhere, as one attack encourages and inspires another, creating a growing ‘canon’ of ‘saints’ and ‘martyrs’ for others to emulate.

On August 3, 2019, Patrick Wood Crusius, a 21-year-old from Allen, an affluent suburb 20 miles north of Dallas, Texas, allegedly drove some 650 miles to El Paso, a journey of more than 10 hours. He then allegedly walked into a Walmart Supercenter near the Cielo Vista Mall on the city's eastern side and opened fire on shoppers using a WASR-10 rifle, murdering 20 people including a 25-year-old mother of three whom he killed as she held her two-month-old baby. Two more shoppers subsequently succumbed to their wounds in hospital, bringing the death toll to 22; another 26 people were wounded.¹ The terrorist attack in El Paso was the seventh-deadliest mass shooting in modern American history. It was also the third-deadliest shooting in Texan history, the worst since

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Research for this article was conducted while the author was a visiting fellow at the International Center for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) in the Netherlands.

a gunman murdered 26 people during a rampage at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs near San Antonio in November 2017.²

Prior to the atrocity, Crusius allegedly posted online that he recognized that his death was “likely inevitable” and that if he was not killed by police, he would be gunned down by one of the “invaders.” Aware that the crime he was about to perpetrate merited the death penalty if he was captured alive (and envisaging a future in which he could not bear to live knowing that “my family despises me” for what he had done), Crusius stated: “This is why I’m not going to surrender even if I run out of ammo. If I am captured, it will be because I was subdued somehow.”³ His online bravado evaporated in the wake of the killings, however. Crusius surrendered without firing a shot. Having driven to a nearby traffic intersection, he stopped and waited for police. Exiting the vehicle with his hands raised above his head, Crusius told the arresting officers: “I’m the shooter.”⁴

Transported to El Paso police headquarters, Crusius waived his Miranda rights and agreed to speak about the incident. He informed the interrogating police detective of his racist motivation, that he had deliberately targeted “Mexicans.”⁵ El Paso Police Chief Greg Allen subsequently confirmed to the media that during his interrogation, Crusius “basically didn’t hold anything back.”⁶ Crusius said that he had targeted El Paso’s Hispanic community rather than one closer to his own home because, he reasoned, “if he committed the attack near his home in a suburb of Dallas, his family and acquaintances would have known that he did it,” local media reported, quoting sources close to the investigation.⁷ The FBI confirmed that Crusius had no local contacts in El Paso.⁸

When Crusius appeared in court for his arraignment hearing on October 11, 2019, he entered a “not guilty” plea to capital murder charges,⁹ thus the following assertions must be considered allegations—based on press reports, manifestos, and court documents—which, at the time of writing (December 2019), remain to be proven in court. El Paso’s county district attorney’s office announced that it is seeking the death penalty for Crusius who is currently jailed without bond awaiting trial.¹⁰ The U.S. district attorney for Texas’ Western District, Joseph Bash, also stated that the massacre was being treated as “domestic terrorism” and that his office will be pursuing federal hate crime and firearms charges.¹¹

Crusius, who had worked bagging groceries at a supermarket, stated in his application for a public defender that he had no income, assets, or expenses and had been living with his grandparents until about six weeks before the shooting.¹² On his LinkedIn page, since-removed, he wrote under “skills,” “Nothing really.” Crusius had graduated from Plano Senior High School in 2017 before enrolling himself at Collin College, a community college in nearby McKinney, where he studied from fall 2017 through to spring 2019.¹³ A former neighbor told *The Los Angeles Times* that he was “very much a loner, very standoffish” and was someone who “didn’t interact a whole lot

with anyone.” Former classmates alluded to the fact that he was frequently “picked on” at school.¹⁴

A Familiar Modus Operandi

The El Paso massacre followed an increasingly familiar pattern in which a manifesto posted online was followed moments later by horrific violence. At 10:15 AM, 25 minutes before the killing in El Paso began, an anonymous user posted two documents to 8chan’s /pol/ board—the third time the image board, which eschews censorship of its content so long as it does not contravene United States law, had been used to announce the onset of a terrorist attack.^{15 a} The first document, entitled “P_Crusius – Notification Letter,” was quickly deleted, its contents unknown.¹⁶ It was replaced by a second attachment entitled “The Inconvenient Truth,” which served as the killer’s alleged manifesto. The accompanying post, titled “It’s Time,” read:

*FML [F**k My Life] nervous as hell. This is the actual manifesto F**k this is going to be so sh*t but I can't wait any longer. Do your part and spread this brothers! Of course, only spread it if the attack is successful. I know that the media is going to try to frame my [sic] incorrectly, but y'all will know the truth! I'm probably going to die today. Keep up the good fight.*¹⁷

There are no reports that any 8chan users alerted the authorities. The ritualized act of posting a manifesto prior to undertaking this form of extreme-right violence serves as a powerful act of propaganda designed to deliver an explanatory narrative, an ideological justification, a tactical lesson, and a call to arms for others to follow.^b Given the self-referential nature of extreme-right violence in the digital age, those who leave manifestos have become “more influential and highly regarded than those who leave only a vacuum,” J. M. Berger has argued.¹⁸ Sociologist Ralph Larkin argued in relation to the Columbine High School massacre on April 20, 1999, which left 13 victims dead and 24 injured, that such an event provided a “cultural script” for subsequent would-be high school killers, for whom the death toll at Columbine was a record to be exceeded; for others, it was an incitement to further violence, an event to be emulated

in their own killing sprees, or indeed a tradition to be ‘honored’ in their own attacks.¹⁹

A similar “cultural script” appears increasingly evident within the digital demimonde of the violent extreme right.^c Arguably, this phenomenon began in 2011 with Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, who, although once considered something of an outlier with regard to extreme right violence, has become an aspirational figure for some within the milieu. While Breivik received praise in some quarters,²⁰ few militants sought to emulate his actions, at least not until the Christchurch attacks, a catalytic event in part because the atrocity was livestreamed, a deliberate device its perpetrator intended to galvanize others to action.²¹ Indeed, as alleged Christchurch attacker Brenton Tarrant had been inspired by Breivik, so Tarrant inspired both John Earnest, the Poway synagogue attacker, and Patrick Crusius, both of whom in their turn hoped to inspire others through both their manifestos and deeds.²²

To help conceptualize the momentum this latest wave of violence has attained, Mark Granovetter’s “threshold model of collective behavior,”²³ which has recently been used to interpret the prevalence of high school massacres,²⁴ is useful. Put simply, Granovetter’s model enjoins analysts to consider these violent acts not simply as resulting from individual decision-making, each considered in isolation from one another, but as part of a broader social process in which violence is enacted in reaction to, and in combination with, other actors. While would-be terrorists might be reluctant to move from extreme thought to violent action, as more and more people participate, the thresholds (both social and moral) for partaking in violence begin to lower. And as they do, increasing numbers of people are able to contemplate and indeed have situated their own actions within a continuum of violent activity that has preceded their own, giving the phenomenon a depth of meaning that the word ‘copycat’ fails to convey. More research is required to understand why this occurs in some cases but not in others, however.

Insofar as extreme-right terrorism is concerned, the digital milieu has played a key role in lowering such thresholds; each act of killing and the way in which it is glorified and gamified through countless memes on forums like 8chan, provides impetus for further violence. Indeed, as Frederick Brennan—the founder of 8chan who has since parted company with the image board he had created—remarked, it is the very structure of 8chan that radicalizes users:

*The other anonymous users are guiding what's socially acceptable, and the more and more you post on there you're being affected by what's acceptable and that changes you. Maybe you start posting Nazi memes as a joke ... but you start to absorb those beliefs as your own, eventually.*²⁵

Arguably, such forums, which provide users with a supportive digital ecosystem, also play a role in shifting behaviors. They comprise a milieu in which the ‘saints’ and ‘martyrs’ responsible for previous atrocities are venerated by other anonymous users. Regardless of whether such posts are made in jest or in all seriousness, there are seemingly no shortage of users willing to gleefully exhort other users to join this pantheon of ‘heroes’ by perpetrating yet greater acts of violence in return for the nebulous reward of celebrity and

a The previous two times 8chan had been used to broadcast murder were the Christchurch attack in New Zealand and the Poway synagogue attack in California. Kristen Gelineau, “5 months on, Christchurch attacker influences others,” Associated Press, August 6, 2019. The October 2019 attack in Halle, Germany, where the perpetrator murdered two people after failing to gain access to a synagogue to carry out a massacre, followed a similar *modus operandi* with the assailant posting a manifesto and livestreaming his attack, albeit on this occasion to Twitch. Highlighting the performative aspect of the attack, when the killer realized his attack was not going to plan, the Halle attacker apologized to his virtual audience: “Sorry, guys.” See “Deadly Attack Exposes Lapses in German Security Apparatus,” *Spiegel*, October 11, 2019, and Daniel Koehler, “The Halle, Germany, Synagogue Attack and Evolution of the Far-Right Terror Threat,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:11 (2019).

b This is a factor common to other categories of lone-actor violence as well. In its study of lone actors, which was not confined to extreme right activists, the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (“Lone Offender: A Study of Lone Offender Terrorism in the United States (1972-2005),” November 2019, pp. 39-41) found that 50 perpetrators (96 percent) “produced writings or videos intended to viewed by others.” Of those 50, twenty-four (48 percent) posted videos or writings (blogs, essays, or manifestos) to social media platforms or their own websites before their attack while 22 offenders (44 percent) produced content before and after their attack while the remaining four offenders in their sample (eight percent) only wrote publicly after their attack.

c Jeff Sparrow makes a similar point in relation to the Christchurch terrorist attacks in *Fascists Among Us: Online Hate and the Christchurch Massacre* (London: Scribe, 2019), pp. 73-74.



The American flag is seen at half-mast, near the site of a mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. (Jose Luis Gonzalez/Reuters)

respect that this environment offers.²⁶ “The new guy deserves some praise,” wrote one 8chan user following the El Paso attack in a post that echoed both the performative and gamified elements of this subculture, “he reached almost a third of the high score.”²⁷

The personal status derived from placing on the ‘leader board’ within this online milieu appears to have fostered an element of competition among certain users; each successive act of violence fueling a cumulative carnival of cruelty in which heinous acts of violence are repeatedly glorified, their perpetrators lionized, and their victims further dehumanized, with a view to galvanizing would-be killers to commit further acts of terrorism. Graphic testimony to this dynamic was provided one week after the El Paso attack when alleged Norwegian terrorist Philip Manshaus who, prior to killing his stepsister and attempting to attack a mosque in Bærum, a town roughly nine miles from Oslo, had claimed online to have been “chosen” by “Saint Tarrant” to “bump the race war thread irl [in real life]” and “if you’re reading this you have been elected by me.”²⁸ Further highlighting the self-referential continuum of extreme-right terrorism, Manshaus also posted a meme depicting Brenton Tarrant, John Earnest, and Patrick Crusius as ‘heroes.’²⁹

The End of 8chan?

Predictably, parts of 8chan were enthused by the killings. One study of the forum’s posts conducted in the aftermath of the crime recorded a spike in racist language toward Mexicans, “showing a sign that terrorist deeds energized toxic language usage on the board.”³⁰ This racist ecstasy was short-lived, however. The El Paso attacks sounded the death knell for the forum. This being the third time in 2019 that

8chan had been used to trumpet a terrorist attack, there was intense pressure for action against it including from its own founder, Frederick Brennan, who publicly regretted his creation following the attacks.³¹ 8chan was knocked offline shortly afterwards when the network provider Cloudflare finally terminated the site’s provision of facilities to the image board on the grounds that it “has repeatedly proven itself a cesspool of hate.”^{32 d}

Unlike its founder, 8chan’s proprietor, James Watkins, sought to deflect from the site’s responsibility, claiming that Crusius’ manifesto had actually first been posted on Instagram before someone else reposted it to 8chan,³³ an assertion that Facebook (the social media behemoth that owns Instagram) denied. Crusius’ Instagram account had been inactive for over a year, Facebook stated.³⁴ Watkins was subsequently subpoenaed to appear before a congressional hearing where he attempted to explain “how careful and responsible 8chan is.”³⁵ Following a period offline, 8chan was resurrected as 8kun, which went live on November 2, 2019, though four days later its domain registrar removed the site for breaching the company’s service agreement.³⁶ It is currently back online, though it is not immediately discoverable using standard search engines. Though the demise of 8chan removed an important performative platform for

d 8chan was briefly picked up by Epik.com, whose clients included Gab, until Voxility, an internet services company it worked with, completely banned 8chan from its network causing the site to disappear again. See Voxility, “Thank you for the note. We are addressing this now ...,” Twitter, August 5, 2019.

would-be extreme-right terrorists, denying them a broader audience, many users have already migrated to end-to-end encrypted platforms such as Telegram.³⁷

The Manifesto

The manifesto posted by the El Paso terrorist was a short, four-page document entitled “The Inconvenient Truth.” Highlighting the aforementioned self-referential nature of extreme right-wing terrorism, the manifesto’s opening sentence announced support for the “Christchurch shooter” and stated that the attack was “a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas.” Crusius framed his violence as defensive: “They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion.”³⁸ He denied his motives were “personal” while hinting at the catalytic impact of the Christchurch terrorist atrocity: “Actually the Hispanic community was not my target before I read [Tarrant’s manifesto] *The Great Replacement*,”³⁹ his phraseology suggesting that he was already considering committing an act of violence against some other “target” prior to reading Tarrant’s manifesto, though this gave him a frame for action.

Crusius’ own missive was saturated with a pessimistic prognosis that the United States “is rotting from the inside out” and that a peaceful means of arresting the decline “seems to be nearly impossible.” Crusius believed that the Republican Party’s anti-immigrant rhetoric, combined with the nation’s changing demography, meant that the “ever increasing Hispanic population” would flock to the Democrats: “America will soon become a one party-state. The Democrat party will own America and they know it.”⁴⁰ His attack was perceived as the opening salvo in a campaign that ultimately would forestall this perceived racial dystopia by encouraging these “economic migrants” who were taking American jobs to return “home.” Railing against corporate America, Crusius also bemoaned the economic consequences of deindustrialization and automation for the white working class, though he also regarded the latter as a blessing since “it will eliminate the need for new migrants to fill unskilled jobs.”⁴¹

Perhaps the most novel aspect of the manifesto was the centrality of its racist, anti-human ecology, which was also evident in Brenton Tarrant’s declaration that he was an “eco-fascist.”⁴² “The Inconvenient Truth”—its title seemingly alluding to Al Gore’s environmental documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), which sounded the alarm about global warming—regaled readers with its author’s neo-Malthusian solution to overpopulation based on terrorism, racial separatism, and an inchoate desire to “send them back” in order to prevent “race-mixing,” which would, in turn, promote “social unity” and environmental regeneration. Despite acknowledging that his fellow (white) Americans were largely responsible for the majority of the issues that so appalled him, including “the takeover of the United States by unchecked corporations,” Crusius targeted “low hanging fruit” for ease of access and because his racist views ensured that even though “non-immigrant targets would have a greater impact, I can’t bring myself to kill my fellow Americans.”⁴³

Thereafter, Crusius briefly outlined the tactical preparations for

his attack, particularly his choice of weapon—an AK-47 (WASR-10), which, he conceded, was not as good as an AR-15-style rifle.⁴⁴ He had, according to his own account, purchased the gun online from Romania, together with 1,000 rounds of ammunition bought from Russia, stated a Texas Department of Public Safety report obtained by The Texas Tribune.⁴⁵ “I didn’t spend much time at all preparing for this attack. Maybe a month, probably less,” Crusius boasted in his manifesto, which differed from the years of meticulous planning that went into Breivik’s atrocities⁴⁶ or even the months that Tarrant spent planning his attacks, according to his manifesto.⁴⁷ Crusius’ attack was—if his own manifesto is to be believed—the child of necessity. “I have [to] do this before I lose my nerve,” he stated. “I figured that an under-prepared attack and a meh [so-so] manifesto is better than no attack and no manifesto.”⁴⁸

In retrospect, within the time frame that Crusius claims he was preparing his attack, there appears to have been an opportunity to interdict it. Lawyers for the family confirmed to CNN that his mother, concerned about her son owning an “AK”-type firearm given his age, his immaturity, and his inexperience in handling such a weapon, had called the City of Allen Police Department on June 27, 2019—roughly five weeks before the massacre. She had spoken to a public safety officer who, according to the family’s attorney, told her that based on her description of the situation, her son was legally entitled to purchase such a weapon. According to the family’s attorneys, the phone call was “informational” rather than being motivated by any concern about her son posing a threat to himself or others, a fact she confirmed to the public safety officer during the course of the call. His mother did not provide her name or her son’s name, and police sought no further information from her before the call concluded, CNN reported.⁴⁹

Crusius subsequently used this legally owned firearm in a state with open and concealed carry laws, confessing to police during his interrogation that he “was surprised when no one challenged him or shot him.”⁵⁰ Even though the first police officers arrived on the scene within six minutes of the first 911 call,⁵¹ law enforcement are perhaps up against the limit of what, if anything, they can do to prevent such atrocities once the shooting has begun beyond neutralizing the perpetrator. Indeed, a central problem is access to semi-automatic weaponry. Though Crusius used an AK-47-style gun, more generally the proliferation of lightweight polymer firearms combined with high-capacity, extended magazines, which have been used in several such attacks, has enhanced the capacity for carnage of even the most technically deficient would-be shooter. As Louis Klarevas has highlighted in relation to gun violence in the United States more broadly, this phenomenon of mass shootings has been accelerated by a toxic triumvirate of unstable *perpetrators*, vulnerable *targets*, and lethal *weaponry*—“the trinity of violence.”⁵²

Although the political will to enact more than meager (by international standards) gun control at the federal level^f remains lacking (though some individual states, for instance New York, have made efforts in this direction⁵³), there is at least some anecdotal evidence that firearms manufacturers themselves recognize that the proliferation of military-style weaponry is facilitating the lethality of mass shootings and terrorism in the United States. Indeed, on September 19, 2019, Dennis Veilleux, president and CEO of Colt, announced

e While it is unknown if Crusius was aware of it, race and conservationism have a storied history within the United States’ extreme right. See Jonathan Spiro, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University of Vermont Press, 2008).

f For a step taken at the federal level, see Brittany Crocker and Nick Penzenstadler, “Bump stocks, which allow rifles to mimic automatic weapons, are now illegal to own, buy or sell,” *USA Today*, March 26, 2019.

that his company was taking the AR-15 out of civilian production, and that although the firm remained committed to the Second Amendment and would continue to fulfill orders for the police and military, “the market for modern sporting rifles has experienced significant excess manufacturing capacity.”⁵⁴

The Aftermath of the Atrocity

Though President Trump denounced the El Paso massacre as “an act of cowardice,”⁵⁵ innumerable commentators blamed him (and other conservative media hosts⁵⁶) for fueling the hostile political climate in which Crusius carried out his attack, unsurprisingly perhaps since Trump has a well-documented record of describing Latino immigration as “an invasion of our country.”⁵⁷ Crusius, who listed his party affiliation as Republican, had indeed admired Trump, apparently tweeting using the handle @outsider609 (which appears not to have been updated since 2017): “#BuildTheWall is the best way that @POTUS has worked to secure our country so far!”⁵⁸ In his manifesto, Crusius had anticipated that he would be viewed as simply acting out the President’s anti-immigration rhetoric and so was at pains to highlight that his own views predated Trump; any attempt to link the two, he stated, was “fake news,” ironically another of the President’s common refrains.⁵⁹ Ultimately, whatever the origins of Crusius violent hostility toward Mexicans, of which more might be learned during his upcoming trial—a date for which has not yet been set⁶⁰—his actions were an extreme but by no means isolated phenomenon and part of a broader historical arc of racist violence against migrants from Latin America⁶¹ and Americans of Hispanic descent. Indeed, from the California Gold Rush to the last recorded instance of a Mexican being lynched in public in 1928, vigilantes have “hanged, burned, and shot thousands of persons of Mexican descent in the United States.”⁶²

The public and political impact of the El Paso massacre was compounded by the fact that within 24 hours, another mass shooting took place, this time in Dayton, Ohio, where a 24-year-old gunman wearing body armor and a mask killed nine people, including his sister who reportedly identified as male,⁶³ and injured another 27 people. Police shot the gunman dead within 32 seconds of the first shot being fired, though his ability to kill nine people during this short timeframe testified to the deadly combination of assault-style rifles and high-capacity magazines. Although police ruled out “seeing any indication of race being a motive” at a subsequent press conference, they did state that evidence uncovered at that point highlighted that the killer had “a history of obsession with violent ideations,” including mass shootings, and a desire to commit one.⁶⁴ Reflecting an increased public awareness of the scourge of gun violence following the two mass shootings, tipoffs to the FBI alone surged by 70 percent in the weeks that followed.⁶⁵ By the end of August 2019, police had arrested more than 40 people in the United States for making threats to commit a mass shooting or actually

planning to do so.⁶⁶

Following El Paso and Dayton demands for gun control combined with a denunciation of political inaction in the face of such violence gathered pace. Although President Trump had intimated that “serious” discussions were taking place regarding gun control in the days after El Paso,⁶⁷ he soon made it clear that he intended to focus on other approaches such as violent video games, online radicalization, and mental illness as a means of preventing gun violence rather than on gun control per se.⁶⁸ Indeed, Attorney General William Barr, blaming partisan gridlock, officially declared the gun control legislative effort, such as it was, dead in November 2019.⁶⁹

Walmart, the largest firearms retailer in the United States, on whose premises the El Paso atrocity had occurred, did not immediately act, issuing a statement two days after the massacre confirming that its gun sale policies remained unaltered by the attack.⁷⁰ Shortly afterwards, however, the company adjusted its position. In early September, Walmart announced its discontinuation of a range of items including the sale of handgun ammunition. It also publicly requested that patrons refrain from openly carrying guns into their stores, even in states where “open carry” was permitted, following several instances in which individuals had attempted “to make a statement” and “test our response,” resulting in panicked shoppers being evacuated and law enforcement called.⁷¹

Walmart’s announcement had been precipitated by several cases including that of Dmitriy Andreychenko, who on August 8, 2019, just five days after the El Paso massacre, caused panic at a Walmart in Springfield, Missouri, when he entered the building openly carrying a “tactical rifle” and 100 rounds of ammunition. Andreychenko subsequently claimed it was a “social experiment” to see if Walmart would honor his right to open carry in their stores. Held at gun point by a fellow shopper until the police arrived, Andreychenko conceded he was lucky his actions had not gotten him killed.⁷²

Walmart itself became a lightning rod for terroristic threats after the El Paso massacre—many of them undoubtedly spawned by the “media contagion effect,” which appears to cause copycat crimes to cluster around well-publicized events.⁷³ In the week after the attack, Walmart stores received at least eight threats, both in-store and online.⁷⁴ One such threat was allegedly made by Floridian Richard Clayton, noted for harboring racist and anti-Semitic views, who posted a threat on Facebook: “3 more days of probation left then I get my AR-15 back. Don’t go to Walmart next week.”⁷⁵ He was allegedly belligerent and uncooperative, racially abusing the arresting officer whom he mistook to be Hispanic. “They are what is wrong with this country ... they come in and are ruining everything,” Clayton allegedly stated.⁷⁶

Responding to the Threat of Extreme-Right Violence in the United States

The El Paso terrorist attack was symptomatic of a broader increase in violent right-wing extremism in the United States. From September 2, 2011, to December 31, 2016, right-wing extremists were responsible for three times as many attacks as those inspired by jihadi ideology: 62 incidents with 106 fatalities compared to 23 incidents with 119 fatalities, respectively.⁷⁷ In 2018, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) highlighted that right-wing extremists were linked to at least 50 killings that year, more deaths than in any year since 1995 when another far-right extremist, Timothy McVeigh, detonated a truck bomb outside a federal building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people. ADL data, which goes back to 1970, also

g The murderous anti-Semitic assault on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018, which claimed 11 lives, was framed by the perpetrator as retaliation for its congregation having previously partnered with a refugee advocacy group, whom the killer believed was helping to transport “invaders” from Central America into the United States, the so-called migrant “caravan” being front and center in Trump’s politicking during the 2018 midterm elections. More generally, Adeel Hassan (“Hate-Crime Violence Hits 16-Year High, FBI Reports,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2019) reports that according to FBI statistics for 2018, hate crimes against Latinos are at their highest levels since 2010.

highlighted that during the last decade (the 2010s), and in a domestic context, right-wing extremists were responsible for 73.3 percent of all extremist murders, compared to 23.4 percent committed by Islamist militants.⁷⁸

In the United States context, efforts to tackle the issue have been complicated by First Amendment-protected speech and association rights, which prevent state agencies from interfering with domestic extremist groups on these grounds, making responses often reactive rather than proactive. “We, the FBI, don’t investigate ideology, no matter how repugnant,” FBI Director Christopher Wray stated on July 23, 2019. “When it turns to violence, we’re all over it.”⁷⁹ Indeed, on this point, U.S. law enforcement agencies have very little room for maneuver compared to their European counterparts because of First Amendment protections of free speech. Furthermore, there is a “significant disparity” in the way that the United States’ legal system treats acts of “international” and “domestic” terrorism, which ignores the transnational digital dimension of right-wing extremism. As a result, mass shootings such as that carried out by Patrick Crusius “do not fall within the current federal terrorism framework,” leaving prosecutors with no alternative but to charge perpetrators under hate crimes legislation or with homicide, which distorts perceptions of the risk posed by the phenomenon.⁸⁰ Enacting a domestic terrorism statute that criminalized acts of terrorism based on domestic “grievances,” it has been argued, would go some way to addressing this gap without becoming entangled in constitutional issues and would also place such offenses unambiguously on the same moral plane as “international” terrorism; would increase public awareness, building trust between communities; and would also allow for better data collection about the threat as well as mandating the direction of more resources toward it.⁸¹

When asked in an interview for the October 2019 issue of this publication whether the distinction between domestic and international terrorism had “outlived its usefulness,” Kevin McAleenan, the then Acting Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), replied, “Well, maybe,” highlighting that his staff were grappling with both terminology and definitions, calling for a “new definition” for targeted violence on the domestic side “as well as an annual assessment of threats to the homeland.” This was something that DHS had requested the Department of Justice to look at in response to both El Paso and Dayton and “whether there are any legislative updates that need to be considered as well.”⁸²

Paradoxically, as the threat posed by right-wing extremists moved center stage in the days after El Paso, CNN reported that the Trump administration had previously spent more than a year rebuffing DHS’ efforts to make combating domestic extremism a higher priority, as had been spelled out in the National Counterterrorism Strategy.⁸³ Indeed, the Trump administration had already defunded several measures aiming to combat the issue.⁸⁴ Predictably, as RAND’s *Practical Terrorism Prevention* (2019) observed, as a result there are “major gaps” in national terrorism prevention efforts, shortfalls precipitated by “limited programmatic focus and resource investment.”⁸⁵

However, DHS’ *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*,⁸⁶ published in September 2019, has for the first time since the agency’s formation after 9/11 included “white supremacist extremism” on its list of threats, though there are undoubtedly some practical and political challenges to implementing this new strategy.⁸⁷ DHS had been “galvanized” to add white supremacy as a result of the recent spate of terrorist attacks, stated

McAleenan.⁸⁸ Underscoring the reasons why white supremacist extremism had finally been incorporated within the *Strategic Framework*, McAleenan told *CTC Sentinel*:

*We wanted to be very clear in this Strategy that we recognize emerging threats from racially motivated violent extremists, and in particular white supremacist extremists in the United States [...] that’s borne out by the FBI’s caseload and current percentages, and it’s been the driving ideological factor in a number of high-casualty attacks, both in the U.S. and abroad in the last two years. So stating that with clarity, that was very important as a strategic direction to the Department of Homeland Security agencies and professionals. But also to show the American people we get it, and we’re addressing emerging threats as aggressively as we can.*⁸⁹

Even before El Paso, however, the FBI was highlighting the growing magnitude of the threat, which was reflected not just in high-profile massacres at synagogues in California and Pennsylvania but also in less publicized cases like that of Coast Guard Lt. Christopher Hasson, who, though he was not charged with terrorism-related offenses, pleaded guilty to four counts of weapons and drugs charges, including the improper possession of 17 firearms and two silencers in October 2019. Inspired by Breivik’s manifesto, Hasson spent hours researching his tactics, prosecutors stated. “I am dreaming of a way to kill almost every last person on earth,” Hasson had written on his computer, while stating that he would “have to take [a] serious look at appropriate individual targets, to bring the greatest impact.” Prosecutors alleged that he had planned a domestic terror attack, pointing to a hit list he had drafted of Democratic politicians and journalists he considered “traitors.”⁹⁰

In May 2019, Michael McGarrity, the FBI’s assistant director of the counterterrorism division, testified before the House Homeland Security Committee that the Bureau had 850 open domestic terrorism cases, 40 percent of which involved racially motivated violent extremism, with the threat continuing to develop.⁹¹ While the number of domestic terrorism cases investigated by the FBI fluctuated—actually decreasing from the number six months prior—McGarrity highlighted that the rate of new cases was increasing:

*What I can tell you of what we’re seeing is the velocity in which our subjects and the velocity in which we’re working our cases—both on the domestic terrorism side and the international terrorism side with homegrown violent extremists—that velocity is much quicker than it’s ever been before.*⁹²

Later that month, an FBI *Intelligence Bulletin* from the Bureau’s Phoenix office identified “conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremists” as a growing menace, one likely to increase during the 2020 presidential election cycle.⁹³

Symptomatic of this increasing concern was a statement by FBI Director Christopher Wray on July 23, 2019—nearly two weeks before El Paso—that made clear that domestic terrorism had become a key preoccupation for the Bureau, the agency having made roughly 90 domestic terrorism-related arrests since October 1, 2018, compared with about 100 international terrorist arrests. According to the FBI, the majority of domestic terrorism cases involving a racial motive were motivated by what Wray stated was “some version of what you might well call white supremacist violence, but does include other things as well.”⁹⁴ Following the El Paso attack, which are being investigated by the FBI Domestic Terrorism-Hate Crimes Fusion Cell, Wray ordered agency field offices across the country to conduct a new threat assessment in part out of concern that the

attack, and those like it, could inspire other individuals to “engage in similar acts of violence.”⁹⁵

This is not an unwarranted fear. The FBI’s “Lone Offender Terrorism Report,” published in November 2019, highlighted that those motivated by ideologies “advocating for the superiority of the white race” accounted for 19 percent of all cases of lone-actor terrorism in the United States, the same percentage as radical Islamist violent extremism.⁹⁶ Given that the internet looms large in the most recent cases of lone-actor, mass-casualty, extreme-right terrorism, it is also important to note that, in a digital age, the United States’ problem with “domestic terrorism” is not simply “domestic” insofar as the diffusion of violent ideologies and strategies occurs transnationally. Indeed, as Russell Travers, acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center recently told an audience in Washington D.C.:

*For almost two decades, the United States has pointed abroad at countries who are exporters of extreme Islamist ideology. We are now being seen as the exporters of white supremacist ideology; that’s a reality with which we are going to have to deal.*⁹⁷

Growing awareness that an international response is required to counter this phenomenon was reflected in the announcement by Acting Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Ambassador Nathan A. Sales on December 10, 2019, that while the U.S. Department of State’s Counterterrorism Bureau remained determined to combat transnational terrorist groups like Hezbollah, “we’re also expanding our efforts to counter racially or ethnically motivated terrorism—in particular, white supremacist terrorism.”⁹⁸

Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether the self-referential and indeed self-reinforcing momentum of extreme right-wing violence will be sustained and whether thresholds for violence will change or whether the velocity of cases will burn themselves out following this surge in violence. There are, as there always have been, voices within the “scene” that counsel against violence, for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the damage that public and political condemnation do to its normalization strategies. Indeed such “internal brakes”⁹⁹ on violence are often reapplied across violent sub-cultures in the aftermath of particularly egregious acts of violence that transcend a group’s own moral norms, not least because of the broader societal revulsion that it can generate against them.

However, the digital ecosystem, of which 8chan was a central component, seemingly lacks such restraining mechanisms and processes. The anonymity this amorphous community of interconnected platforms, unconnected to any particular organization, provides and the accelerated access it affords for learning, tactical evolution, and indeed opportunities to broadcast violence for an audience that deifies rather than condemns its perpetrators, presents a new sort of challenge: one that appears unfettered by the strategic and political priorities of groups that inhabit the “real” world. The longer-term consequences of this increasing propensity for mass carnage from within a portion of the extreme-right milieu, or moreover, often from individuals self-identifying with it through digital mediums, is as yet unknowable. It is perhaps too early to say whether a critical mass has been reached already given the unpredictability of the threat and its transnational nature, or whether there will be further links in this chain reaction of extreme-right terrorism during the coming months and years. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Lieutenant General John N.T. “Jack” Shanahan, Director, Joint Artificial Intelligence Center, Department of Defense

By Don Rassler

Lieutenant General John N.T. “Jack” Shanahan is Director of the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center, Office of the Department of Defense Chief Information Officer. General Shanahan is responsible for accelerating the delivery of artificial intelligence-enabled capabilities, scaling the department-wide impact of AI and synchronizing AI activities to expand joint force advantages.

General Shanahan has served in a variety of assignments, most recently as Director of Defense Intelligence Warfighter Support, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence at the Pentagon. He was also Director of the Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team (Project Maven), where he led the artificial intelligence pathfinder program charged with accelerating integration of big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence.

General Shanahan also served as the Commander, 25th Air Force, Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, Texas, where he led 30,000 personnel in worldwide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations and also served as the Commander of the Service Cryptologic Component. In this capacity, he was responsible to the director of the National Security Agency, and the chief of Central Security Service, as the Air Force’s sole authority for matters involving the conduct of cryptologic activities, including the spectrum of missions directly related to both tactical warfighting and national-level operations. Prior to these assignments, General Shanahan also served as Deputy Director for Global Operations on the Joint Staff.

CTC: The Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC) is still a fairly new organization. What have been JAIC’s initial accomplishments?

Shanahan: The JAIC is now just over a year old. It’s taken a while to grow, but the momentum is increasing as we bring more people into the organization. We are seeing initial momentum across the department in terms of fielding AI [artificial intelligence]-enabled capabilities. Yet, we still have a long way to go to help bring pilots, prototypes, and pitches across the technology valley of death to fielding and updating AI-enabled capabilities at speed and at scale. Adopting and fielding AI is difficult work, especially for a department that is making the transition from an industrial age, hardware-centric force to an information age, software-driven one. Yet, it is critically important work. It’s a multi-generational problem requiring a multi-generational solution. It demands the right combination of tactical urgency and strategic patience. Our ongoing projects include predictive maintenance for the H-60 helicopter; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, or HA/DR, with an initial emphasis on wildfires and flooding; cyber sense-making, focusing on event detection, user activity monitoring, and network

mapping; information operations; and intelligent business automation.

For the next year, in addition to expanding the scope and scale of the projects we started over the past year, we are beginning to focus on a mission initiative we are calling Joint Warfighting. This is a broad term of course, but as for all early stage AI projects, we are working with the military Services and combatant commands on bounded, high-priority operational mission requirements. We used the last several months to frame the problems the services and combatant commands want help solving. These include Joint All Domain Command and Control (JADC2); autonomous ground reconnaissance and surveillance; operations center workflows; accelerated ops-intel fusion and sensor-to-shooter solutions; and targeting. We are very much in the early stages in each of these lines of efforts, continuing with user-defined, data-driven workflow analyses to better understand how AI can—or equally important, cannot—help with a given operational problem.

We are also embarking with the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) and the services’ Surgeons General, as well as other key organizations such as the Defense Health Agency and Veterans Affairs, on a predictive health project, with several proposed lines of effort to include health records analysis, medical imagery classification, and PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] mitigation/suicide prevention.

Our other major effort, one that is instrumental to our AI Center of Excellence concept, is what we are calling the Joint Common Foundation, or JCF. The JCF will be a platform—think platform as a service, residing on top of an enterprise cloud infrastructure as a service—that will provide access to data, tools, environments, libraries, and to other certified platforms to enable software and AI engineers to rapidly develop, evaluate, test, and deploy AI-enabled solutions to warfighters. It is being designed to lower the barriers of entry, democratize access to data, eliminate duplicative efforts, and increase value added for the department.

CTC: What have been some of the key challenges JAIC has faced during its first year? What have been some of the lessons learned so far?

Shanahan: One of our biggest challenges as we continue to stand up the JAIC is what every startup organization goes through: namely, finding the right people—like everyone else in the AI game, we’re in a war for talent—getting stable funding, consolidating our workforce into a single operating location, and so on. We like to think of ourselves as a startup, yet we also have to operate as part of the institutional bureaucracy known as the Department of Defense. That makes for some unique challenges. Though I have to say that we continue to have tremendous support from DoD [Department of Defense] senior leaders and the Congress.

Some other lessons included the importance of problem fram-

ing, as I mentioned earlier. It is far too easy to jump to an AI solution before fully understanding the problem you are trying to solve. And far too often, I find that solutions offered tend to be narrow solutions to a narrow problem, whereas we are seeking more comprehensive answers to a wide range of challenges. Not surprisingly, data management is a perennial challenge in DoD, especially for machine-learning projects. Data is at the heart of every AI project. We have to liberate data across the department. We are addressing challenges related to data collection, data access, data quality, data ownership and control, intellectual property protections, and data-related policies and standards. After working on Project Maven^a for two years and the last year with the JAIC, I am now convinced we have to divide our challenges into two major categories: legacy data, systems, and workflows—in essence, we have to play the data as it lies; and developing the AI-ready force of the future in which data is treated as much a part of a weapon system's lifecycle management as is cost, schedule, performance, and security. We still have a long way to go.

Third, DoD's AI adoption capacity is limited by the pace of broader digital modernization. Along with enterprise cloud; cyber; and command, control, and communications (C3), AI is one of DoD Chief Information Officer Dana Deasy's four digital modernization pillars. These four pillars are going to converge in such a way that digital modernization and warfighting modernization become synonymous. As we look to a future of informatized warfare, comprising algorithm against algorithm and widespread use of autonomous systems, we need to help design operating concepts that harness AI, 5G, enterprise cloud, and robotics. This critical path from a hardware-centric to an all-domain digital force will shape the department for decades to come.

CTC: How does JAIC approach partnerships? Can you provide any examples of some of JAIC's partnerships, and what these partnerships or collaborative efforts look like in practice?

Shanahan: Even as an organization dedicated to AI, we know we will never corner the market on AI expertise or experience. For that reason, our partnerships with academia and private industry are paramount to the JAIC's success in fielding AI in the DoD at scale. We continue to have robust dialogues with thought leaders in commercial industry and academia, along with our allies and partners, to help inform our approaches to AI principles and adoption. Our strategic engagement team, working with partners such as the Defense Innovation Unit and the National Security Innovation Network (NSIN), is developing industry outreach initiatives to engage with technology companies of all sizes and scope. We've also facilitated a series of hackathons and technology challenges to solicit ideas from academia and industry on the AI and ML [machine-learning] solutions that we are working on through our mission initiatives. For instance, in September, the JAIC partnered with the NSIN to facilitate a hackathon at the University of Michigan's School of Aerospace and Engineering, where military aircraft maintenance personnel with decades of real-world experience worked



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alongside students and industry professionals to develop new ideas to incorporate AI-enabled solutions for aircraft preventive maintenance.

We've also been active in reaching out to our international allies and partners to discuss national security approaches to AI and to offer perspectives on frameworks for developing common AI governing principles. All of these outreach activities enable the JAIC to harness innovation and provide leadership that strengthens our role as the DoD AI Center of Excellence and focal point for AI adoption.

CTC: When it comes to AI and non-state threats, what does the danger look like in your view, and how can the United States government use AI/ML to try to both anticipate and manage future use or incorporation of AI by terrorist entities?

Shanahan: We acknowledge the dangers presented from the proliferation of weapons and emerging technologies. The DoD works very closely with the Department of State and other international partners to strengthen protocols and frameworks to prevent and deter weapons proliferation efforts of non-state actors and adversaries alike. As AI/ML technologies mature and adoption becomes more ubiquitous, the DoD will continue to work with other agencies and international partners to encourage international norms and provide meaningful leadership to guide the responsible and principled adoption and use of AI-enabled military capabilities.

In general, the barriers to entry for AI/ML are quite low. Unlike

^a Editor's note: For background on Project Maven, see Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work, "Memorandum: Establishment of an Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team (Project Maven)," Department of Defense, April 26, 2017.

most big weapon systems in the past that were dominated by the Defense Industrial Base, many if not almost all AI-enabled capabilities start in commercial industry. We are seeing a true democratization of technologies that, like so many other emerging technologies in history, are as capable of being used for bad as they are for good. It is going to be increasingly difficult to prevent the use of AI-enabled capabilities by those who are intent in causing harm, but you can expect the department will continue with a concerted effort to stymie those who wish to harm the United States and our allies and partners.

CTC: The use of AI tools and technologies to both aid misinformation or disinformation campaigns, or to detect and prevent them, has been quite well documented. Terrorist use of these types of approaches has not yet arrived, at least not on a consistent or broad scale. How concerned are you about this issue, and its potential?

Shanahan: I am very concerned about it. I've spent a considerable amount of time in the information operations business over the course of my career. In fact, information operations was one of my core responsibilities when I served as the Deputy Director for Global Operations on the Joint Staff six years ago. Hence, I am very well aware of the power of information, for good and for bad. The profusion of relatively low-cost, leading-edge information-related capabilities and advancement of AI-enabled technologies such as generative adversarial networks or GANs, has made it possible for almost anyone—from a state actor to a lone wolf terrorist—to use information as a precision weapon. What was viewed largely as an annoyance a few years ago has now become a serious threat to national security. Even more alarming, it's almost impossible to predict the exponential growth of these information-as-a-weapon capabilities over the next few years.

We are seeing the rapid proliferation of AI-enabled technologies that are leading to high-fidelity "Deepfakes," or the creation of forged text, audio, and video media. While there are a number of methods available for detecting these forgeries, the level of realism is making it harder to keep up. This is becoming a cat-and-mouse game, similar to what we've seen historically in electronic warfare and now cyber—action, counter-action, counter-counter-action, and so on. DARPA [Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] has a project underway to help detect Deepfakes, and there are other projects elsewhere across DoD and the intelligence community oriented against detecting counterfeit text, audio, and video. But as fast as we can come up with solutions, the other side will find creative new ways of defeating them.

A holistic response to state and non-state actors use of Deepfake technology for disinformation, social engineering, or other attacks will require a coordinated effort between DoD organizations with capabilities and authorities spanning AI technology, cybersecurity, criminal investigation, information operations, and public affairs along with coordination with our interagency partners. This will require a long-term, sustained effort to monitor, engage, and deter the growing threat of disinformation campaigns invoked by Deepfake technology. We're still working through the JAIC's role in this, but there is no question that we need to be part of the solution given that AI/ML is now playing a substantial role in the creation of these Deepfakes.

CTC: A core, stated area of JAIC's focus has been to develop AI principles and to lead in the area of military AI ethics and safety. What type of work has JAIC been doing in this sphere?

Shanahan: AI-enabled capabilities will change much about the battlefield of the future, but nothing will change America's steadfast record of honorable military service or our military's commitment to lawful and ethical behavior. Our focus on AI follows in the path of our long history of investing in technology to preserve our most precious asset—our people—and to limit the risks to civilians and the potential for collateral damage. All of the AI-enabled systems we field will comply with the law of war, international humanitarian law, and rules of engagement. Moreover, we will take into account the safe, lawful, and ethical use of AI-enabled capabilities at every step in the AI fielding pipeline—from establishing requirements on the front end to operational employment on the back end—with rigorous validation, verification, test, and evaluation at the appropriate points in the pipeline.

We are intensely focused on accelerating the adoption of AI across the DoD, but we have no interest in using unsafe or insufficiently tested technology for mission-critical applications. The DoD's history clearly demonstrates our track record of investing in technologies that reduce risks to our warfighters, our allies, and non-combatants even as we seek to increase our combat effectiveness. Over the last 50 years, the DoD has invested literally hundreds of billions of dollars to make our weapons more precise, safer, and more effective. Our compliance with the law of war and DoD regulations is a part of the development of every system, from setting requirements through ongoing operational testing and fielding. The DoD has a methodical testing and evaluation process for technology development; we do not field technologies for mission-critical applications before we have substantial evidence that they will work as intended. Moreover, the DoD is spending considerable time evaluating the use of AI-enabled applications in lower-consequence operations (such as ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance], HA/DR, and predictive maintenance) before we apply AI to higher-consequence and higher-risk warfighting operations. These initial lower-risk mission applications have allowed us to absorb valuable lessons about best practices in AI program management without disrupting existing operations or risking lives. In considering the application of AI-enabled capabilities across DoD, we will consider a number of core ethical principles to ensure that our use of AI systems is responsible, equitable, traceable, reliable, and governable. In summary, if we cannot perform a mission using AI in an ethical and responsible manner, then we will not use AI for that mission.

CTC: When near competitors appear to be comfortable with AI uses/approaches that the United States is not, how does the United States ensure that it leads on both the ethics and capabilities front—and do so when other states might be willing to take AI steps or actions that the United States is not prepared to take due to ethical considerations?

Shanahan: Authoritarian regimes inherently possess some advantages in civil-military cooperation. They often have fewer barriers for fielding technology, without the kind of rigorous testing and evaluation processes or adherence to ethical principles considered core to DoD operations. This should not mean that DoD needs to

change its approach to fielding AI-enabled capabilities. Instead, it means we must call out our adversaries when they fail to abide by ethical principles. The temporary advantages accrued to those who do not abide by these principles will, in the long run, be outweighed by those who value the safe, responsible, and ethical approaches to

fielding AI-enabled technologies. In the long run, our strong approaches to AI ethics, combined with a sustained focus on fielding AI-enabled capabilities to the right places, at the right time, and in a safe and effective manner, will provide the U.S. military a strategic advantage over our adversaries. **CTC**

The Halle, Germany, Synagogue Attack and the Evolution of the Far-Right Terror Threat

By Daniel Koehler

On October 9, 2019, 27-year-old Stephan Balliet allegedly attempted to forcibly enter the Jewish community center and synagogue in the eastern German town of Halle (Saale) and execute a mass shooting livestreamed online. It is alleged that after failing to enter the building, he randomly shot a woman who happened to be passing by and moved to a Turkish restaurant as a secondary target, where he shot and killed a second victim. Balliet appears to be mainly a copycat attacker inspired by previous incidents involving the posting of a manifesto and online livestreaming, such as the shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019; Poway, California, in April 2019; and El Paso, Texas, in August 2019. The Halle attack reflects and evidences several trends, including the internationalization of right-wing terrorism and lone-actor terrorists fashioning their own weapons. The attack stood out because it was the first time a terrorist appears to have used homemade firearms.

On October 9, 2019, at 11:54 AM, the alleged shooter Stephan Balliet allegedly sat in his rental car on a parking lot close to the Jewish community center and synagogue in the eastern German town of Halle and started his livestream on the gaming platform Twitch. He allegedly used a smartphone attached to a helmet for that purpose. At 11:57 AM, he published a link to the Twitch livestream on the social media picture network site Meguca, where he allegedly uploaded his manifesto.¹ Meguca, the now-defunct² niche network site, contained general-purpose discussions and was

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“loosely affiliated with 4chan’s^a anime board.”³ According to Twitch, only five users actually saw the livestream in real time. It took the platform administrators 30 minutes to find and delete the video. By then, it had been watched by approximately 2,200 viewers.⁴ Notwithstanding Bailliet’s later confession (which is discussed below), these details and all the other assertions about the case that follow must be regarded as allegations as they have not—to date—been proven in court.

Balliet arrived at the synagogue at 12:01 PM. At this time, 51 people were inside the building celebrating Yom Kippur. It is alleged that after several failed attempts to force entry into the building through the main door and a side gate using his firearms and improvised explosive devices, Balliet shot and killed a 40-year-old woman who happened to walk by. The perpetrator was now clearly agitated and frustrated as he also shot his car’s front tire by accident. When Balliet allegedly attempted to shoot a second person who had stopped to render help to his first victim, his self-made fully automatic weapon jammed multiple times as can be clearly seen in the livestream. Abandoning his main target, Balliet drove away from the scene in a seemingly aimless fashion. He then came across a Turkish kebab restaurant approximately 656 yards away. It appears he spontaneously decided to stop and continue his attack at 12:10 PM, where a second victim, a 20-year-old restaurant guest, was shot and killed. At 12:16 PM, police officers arrived at the scene and engaged Balliet in a firefight during which he received a minor neck injury and was able to escape. At 1:00 PM, Balliet changed his car in the neighboring village of Wiedersdorf where he allegedly shot and seriously injured two victims who refused to give up their vehicle to him. Unable to use their car, he moved on to stealing a cab and attempted to flee southward toward Munich on the highway until he caused a traffic accident with a truck and was arrested at 1:38 PM approximately 25 miles from the attack site and without further resistance.⁵

This article outlines what is known about the perpetrator of the Halle attack and his motives and ideology. It then describes how the attack both evidences and reflects trends seen in extreme right-wing terrorism and terrorist violence more generally.

One of these is the internationalization of far-right terrorism. While right-wing extremist groups and terrorists have long been very well connected internationally, their main target audience usually was their home nation. With the increasing use of livestreaming, English-language manifestos, and social media platforms as the main facilitator of personal networks, right-wing terrorism is shifting more toward a global stage.

a 4chan is an anonymous English-language imageboard website launched on October 1, 2003. As a hub for online subculture (e.g., memes), the politics discussion board /pol/ has been infiltrated by white supremacists and neo-Nazis and has become a hotbed of racist and sexist content.

Another trend is the emergence of “hive terrorism,” where extremist activists who are part of fluid networks of likeminded individuals without previous connections to organized extremist milieus more or less spontaneously mobilize to violence and are therefore difficult to detect.

A third trend is lone terrorists improvising their own weapons for attacks, making it unnecessary for them to obtain or purchase weapons from other parties and therefore making their attack plots more difficult to detect. This has been seen in Islamic State-inspired attackers’ use of vehicles and knives in attacks. As outlined in the article, the Halle attacker appears to have crossed a new threshold by self-manufacturing the guns he used in the shooting. His livestream appears to show him firing two of the self-manufactured firearms that he had described and photographed in his manifesto.⁶ Investigators have not publicly stated whether they believe he made the weapons alone or received outside help in making them.

Whether or not he received such help, the Halle attack appears to be the first time a terrorist had used self-manufactured firearms for an attack.

The Perpetrator, Motives, and Ideology

The perpetrator of the Halle attack was allegedly German national Stephan Balliet. Born in 1992, he experienced the divorce of his parents at the age of 14.⁷ He graduated from high school in 2010 and served in the German military in an armored infantry battalion as one of the last conscription cohorts between 2010 and 2011.^b There are no reports of any extremist or otherwise concerning behavior during his military service.⁸ At the age of 22, Balliet started and dropped out of university programs in chemistry and chemical engineering after only a short time, possibly due to health issues.⁹ In 2018, he applied to become a professional soldier in the Bundeswehr but never showed up to the job interview for unknown reasons.¹⁰ In the months before the attack, Balliet was living with his mother who later described him as socially isolated.¹¹

In his confession, Balliet stated his motives were anti-Semitic in nature but denied being a neo-Nazi.¹² According to his lawyer, Balliet blamed a Jewish conspiracy for his social and economic failure.¹³ In his interrogation, he also blamed his lack of intimate partnerships on foreigners¹⁴ and referred to Jewish-invented feminism in the livestream. He said he shot and killed the female passerby outside the synagogue and the male diner at the Turkish restaurant out of panic after he failed to enter the synagogue.¹⁵

Further indication of Balliet’s ideological motivations can be found in his statements during the livestream. In the first introductory remarks before starting his car to drive up to the synagogue, Balliet explained that he believed the Holocaust never happened. He then proceeded to claim feminism would be responsible for decreasing birth rates and subsequently for mass migration. All of this, in his view, was the doing of “the Jew.”

Balliet’s 16-page English language manifesto,¹⁶ which he posted to Meguca before the attack, was broken up across three PDF files. There was a section in one of the PDF files called “The Objective,” which outlined his main goals:

“1. Prove the viability of improvised weapons; 2. Increase the moral [sic] of other suppressed Whites by spreading the combat footage; 3. Kill as many anti-Whites as possible, Jews

preferred.”

Balliet also included gaming-like “achievements” according to the number of killed victims. Even though anti-Semitism clearly dominates the text, Balliet wrote that he did consider attacking a mosque or antifa center because of what he saw as their less robust protection. According to his manifesto, in the end, he decided his main target would be the Jewish community because he viewed them as supremely responsible for all societal problems. Most of the manifesto consisted of descriptions and pictures of his self-manufactured weaponry.

The perpetrator appears to have been motivated predominantly by a mixture of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and anti-feminism. His rhetoric both in the livestream and the manifesto does not contain many classical references or codes typically associated with white supremacism or neo-Nazism. On a more subtle level, nevertheless, it is possible to trace at least elements of broader extreme right-wing ideological components. For example, Balliet references the “Zionist Occupied Government” (ZOG) in his manifesto and the first background song played in the livestream, “Powerlevel” by the cover rapper Mr. Bond, is filled with standard neo-Nazi references, such as “master race” or the “black sun.” He also jokes during the video: “Nobody expects the internet SS,” referring to the Nazi “Schutzstaffel” (protection squad) who were responsible for guarding and managing the concentration camps, among other duties.

There are, however, also multiple references very untypical of the wider extreme right-wing movement and arguably difficult to decipher for many within it, at least in the German scene. Starting with self-references like “Anon” (an abbreviation for “anonymous” and widely used by online gamers) and “weeb” (internet users who are followers of video games and animation forums), one of his manifesto files includes an anime cat-girl picture and reference to “techno-barbarism,” a term used in the Warhammer 40,000 fantasy computer game. “Techno-barbarians” in this game are troops who dominate a certain time period called the “Age of Strife” and are equipped with a primitive form of armor, which can become the basis for the development of much superior weaponry later on. Interestingly, this specific era in the game is a destructive, anarchic, and regressive time period prior to the forming of the “Imperium of Man,” a galactic empire under which the majority of humanity is united.

Without reading too much into them, the gaming culture references are fitting to Balliet’s declared goals to inspire future generations of activists to develop better improvised weaponry and stand up against the proclaimed Jewish conspiracy. Another set of codes used by Balliet are mentions of “waifus,” fictional female anime, manga, or video game characters to which someone is strongly attracted. The Halle attacker writes in his manifesto: “Repeat until all Jews [sic] are dead or you prove the existence of Waifus in Valhalla, whatever comes first.” The mixture of Japanese anime culture with Norse mythology is striking and is reminiscent of jihadi promises of 72 virgins awaiting the martyr in paradise. Achieving martyrdom during his attack does not seem to have been a major goal for Balliet. Even though he acknowledged in his manifesto that he could “fail and die,” he declared that surviving the attack would be a “bonus.” Balliet ultimately did not resist arrest.

Racism in the form of white supremacism appears to have been an important part of Balliet’s worldview. One of his declared goals was to “increase the moral [sic] of other suppressed Whites” and kill as many “anti-Whites” as possible. His particular self-image as

b General conscription was ended in 2011.

a “loser” and a “disgruntled white man”¹⁷ in combination with his anti-feminism strongly points toward him espousing an “Incel”^c ideology and identity¹⁸ rather than classical white supremacy, however.

At this point, it must be made clear that this author’s interpretation of Balliet’s motives and ideology necessarily relies on his own written and spoken words, as well as to a small degree on his lawyer’s statements. Hence, analysts must be cautious in making conclusions. Until the end of the official investigation and trial, which might produce additional or alternative motives, all that is possible is to describe how Balliet wanted to appear. In this context, it is noteworthy to point out that Balliet wrote his manifesto in English and shifted between English and German language during his livestream. Hence, it appears clear that he wanted to reach a global audience well versed in his gaming, anime, anti-Semitic, and right-wing extremist references rather than the hardcore neo-Nazi milieu in Germany or abroad.

c “Incels” (short for “involuntary celibates”) are members of online subcultures defining themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one, a state they describe as “inceldom.” Racism, misogyny, male supremacy, and legitimization of violence are often part of Incel discussions online. With a growing number of violent attacks by perpetrators who identified as Incels, their celebration online and the publication of quasi political and ideological concepts within the movement, Incels continue to evolve into a form of violent extremism. See Zack Beauchamp, “Incel, the misogynist ideology that inspired the deadly Toronto attack, explained,” Vox, April 25, 2018.

In addition, as the investigation is currently still ongoing, it is also unclear if Balliet was connected to any other co-conspirator or someone else supporting the attack. The perpetrator himself confessed that he had received financial support for his attack preparation from a so far unknown individual in the form of cryptocurrency.¹⁹ Looking at research on preparatory acts and characteristics of lone-actor terrorism, poor operational security and intent leakage are common features.²⁰ As far as is currently known, neither were the case with Stephan Balliet. Regardless, it is safe to assume that the Halle attack was at least partially inspired by the attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, which received significant global media coverage and perhaps also the Poway, California, attack because Balliet’s mode of operation (livestreamed mass shooting following the posting of a manifesto) aligns with those incidents. Similar to what was attempted in the Poway attack²¹ and what materialized in the Christchurch attack,²² Balliet also used a helmet-mounted camera to livestream his attack. Like Tarrant²³ in Christchurch, Balliet also made numerous references to video games and online subculture and both announced their upcoming attack and lives-

d According to reporting by Bellingcat, the Poway shooter posted a link to an impending livestream before the attack. ABC News reported the shooter “wore a helmet mounted with a camera that malfunctioned and prevented him from livestreaming the attack.” Robert Evans, “Ignore The Poway Synagogue Shooter’s Manifesto: Pay Attention To 8chan’s /pol/ Board,” Bellingcat, April 28, 2019; Bill Hutchinson, “Alleged San Diego synagogue shooter John Earnest had 50 rounds on him when arrested: Prosecutor,” ABC News, April 30, 2019.



Flowers and candles are seen outside the synagogue in Halle, Germany, on October 10, 2019, after two people were killed in a shooting. (Fabrizio Bensch/Reuters)

tream on image boards.

The Halle Attack and Terrorism Trends

The Internationalization of Far-Right Terror

The Halle shooting was, without a doubt, a right-wing terror attack. Still, it was a very unusual one on many counts. Right-wing terrorists, at least in Germany, have predominantly shied away from focusing public attention to themselves or their attacks, for example through claiming responsibility. In fact, any form of public communication connected to violent acts by right-wing terrorists has been extraordinarily rare, at least in Germany.²⁴ A prime example of this phenomenon is the German “National Socialist Underground” (NSU) terror group, which assassinated 10 victims and conducted numerous bombings and bank robberies over the course of its 13-year existence. It was only after the group’s detection and the suicide of the other two main cell members that the last surviving member Beate Zschäpe mailed out a video (mostly to press and politicians) claiming most of the attacks attributed to the group.²⁵ Similarly, even the most outspoken German militant right-wing extremists in the past such as, for example, Michael Kühnen^e or Karl Heinz Hoffmann^f were careful to distance themselves from terrorist attacks or other severe acts of violence. Some tactical manuals for right-wing guerrilla warfare against the democratic system even made it crystal clear that publicity is counterproductive and increases the likelihood of being detected and arrested by the authorities.²⁶ Continuing to attack the enemy was typically seen as much more important than gaining public attention. Celebrating the attack openly with a focus on the individual perpetrator like in recent livestreams in New Zealand, Poway (attempted livestream), or Halle is highly untypical for the German extreme right-wing movement.

This point is very relevant for a development described as “the globalization” of right-wing terrorism, for example by the Soufan Center,²⁷ meaning the increasing blurring between “domestic” and “international” terrorism through transnational influences and impacts.²⁸ Indeed, it was pointed out by *The New York Times* that recent extreme right-wing terrorists since Anders Breivik’s 2011 Oslo and Utøya island attacks display a significant degree of mutual inspiration or sometimes even actual connections.²⁹ However, international connections within the extreme right are not at all new. Internationally operating neo-Nazi networks like Blood & Honour³⁰ or the Hammerskins³¹ have created divisions in countries

e Michael Kühnen (1955-1991) was a leading German neo-Nazi in the 1980s. He was involved with several militant and terrorist groups but could not be legally tied to their actions. For a short biography, see Anton Maegerle and Rainer Fromm, “Michael Kühnen. Biographie eines Neonazis,” *Der rechte Rand* 13:91 (1991): pp. 21-22.

f Karl-Heinz Hoffmann (born 1937) is a notorious German neo-Nazi and founder of the “Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann (WSG)” (military sports group Hoffmann), which became one of the largest extreme right-wing paramilitary militias in Germany. The group was banned in 1980, and several members became perpetrators of some of the bloodiest extreme right-wing terrorist attacks in that decade and beyond. For example, the 1980 Oktoberfest bombing was executed by a former WSG member and is to date the most lethal terror attack in post-World War II Germany. Hoffmann’s personal involvement in the former group members’ campaigns of violence was suspected but could never be proven. For a detailed account of the group’s history, networks, and involvement in violence, see Rainer Fromm, *Die “Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann”: Darstellung, Analyse und Einordnung: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen und europäischen Rechtsextremismus* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998).

around the world for decades. Even groups traditionally focused on one nation have formed international chapters, for example the Ku Klux Klan³² or the Aryan Brotherhood³³ in Germany. Individual neo-Nazi leaders have also had significant international influences and networks. To name only one example, the American right-wing extremist Gary “Gerhard” Lauck has exported neo-Nazi propaganda into 30 countries, and he was instrumental in rebuilding the neo-Nazi movement in post-World War II Germany in the 1980s.³⁴ International influences through shared literature and music or through personal meetings at rallies and concerts or for strategic collaboration have always been an integral part of extreme right-wing movements. Nevertheless, the international impact of extreme-right wing violence and terrorism seen with the Oslo or Christchurch attacks and their deliberate orchestration to reach a global audience is certainly a new development in right-wing extremist terrorism and is a new form ‘internationalization’ in itself.

A second noteworthy aspect is that Balliet, from what is known so far, had no previous ties or contacts with the organized right-wing extremist milieu in Germany.⁸ While he must have consumed subcultural products (e.g., music) with right-wing extremist origin or content, he was unknown to the authorities for participating in extremist groups or any criminal activities.³⁵ The ongoing investigation will hopefully shed light on his online and offline connections, as well as radicalizing influences, but it appears he is a representative of what has been called “Hive Terrorism.”

Hive Terrorism

“Hive Terrorism,” a term introduced by the author, is a very recent and growing phenomenon in Germany and is composed of fluid networks centered around shared opposition to democratic government and immigration and mobilizing activists from mainstream society more or less spontaneously for terrorist and other violent acts.³⁶ Hive terrorism can have two manifestations: a) individuals without previous ties to extremist milieus committing terrorist crimes and violence (e.g., arson or explosive attacks) or b) these individuals without previous ties to extremist milieus all of a sudden becoming involved in terrorist plots with hard-core members of that environment.³⁷ The increasing number of individuals engaging in terrorism without identifiable radicalization pathways that bring them into observable contact with extremist groups and milieus has become a major concern for the German authorities and could potentially also be a significant future risk in other countries.³⁸ The author’s theoretical explanation for this development takes into account the role of extremist subculture and recruitment activities (e.g., concerts and rallies), which bring individuals from the outside of extremist milieus into contact with their ideas and members. Furthermore, an opportunity for mobilization (e.g., significant increase in refugees in Germany between 2015 and 2016) might be a strong push factor for “Hive Terrorism” in the extreme radical-right milieu in Germany.³⁹ In Balliet’s case, the findings of the investigation and trial will likely shed further light on the details of his specific radicalization process.

g As noted earlier in this article, Balliet did, by his own account, receive financial support from a yet unknown source who could turn out to be member of the right-wing extremist milieu.

A New Threshold in Weapons Improvisation

Notwithstanding the significance of the attack in the evolution of right-wing terrorism, the Halle attack most likely will be remembered as historically significant for apparently being the first time a terrorist ever used homemade firearms, some with 3D-printed components. Much has been written about how Islamic State sympathizers in the West have fashioned their own weapons, be it knives, vehicles, or explosives. This has made detecting such plots more difficult for authorities because there is no trip wire triggered unlike plots in which, for example, extremists purchase weapons or explosive precursor chemicals.

But the Halle attack appears to have crossed a new threshold in weapons improvisation in terrorism. Balliet stated in his manifesto that he produced his own firearms, including fully automatic weaponry, using generally available low-tech components from a standard warehouse and high-tech 3D printing at the same time.⁴⁰ While authorities have not publicly confirmed he made weapons in this way nor publicly ruled out that he received assistance, no evidence has publicly come to light calling his claim into question. Balliet claimed to have constructed^h a fully automatic Luty 9mm submachine gun,⁴¹ a 12-gauge shotgun, and a pistol for use during the attack using widely available materials like steel and wood. In his manifesto, he further claims to have manufactured two more firearms as reserve to be placed in the car: another 9mm Luty submachine gun with 3D-printed plastic components, calling it a “Plastic Luty,” and a “Short Slam-Bang” shotgun.⁴² According to one German media report, the “Plastic Luty” submachine gun had a 3-D printed magazine and grip,⁴³ which appears to fit with the visual impression of the “Plastic Luty’s” picture in the manifesto. It is not certain yet which of the two Lutys Balliet actually used in the attack. Even though he also had acquired professionally made weapons, Balliet, the livestream appears to show, completely relied on the improvised ones during the attack.⁴⁴ The livestream repeatedly showed how the attacker struggled with jamming problems, which prevented the death of at least one other victim.⁴⁵

Explicitly aiming to provide a proof of concept for the use of self-made weaponry in terrorist attacks, Balliet neither failed nor succeeded. Without a doubt, more people would have been killed, if entry into the synagogue would have been possible. But his “improvised” weapons did not fully pass the final test of reliability during the exact time when needed. For his target audience, however, Balliet likely did accomplish enough to show the potential of such weapons and to trigger more development and fine-tuning of the manufacturing process by others. For extremists like him, using “relatively cheap technology” for “increasingly lethal purposes”⁴⁶ is likely seen as holding the promise of gaining an edge over otherwise greatly superior police and intelligence agencies. Current methods of detecting high-risk individuals in the run up to an attack (for example, placing mass purchases of certain chemicals under mandatory reporting, gun regulations, and online monitoring) would have been fruitless in Balliet’s case.

h Based on the author’s analysis of Balliet’s manifesto, it is unclear if he received any help in producing the weapons. Even though Balliet does not directly acknowledge using manufacturing manuals, it is clear that he utilized information widely available online, for example regarding the Luty submachine gun. See Oliver Moody, “Machinegun used by Stephan Balliet in Halle synagogue attack designed by British activist,” *Times*, October 10, 2019.

From what is known so far, Balliet did not stand out in any discernible way in his specific online environment. This does not mean that his radicalization process came out of the blue and is not traceable. But in the course of moving toward violence, it appears that Balliet did not cross a line or display any red flags that would have warranted any intervention by security agencies or even one of the many countering violent extremism (CVE) programs in Germany. Again, it should be stressed that at this point, little is known about his own online behavior in the years and months before the attack.

His offline life, albeit dominated by social isolation and failure to achieve educational or economic successes, did not contain significant criminality or deviance. From one media interview with his mother, it appears that anti-Semitic conspiracy theories might have been part of his upbringing and parental influence. In it, Balliet’s mother explained that from her perspective, her son does not hate Jews as such but only those “behind financial power,” hinting at a belief in stereotypical Jewish conspiracy theories.⁴⁷ There are many questions, with one unknown being whether Balliet engaged in spreading hate postings or illegal extremist codes and symbols or partially illegal anti-Semitic tropes (e.g., denying the Holocaust). Based on the currently available information, an early intervention by the authorities would most likely not have resulted in any charges. Interventions by one of Germany’s many CVE or deradicalization counseling programs were unlikely. First, voluntary participation by Balliet can be dismissed as unrealistic as he has not shown any signs of ideological distancing from his actions since the attack.ⁱ This leaves only his family or social environment as counseling clients who could have had a potential risk mitigating or deradicalizing influence on him. As no one around Balliet (online and offline) seems to have noticed or seen any reason for concern in his views, this second scenario would also not have been likely.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Stephan Balliet painfully highlighted the limits and boundaries of security agencies’ current ability to prevent lone-actor terrorism by individuals with little apparent online or offline extremist footprint who can fashion their own weapons—be it cars, knives, or guns apparently made with 3D-printed components. Unless the investigation brings to light significant new details about previous illegal activities, Balliet did not show any red flags and prepared and executed the attack with little if any potential opportunity for an early intervention. The attack may have been virtually impossible to detect and stop. Even the most robust countering violent extremism network imaginable is futile if no one in the social environment close to the future attacker spots troubling behavior or ideology and dares to call in help or if intelligence or police services do not learn of any concerning activity.

Hence, countering a future terrorist threat like the one in Halle requires a shift in the public perception of some key components of Balliet’s radicalization and worldviews so that people (relatives, acquaintances, friends, co-workers, and the like) can see potential warning signs. First, research has shown a link between conspiracy theories and tendencies toward political extremism and violence.⁴⁹ Conspiratorial narratives, for example, in political rhetoric might therefore increase the risk of violent behavior.⁵⁰ Hence, awareness

i Balliet did express remorse but only for killing and hurting Germans instead of Jews or Muslims.

of the potential consequences of conspiracy theories should inform measures to prevent the spread of truth-decaying content online and offline.⁵¹

Second, what has become known as the “Incel” movement should be recognized at least in part as a form of political extremism, as has been argued before. For example, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) added male supremacy to their list of ideologies tracked on its hate map in 2018.⁵² Only recently have terrorism experts begun to study the incels as a form of violent extremism—for example, Dr. John Horgan of Georgia State University with a grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security awarded in June 2019.⁵³ Especially the link between social isolation, deep rooted psycho-social frustration and deprivation, misogyny, and violence calls for specific psycho-therapeutic and social support on the level typically associated with countering other forms of violent extremism. Dedicated prevention and social services must be developed and made available to address this phenomenon.

Third, norms and values governing acceptable, deviant, or high-risk behavior offline (for example, regarding bullying, sexual abuse, and violence) and the subsequent impulse for family and friends of an at-risk individual to seek outsider assistance for that individ-

ual^l need to spread to online environments as well. However, the solution cannot be enforcing stricter community rules of engagement alone, as this would too often lead to the creation of parallel networks and shift users to the darknet or more lenient platforms. Rather, primary and secondary education must recognize the online space as a part of civic, political, and cultural communities of practice in which political opinions, social values, norms, and offline behavioral patterns are constructed, negotiated, and transmitted. The solution to terrorist threats like the Halle attack is not necessarily to extend criminalization or political correctness to online spheres but to build and embed virtual civic communities that are aware of warning signs that warrant calling for outside help, before a person turns to violence.^k **CTC**

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The 2016 Copenhagen ‘Matchstick’ Terror Plot and the Evolving Transnational Character of Terrorism in the West

By Tore Hamming

In May 2019, Syrian refugee Moyed el-Zoebi was sentenced to 12 years in prison and (to be followed by) deportation from Denmark. El-Zoebi, who had previously fought alongside jihadis in Syria, was found guilty of planning a terrorist attack in Copenhagen while living in Sweden and in cooperation with another Syrian refugee living in southern Germany. The two were directed by an Islamic State ‘virtual planner’ based in Syria. Their plan, which eventually failed, was to construct several bombs using a large number of matches and strike a political target. An examination of the so-called ‘matchstick plot’ provides important insights into contemporary Western terrorism, its international character, and the methods of coordination.

In 2015, Moyed el-Zoebi, a Syrian national then in his 20s (and now 32), came to Sweden seeking asylum together with his wife and their one-year-old son. Having been acquitted for an attack he was alleged to have carried out on a Shi`a community center in Malmö on October 11, 2016, claimed by the Islamic State,¹ el-Zoebi proceeded to plot a terrorist attack on a political target in Copenhagen in cooperation with another Syrian refugee living in southern Germany. The first part of the article looks at el-Zoebi’s trajectory. The valuable insights this provides into the terrorist threat Western countries now face is discussed in the article’s second part. Almost all information about el-Zoebi and the plot comes from court documents from el-Zoebi’s trial in Denmark, which includes testimonies from his accomplice’s court case in Germany.² Unless otherwise noted, the information provided here comes from these documents.

Moyed el-Zoebi’s time in Sweden started with tragedy. Having arrived on September 14, 2015, less than two months later on November 10, his infant son died in a car accident. Less than a year later, el-Zoebi’s wife left him, thus cementing his personal tragedy. It was around the same time (October 2016) that he was alleged to have carried out an attack against a Shi`a community center in the Rosengården neighborhood in Malmö with Molotov cocktails. Although the attack was during the Ashura, a day of great religious significance for Shi`a, there were no casualties since it took place in the early morning hours. The building suffered extensive damage from a resulting fire, however. Due to a lack of technical evidence—a private video recording from a camera installed by a company on

a building across the street capturing the actual attack was deleted before the police managed to seize it—el-Zoebi was acquitted, and he even received compensation (approximately \$10,200) for his time spent in custody.³

El-Zoebi’s personal history is interesting. Born in Riyadh, he would move back and forth several times between Saudi Arabia and Syria, making him a national of both countries. Having completed two years of university studies in business and economy in Syria, he returned to Saudi Arabia to work as a make-up artist. But when the conflict broke out in Syria in 2011, he would help found the Free Syrian Army’s media office, although he remained in Saudi Arabia until the end of 2013 when he finally relocated to Syria. Most likely in 2014, he left the Free Syrian Army and joined al-Qa`ida’s Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, participating on the frontlines near Aleppo, according to a video el-Zoebi posted to his Facebook profile on November 18, 2016, the day before traveling to Copenhagen in furtherance of the plot and which was presented at trial. When exactly he began to show sympathy for the Islamic State is not known, but when he arrived in Sweden in September 2015, residents at the Swedish asylum center testified that he regularly spoke positively about the group. It is not clear how he got to Sweden from Syria. Authorities were not aware of any of his past jihadi activity or jihadi sympathies before his Danish trial.

The Plot

Moyed el-Zoebi’s plan was to execute a terrorist attack in Copenhagen in December 2016 in cooperation with the 21-year-old Dieab Khadigah. The two Syrian refugees residing in Sweden and Germany, respectively, had never met but were connected through an Islamic State external operations planner in Syria that this author will refer to as the *virtual planner*.⁴ It is not clear how the two established contact with the virtual planner, and there was no information provided in court on the virtual planner’s identity. El-Zoebi and Khadigah were supposed to meet at Copenhagen’s main train station on November 19, 2016. El-Zoebi took the train from southern Sweden while Khadigah arrived by train and then ferry from the German city of Puttgarden.

Khadigah had been tasked by the virtual planner with acquiring the materials needed to construct explosives: several thousand matches, as well as batteries, fireworks, and walkie-talkies. To avoid suspicion, he followed the instructions of the virtual planner who told him to buy the materials in different places: one half in the German supermarket chain Kaufland in Laupheim, the other in Warthausen between November 16 and 19, 2016.

The first known time that al-Zoebi and Khadigah were in contact was on November 17, two days before they were supposed to meet in Copenhagen. Up until that point, the virtual planner had been in charge of communicating with each of them and giving instructions through the encrypted platforms WhatsApp and Telegram. After receiving el-Zoebi’s telephone number from the virtual

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The Danish flag is pictured in Copenhagen, Denmark. (Fabian Bimmer/Reuters)

planner, Khadigah sent a text message to al-Zoebe who immediately told him to acquire two large knives. The following day before his departure to Denmark, Khadigah bought two knives with 18-centimeter blades.

The plan was for the two Syrians to meet in Copenhagen and then to construct five bombs. According to the court documents, instructions for the bombs came from Inspire, an English-language online magazine published by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula between 2010 and 2017. As part of the Danish trial, explosive experts constructed a model of the bomb that el-Zoebe and Khadigah planned to construct and concluded that it would be lethal to people within a range of 50 meters.⁵ A manual on how to construct these devices was found on el-Zoebe's computer.

The exact target of the plot has never been revealed, but according to Khadigah, it was decided by the virtual planner and el-Zoebe. All that was revealed at the trial is that it was supposed to be a political target. Browsing history from al-Zoebe's computer showed that he had done research on embassies in Copenhagen. Videos of Danish tourism attractions were also found. Once the bombs had been constructed, the plan was to use the knives to attack as many random people as possible before setting off the explosives.

Luckily, the two never got that far as things did not go according to plan. While el-Zoebe was at Copenhagen's main train station on the afternoon of November 19, 2016, waiting to meet his accomplice, Khadigah found himself on a ferry on his way back to Germany. Having reached Denmark, he had been denied entry because he

had no passport. With Denmark being part of Schengen,^a Khadigah thought he could enter simply using his ID card, not knowing that passport control had been reinstated. Danish police checked his backpack and noticed the unusual materials—several thousand matches, knives, fireworks, and walkie-talkies—he was carrying. Allowing him to keep his backpack, they put him on a ferry back to Germany where he was arrested by the German police the following day. It is likely that Danish police contacted their German colleagues about Khadigah, but this has not been confirmed. On July 12, 2017, Khadigah was sentenced in Germany to six and a half years in prison for plotting a terrorist attack in Copenhagen with el-Zoebe.⁶

After waiting in vain for some hours on November 19, 2016, al-Zoebe returned by train to Sweden, resetting his phone to factory settings on the way and then changing its SIM card a few days later. Two weeks later, he was arrested in Sweden and charged with the attack on the Shi`a community center, for which he was later acquitted. At this point, authorities had no knowledge of his failed terror plans in Copenhagen. El-Zoebe was eventually arrested on November 7, 2017, on his way to board a plane from Copenhagen airport to Athens with a layover in Istanbul—possibly with Syria his true destination—because he used a fake passport. He was original-

a Schengen is a union of 26 European states that in 1995 abolished border control and the need for passports when traveling between the countries. A few of these countries, among them Denmark, have reinstated temporary border control as a result of the 2015 migration crisis.

ly sentenced to 40 days in prison for forgery, but after only six days, he was charged with terrorism.^b

Connection to the Islamic State

During el-Zoebi's trial, the main challenge faced by prosecutors was to connect the plot to the Islamic State. El-Zoebi himself rejected the notion that he had any sympathy for the group, insisting that he had been part of the Free Syrian Army and that after migrating to Sweden, he had entirely abandoned militancy. On his confiscated computer and telephone, however, the police found large amounts of Islamic State propaganda including approximately 400 videos and more than 5,000 pictures. While possession of Islamic State material does not necessarily qualify as sympathy with the group or its ideology—a common mistaken inference in court cases and public opinion—in el-Zoebi's case it did appear to be the case. He even had the flag so heavily associated with, albeit not exclusive to, the Islamic State as a background image on his computer.

Also, in a chat with a close family member on October 8, 2016, el-Zoebi declared that he wanted to “die as a Shaheed [martyr].”⁷⁷ In another chat with his mother just a month before his planned meeting with Khadigah, el-Zoebi wrote that he would “kill the whole world until God is worshipped 100 percent.”⁷⁸ It is also noteworthy that el-Zoebi's first alleged act of militancy in the West, the Molotov cocktail attack against the Shi'a community center in Malmö, was claimed by the Islamic State in its Al Naba newspaper issued on October 20, 2016. A Germany-based Syrian man working for the group's Amaq news agency was in contact with el-Zoebi in October after the attack through WhatsApp to confirm his sympathy for the Islamic State.⁹ The Amaq official told el-Zoebi to send him a voice message documenting the attack in detail as proof. El-Zoebi told him he would soon send him something, but there was no information presented at trial indicating whether he actually did. What is known is that el-Zoebi took a picture of the fire and sent it to one of his friends in Sweden who administered the Facebook page of a salafi mosque in the Swedish town of Hässleholm, which regularly posted militant propaganda material.¹⁰

The problem for el-Zoebi was that although he pleaded innocent and refused all accusations that he supported the Islamic State, Khadigah had confessed to everything during his own trial in Germany and as part of the Danish trial against el-Zoebi—including the role of his accomplice. Khadigah admitted to supporting the Islamic State and that the plan was to carry out an attack in Copenhagen with the materials he acquired. He explained the role of the virtual planner, who was in charge of organizing the attack and who instructed el-Zoebi and Khadigah. He also admitted that he initially wanted to join the Islamic State in Syria, but his father prevented his departure, thus highlighting the potential danger of “frustrated travelers.”¹¹

The plot is testimony to one of several methods the Islamic State uses to instigate terrorist attacks outside of its main areas of conflict. While most jihadi terrorist attacks in the West in the period 2014-2019 were *inspired* rather than *guided*,¹² the matchstick plot is illustrative of how the Islamic State used virtual planners not just to influence potential attackers but to plan and organize the specific attack, including identification of the target and connecting

people. El-Zoebi's case is also an example of how the group appears in certain instances to work to determine the veracity of the linkage between attacks in the West and sympathy for the group. In the West, the Islamic State's claims of responsibility in the wake of a terrorist attack are typically questioned and considered opportunistic. This is certainly the case with some terrorist attacks like the Las Vegas shooting.¹³ But in the case of el-Zoebi's first alleged attack in Malmö, it is noteworthy that the Islamic State managed to establish a link when a media operative reached out to the attacker to verify his motive.¹⁴

Transnational Terrorism

The jihadi terrorism threat to the West has evolved considerably over the decades. Initially stemming from militants living outside the targeted country, it would later become dominated by *home-grown*s^c who spent time in jihadi training camps in places such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. More recently, a significant part of the threat has come from numerous people acting without any physical exposure to militancy and training.

Yet, the matchstick plot is unusual because it was planned to be executed by two men not living in the target country, with no prior knowledge of each other^d and directed from Syria by a third (the virtual planner).^e Not only does it highlight the challenge for national intelligence agencies and stresses the importance of international collaboration, but it illustrates that the motive of such attacks is not always connected to retribution against a plotter's *home* country or country of *residence*. A further takeaway is how little say the attackers had in the planning of the attack, which appears appears to have been largely planned and coordinated from Syria. El-Zoebi's role was arguably more central than Khadigah's, but neither of the two refugees appears to have been the mastermind behind the plot.

The plot presented obvious challenges for Western security institutions. Central to its planning and execution were the virtual planner^f and the availability of instructions on how to construct explosives. In recent years, the online circulation of instructions on how to plan terrorist attacks, including recipes on how to construct weapons and explosives, has grown greatly, thus offering would-be terrorists an abundant range of options—from the really simple to more advanced weapons.

Inspire magazine helped shape a decade of terrorist attacks in the West. For instance, its suggestion to use vehicles as a weapon

c Homegrowns refer to plotters born or raised in the country of the terror plot or attack.

d It is worth noting the example of the French Islamic State virtual planner Rachid Kassim who linked together the two men, Adel Kermiche and Abdelmalik Petitjean, with no prior connection to collaborate in the killing of the priest Jacques Hamel in Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray. See “Attentat de St Etienne-du-Rouvray : le portrait d'Abdel Malik Petitjean, le complice savoyard d'Adel Kermiche,” *FranceInfo*, October 22, 2016.

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b It is not known publicly, but the information about el-Zoebi's terror plot likely came from the German police investigation into Khadigah.

has been followed on several occasions since the rise of the Islamic State's terrorist campaign in the West. While the simpler methods appear to be the preferred choice for militant Islamists these days¹⁵—the November 2019 terrorist stabbing attack in the vicinity of London Bridge being an example—far more complex recipes for terror are in circulation; a December 2019 jihadi terror plot uncovered in Denmark involving the production of TATP, or the intention

to produce it, is the most recent example of how jihadi sympathizers attempt to produce relatively more advanced explosives.¹⁶ The more complex the method, the harder they typically are to execute, but it nonetheless increases the potential danger posed by jihadi sympathizers in the West with little to no experience from battlefields or training camps.¹⁷ **CTC**

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