FEATURE ARTICLE

The Islamic State's Strategic Shifts and Jihadi Tactics in Australia

ANDREW ZAMMIT AND LEVI WEST

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

G.B. Jones

CHIEF SAFETY AND SECURITY
OFFICER, FIFA WORLD CUP 2026

Contents

FROM THE EDITORS

On December 14, 2025, two supporters of the Islamic State conducted the first mass casualty terrorist attack in Australia, at a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach in Sydney. As Andrew Zammit and Levi West write in our cover article this month, "It was also the deadliest jihadi attack in a Western country since 2017, and the deadliest Islamic State attack targeting Jewish people in the movement's history." The authors outline what is known so far about the attack and then situate it in the context of over 25 years of jihadi activity in the country, "showing how it differs from earlier plots and attacks in crucial respects and what this means for the threat environment."

Our interview is with G.B. Jones, the chief safety and security officer for the FIFA World Cup 2026. Jones, who previously served as the international security director for the National Football League, brings decades of law enforcement experience to the role, including 23 years with the FBI. "No *one* government has oversight of the entire footprint," he explains of the tri-country tournament that gets underway in June. "So even as a private partner, FIFA has to be the one that's laying over the top as the honest broker, ensuring that we've got all of the resources necessary from the public and the private side to fully integrate on private security and public law enforcement, fire, EMS, homeland security across the entire footprint. So, we have a much larger role than historically we've seen in World Cups."

Michael Horton explores how the Houthis' tribal alliances are fraying, particularly amid the ongoing war against Iran and the weakening of Tehran's Axis of Resistance. The Houthis' tribal compact, he explains, is endangered by "five key pressure points—economic strain, narrative fatigue, generational shifts, ideological constraints, and leadership changes." "The Houthis from the outset wove themselves into the fabric of tribal society through intermarriage, mediation, patronage, and force," Horton writes. "The key question is whether this carefully woven tapestry, crafted over three decades, can withstand current pressures; a weakened Iranian regime and the potential loss of support could accelerate its unraveling."

Finally, Jesse Humpal reviews 50 years of extremist attacks and plots against U.S. critical infrastructure and industrial/commercial targets. Across analysis of an original open-source dataset (1970 to mid-2025), he "traces tactical evolution from arson and clandestine cells to digitally networked mobilization, firearms, and higher-casualty-risk methods." Humpal finds "that critical infrastructure and adjacent industrial/commercial targets have become a shared battlefield for extremist movements motivated by differing ideologies."

Don Rassler and Kristina Hummel, *Editors-in-Chief*

The Bondi Attack: The Islamic State's Strategic Shifts and Jihadi Tactics in Australia

By Andrew Zammit and Levi J. West

On December 14, 2025, two Islamic State supporters carried out the first mass casualty terrorist attack on Australian soil, targeting the Jewish community in the Sydney suburb of Bondi. This article analyzes the Bondi massacre, what the attack involved, and how it differs from earlier jihadi attacks in Australia. The article also examines how the attack came about, combining the currently available information on the pathways of the alleged attackers with the broader context of the Islamic State's approach to transnational mobilization and its recent efforts to exploit the war in Gaza to regain some global momentum. In doing so, this article identifies how the Islamic State's post-Gaza adaptations contributed to the deadliest jihadi terror attack in Australia's history.

O
n December 14, 2025, two men carried out a mass shooting and attempted bombing attack at Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia. The attack targeted a Hanukkah celebration, killing 15 people and wounding 40 others. The terrorists unveiled two Islamic State flags at the scene as a precursor to the shooting.[1] Within days, the Islamic State claimed—via its Al Naba newsletter—to have inspired the attack by having "consistently incited the targeting of Jews and Christians during their holidays and gatherings" and credited the attackers with having "answered the call and carried out the recommendations to target holidays and gatherings."[2] It was the 12th jihadi attack in Australia since the Islamic State declared its 'caliphate' in mid-2014, but its consequences were unprecedented, causing more fatalities than all earlier jihadi attacks in Australia combined. It was also the deadliest jihadi attack in a Western country since 2017, and the deadliest Islamic State attack targeting Jewish people in the movement's history.[a]

This article examines the antisemitic mass murder in Bondi in the context of prior Australian jihadi activity and post-October 7 shifts in the Islamic State's approach to transnational mobilization. It first examines the attack itself, including the evidence of substantive planning and Islamic State inspiration. The article then situates the Bondi shooting in the context of over 25 years of jihadi activity in Australia, showing how it differs from earlier plots and attacks in crucial respects and what this means for the threat environment. The article also explains how the attack can be understood as an outcome of the Islamic State's exploitation of the war in Gaza and its strategic adaptation in order to regain some global momentum. The article concludes by examining what is currently known about the radicalization and mobilization of the two men alleged to have carried out the attack, to help explain how such an unprecedented event occurred in Australia.[b]

Andrew Zammit is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Victoria University. He has a PhD in political science from Monash University, and his work focuses on terrorism and security studies, including both public-facing research and applied research with government partners. His research career has included a core focus on terrorism and violent extremism in Australia, the relationship between terrorism and transnational dimensions of armed conflict, and other areas of public policy and national security. He is the recipient of an Office of National Intelligence National Intelligence Postdoctoral Grant (project number NIPG202503) funded by the Australian Government.

Levi J. West is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Australian National University. He holds a PhD in political science from Victoria University, and his research has focused on terrorism, propaganda, and technology, as well as the strategies of terrorism. His current research is focused on modeling radicalization. He is funded through a National Intelligence and Security Discovery Research Grant (NI230100021), administered by the Australian Research Council on behalf of the Office of National Intelligence. West is also a Director with Praxis Advisory, a bespoke advisory firm servicing the national security sector.

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a   The most recent Islamic State-associated attack in a Western country to kill more than 15 people was the Manchester Arena bombing in the United Kingdom on May 22, 2017, which killed 22 people. However, the New Orleans attack on January 1, 2025, was almost as deadly as the Bondi massacre, killing 14 people. For Islamic State-associated attacks that targeted Jewish people, see Mitchell D. Silber, "Terrorist Attacks Against Jewish Targets in the West (2012-2019): The Atlantic Divide Between European and American Attackers," *CTC Sentinel* 12:5 (2019): pp. 31-35; and Petter Nesser and Wassim Nasr, "The Threat Matrix Facing the Paris Olympics," *CTC Sentinel* 17:6 (2024): pp. 2-7.

b   At the time of writing, the surviving alleged attacker is facing a criminal prosecution. In addition to a criminal trial, the Australian government has launched a Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion, announced by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on January 8, 2026. This Royal Commission has incorporated the previously announced (December 21, 2025) review of the circumstances of the attack and the actions of federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Both processes limit the information currently in the public domain, so the analysis that follows may require revisiting as more information becomes available in the years ahead. Nonetheless, by combining the currently available information on the attack and the alleged perpetrators with the authors' research on the Islamic State's transnational mobilization and the evolution of Australian jihadism, this article proposes a detailed first picture of how the attack came about. "Prosecution of Naveed Akram," Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions, 2025; "Review into Federal Law Enforcement and Intelligence Agencies," Prime Minister of Australia, December 21, 2025; "Establishment of Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion," Prime Minister of Australia, January 8, 2026.

Police are pictured at Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia, on December 15, 2025, the day after a terrorist attack targeted a Hanukkah celebration there. (AP Photo/Mark Baker)

The Bondi Attack

On the evening of December 14, 2025, two men drove to the Sydney suburb of Bondi. They parked near a footbridge overlooking Archer Park, where the annual Chanukah by the Sea festival was being attended by roughly 1,000 people.[3] They removed two single barrel shotguns and a Beretta rifle from the car, along with multiple improvised explosive devices (IEDs)[c] and placed homemade Islamic State flags on the front and rear windshields of their vehicle.[4] They threw the IEDs in the direction of the festival, but they failed to detonate.[d] The younger gunman positioned himself on the footbridge and began firing at the festival attendees approximately 50 meters away.[5] The older gunman had remained standing by the vehicle when he first began firing at the event. A nearby man, Boris Gurman, tackled the older gunman and wrestled the firearm from him. However, the gunman used another firearm and fatally shot Boris, before killing his wife, Sofia Gurman.[6] The Gurmans were the first two fatalities of the attack, which would claim the lives of 15 people and wound 40.[7]

The older gunman then joined the younger gunman on the footbridge where they continued to fire at the festival. Dozens of people were shot within minutes. Civilians fled and took shelter, others feigned death to avoid being targeted, and many protected others with their bodies. Bondi lifeguards ran toward the gunfire to treat the wounded, even as the shooting continued.[8] After several minutes of firing, the older gunman left the footbridge and walked toward the festival, continuing to shoot people while the younger gunman fired from the footbridge. A bystander named Ahmed al-Ahmed raced toward the older gunman and disarmed him, while another man, Reuven Morrison, threw a brick at the now disarmed gunman.[9] However, both al-Ahmed and Morrison were soon shot, Morrison fatally, by the younger assailant firing from the footbridge. The older gunman walked back to bridge, picked up another firearm, and continued shooting.[10]

At this point, New South Wales (NSW) Police officers (some on duty at the Hannukah event and some newly arrived in response to the shooting) had begun engaging the gunmen. The officers found themselves immediately outgunned, as their handguns had a far shorter range than the attackers' rifle and shotguns.[11] One police vehicle was fired at from 70 meters away as it arrived.[12] Several police officers advanced toward the footbridge from different directions and engaged the gunmen. Two officers, Jack Hibbert and Scott Dyson, were wounded by gunfire from the attackers.[13] The older gunman was fatally shot by Detective Senior Constable Cesar Barraza, using his Glock 19 service weapon, from around 40 meters away.[14] The younger gunman was then shot and wounded, and police moved in and arrested him.[15]

As emergency services secured the area, established a crime scene, and tended to the victims, counterterrorism authorities sought to make sense of the event, discovering that it had been planned in support of the Islamic State over the preceding months. The NSW Joint Counter Terrorism Team (JCTT), consisting of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the

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c   Police believe that three pipe bombs and one tennis ball bomb were taken out of the car, and that another IED remained in the car. *H 86600515 Statement of Facts*, pp. 13, 17.

d   However, police later assessed these as viable IEDs. *H 86600515 Statement of Facts*, p. 13.

Australian Federal Police (AFP), NSW Police, and the NSW Crime Commission, established a new investigation named Operation Arques.[16] At 11:50pm that night, they conducted a search of the family home of the two men identified as the shooters, seizing two phones, a homemade wooden firearm, a bow with 12 arrows, and a copy of the Qur'an with highlighted passages.[17] The next day, the NSW JCTT searched an Airbnb in the Sydney suburb of Campsie where the two men had stayed before the attack, seizing additional weapons and devices.[e] Videos from one or more of the seized phones revealed the men had engaged in outdoor firearms training near Goulburn,[18] in regional NSW, in late October 2025.[19] The NSW JCTT also found a 15-minute video, filmed in October, of the two men in front of the Islamic State flag claiming responsibility for their forthcoming "Bondi attack."[20] The two men had also traveled to the southern Philippines from November 1 to November 29, 2025, and had conducted a reconnaissance visit to Bondi from their Campsie accommodation two days before the attack.[21]

The NSW JCTT soon initiated legal proceedings.[f] They alleged that the dead gunman was 50-year-old Sajid Akram, who had immigrated to Australia from India in 1998, and that the surviving gunman was 24-year-old Naveed Akram, Sajid's son.[22] On December 17, 2025, the NSW JCTT charged Naveed Akram with one count of engaging in a terrorist act, 15 counts of murder, 40 counts of attempted murder, and other counts involving discharging a firearm with intent, displaying a prohibited symbol, and placing explosives in a public place.[23] The attack was unprecedented in the Australian context, in terms of the scale, complexity, and the specific targeting.

The Bondi Attack in the Context of Australian Jihadism

Before the Bondi massacre, 34 jihadi plots had occurred in Australia according to a dataset maintained by one of the authors.[g] This began with a small number of highly ambitious but unsuccessful plots: three bombing plots from 2000-2005 with connections to al-Qa`ida and Lashkar-e-Taiba, followed by a mass shooting plot by supporters of al-Shabaab in 2009.[h] However, the emergence of the Islamic State dramatically changed the threat landscape, resulting in 30 jihadi plots between September 2014 and December 2024, 11 of which resulted in attacks that killed or injured people.
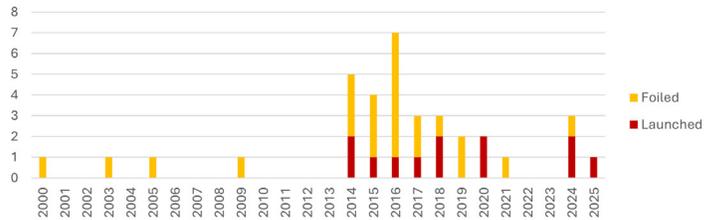

Figure 1: Jihadi plots in Australia, launched and foiled: 2000-2025

The Islamic State-linked attacks began after the group's spokesperson Abu Mohammed al-Adnani's September 22, 2014, call to arms and lone jihad, "Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful."[24] The immediate aftermath saw the September 23 stabbing of two police officers from the Victorian JCTT, followed by additional attacks over the next decade.[25] Until Bondi, these tended to be low capability attacks, largely in keeping with the Islamic State's public guidance, and primarily involved stabbings. Some of the disrupted plots inspired or instigated by the Islamic State in Australia were also relatively unsophisticated. However, there were highly significant exceptions, such as the December 2016 Federation Square plot and the July 2017 Sydney plane plot.[26]

As a result of the successful disruption of the most ambitious plots, and the more rudimentary nature of those plots that resulted in actual attacks, for the first 25 years of the 21st century Australia avoided an onshore mass casualty jihadi terror attack.[i] The 11 jihadi attacks in Australia prior to Bondi each killed between zero and two people, resulting in a total of seven fatalities (excluding the perpetrators).[27] Through a combination of good fortune, gun control measures, and effective counterterrorism (including the extensive use of travel restrictions to prevent local jihadis from gaining training experience abroad), Australia had not experienced the scale of jihadi violence seen in Europe and North America.[28] The December 14, 2025, Bondi massacre changed this. It was the 35th jihadi plot in Australia, and the 12th attack. The perpetrators caused more than double the total fatalities of all earlier jihadi attacks in Australia.

The Bondi attack differed from Australia's earlier jihadi incidents in several important ways, including the firepower that the attackers had on hand. Australian jihadis traditionally faced great difficulties when seeking to acquire firearms.[29] This was due to gun control laws (introduced after a mass shooting in Tasmania in 1996) that outlawed ownership of the deadliest types of firearms and established a layered license regime for other types, based on

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e   This included another rifle and shotgun, ammunition, various firearm parts (one of which was 3D-printed), bomb-making equipment, and a suspected IED. *H 86600515 Statement of Facts*, p. 19.

f   Since the criminal charges were filed, there have been discrepancies in how Sajid and Naveed Akram have been discussed in Australia. Some media reports describe the Akrams as the perpetrators of the attack without using the language of "allegations." However, public statements by police continue to use the language of "allegations" and consistently emphasize the need for cautious language to not place the criminal proceedings at risk. To err on the side of caution, the authors follow the latter approach when referring to claims about the Akrams' alleged involvement in the Bondi attack.

g   This is preliminary data from a dataset on proven and alleged terrorist plots in Australia being developed by Andrew Zammit as part of a National Intelligence Postdoctoral Grant (project number NIPG202503), building on earlier work. See Andrew Zammit, "Australian Jihadism in the Age of the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 10:3 (2017): p. 28. The inclusion criteria is designed to be consistent with events that would be considered Category 1 or Category 2 under Petter Nesser's Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset (JPED), to enable comparison. Petter Nesser, "Introducing the Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset (JPED)," *Journal of Peace Research* 61:2 (2023): pp. 319-320. The figure of 34 has limitations, in both directions. There is a risk that it overstates the number of plots, as the four events in 2024 and 2025 have not yet been through legal proceedings, so their inclusion may need to be revisited depending on subsequent information (the inclusion criteria does not always require a criminal conviction, but evidence resulting from legal processes feeds into the decision to include or exclude). However, there is also the risk that it understates the number of plots, as there may be other plots that occurred but are not known about publicly.

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h   The 2000 plot was directly instigated by al-Qa`ida, the 2003 plot was guided by a senior Lashkar-e-Taiba figure who was later involved in the 2008 Mumbai massacre, and the 2005 plot was self-starting but some of the plotters had trained with al-Qa`ida and Lashkar-e-Taiba. The 2009 plotters were in communication with al-Shabaab but did not receive direct instructions or training for the intended attack. See Andrew Zammit, "Explaining a Turning Point in Australian Jihadism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36:9 (2013): pp. 739-755.

i   This is based on a definition of mass casualty as 10 or more deaths. Nesser, p. 321.

needs such as sporting and hunting, and because of black market dealers being wary of drawing counterterrorism attention.[30] In several of the earlier foiled plots, the aspiring perpetrators struggled to obtain firearms, often providing opportunities for counterterrorism authorities to infiltrate plots on the premise of providing access to such weapons.[31] Only three of the 11 earlier jihadi attacks in Australia involved firearms, and these included rudimentary shotguns and a revolver that was around 70 years old.[j] In contrast, the alleged Bondi attackers legally owned six firearms, and used three in the attack, "enabling sustained fire across the site."[32] Another difference is that the earlier attacks were almost always perpetrated by lone actors.[k] The Bondi attack, in contrast, was carried out by a father-son dyad acting as a two-shooter team, increasing the harm they were able to cause.[33]

The most crucial difference was the target. The 11 prior attacks mostly targeted police officers or random members of the public. Of the 34 prior plots, only two had focused on Jewish targets. One was the 2000 failed bombing plot instigated by al-Qa`ida, which targeted Israeli diplomatic offices in Canberra and Sydney, and a Jewish community figure in Melbourne.[34] The other was an alleged plot in April 2024 for which details are currently unclear, but involved several teenagers who reportedly targeted "Jewish and Assyrian people."[35] By targeting a Jewish religious celebration, the Bondi massacre differed dramatically from most of Australia's earlier jihadi plots.

Moreover, the Bondi attack occurred in the context of a small increase in jihadi plots in Australia that appear to have focused on religious targets, reflecting a wider international trend. As Figure 1 shows, jihadi plots in Australia declined after the Islamic State's setbacks in the Middle East; there were no publicly known jihadi terror plots in Australia in 2022 and 2023. This changed in April 2024 with the Sydney stabbing of an Assyrian Christian bishop closely followed by the aforementioned alleged plot by Sydney teenagers reportedly including Jewish and Assyrian people as targets.[36] Therefore, to understand how the Bondi massacre came about, it is necessary to examine the Islamic State's post-October 7 approach to transnational mobilization, which led to an increased frequency of plots throughout Western countries and an increased emphasis on Jewish targets.

The Islamic State's Post-Gaza Targeting of Jewish Communities

Antisemitism has a long history within the global jihadi movement, as evident in Usama bin Ladin's *Declaration of Jihad against the Americans* and his 1998 declaration in the name of the then World Islamic Front, the *Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders*, both containing conspiratorial references to what they called the Jewish-Crusader Alliance.[37] Al-Qa`ida had proven adept at combining this antisemitism with its efforts to "exploit the deep symbolic value of Palestine and Jerusalem" when mobilizing support.[38] In contrast, the Islamic State tended to focus on Palestine with far "less intensity and continuity than al-Qaeda" and emphasized that the Palestinian cause should not outweigh the movement's global ambitions, despite having "vehemently lashed out at Jews as irreducible enemies on religious grounds."[39] The Bondi attack can be understood in part as a consequence of the Islamic State no longer ceding this rhetorical territory, shifting to effectively exploit the war in Gaza to regain some global momentum.

The Islamic State's capacity for violence had been steadily declining from 2018-2023, despite the movement's effort to offset its territorial losses in Syria and Iraq by expanding its provinces elsewhere, most successfully in Africa. The Islamic State appeared to struggle in 2023, with a decline in claimed activities in most parts of the world (the exceptions being the Sahel and the Philippines).[40] BBC data shows that the Islamic State had claimed 838 attacks worldwide from January-November 2023, compared to 1,811 the previous year.[41] Moreover, the Islamic State initially seemed slow to take advantage of the war in Gaza in the first months after October 7, 2023. While al-Qa`ida and its affiliates released multiple statements calling for global terrorist attacks in support of Palestinian armed groups, the Islamic State initially avoided public comments on the conflict.[42] A key exception was an October 20, 2023, editorial in Al Naba, in which the Islamic State went to great lengths to frame that conflict as part of its global struggle but avoided the ideological accommodation of Hamas that had been evident in al-Qa`ida's statements.[43]

However, the Islamic State ended 2023 by increasing its efforts to exploit the war to mobilize followers into new attacks, including a renewed focus on attacks in the West. One early indicator was that the Islamic State returned to claiming responsibility for attacks in Europe. The October 16, 2023, murder of two Swedish soccer fans in Belgium marked the first time the Islamic State claimed responsibility for an attack in Europe since the Vienna attack of November 2, 2020.[44] Additionally, the December 2023 issue of Islamic State Khorasan's English-language magazine Voice of Khurasan featured the cover story "The Nation Deserving Holocaust the Most"[45] and was laden with antisemitic tropes, as well as an infographic that detailed various strategies to "confront Jew[s]" including "targeting Jews wherever they can be found" as well as suggesting tactics including "guns from black market."[46][l]

On January 4, 2024, the Islamic State released a speech by its spokesperson, Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari, entitled "And Kill Them

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j   The December 2014 Lindt Cafe Siege involved a "La Salle 12-gauge pump action shotgun manufactured in 1960" that could hold up to four cartridges. The June 2017 Brighton siege involved two firearms, a "double barrel 12-gauge Nikko brand, Model 5200" shotgun and "a 12 gauge Barton & Co double barrel shotgun." The October 2015 murder of a NSW Police employee was carried out with a ".38 special calibre Smith & Wesson model British service revolver" left over from World War II. "Inquest into the Deaths Arising from the Lindt Café Siege: Findings and Recommendations, Report," State Coroner of New South Wales, 2017), p. 128; *Khayre: Finding into Death with Inquest of Khayre, Yacub* (COR 2017 002643), No. 28687 (VicCorC August 23, 2023), pp. 14-15; *R v Alameddine* (No. 3), NSW (Supreme Court of New South Wales 2018), p. 4; Adelaide Lang, "'Extremist' Allegedly Supplied $3000 Gun for Police Shooting," News.Com.Au, February 23, 2023.

k   The only exception is the October 2015 murder of a NSW Police employee in Sydney, which involved several co-conspirators. However, even in that case, the attack itself was carried out by a single individual. *R v Alou* (No. 4), NSW (Supreme Court of New South Wales 2018); *R v Atai* (No. 2), No. 1797 (Supreme Court of New South Wales November 23, 2018); *R v Alameddine* (No. 3).

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l   As one of the primary English language propaganda outlets of the Islamic State, Voice of Khurasan plays an integral role in seeking to influence English language audiences and "established itself as the English-language flagship of the global media jihad." Haroro J. Ingram, *Voice Of Khurasan: Inside Islamic State Khurasan Province's English Language Magazine* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2026), p. 1.

Wherever You Find Them," which clarified the group's perspective on the Gaza conflict and set the parameters for its transnational mobilization narratives.[47] The speech placed the Gaza war at the center, while framing the conflict within the Islamic State's core mobilization themes and claiming activity in over 30 countries.[48] It denounced Hamas, their Iranian patrons, and the broader "Axis of Resistance" as "Rafidah" who were co-opting the Palestinian cause.[49] Through this framing, the Islamic State took credit for the suicide bombings that killed around 100 people in the Iranian city of Kerman.[50] Additionally, the speech denounced Israel and its Western backers along with the Arab states.

Most importantly, in relation to Bondi, the speech included an explicit call to arms that echoed the infamous "Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful" speech by then Islamic State spokesperson al-Adnani in September 2014 that precipitated the wave of attacks that took place across the West from 2014 onward.[51] The January 2024 speech similarly sought to inspire sympathizers to undertake terrorist attacks in their home countries and provided sanction for a range of tactics, suggesting that perpetrators "detonate explosives … [and] shoot them with bullets."[52] The call to arms stated that:

> we call you to action today, to reenergize your activities, and to bring to life the blessed attacks in the heart of the Jews' and Christians' homelands … Chase your preys whether Jewish, Christian or their allies, on the streets and roads of America, Europe, and the world.[53]

The speech encouraged adherents to "kill them by the worst of means, turn their gatherings and celebrations into bloody massacres."[54] It explicitly stated that its targeting advice sought to ensure that any resulting attacks matched the movement's strategic and ideological logic, stating that followers should:

> seek easy targets before hard ones, civilian targets before military one[s], religious targets like synagogues and churches before others, for this will satisfy the soul and will demonstrate the characteristics of the battle, as our battle with them is a religious one and we kill them wherever we come upon them in response to Allah Almighty's command.[55] [m]

It did not take long before these renewed efforts to inspire attacks in the West showed results, with multiple attacks in Europe occurring from October 2023 onward.[56] Nesser and Nasr, drawing on Nesser's Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset (JPED), have noted that even though "there was a significant decrease in Islamic State-related attack plotting across Western Europe following the territorial defeat of the caliphate in 2019, plotting and attacks never ceased, and ticked up in 2023-2024."[57] Marone's Jihadist Terrorism in Europe Database (JTED) shows that Europe experienced 15 jihadi attacks over the 15 months from October 2023 to December 2024 compared to three jihadi attacks in the preceding 15 months.[58] This surge in jihadi activity in Europe had multiple drivers, including the increased propaganda production, ongoing cultivation of an online ecosystem, and the operational reach of Islamic State Khorasan, all alongside the explicit exploitation of the Gaza conflict.[59] Nesser and Nasr highlighted that "injustices against

Palestinians have once again featured as a partial motive and trigger for jihadi plots in Western Europe."[60] Moreover, according to JTED data, three of the 15 attacks from October 2023 to December 2024 were aimed at Jewish and Israeli targets, compared to only one in the preceding seven years.[61] One plot foiled in 2024 was a plan by two Islamic State supporters in the United Kingdom to conduct a mass shooting attack targeting a march against antisemitism and then travel to predominantly Jewish suburbs in north Manchester to murder more people.[62]

The themes established in "And Kill Them Wherever You Find Them," including increased targeting of Jews, continued to manifest over the subsequent years. Issue 40 of Voice of Khurasan, released in October 2024, ended by declaring that "we renew and repeat our encouragement to individual lions to make diligent efforts to target Jews and Christians. Target them especially in the crusader America and Europe, in the heart of the Jewish homeland, and the land of al-Quds and al-Maqdis (Palestine)!"[63] On September 18, 2025, an editorial in issue 513 of Al Naba reiterated calls to "carry out daring and courageous operations targeting Jewish and Christian gatherings and neighborhoods everywhere, especially in Crusader European countries."[64] On October 2, 2025, an Islamic State supporter in the United Kingdom murdered two people at a Manchester synagogue, and the attack was widely celebrated by Islamic State supporters online.[65] That same month, the two alleged Bondi perpetrators were training with firearms in remote NSW and recording a video for their planned attack.

Analyzed in this context, what stands out is the extent that the Bondi attack correlates with the mobilization themes and targeting advice promoted by the Islamic State since the "And Kill Them Wherever You Find Them" speech. The attackers' use of IEDs and firearms matched the speech's call to "detonate explosives … [and] shoot them with bullets."[66] Their target selection matched the Islamic State's increased emphasis on attacking Jewish people, and was also consistent with the guidance to "seek easy targets before hard ones" and religious targets over secular targets.[67]

The consistency with which the targeting and tactics of the Bondi massacre were aligned with the Islamic State's strategic logic is one of the attack's most distinctive features compared to Australia's earlier jihadi attacks. This consistency was not evident in several earlier incidents. The perpetrator of the December 2014 Lindt Cafe siege infamously brought the wrong flag and demanded that police bring him the correct one;[68] the plotters behind the October 2015 murder of NSW Police employee Curtis Cheng were rebuked by their Syria-based contact for not attacking a random member of the public and not filming the attack;[69] the perpetrator of the June 2017 Brighton siege claimed the attack in the name of both

> "The consistency with which the targeting and tactics of the Bondi massacre were aligned with the Islamic State's strategic logic is one of the attack's most distinctive features compared to Australia's earlier jihadi attacks."

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m   The extent to which this marked a shift in targeting emphasis can be seen by comparing it with the explicit targeting advice provided in the February 2023 issue of Voice of Khurasan, which placed "Armed Men and Women (Police and Security Guards)" at the top of the list and made no mention of religious targets or any target specifically involving Jewish people. "O Supporters of Khilafah," Voice of Khurasan, February 2023, p. 30.

al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, at odds with the Islamic State's insistence that loyalty be to it alone.[70] Moreover, some jihadi attacks in Australia had resembled instances of suicide-by-cop rather than acts calculated to follow the Islamic State's guidance and inflict maximum damage to advance its cause. In contrast, the Bondi massacre resembles the more ambitious jihadi plots Australia had experienced.

This raises the question of the relationship between the Bondi perpetrators and the Islamic State's global movement. In six of Australia's earlier jihadi plots (including some of the most ambitious plans such as the September 2014 plot to initiate a months-long kidnapping and murder campaign or the 2017 plot to bomb an Etihad flight and create a chemical weapon), the plotters in Australia were receiving direct instructions from Islamic State figures abroad.[71] Based on the publicly available information, the Bondi attack does not currently appear to resemble this model. The Australian Federal Police have emphasized that there is currently "no evidence to suggest these alleged offenders were part of a broader terrorist cell or were directed by others to carry out an attack" nor that their travel to the southern Philippines meant that they "received training or underwent logistical preparation."[72] This is consistent with the language contained in the Islamic State's claims of inspiring the attack.

"The Pride of Sydney"

The Islamic State formally recognized the Bondi attack in issue 526 of Al Naba, in an article entitled "The Pride of Sydney." The article fell short of the traditional press release style of Amaq News Agency, which historically "dubbed each perpetrator a 'Soldier of the Caliphate,'"[73] and instead acknowledged the perpetrators as having:

> answered the call and carried out the recommendations to target holidays and gatherings. They armed themselves with the Prophetic methodology and set off without looking back, plunging unarmoured into the Hanukkah celebration and turning it into a scene of mourning.[74]

The Islamic State, and al-Qa`ida before it, has a long history of encouraging what it has frequently referred to as "lone jihad."[75] As originally theorized by jihadi strategist Abu Musab al-Suri, the jihadi movement succeeded in building a "system, not an organisation" to facilitate and inspire "individual and small cell jihad."[76] Even though the Islamic State explicitly disavowed al-Suri's strategic doctrine over a decade ago, much of its current approach to transnational terrorism appears to fulfill al-Suri's vision.[77] This strategy was initially operationalized by Anwar al-Awlaki in particular, via al-Qa`ida's English language online magazine Inspire, which he and his co-editor viewed as "a direct extension and realization of al-Suri's vision."[78] This "system" reached greater potential when the Islamic State integrated it into its full spectrum social media campaign from 2014 onward.[79] Since September 2014, the Islamic State prioritized "lone jihad" narratives as a key pillar of its ability to launch operations in the West. The release of "Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful," and its translation into English in the fourth edition of Dabiq, served as a crucial catalyst for inspiring a wave of lone actor terrorists undertaking predominantly low-capability jihadi attacks across the West, including in Australia (see Figure 1).[80]

Al-Suri's logic of autonomous attacks has proven an enduring and effective one, and despite a nadir in recent years, it remains a key element of the jihadi operational arsenal. What has always been central to this system is English (and other European) language propaganda. In much of the Islamic State's recent propaganda, it has sought to restate its incitement guidance for Western-based operatives. This continuity is reflected in "The Pride of Sydney," which stated that:

> [The Islamic State] is not eager to claim all these blessed attacks officially, especially since its name is already engraved upon them through its methodology and the blood of its mujahideen.[81 n]

The Islamic State more emphatically took credit for the Bondi attack just over two months later. On February 21, 2026, al-Furqan Media released the first speech from the Islamic State's spokesperson, Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari, in nearly two years. The new speech, "Guidance Has Become Clearly Distinguished from Error," again claimed credit for the Bondi attack, treating it as one of the movement's global successes for 2025:

> Ask the corpses of the Jews in Sydney, the Christians in [New] Orleans. Ask the Russians in Moscow and their lackeys in the Caucasus. Ask the temples of the Rafidites in Kerman and Oman, and ask them in Khorasan and Pakistan. Ask every region of this world about the heroic acts of our soldiers and the strikes of our lions.[82]

The Islamic State's consistent emphasis on encouraging supporters to follow its "methodology" but otherwise act on their own initiative continued to produce results more than two years after the Gaza war broke out. This is shown by the Bondi attack occurring as part of a broader spike in anti-Western plots inspired or instigated by the Islamic State in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States during December 2025, predominantly targeting holiday events such as Christmas markets.[o] The February 2026 speech appeared to allude to the foiled December plots, declaring that "there is sufficient evidence for this in the great losses Crusader Europe has faced this year to secure their festivals, and how their streets have turned into fields of war."[83] These December 2025 operations are yet to be publicly assessed for any central coordination from the Islamic State; however, Garofalo

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n   This approach to claiming attacks, with its emphasis on autonomous operations, had been foreshadowed in earlier statements by the Islamic State since 2024, and the manner in which it described the New Orleans attack. Eve Sampson, "ISIS Says It Inspired New Orleans Attack, but Doesn't Claim Responsibility," *New York Times*, January 10, 2025.

o   On December 13, 2025, an Islamic State-associated attack near Palmyra, Syria, killed three Americans (two U.S. servicemembers and a civilian interpreter). It was the first deadly attack against U.S. forces in Syria since 2019. Ahmad Sharawi, "3 Americans Killed, 3 Injured in Islamic State Ambush Attack in Palmyra, Syria," FDD's Long War Journal, December 13, 2025. Throughout December 2025, there were also alleged Islamic State plots in Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands, reportedly aimed at holiday targets such as Christmas markets. "Syrian Arrested in Dutch Port City Suspected of Christmas Terrorist Attack Plot in Europe," NL Times, December 30, 2025; "Polish Student Detained over Suspected Christmas Market Attack Plot," Reuters, December 16, 2025; "Germany says it foiled a potential 'Islamist' plot to attack a Christmas market," *Monde*, December 14, 2025. In late December 2025, alleged plots were foiled in Turkey, with conflicting reports as to whether any were aimed at Western targets. "Turkey detains dozens of IS suspects planning attacks on Christmas and New Year's celebrations," *Monde*, December 26, 2025, and Anil Can Tuncer, "Turkey Thwarts Islamic State-Led New Year's Eve Suicide Attack Plot," Euronews, December 23, 2025. On December 31, 2025, an alleged plot was disrupted in the United States, reportedly targeting a grocery store and restaurant in North Carolina on New Year's Eve with notes including references to Jews, Christians, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Lucy Campbell, "FBI Says It Thwarted Planned New Year's Eve Terrorist Attack in North Carolina," *Guardian*, January 2, 2026.

has highlighted that the system functions without a requirement for central coordination, and notes that "unlike direct operational command, enablement consists of the creation of an ideological and symbolic ecosystem that makes the action violent, legitimate, expected and replicable."[84] While not all its operations in the West or against Western targets should be presumed to be autonomous operations—and the Islamic State deploys claims of involvement or inspiration for strategic purposes that should therefore not be taken at face value—the information available on the alleged Bondi perpetrators is currently consistent with an autonomous attack by individuals within the Islamic State's "ideological and symbolic ecosystem."

Local Networks and the Bondi Attack

Understanding what enabled the Bondi massacre to be so different from earlier jihadi attacks in Australia requires examining how the attackers radicalized to extremism and mobilized to violence.[p] Current information is limited, but there is evidence that Naveed Akram, the alleged younger gunman, once had face-to-face social connections, through a street preaching group and prayer center, with at least two Islamic State supporters who belong to what became known as the el Matari network.[q] The key figure was Isaac el Matari, a Sydney man arrested in Lebanon in September 2017 for trying to join the Islamic State, at the age of 18, but released in June 2018 before returning to Australia.[85] Upon return, he described himself as Australia's "General Commander" for the Islamic State[86] and developed bombastic plans to lead an insurgency in NSW, envisioned to involve around 1,000 people and take place over the course of around five years.[87] The plans centered on a series of armed assaults with firearms, unlike the stabbings seen in most actual attacks in Australia. El Matari was arrested in July 2019, but continued plotting violence from jail for some months afterwards.[88] He also briefly plotted with Tukiterangi Lawrence, another Islamic State supporter, in the prison.[89]

El Matari was later convicted for plotting a terrorist attack, planning a foreign incursion, and being a member of the Islamic State.[90] His plans were described by the sentencing judge as "grandiose," reflecting how utterly unrealistic his goals were.[91] However, while his ambitions were implausible, the prospect of one or more deadly acts of violence arising in the process of seeking to achieve them was real. Naveed also participated in street preaching activities with another member of the network, Youseff Uweinat, whose role centered on encouraging young people to support the Islamic State. Uweinat was arrested in December 2019 and was later convicted of advocating terrorism and being a member of the

Islamic State.[92]

The el Matari network had a range of connections to Islamic State members and supporters worldwide, at a time when the movement's setbacks in Syria and Iraq were making it harder for Australian sympathizers to form direct links with the group. For example, one member of the network, Radwan Dakkak, communicated with an Islamic State contact in Syria to see if they could assist el Matari's attempt to join Islamic State Khorasan; an Islamic State-affiliated Shiekh in Kenya to translate religious material and promote the Sheikh's teachings; and an Islamic State supporter in the United States to assist the production and distribution of material from Ahlut-Tawhid Publications, an unofficial outlet in support of the Islamic State.[93]

Figure 2 provides an indication of the el Matari network's importance for jihadi activity in NSW. From October 2017 to March 2024, there were only two publicly known jihadi plots in NSW, and both were associated with this network. One was el Matari's plotting through much of 2018 and 2019, and the other was also in 2019, by the prisoner Tukiterangi Lawrence who developed a plan to threaten or attack prison staff in their homes and who a few months later loosely participated in el Matari's insurgency idea.[94] There were no other publicly known plots in NSW until the post-October 7 uptick that began with the April 2024 stabbing of an Assyrian bishop.

Counterterrorism authorities maintained pressure on the el Matari network well after the 2019 arrests.[r] However, what actions were taken by authorities in relation to the Akrams remains unclear and highly contested. ASIO began a six-month investigation of Naveed Akram in October 2019, after el Matari's arrest but before Uweinat's, reportedly due to his associations with both men.[95] In ASIO's later description, the investigation concluded that Naveed Akram "did not adhere to or intend to engage in violent extremism at that time."[96] What happened next regarding any assessments and information sharing about the Akrams, by ASIO, NSW Police, and other elements of the NSW JCTT, remains unclear and is being examined by the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion.[97]
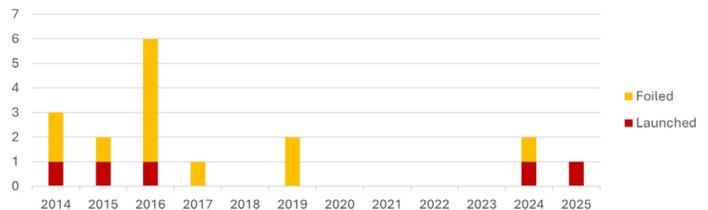

Figure 2: Jihadi plots in NSW, launched and foiled: 2014-2025

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p Currently, the available information on the alleged perpetrators is limited, fragmented, and contested, and may remain so until the criminal prosecution and Royal Commission proceed further.

q The extent of Naved Akram's association with these two individuals is currently in dispute, but there is no dispute that there was some association between them in 2019. See Stephen Rice, Liam Mendes, and Mohammad Alfares, "New Photo Evidence Links Bondi Gunman Naveed Akram to ISIS Terrorist Youssef Uweinat," Australian (Online), December 17, 2025; Stephen Rice and Liam Mendes, "Killer Linked to 'Factory of Hate,'" *Australian*, December 17, 2025; "Bondi: Path to Terror," Four Corners, directed by Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, February 9, 2026; "ASIO Statement: Four Corners," Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, February 8, 2026; and Linton Besser, "ASIO vs ABC," Media Watch, episode 3, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, February 16, 2026.

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r After Dakkak completed his sentence in 2021, he was subjected to a control order and later charged and convicted for breaching it. After Uweinat completed his sentence, authorities sought to impose ongoing restrictions on him, but the court rejected this attempt. NSW authorities also sought a Firearms Prohibition Order against a man associated with another network member, Joseph Saadieh, but this was also rejected by the court. *Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions v Saadieh,* No. 232 (NSWCCA September 27, 2021); *R (Cth) v Dakkak,* No. 181 (NSWDC April 11, 2022); Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop, "Sydney Cleric, IS Child Groomer Target pro-Palestinian Cause for Recruits," ABC News, August 20, 2025; Perry Duffin, Mostafa Rachwani and Michael McGowan, "Police Feared Bondi Gunman's Islamic State Associates Were Seeking Weapons," *Age,* December 17, 2025.

It is also unclear if either Akram had any ongoing connections to the el Matari network after 2019, as information on their activities from 2020 to late 2025 remains limited. However, some information on other aspects of their activities during this period is available, including their acquisition of firearms. In June 2020, two months after ASIO's investigation of Naveed concluded in April 2020, Sajid Akram applied for and obtained a firearms license. He legally purchased six firearms in the lead-up to Bondi.[98] This included three firearms purchased on a single day in September 2023 and three more over the next two years, with the most recent purchase in September 2025, the same month that Al Naba reiterated the Islamic State's calls for attacks on Jews and Christians in Western countries.[99]

Other information on the Akrams' activities prior to the Bondi attack involves their international travel. This includes their travel to Mindanao in November 2025. Scholars have noted that it is unlikely that foreigners could train with Islamic State-aligned groups in the southern Philippines in 2025, due to the improved security situation, and the AFP has stated that they found no evidence of the Akrams engaging in such training or logistical preparation.[100] However, the AFP also made clear that they were not claiming that the Philippines travel was unrelated to the attack, with the Commissioner stating that the AFP were "not suggesting that they were there for tourism."[101] Most recently, Philippine authorities announced that they had arrested a Jordanian national in Mindanao for visa violations, and that he had a connection to the Akrams, but there is little further information.[102] In addition to the Mindanao visit, counterterrorism authorities have also shared that they are investigating other travel undertaken by Naveed and Sajid, both individually and together.[103] This includes an unconfirmed media report that, at some point before the Bondi attack, the two Akrams traveled to Central Asia with the aim of reaching Afghanistan, but were turned back in Kyrgyzstan.[104]

There is also information suggesting changes in the Akrams' personal circumstances in 2025. At some point in the six months before the Bondi attack, Sajid and his wife separated, resulting in both Sajid and Naveed moving out of the family home. Police have said that they are examining whether, prior to that, the mother had "kept them in check."[105] Similarly, at some point in 2025 Naveed left his job as a bricklayer, either due to being laid off or quitting after a boxing accident.[106] At this point, it is not possible to identify the relative importance of the changes in their personal circumstances, which coincided with the Islamic State's renewed emphasis on attacks in Western countries in the lead-up to the attack.

Conclusion

Based on currently available information, some aspects of the radicalization and mobilization of the alleged attackers look familiar to the processes seen in many Western jihadi plots elsewhere: Close-knit individuals with varying associations with local extremist networks, withdrawing voluntarily or involuntarily from their broader social environment, reportedly seeking international jihadi connections with uncertain success, all the while propelled to varying degrees by violent conflicts abroad, transnational mobilization efforts by armed movements, personal circumstances, and individual choices.

However, several features are less familiar in the Australian context. The first is the potential range of international connections. The Akrams had some sort of association with the el Matari network (which was connected to Islamic State members and supporters in Lebanon, Syria, Kenya, and the United States) and had engaged in unexplained travel to the Philippines and possibly elsewhere themselves. This may have contributed to the targets, tactics, and political communication of the Bondi attack correlating so strongly with the Islamic State's global terror campaign. The second unfamiliar feature is the specific composition of the cell, allegedly a father-son duo proficient with firearms. The third unfamiliar feature is the absence of effective pre-emption. Unlike comparable plots in Australia, the attackers were not disrupted by JCTT intervention nor impeded from acquiring firearms or leaving Australia. The last difference is the sustained planning, which was more extensive than earlier jihadi attacks in Australia. The Akrams were allegedly engaging in rural firearms training for months in advance and as early as October 2025 recording a video noting their target as Bondi.[107]

Prior to the Bondi attack, counterterrorism authorities had successfully disrupted every mass casualty jihadi plot on Australian soil, while measures beyond specific disruptions (such as gun control and travel restrictions) had helped to ensure that most attacks that did occur tended to cause few deaths. This was an internationally unusual track record that was not likely to last indefinitely. Investigations continue into the local dynamics of how the attackers became involved in terrorism and launched the attack, and the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion is seeking to identify "any lessons for security and law enforcement agencies to prevent and respond to similar attacks in the future."[108] However, in the global context the December 14, 2025, Bondi massacre can be understood as a consequence of the Islamic State's post-2023 exploitation of the war in Gaza to remobilize its transnational support. As announced in the January 2024 "And Kill Them Wherever You Find Them" campaign, this mobilization effort took care to not let the Israel-Palestine conflict overshadow the movement's global revolutionary goals and wider range of enemies, while including a renewed focus on attacks in Western countries with a greater emphasis than before on Jewish targets.

Much of this global campaign was consistent with the Islamic State's earlier calls for autonomous attacks, which built on the groundwork theorized by strategists like al-Suri, and its earlier efforts to use local conflicts to mobilize transnational supporters for its global ambitions, which built on the earlier mobilization efforts by rival movements such as al-Qa`ida. Nonetheless, the Islamic State managed to frame this renewed global mobilization in a way that reduced the risk of indirectly benefiting its rivals who were likewise seeking to exploit global anger over the war in Gaza. Moreover, through its global propaganda, online ecosystem, and external operations capabilities, the Islamic State has successfully translated this effort into violence on the ground in enemy countries. As a result, the Islamic State partly recovered from its 2022-2023 low point, leading to a larger number of attacks and plots against Western countries after October 7, with a greater proportion targeting Jewish communities.

This transnational mobilization had deadly results in Bondi, resulting in an attack unprecedented in the history of jihadi activity in Australia. Whether the Islamic State can maintain this renewed momentum is unclear and will doubtless be shaped by the trajectory of broader conflicts in the Middle East. Nonetheless, targeted countries need to be prepared for some of their citizens heeding these calls for "attacks against the Crusader and Jewish

targets in every place," acting consistently with the Islamic State's tactical advice, and proving capable of carrying out devastating attacks.[109] CTC

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A View from the CT Foxhole: G.B. Jones, Chief Safety and Security Officer, FIFA World Cup 2026

By Brian Dodwell and Don Rassler

G.B. Jones is the Chief Safety and Security Officer for the FIFA World Cup 2026, where he is responsible for leading safety and security, access control, accreditation, medical, and emergency preparedness planning for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and its test events.

Prior to joining FWC2026, Jones was the International Security Director for the National Football League, where he led security planning for the NFL's international markets, including the games in London, Germany, and Mexico. He retired from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in May 2019 after 23 years of service, where his assignments included directing counterterrorism programs for special events, aviation security, and maritime security. He was a sworn law enforcement officer for more than 31 years and has experience as a municipal police officer, deputy sheriff, Minnesota State Trooper, and FBI Agent.

CTC: You bring a unique set of skills to your role as the Chief Safety and Security Officer for the FIFA World Cup 2026. You spent 23 years with the FBI, during which time you served in various CT leadership roles, and also as the Unit Chief of the Bureau's Special Events Management Unit. Prior to your current role, you were the NFL's International Security Director. How have your prior roles prepared you for your current position, and what are some of your most memorable and meaningful moments from your career?

Jones: My professional career started about 35 years ago, but my preparation started earlier than that. I was very active in Scouting growing up; I was an Eagle Scout. The motto of the Boy Scouts is 'be prepared,' and that is the motto that has best informed my career. It's all about preparedness. It's all about doing the right thing, about being ethical in what you do, and looking out for others. So, the preparedness theme and the service theme really go hand in hand for me. My folks were very much community service-focused and service-oriented. They worked in the private sector and in the volunteer and nonprofit sector. They weren't in public safety, but I learned about service commitment very early on at home.

When I was 19 years old, I began policing. I hadn't been to the police academy yet; I was in college. In fact, at the time I was working part-time as a security officer at my university and then was licensed as a part-time peace officer. At 19 years old in Minnesota, I couldn't buy my own bullets, so my mom bought my bullets, the department gave me my gun, and I went on patrol. Still hadn't been to the police academy, but I started policing my hometown. I did that as a city police officer and as a deputy sheriff. Ultimately, I graduated from college and went off to a police department in an exurb of Minneapolis called Elk River, Minnesota. I did that for about three years and then became a Minnesota State Trooper. During my time with the State Patrol, I encountered a guy who

was a retired FBI agent. He worked at the local courthouse. We had a really good, deep conversation about what service meant at the next level. That led me to apply to the FBI, and in 1996, I was hired as a special agent.

I was sent right back to Minneapolis out of training and did my first five years there. During that time, I became the case agent on a top 10 fugitive case on Andrew Cunanan, the guy who shot Gianni Versace in South Miami Beach. I was six months in the Bureau, and I thought, 'As a brand new agent, I've already peaked. What else is left for me?' But five years later, I found myself as the acting supervisor of the International Terrorism Squad in Minneapolis. And we made the decision to arrest a guy named Zacarias Moussaoui[a] three weeks prior to 9/11 and spent the next three weeks trying to convince FBI headquarters that we had a no kidding, real-life terrorist in our custody. That was met with deaf ears, really, at FBI headquarters. They insinuated, 'You're Minneapolis. Nothing ever happens in Minneapolis,' and we experienced a number of obstacles that ultimately led to some very trying and troubling times. But those trying and troubling times reinforced for me what doing the right thing was: keeping detailed notes, talking about threat and risk in a way that resonates with people to try to get their attention, and then ultimately acting with conviction on those things that are really most important to you.

9/11 was a trying and very personal time for me because I was leading, for the first time ever, an international terrorism case with a squad of young agents, all of whom had really good depth in international terrorism despite their young age. All of them were veterans and had worked in foreign countries prior to 9/11 and understood what the threat was. But again, they were up against this machine that was FBI headquarters, that didn't allow us to really move forward with our case. So, there were several formative things that happened in my early career that led me to this service, that led me to threat and risk, that led me to planning, communication, integration with the interagency, and cross-talking preparedness operations up to and through operational delivery.

CTC: What are the primary threats that you're tracking and prioritizing as we head into this summer's World Cup?

Jones: Folks ask me what keeps me up at night, and I often tell them, 'It's just easier not to sleep, because it's everything.' It really is all the threats that I'm concerned about. One of the biggest threats that I encountered very early on—and this is not so much a threat as

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a   Editor's Note: Zacarias Moussaoui, "the only prisoner ever convicted in the United States of having ties to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks", … "was arrested in Minnesota a month before the hijackings, which killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania." Carol Rosenberg, "'20th Hijacker' Is Denied Transfer From Federal Supermax to French Prison," *New York Times*, July 31, 2024.

G.B. Jones

it is a challenge—is within the United States, there's a bit of hubris that goes with special events. We have big agencies and experienced stadium teams, and they often say, 'We do big events all the time. We got this.' But what we're asking them to do now has such intensive resource demands over the course of 40 days that the sustainability of resources is going to really be called into question.

We're going to do 104 matches in 16 cities in three nations in 39 days. It's the largest sporting event in the history of the world. Nothing like this has ever been attempted before. There are no models out there. In fact, when I took this job, there was no handbook despite FIFA's 100 years of doing the World Cup. And the reason there is no handbook is every time the World Cup is delivered, it's done in a different location, it's done with a different geopolitical landscape, and it has to be cast almost from scratch. Now, there's a general framework and we know what has worked well in the past for FIFA World Cups, but you can't even look at Qatar 2022 as an effective framework for what we're doing here. It's a state that is run by an emir. It's got one Minister of the Interior that controls all of the domestic police services. So, if you need 15,000 cops, you call one guy, you get 15,000 cops. In the United States, there's 18,000 police agencies, 50 percent of which have fewer than 10 officers. So, if I need 15,000 cops, I have to call 18,000 chiefs and ask them to send one or two. And their first question is, 'Who's going to pay for this, and where's the equipment going to come from? Who's going to transport them?' So, resources is probably one of the biggest challenges we have—this hubris of 'we do big events all the time' followed by the resource and demand challenges.

Additionally, we've got threats of international scope and scale. The geopolitics of the day certainly are influencing what we're doing in terms of planning. When some people approach special event planning, they take a look at a perimeter, and they'll protect that perimeter with guards, gates, and guns. They think their planning is done. That's not what we're doing here. We can't afford to do that here. We know that at some point, guards, guns, or gates are

going to fail. So, our level of planning goes into the resources and the responders and the relationships that are going to be leveraged when those guards, gates, and guns fail. It doesn't matter to me what the threat is, as long as we've got the right people in the right places who are already connected, they will be able to sort that issue out, solve it, and move on. And importantly, the way that we do our planning is victim-centered. How are we going to treat the people that are going to be impacted by this event? And do we have the resources to help them recover as quickly as we can? It's that resilience piece that really is important, because the victims are the ones that are going to be judging how well we did if an incident occurs.

If you just want to go to pure threat, of course there's always the hostile vehicle mitigation that we have to worry about because of vehicle-borne threats. There's drones and counter drones as the newest emergent threat. The geopolitical threats and risks of the day, counterterrorism, counterintelligence, cyber, criminal, WMD, all of those things are hugely impactful to us. Transportation capacity to me is a huge threat. Just this weekend, I was flying home from Huntsville, Alabama, where I was at the FBI's new counter-UAS training school, and I was passing through Atlanta. A weather delay of three hours led to a flight cancellation, and cancellation of 200 other flights, and now all of those people were displaced into the Atlanta area with no place to stay, with no flight guarantees going out the following day. The capacity of our aviation system is stressed to the max on a blue sky day. What happens when you introduce another five million people that are travelers to the United States to go and see the World Cup, and you've got weather delays, hazardous weather of any kind, you've got this transportation infrastructure threat and the inability to move large numbers of people in a short period of time?

And in a broader geopolitical context, we're certainly very concerned about things that are happening overseas. That does have an impact on the World Cup. The World Cup is the world stage, and it is a microcosm of everything that's happening in the world. Because 48 teams, for the first time ever—the largest field ever—are represented in the World Cup. Those 48 teams don't check their politics at the door. They don't leave their issues at home, nor do their fans. Those issues that have to do with each of those countries tend to follow where those fans are. And that's not intended to be a negative spin or a connotation. It's not a threat. It's just the real context. This is religion, politics, nationalism, civics—all of this is in soccer, and that's what travels with our soccer fans.

And then, of course, when we talk about international football, we talk about fan conduct and we talk about some of the challenges that may come with some of these spirited fans. I have heard the term 'hooliganism' in the past; I really shy away from that because hooligans were really just a very small set of people who were defined in the late '80s as people that were particularly focused on violent criminal activity in the context of soccer. It wasn't that they were soccer fans who happened into some activity. They were violent criminals that targeted soccer matches. So that's different than what we expect to see at the World Cup. What we'll see at the World Cup are passionate fans who are spirited, focused, nationalistic, patriotic, and almost religious in their following of their teams. They're not criminal or destructive or violent unless different conditions [arise] that are consistent with any crowd dynamic, not just an international football dynamic.

There's a whole world of threats out there, and the way we're trying to approach that is by looking two and three magnitudes

into the threat and ensuring that we've got the resources, the relationships, and the responders to respond to whatever the threat is.

CTC: You mentioned the threat posed by drones, particularly small drones, and this is an area where you have a great amount of experience. The threat from small drones is a serious and evolving problem. It's a problem that you dealt with at the FBI and at the NFL. And I understand that you're also a drone pilot. In your view, when it comes to large events, how has the drone threat evolved, and what does it mean for FIFA World Cup 2026?

Jones: The drone threat continues to evolve, and it's been an existent threat since at least 2005. That was my first introduction to drones and what drones were really capable of doing. We were planning for the presidential inauguration, and I did a red cell meeting with some government partners while I was still working with the FBI, to understand what that threat looked like. The discussions kind of faded away; they were always present there, but they faded away in the context of special events until as many as 10 years later.

One of my colleagues, Cathy Lanier, has stayed on this threat the entire time because she was in the position of police chief in Washington, D.C. And so, she was really attuned to what those issues were and how they could impact special events. In 2020, when I joined the NFL, Cathy and I had some conversations about drones and drone threats. Prior to my time there, the NFL believed that drones were bad, full stop. That was it. That was the NFL's position. We didn't want anything to do with it. But by the time 2020 came around, drones were being used for commercial applications and for good as well. And so, we made a very conscious decision to try to embrace the good and the utility in drones; at the same time, we were balancing keeping bad drones out of the airspace. So, we created a way to integrate drones for good into special events, really understanding the airspace domain. It was unique to the NFL. We were a private company. We had no authority or standing to be able to do this, but the brand, the shield of the NFL, is pretty strong. And when we were partnering with the teams and the broadcasters and the commercial partners that wanted to fly drones in this space, they would listen to what it is we had to say because we were establishing a new landscape in the drone space.

We created a process whereby if a commercial drone operator wanted to fly, we would ask them where they wanted to fly, how high they wanted to fly, and what they were going to fly. We would vet the pilot. We would vet the registration on the aircraft. We would vet their history and make sure that they had appropriate emergency procedures and insurance and some of the other pieces to make it happen. Then we would integrate them into the drone airspace. We would whitelist the good guy drones, and then we could discern between the good guys and the bad guy drones.

Understanding how you can leverage this technology for good enhances our situational awareness, and we can use drones of course for broadcast and commercial purposes as well. But we have to offset that with the rogue drones and the damage that can be done from bad drones. So, airspace domain awareness is really the thing that is most important with this emerging threat. And the NFL, and now FIFA, are leading this airspace domain awareness effort as private entities, bringing the government authorities and commercial partners to the table to talk about what the threat

is, how to control against that threat, and how to build in some layers of protection, even while we're trying to leverage this new technology.

CTC: If we can pull on the thread a little bit on airspace domain awareness, can you help our readers understand the counter-UAS aspect of that? How are you approaching that, to the extent that you can share? It's long been discussed how different C-UAS approaches have various strengths, but there are also different types of limitations and different trade-offs that first responders need to consider when thinking through their counter-UAS framework.

Jones: We have seen more traction in the counter-UAS space in the past year than we have the previous eight years. A lot of that is thanks to the leadership from the White House, from DHS, from the FBI, and other key private sector partners like the NFL, Major League Baseball, Commercial Drone Alliance, Association for Uncrewed Vehicle Systems International (AUVSI), and other industry partners. These groups have all coalesced around the fact that this is a threat, and we can do something about that.

The biggest gap we had was the expansion of authorities into the hands of state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement so that they could enhance the capabilities of the FBI and DHS and those federal partners that had this unique counter-UAS mitigation authority. I advocated for—and have been for several years, as has Cathy Lanier, as have some others in this space—expansion of this authority in a really thoughtful way. There were some great models we reviewed. For instance, all bomb technicians in the United States, public safety bomb techs, are trained at the same schoolhouse. It's at Redstone Arsenal down in Huntsville, Alabama. It doesn't matter if you're an LA cop, an NYPD cop, or an FBI agent, you go through the same schoolhouse. You're learning the same equipment, you're learning the same procedures, and you're learning the same language so that you're truly interoperable. What that does is not only level up an individual capability, but it grows collective capacity across the country so that we can lift and shift bomb technicians wherever we need them whenever there's an issue.

I have been an advocate for a long time of doing exactly the same thing in the counter-UAS space: Have a centralized schoolhouse that teaches people the same procedures and how to utilize the same equipment so that today it's the FIFA World Cup as a potential event, but two years from now it's going to be LA28 [the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, California]. If we're going to get state, local, tribal, and territorial cops smart on this threat and how to mitigate this threat, and then we're going to use federal funds to equip them to address this threat, we should do so in an interoperable and thoughtful way so that while we're building individual capacity in individual cities, we're building this collective capacity across the nation to be able to address not only special events, but counterterrorism response, criminal incidents, natural disaster response, and other incidents and events.

I think we're absolutely on the right path right now. I think we have a long way to go because although this authority is now extended to state and locals, they have to be trained at a single schoolhouse that only has a finite amount of capacity to train them. And then they have to roll out with only two weeks of training and work in this really, really complex world. And there's probably no place more complex in the counter-UAS space than in urban, high

radio frequency, GPS-denial locations where threats in and around stadiums have to be addressed without impacting legitimate technology and operations in the stadium environment.

CTC: You mentioned the expansion of authorities to state, local, tribal, and territorial for drone mitigation. That was further enabled by the Safer Skies Act and the passage of that last fall here in the United States. What does the authority landscape look like in Canada and Mexico, in terms of their ability to provide a broader collective coverage of C-UAS mitigation authorities? Is it similar to the United States? Is it different?

Jones: It's similar to what the U.S. was prior to the passage of the Safer Skies Act. Canada and Mexico both have primarily federal mitigation authority. In Canada, the Canadian Armed Forces are the ones that, by statute, have the responsibility for mitigation, but they have an ability to implement that mitigation authority through a partnership with RCMP.[b] And RCMP can actually operationalize that over special events. But it's primarily a federal responsibility. In Mexico, it's very much the same thing. It's the military forces in Mexico that are going to help us with that counter-UAS capability.

Now I'm very pleased to say that Canada, Mexico, and the United States trilaterally and collectively are really on the same page in terms of how we're going to mitigate and what they're going to do to protect the World Cup. We have two people in our organization that are airspace security specialists who were hired particularly for this purpose. When I was with the NFL, I had that as a collateral duty on top of my regular day job, and it was an emerging area of coverage that needed a lot more attention. So here we actually built a deliberate airspace security team that is focused on building the right relationships with government partners to ensure we have consistency and thoughtful integration of counter-UAS measures across the entire tournament footprint.

CTC: If we can switch focus a little bit, there's been a lot of discussion over the last couple of years about issues surrounding misinformation and disinformation. How might that shape or skew perceptions of events related to the World Cup and especially security incidents, and how do you plan to manage those challenges?

Jones: This is a significant issue, and it's really an emerging problem with the advent of AI. We just lived this with the fallout in Guadalajara and Jalisco in the wake of the death of El Mencho. AI-generated images and videos, news stories, and content painted this horrible picture of what was happening in Mexico. And fortunately, we had boots on the ground. We had connectivity to the Mexican government as well as to the U.S. government, who have folks in Mexico that we're operating with and interacting with on a regular basis. Even after the authorities regained control, though, the misinformation persisted and people had this perceived concern that Mexico was devolving to violence from which it would never recover. We had to get ahead of that. We did get ahead of that as quickly as we could, and we were messaging out, 'We support the Mexican government and what it is they're doing.' And we knew

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that they supported us.

The government of Mexico is treating the World Cup as not only a matter of national significance but one of national pride. This is the third World Cup they've hosted. They have a lot of skin in the game here, and they're not going to be overrun by thugs and criminal groups that are going to take that celebration away from the Mexican people. It's nearly impossible right now to assess what is fact versus fiction within social media and AI-generated content. But what we're trying to do is leverage our intelligence unit to understand what is really happening on the ground, to identify those sources of truth and have those verified sources of truth available to the folks that are paying attention to what's happening with the World Cup.

When we built the intelligence apparatus here, I very deliberately told our team, 'The focus of your attention is not on counterterrorism, counterintelligence, transnational organized crime, cyber, all of those things that public sector partners are focused on. Our focus is on soccer intelligence. What uniquely do we do to add value to the intelligence community in Canada, Mexico, and the United States about what soccer culture is, what fan culture is, what the teams are, and what we're seeing around the world as it impacts the World Cup?' So, we are very narrowly focused on soccer intelligence that is going to level up all of our partners. And we pass our soccer intelligence through all of the normal channels: Fusion centers at the state and local level, through FBI, through DHS, through RCMP Intel, through the Center for National Intelligence in Mexico.

And then we also have a tremendous number of private sector partners, many of whom have their own global security operation centers, and we're leveraging them to say, 'Hey, just add hashtag World Cup to what you're already collecting to protect your brands and your personnel in your companies and to add value to what our sponsors and our partners are typically collecting.' So, we are focused on leveraging personal relationships and professional relationships on the private side and on the public side, to understand what the landscape is and to push out vetted intelligence to level-set people on where the truth lies.

CTC: You mentioned the killing of El Mencho. The recent killing of El Mencho, the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) in Mexico, sparked a violent reaction by CJNG members in various locations across the country. It forced the closure of Mexican airports and pushed the U.S. Department of State to issue shelter-in-place guidance for American citizens in the country. The event showed the influence of the cartels and

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b   Editor's Note: The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) is Canada's national, federal, provincial, and municipal police service.

the ability they have to cause widespread disruption. How is FIFA preparing for this challenge, and does it pose any unique insider threat concerns?

Jones: The Mexican government has been planning full-time for the World Cup for at least three years. I've met with them a number of times during those three years. National Guard leaders have reviewed—I was really struck by this—every historical incident and issue with respect to international soccer tournaments. They've sought input from crowd management specialists and behavior assessment personnel to understand crowd dynamics and threats, and they've conducted really, really good and extensive training and drills. So, they are taking this extremely seriously. And again, as I mentioned at the outset, they're treating the World Cup as a matter of national pride and national significance. So, they're all in. They're proud, they're skilled, they're really working hard. What they may lack in some technical expertise, they're either making up for in education or they're making up for in the dispatch of personnel to cover down on the threats.

When I was working for the NFL down in Mexico, the Mexico City Police Department provided 1,500 Mexico City cops outside the stadium and 1,500 cops inside the stadium. We don't see anything like that anywhere in the United States. And just that officer presence has a huge impact on dissuading terrorism and criminal threats from emerging, certainly at those centers of gravity like the stadiums. The Mexicans are also working really, really hard with bilateral and trilateral partners. I was there recently in the context of counter-UAS with Canada and with the U.S., talking about counter-drone threats and how to better position Mexican authorities, Canadian authorities, and U.S. authorities to share information on drone threats and mitigation strategies.

Insider threats are a challenging problem no matter where you are. This isn't limited to Mexico. But this is why we have a really robust background and name check process to try to vet and validate all credential holders across all three countries. We have an integrated name check process that connects to the Mexican authorities, the U.S. authorities, and the Canadian authorities. So, anybody who applies for a credential to be any part of the World Cup—if you're a vendor, if you're a staff member, if you're a player or a referee, anybody who's coming into the World Cup, who's going to be credentialed into a space for greater than public access—they're going to be reviewed through a government name check process.

CTC: As any of us who have watched this event over the years knows, you're going to get thousands of fans who show up to a city, who don't have tickets to the game, but are just there for the good time. How do you think about those challenges? I imagine a lot of it's related to what you just said, particularly liaising with the member organizations from the various countries.

Jones: Again, a lot of what we're doing to focus on this is education: education of our law enforcement partners, our fire and EMS partners, homeland security partners, and private sector partners about what fan culture really is. There's a very real distinction between club football fans and national football fans. If you think of the club fans: Messi plays for Inter Miami, that's his club team. He's an Argentinian, though. When it comes to the World Cup, he plays for Argentina. And the passion that runs in club football, with history that can be a couple of hundreds of years old, is really very

specific to their club. We see a lot more nationalism and civic pride in the national team matches and less of that really directed passion that we see in the club matches. So, you should think of a World Cup game as more of a corporate event, if you will, or more of a family event than what you would see maybe on a Saturday night during a high-stakes club match anywhere else in the world. It's a different dynamic. We're trying to educate all of our stakeholders on how that is different.

I'll give you probably the best example that I found that resonates with folks, which is the difference between the World Cup and a traditional NFL game: On a Sunday, when you go to a regular season game up at MetLife Stadium, 90 percent of the people that are going into that game are season ticket holders. They've waited an entire generation to get those season tickets from their parents before them or their grandparents before them. There are already guardrails around their behavior because they've waited for those tickets and they don't want to lose them. They show up four hours early because they tailgate. They park in the same spot, they go in the same gate, they sit in the same seats. They don't need wayfinding information. They don't need any additional information about what to do, because this is culturally appropriate for what they're doing every given Sunday. The NFL's best practices for safety and security are built around that fan. It's 100 years of the NFL experience. You can't take those best practices and lift and shift them over to the World Cup and have them align 100 percent because all of the assumptions are wrong. The international traveler may never have been to the United States before. They certainly haven't been to that stadium before. They don't know about this thing called tailgating because that's not part of the international soccer culture. So, they will stay at the bars and the restaurants until 30 minutes before kickoff, and they're going to rush the gates, expecting to be in to hear their national anthem played in a stadium that's not theirs in a country that's not theirs. So, our model calls for 70 percent of the capacity of the stadium arriving in the last hour. That's different than planning for the steady flow of people that have trickled in over four hours at an NFL game. And when the soccer fans get into the stadium, they may not even sit in their assigned seats. They're going to migrate behind the goals where the most spirited and passionate fans are because they want to be a part of that support for their team. There are fewer guardrails around their behavior because they're not afraid to lose the season tickets. They don't have them, right? They're there for a single day.

It's about understanding that fan and that fan culture. It's the intelligence and information sharing that we're offering to our partners here to help them better prepare for that traveling international fan. We need better signage. We need more wayfinding. We need multi-language wayfinding and engagement with folks. We need active engagement with the organized supporter groups so that they know what our expectations are, what we will and what we won't allow at a North American stadium that are going to be different than their home stadiums. All of these things are important to managing that boisterous fan, if you will. But it's cultural awareness, and it's this emphasis on safety, security, and service.

With respect to safety, security, and service, the safety and security cases are pretty much foregone conclusions. Safety is essential to everybody's enjoyment of the game. We don't want to send people off to the hospital and have them miss the game. For that, we're planning to do a lot of treatment up to physician-

level care in the stadiums so that we're not overburdening the local community health system. If someone is injured or ill after traveling to see one of our events, we're going to patch them up with hopes they can return to watch the match. They've traveled a long way. We want them to go and enjoy the game. Security, of course, is ever present and an important component. But safety and security are both enhanced if you have a better customer service experience. The more you can engage with fans ahead of time, share information and expectations with them, provide them support via wayfinding in their native language, provide them information about where we want them to go and what we want them to do, the better you have a safe and secure experience. And so, it's that customer service ethos. It's leaning into it; it's meeting somebody with a smile when you're the very first security guard they meet to set the tone for their day. If we are approachable and if we are service-oriented, we're going to get more information and intelligence that's going to enhance safety and security as well. Safety and security have to work in concert with service, and that's the mantra that we have. That's the model that we have. That's the vision that I cast early on for our team to fully understand. This isn't about a security event with a little bit of a soccer ethos. This is a sporting event that's got a security overlay to it. And so, it's got to be service oriented, service focused to enhance our safety and security overall.

To enhance that further, we do a lot of training. We do supporter engagement and understanding, and focus a lot on fan communications. One of the ways that we enhance the awareness of culture and what the fans are doing is we consolidate the efforts of international police officers, or National Football Information Point (NFIP) officers, in an International Police Cooperation Center (IPCC). And for this tournament, it's going to be just outside of Washington, D.C., so that the IPCC is a source of truth and understanding of the culture of different traveling fans. That information can be pushed out by the cops that police those fans on a regular basis to the host city police that are charged with policing them during the World Cup.

Then lastly, we talk a lot about crowd management versus crowd control. You don't want these external forces on crowds to try to tell them what to do. You want that control to be done organically from within. By establishing dialogue with the leaders or liaisons of the supporter groups, we can work together to achieve common goals. They want to celebrate their teams and show their spirit, and we want to facilitate that safely within the parameters permitted by authorities.

CTC: You've mentioned already the various ways in which the World Cup this summer will be unique. It's happening in three different countries—the United States, Canada, and Mexico jointly hosting the games—matches at 16 different venues in those three nations, including in 11 U.S. cities. How are you and your team working to shrink the problem and manage the complexity of the task? It seems pretty daunting.

Jones: It certainly is daunting, but it's not insurmountable. We leverage what all of our networks know. And those of us that are working with this problem set have done large-scale special events before. Never anything of this magnitude, so we go in with our eyes wide open. But one of the first things we did was we spoke to each of the host cities and we spoke to each of the host nations, and we asked them what they do when they plan for a major special event.

And we knew a number of models that worked in the United States; NSSE [National Special Security Event] models typically have a committee structure with a bunch of subcommittees underneath them, and they'll focus on particular areas as they do their planning. It turns out almost everybody has a planning model that has some similarities when it comes to the major special events. They've got certain things that they focus on.

So, what we did in those conversations was we identified 18 areas of planning that were common to each of the host cities and each of the host nations, and we built a common plan around those 18 areas. In concert with subject matter experts from each of the host cities and host nations, we wrote a specific definition for what each of those 18 areas meant. Once everyone agreed to the common definition, we identified six or eight strategic objectives for each one of those 18 areas of focus. It may be 'create a crisis communications plan that is specific to your area.' They were fairly broad and strategic, but what that did was it created a foundational document for us called our Safety and Security Concept. The document identified the 18 validated definitions that everyone could anchor on and six to eight strategic objectives in each of those 18 areas of focus that each of the host cities agreed to deliver. With that foundational product, we are able to hold everybody accountable to the same standard. That becomes our foundation that we can always level up from, but we can never go below. If another city wants to layer on something on top of that, they can do that. But at a baseline, we wanted to ensure that everybody could deliver this safety and security concept at an acceptable level across the entire tournament footprint in a consistent way.

In addition to those 18 areas of focus, we also had six areas of focus that were federal in nature, and we got the federal authorities to coalesce around those definitions and the strategic objectives there as well. That created a framework around which we could start to do our planning. FIFA focuses on those FIFA areas, and we do much more tactical planning on the things that happen from the stadium outer security perimeter *in*. The host cities have a responsibility to work with us on those stadium sites, but they also have a broader responsibility for public safety and transportation security and fan march security and the areas outside of the stadium. So, with this foundational document—the safety and security concept—we then put a planning guide together that fleshed out how to implement the concept. We wrote a handbook that also identifies what our expectations are, and we've shared that with each of those cities.

So, shrinking the problem by building consistency into our overall framework was part of a deliberate strategy. It is important to me that teams and traveling fans have the same experience in Guadalajara, Mexico, that they have in New York. They experience the same things that they can take into the stadium in Vancouver that they can take in in Miami. We're not creating 16 World Cups. We're creating one World Cup with 16 really unique flavors from each of the contributing host cities.

CTC: You mentioned before some of the challenges with funding, particularly for state and local agencies, and this has been a bit of a topic of public discussion in the last month or two. What role does FIFA play in helping those agencies work through those challenges?

Jones: Our role has really been one of endorsement. We recognize

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that the subject matter experts for special event planning in each community reside in their communities. So, if a host city or a host nation is asking for something from their funding authority—be it their city council or from Congress—we certainly are quick to endorse them and say, 'They're the subject matter experts. We fully support. Whatever they're asking for, we think it is useful in terms of the World Cup.' We're very careful not to ask for funding from government sources. That's not our responsibility. Our agreements principally are with the host cities and with the stadiums under the contractual agreements that go with the bid process. They are on the hook then to deliver those resources that they've agreed to contractually. That's where the public funding comes in. So, we're very much aware of the public funding. We're very much concerned about ensuring that the public funds and privately raised funds, which are also a part of the bid process, are sufficient to be able to support the safety and security apparatus. We're not out soliciting for those funds, but we do lean our shoulder into it.

I will talk to anybody anywhere about what our plans are. Particularly, I spend a lot of time at Congress talking to them about our plans and how they work because I know that educates them about the exposure that we have to certain threats and risks that they're in a position to help mitigate through funding. So, we're full partners with the host cities and the host nations in their quest for funding. But we're careful not to be asking for it because we do that through different mechanisms, including the bid process.

CTC: What are the primary lessons that you and your team have drawn from prior World Cups and other notable large events, recognizing that every World Cup is different? We just had the Summer Olympics in Paris, the recent Olympic Winter Games in Italy, and the Super Bowl. What are the most unique aspects of this event that will require new approaches and solutions for you and your team?

Jones: There are a couple of incidents that I reference for all of our new people, and for all of our safety and security leaders, to really fully understand and unpack in preparation for what we're doing. One is the 2020 Euros final that was played at Wembley Stadium in 2021, subject of "The Final: The Attack on Wembley" on Netflix, which is an interesting show to watch if you haven't seen

it yet. It is interesting to help understand fan dynamics and the impact they have on special event planning. And the other is the 2022 UEFA Champions League final at Stade de France in Paris. Those were both major international soccer events, both of which narrowly missed historic calamity. They were real near-misses with potential for tremendous negative impact and perhaps even loss of life because of the way the challenges unfolded and the way they were managed. So, our focus is on the lessons learned and takeaways from sporting events that are closest in context to what we are planning—international football.

A couple of takeaways from the 2022 Champions League final included a lack of dynamic risk assessment and redeployment of personnel to effectively protect the safety and security of supporters. As I talk about the differences between the NFL and what FIFA is trying to do, I talk about the difference between best practices planning and dynamic risk assessment. The NFL uses best practices planning based on 100 years of experience with NFL fans and games. We have to approach planning by leveraging dynamic risk assessment because so much changes with each of our matches. For example, we're looking at each one of the teams individually. There's a team threat profile that goes with each team, just as they stand alone in isolation on a blue sky day. When they meet another team, that dynamic changes, and every meeting is different. So, every match is assessed individually, and two days before the match, each of the partners that we're working with will get a match risk assessment that tells them historically what's happened when these teams have met. If they've never met before (which is happening quite a bit in this tournament because we've got such a big new field), we will assess what has happened in other matches that they have played around the world. Every time they play, there's a different match risk assessment. *When* they play in the course of the tournament matters because in the group stage, there's less at stake because they have a guaranteed three games. As they move through the knockout stage and into the final stage, that dynamic changes, so you have to reassess with every match.

Where teams play geographically matters as well, because if there's a large local diaspora, you must consider the potential for local fans who may descend on the stadium. This is exactly what we saw at Hard Rock Stadium in July of 2024 when Argentina and Colombia were playing. It wasn't 150,000 traveling Colombians that came to Miami that put pressure on the gates. It was some of the 150,000 that already call Miami home. One of the big takeaways is you've got to be changing that risk assessment with every match, with every day, and throughout the course of the tournament. So dynamic risk assessment is one way we're controlling for that.

In that same '22 after action report, UEFA, which was the organizing body, was found to have not provided clear oversight of the planning.[1] They weren't really focused on interoperability. They didn't study the communication strategies. They didn't fully account for the integration of public and private resources. It was seen as basically a policing event and then the UEFA soccer event. One of the things that came out of this after action was that UEFA's safety and security department was revamped; it got new leadership, it got more resources, and they became the ones that are now the final arbiters of the safety and security plans for all of the UEFA tournaments. They are excellent partners, and we have worked with them and shared with them and learned from them. This is the value in the international networks.

I have taken that same book and said, 'Look, FIFA at the end of

the day has to be the one that owns the safety and security process for the World Cup.' We have three different national governments that are participating here. No *one* government has oversight of the entire footprint. So even as a private partner, FIFA has to be the one that's laying over the top as the honest broker, ensuring that we've got all of the resources necessary from the public and the private side to fully integrate on private security and public law enforcement, fire, EMS, homeland security across the entire footprint. So, we have a much larger role than historically we've seen in World Cups. Formerly, a single nation, which is accountable to a single national authority, has been the lead safety and security planner for the World Cup. With the 2026 World Cup, FIFA must be the entity to knit together those federal governments as well as the host cities to make sure that what is delivered meets our FIFA international standard.

CTC: Pulling together all the complexity that we've talked about, how is FIFA leveraging technology to assist its efforts in this regard? Whether it's integrated use of artificial intelligence or other technical tools that might be available now that maybe haven't been at past events.

Jones: Technology is a huge enabler to what it is we're doing. And one of the things that we *are* focused on to minimize training and to maximize the impact that we have at each one of the stadiums is leveraging the technology that's already in place at the stadiums. So, if we're going to increase the perimeter and we need more screening systems, we're using the same screening systems that the incumbent stadium is using to ensure that we don't have to retrain everybody in a brand new system. But many of those systems are cutting edge, and we've evaluated all of those to make sure they are well suited to our needs. Many are AI-enabled screening systems, for instance, with some of the best-in-class technology. The stadiums in the United States are living, breathing laboratories for security technology, and many of them are early adopters of technology. So, we're leveraging some of that.

We do have a commercial partnership with Lenovo that is helping us with an AI integration that brings several data feeds into a single interface for our tournament operation center so that we get real-time updates on ticketing data, on access management data, and on the status of other critical systems and operations. So, every time the turnstile spins and somebody comes in, that feeds into a system that is all aggregated together and enhanced by AI so we can track how quickly people are coming in as well as wait times, dwell times, and other key metrics. We know if there are faults at the gates. We know if there's a backup at a gate. And we can use that situational awareness to be more responsive to operations.

We're using AI also in some of those threat and risk assessments to ensure that that dynamic risk assessment fully integrates large volumes of information and produces digestible products that can be shared with our public and private partners, to ensure that the

intelligence information is moving as quickly as it can. Now, as with anything that is AI, you still need to have really experienced humans in the loop. We still need good awareness. We need experienced judgment to help with all of this. We are also mapping all of the command-and-control nodes across the entire footprint to know where the centers of gravity for decision-making are in each of the host cities and host nations. This will enable us to leverage those key decision makers through the FIFA Tournament Operations Center for key tournament-wide issues.

This tournament will follow a dispersed decision-making model, so we fully empower the people that are in the venues to be making decisions in the venues. Ninety-five percent or more of the decisions that are going to happen with every one of these matches are going to be happening with the stadium teams and their public safety partners on the ground. They have access to the most current information, the most relevant information, the most complete information. We shouldn't be making decisions at the Tournament Headquarters in Miami that should be made in the stadiums. We reserve the right to make larger decisions that are going to have a broader tournament impact back at our tournament operation center. And of course, we'll do that in concert with our senior leadership and also in concert with federal partners in the relevant nations and any local incident commanders who are stakeholders in the decisions.

CTC: Is there anything else that we haven't asked that you'd like to share with our readers?

Jones: This is an epic challenge. It really is to me the opportunity of a lifetime to take 35 years of experience in fire and EMS, in law enforcement, in federal intelligence operations and counterterrorism operations to work a really interesting problem set. None of this is possible without the networks of networks and the experience that exists around the entire *world* to make sure that this is delivered safely and securely. Delivery of safety and security with a customer service-oriented focus, I think, is the pathway to ensure that we can achieve the greatest results.

The world is a really challenging place right now. We get that. What I want to see is the delivery of an international football tournament this summer that serves to unite the world. It gives everybody pause, to step away from all of the ills of society and celebrate what can be unity and power. That's what the FIFA president means when he frequently says that 'football unites the world.' I truly do believe that football can unite the world. And we're prepared to do exactly that. We want people who are attending the World Cup to enjoy the experience and to be focused on what happens on the pitch. Safety and security should not be the story. An exciting and uniting World Cup is what we intend to deliver so the focus remains where it should be—on the play that will result in awarding the trophy to the 2026 World Cup champions.   **CTC**

Citations

1   Editor's Note: See "Independent Review, 2022 UEFA Champions League Final," Independent Review Panel, February 2023.

Will the Center Hold? The Houthis' Fraying Tribal Alliances

By Michael Horton

Amid the ongoing war against Iran and the systematic weakening of Tehran's Axis of Resistance, Yemen's Houthi movement confronts growing internal threats to its grip on power. Tribal alliances are fundamental to political authority in Yemen, a reality the Houthis recognized from their earliest days. Accordingly, they built a substructure of tribal support—through strategic intermarriage, mediation, and intelligence-driven co-option—well before seizing Sana'a in 2014. After taking power, they absorbed Yemen's intelligence agencies and state tribal management structures, gaining vast troves of data on tribal networks, which they then weaponized to deepen their control. However, this compact was always transactional, and today it is under pressure from a failing economy, narrative fatigue, generational shifts, and leadership changes. An older generation, having accumulated wealth, now prioritizes self-preservation over the *esprit de corps* that once defined the movement. The Houthis are responding with increasingly harsh methods. Yet, they remain formidable: adaptive, battle-hardened, and with significant escalatory leverage.

The U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran that began on February 28, 2026, are an existential threat to the Iranian-backed Axis of Resistance.[1] Yemen's Houthi rebels, also known as Ansar Allah, are now the best armed and largest force within the Axis. The fragility of the Iranian regime threatens the Houthis' domestic order. Iranian support for the Houthis has never been limited to weapons. It has included oil shipments, cash routed through IRGC-linked intermediaries, commodities sent through shell corporations, and technical assistance. Together, these have helped sustain the Houthis' military wing and the patronage networks that keep select tribal elite compliant. Recognizing the risks of overdependence on Iran, the Houthis have spent much of the last four years diversifying critical supply chains and revenue streams to reduce their dependence on Iran.[2] However, a near or total loss of Iranian support—especially for their missile program—will intensify already mounting domestic pressures.

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The Houthis' reaction to the war highlights their current dilemma. On February 28, they threatened to resume attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in solidarity with Iran.[3] However, as of mid-March, they had not attacked targets outside Yemen.[4] This restraint, by the same leaders who engaged U.S. warships in 2024 and 2025, signals a new calculation: They must now weigh whether their domestic base can withstand further escalation as Iranian support wanes.[5] This change in approach underscores the profound effect the war against Iran has had on their decision-making.

One of the primary constraints on Houthi escalation is rising discontent within their tribal alliances. Yemen is not a state with tribes; it is a nation of tribes that has intermittently had a state. When former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was asked whether Yemen had moved from tribalism to statehood, he replied: "The state is part of the tribes, and the Yemeni people are an ensemble of tribes."[6] Recognizing this dynamic, the Houthis from the outset wove themselves into the fabric of tribal society through intermarriage, mediation, patronage, and force. The key question is whether this carefully woven tapestry, crafted over three decades, can withstand current pressures; a weakened Iranian regime and the potential loss of support could accelerate its unraveling.

This article examines the Houthis' tribal compact and the pressures threatening it. It begins by tracing how the Houthis built their substructure of tribal support through intermarriage, co-option, and the absorption of state intelligence structures. It then analyzes the five key pressure points—economic strain, narrative fatigue, generational shifts, ideological constraints, and leadership changes—that endanger that compact. The article concludes by assessing why, despite these pressures, the Houthis remain adaptive and formidable, and what their trajectory means for regional stability.

Building the Tribal Compact
The Houthis' engagement with Yemen's tribal system began long before they seized power. Badr al-Din al-Houthi—a respected

Zaydi[a] scholar, father of the movement's founder, Hussein al-Houthi, and the current leader, Abdulmalik—built a dense social network around the Zaydi revivalist movement in the 1980s and 1990s.[7] Strategic intermarriage was central to this effort.[b] Sayyids, claiming descent from the Prophet Mohammad's family, ruled north Yemen as imams until the 1962 republican revolution. In Yemen, sayyid men often married women from tribal and sheikhly families. The Houthi family used this tradition to build durable alliances. Badr al-Din's sons married into prominent tribal families. Notably, they spent much of their childhoods with maternal uncles and were raised as de facto members of their mothers' tribes.

These bonds went beyond politics. Badr al-Din reinforced these ties as a traditional sayyid notable. He mediated tribal conflicts, arbitrated family disputes, and taught youth in religious study circles. These circles later became the Believing Youth Movement, which formed the core of the Houthis (Ansar Allah).[8] Badr al-Din's reputation, combined with his sons' tribal ties, was a strong investment in lasting relationships. By 2004, when the six Saada wars began, the Houthis had a solid substructure of tribal alliances rooted in kinship and shared family culture. Each war deepened these ties. Tribes that fought alongside the Houthis against Yemeni government forces and, in the final war of 2009-2010, against Saudi forces, developed a mutual sense of defending tribal territory. The Houthi family's military competence, willingness to lead from the front, and role as protectors of tribal lands gave the movement legitimacy that religious teaching alone could not.[9]

The seizure of Sana'a on September 21, 2014, marked a turning point for these alliances: A guerrilla support network transformed into a new governing order. The Houthis capitalized on their alliance with Saleh,[c] whose patronage networks and tribal clients provided vital access to major tribal confederations.[10] Over the next four years, the Houthis systematically co-opted tribal governance—appointing new sheikhs without consensus, imposing compliant figures by force, and granting economic concessions to collaborators. Those unwilling to comply were subjugated.[11] Critically, they imposed Hashemite supervisors (*mushrifeen*) above tribal and state structures, overriding the authority of traditional sheikhs.[12]

The most significant gain, however, was institutional. When the Houthis took Sana'a, they absorbed much of Yemen's intelligence and internal security apparatus. This included the Political Security Organization (PSO), the National Security Bureau (NSB), and the state apparatus for managing tribal relations. In addition to these organizations, the Houthis also seized decades' worth of files on tribal networks, hierarchies, alignments, and personal vulnerabilities accumulated under Saleh's presidency.[13] Moreover, they acquired not just data but also many officers who ran the networks. Many of these men had in-depth knowledge of tribal families' loyalties, debts, feuds, and leverage points. As the Houthis took over the agencies, some of these officers joined them or were otherwise co-opted.[14] The tribal affairs files listed every sheikh's relationship with the Saleh government: payments, disputes, and which of their sons held government posts. This information, along with the intelligence officers themselves, became key resources for the Houthis' efforts at tribal co-option.[15]

The Houthis then wired compliant tribal leaders into their financial and business networks. In doing so, they repurposed many of the Saleh-era patronage structures.[16] Cooperative tribal elites received access to smuggling revenues, government salaries, import licenses, and positions in the Houthi bureaucracy and military. The most favored or key tribal figures received stakes in fuel import operations and qat distribution networks. They also gained the authority to tax goods moving through Houthi territory. As a result, these arrangements made tribal leaders financially enmeshed with the Houthis, making defection costly.[17] The result was a functioning tribal order that was fundamentally transactional. Most tribal elites did not embrace Houthi theology or supremacy. Instead, they were bought, coerced, or left with no alternatives. Many who refused were jailed or killed.[18]

Why the Compact Is Fraying
The Houthi tribal compact is now under strain from five key pressure

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a   Zaydi Shi`ism, the branch practiced in the highlands of northern Yemen, differs from Jafari (Twelver) Shi`ism—the dominant form in Iran and Iraq, and the primary Shi`a tradition in Lebanon—in several important respects. Zaydis recognize only five imams, halting their line of succession at Zayd ibn Ali, the grandson of Husayn and great-grandson of the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali. Unlike Jafari Shi`ism, Zaydi doctrine holds the imam is neither hidden nor infallible, and the office lapses when no qualified claimant rises. Theologically and legally, Zaydism sits closer to Sunni Islam than any other Shi`a school: It maintains its own legal tradition that frequently converges with Sunni jurisprudence, rejects the institutionalized use of *taqiyya* and the shrine veneration characteristic of Jafari practice. There is tension within the Houthi movement, and likely within the family itself, over perceived and real attempts to shift or morph Zaydism into a hybrid sect combining aspects of Zaydism with Jafari *wilayat al-faqih. Wilayat al-faqih* vests governing authority in a qualified jurist in the absence of a legitimate imam. The doctrine is incompatible with classical Zaydi conceptions of the imamate. The Houthis have never explicitly endorsed it but use similar language and reasoning to justify Abdulmalik's absolute authority. The Houthis have jailed many Zaydi religious scholars, including Hashemites, who have criticized the movement's drift toward Jafari Shi`ism. There is also a tension within the research on to what degree the Houthis have attempted to alter Zaydi doctrine. See Ebrahim Mohammad Abdo Mousi, "The Houthi Phenomenon and Their Ideological Shift from Zaidism to Shi'Ism: An Analytical Descriptive Study," *Al-Qanatir: International Journal of Islamic Studies* 23:1 (2021) and Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (London: Hurst/OUP, 2017).

b   In the years following Hussein al-Houthi's death on September 10, 2004, and the death of Badr al-Din al-Houthi on November 25, 2010, the Houthi family also broke with traditional practice by allowing their daughters to marry men from tribal backgrounds, a significant departure from the centuries-old norm of sayyid endogamy in which sayyid women married only within the Hashemite sada. Gabriele vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 139-168 documents the broader post-1962 erosion of sayyid endogamy norms, providing context for the Houthi family's strategic exploitation of this shift in recent years.

c   Ali Abdullah Saleh served as president of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) from 1978 and then as president of unified Yemen following the merger of North and South Yemen in 1990 until his resignation under pressure in 2012 following the Arab Spring uprisings. He spent much of his presidency fighting the Houthis across six wars in Sa'ada between 2004 and 2010. His subsequent alliance with them was one of convenience: Sidelined from power, Saleh saw in the Houthis a vehicle for reasserting influence, while they gained access to his patronage networks, tribal clients, and the loyalty of some of the military and security elements personally tied to him. With aid from Saleh, the Houthis seized Sana'a in September 2014 and drove the internationally recognized government into exile. The alliance between Saleh and the Houthis was always uneasy. Saleh retained influence in what had been the ruling party, his own party, the General People's Congress, and maintained back-channel communications with foreign governments. By late 2017, with the war stalled and with increasing pressure from the Houthis on his family and networks, Saleh broke publicly with the Houthis on December 2 and called on Yemenis to turn against them. The Houthis responded with overwhelming force and assassinated Saleh on December 4 as he attempted to flee the capital. His death allowed the Houthis to consolidate control over Sana'a and most of northwest Yemen.

Houthi supporters are pictured during a weekly anti-Israel rally in Sana'a, Yemen, on September 12, 2025. (AP Photo/Osamah Abdulrahman)

points. The first is economic. Israeli strikes on ports, airports, and infrastructure have disrupted some of the revenue streams that fund the Houthis' patronage networks. Most specifically, damage to ports and oil and refined product offloading infrastructure has reduced the Houthis' ability to collect duties on imported oil and refined products, as well as to sell them. This damage, along with U.S. Treasury sanctions on the import of oil and refined products into Houthis-controlled ports, has had a significant impact on the Houthis' finances, as duties on imports and the sale of refined products accounted for as much as 50 percent of their estimated income.[19] Tankers continue to dock at Houthi-controlled ports, but volumes are estimated to have been reduced by half.[20] Efforts by the reconstituted Yemeni Coast Guard and other Government of Yemen (GoY) forces have also begun to curtail some of the smuggling that the Houthis benefited from, both by reducing the taxes and fees the Houthis collect on smuggled goods and by reducing the weapons and materiel that supply the Houthis.[21] The Houthis are attempting to compensate by diversifying their financial and procurement networks.

While the flow of Iranian-sourced and funded refined products had already declined due to greater sanctions oversight and damage to oil handling and port infrastructure in Yemen, the war with Iran and partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz will further limit the Houthis' revenue streams at a time when the overall Yemeni economy is under severe stress. The World Bank reported in 2025 that Houthi-controlled areas are experiencing deflation and a shift toward informal barter-based transactions.[22] This growth of the barter economy undermines the Houthis' ability to collect and impose an array of taxes and fees on transactions. With the

reduction in imported refined petroleum products, these taxes and fees are even more critical sources of funding for the Houthis. The Houthis' response to funding constraints is to resort to even harsher collection methods, which include expanded property seizures and the imposition of ever-higher levies on businesses and wealthy families.[23] These measures further stifle the private investment that might otherwise offset declining revenue. The result is a vicious cycle: Economic contraction drives predatory extraction, which in turn fuels barter and capital flight, deepening the contraction. The Houthis' severe financial crisis will put further pressure on the group's extensive and vital patronage networks. Tribal leaders, imposed or otherwise, who were bought with economic concessions may become liabilities demanding payment that the Houthis can no longer afford.

The second pressure point is narrative fatigue. The Red Sea campaign and strikes against Israel generated significant propaganda value for the Houthis from late 2023 onward.[24] This allowed the Houthis to frame themselves as defenders of the Palestinians. That narrative papered over economic failure, justified wartime austerity, and drew support from tribes and political figures who had previously opposed the Houthis.[25] But the October 2025 Gaza ceasefire and the costs of intermittent U.S. and Israeli retaliation have stripped the narrative of much of its power. The Houthis are now left with domestic governance and economic prosperity as the tests of their authority. They are failing at both. The war against Iran presents an additional complication. The Houthis are attempting to pivot to a solidarity-with-Iran narrative, but, so far, this lacks the mobilizing force of the Palestinian cause.[26] Many Yemenis, including within the Houthis' own tribal base, regard

> "Sana'a remains the most secure governorate in Yemen, locked down by layered concentric defenses, comprehensive surveillance, and a highly capable intelligence apparatus. But the peripheries of areas under Houthi control are increasingly vulnerable to unrest."

Iran—a Persian, majority Shi`a nation—with suspicion. Anger toward Israel remains pronounced across Yemeni society, and the Houthis can still tap into it.[27] But Iran's retaliatory strikes on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Jordan, and Qatar in the current war have made it harder for the organization to cast Tehran as an ally of the Arab and Muslim street.

The third pressure point is generational, and it cuts in two directions. The Houthis have invested heavily in reshaping the ideological and cultural terrain of northwest Yemen. Youth indoctrination is a long-running first-tier priority alongside the drone and missile programs. The Houthis' Believing Youth camps date to the 1990s, when Hussein al-Houthi and his brothers built a network of associations, sports clubs, and summer camps that funneled thousands of boys each year through Zaydi revivalist programming.[28] Since 2014, this project has accelerated into an attempt to reshape Yemeni understandings of their shared history and even religious beliefs. School curricula have been rewritten.[29] Mandatory ideological courses and military training are imposed on tribal leaders, teachers, and students.[30] Republican symbols—including the September 26 revolution anniversary—have been systematically suppressed and replaced with Houthi and Zaydi Shi`a-oriented commemorations.[31] The end goal is to produce a generation that places allegiance to the Houthis above tribal and national affiliations.

The Houthis are having some success: Many younger fighters in their ranks display a commitment to the movement's ideology that their fathers, who were recruited through patronage rather than conviction, rarely possessed.[32] But the same generation is exposed to an array of countervailing influences that, at least to some degree, undermine Houthi propaganda. Social media, which the Houthis cannot consistently block access to, gives young Yemenis a window into the prosperity of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations and Asian countries—a prosperity the Houthis have conspicuously failed to deliver. A revivalist republican counter-ideology, amplified through social media, is gaining traction among urban youth who see the September 26 anniversary as a vehicle for expressing dissent against Hashemite rule.[33]

The fourth pressure point is ideological. The Hashemite claim to primacy was never universally accepted and was repudiated by the 1962 republican revolution.[34] In Sunni Shafi'i-dominant areas such as Ibb, Taiz, and parts of the Tihama, the imposition of Hashemite supervisors is experienced as sectarian colonization.[35] Even within Zaydi communities, the historical relationship between tribesmen and sayyids was one of negotiated reciprocity. Zaydi doctrine permits *khuruj*—rebellion against unjust rule—a principle the Houthis have suppressed but not erased.[36]

The fifth pressure point lies within the movement itself. The older generation that fought through the Saada wars has accumulated significant wealth through the war economy and rampant corruption.[37] Houthi-affiliated officials have used fraudulent legal pretexts to seize state and private assets worth hundreds of millions of dollars.[38] These men now have personal fortunes to protect. The *esprit de corps* among top-tier leaders that once defined the Houthis is no longer what it used to be. Instead, the leadership is increasingly focused on self- and regime-preservation rather than the carefully calibrated tribal management that kept the compact functional.[39] The gap between what the Houthi elite extracts and what it redistributes to the tribal base is widening.

The pattern of fraying is geographically instructive. It is most visible at the periphery of Houthi control. In the border districts of Nihm, Bani Dabyan, and Arhab east of Sana'a, sporadic anti-Houthi tribal unrest persists despite years of security operations.[40] Meanwhile, in the northern reaches of the Tihama coastal lowlands, where tribal and social structures were less robust, the Houthi takeover has been more seamless. However, even there, the Houthis' pursuit of economic extraction without providing services or economic opportunity is generating resentment among lowland communities that have been marginalized for decades.[41] Sana'a remains the most secure governorate in Yemen, locked down by layered concentric defenses, comprehensive surveillance, and a highly capable intelligence apparatus. But the peripheries of areas under Houthi control are increasingly vulnerable to unrest.

The evidence of simmering unrest and the harsh responses by Houthi security forces is visible across multiple governorates. On July 1, 2025, Houthi forces killed Sheikh Saleh Hantos, a prominent tribal leader in Raimah, and then detained and tortured 12 of his relatives.[42] On October 28, 2025, at least 200 men, accused of being members of the Islah Party, were arrested in Dhamar on specious charges. The arrests further inflamed anti-Houthi sentiment in the governorate.[43] In Taiz, Houthi militias launched raids following the defection of a loyalist tribal sheikh.[44] In Ibb—where ACLED recorded 40 percent of all Houthi-controlled infighting between January 2022 and January 2025—the movement has meddled directly in tribal disputes, pitting one tribe against another to weaken resistant groups.[45] The UN Panel of Experts documented at least 403 cases of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance from August 2024 to July 2025, 306 attributed to the Houthis.[46] Houthi security forces cracked down on celebrations of Yemen's republican revolution anniversary in September 2025, making arrests across Sana'a and other areas under the group's control.[47] After the August 2025 Israeli assassination of Houthi-appointed Prime Minister Ahmed al-Rahawi, the Houthis launched internal purges due to security breaches. They demanded new oaths of loyalty from tribal figures and began detaining U.N. staff ostensibly on suspicion of espionage.[48] Consequently, the World Food Program and many other NGOs suspended operations in Houthi-controlled areas.[49] This created a self-reinforcing cycle: Repression drove away the humanitarian organizations that partially mitigated economic hardship, further deepening tribal resentment and prompting further repression.

Adaptive, Dangerous, and Not to Be Underestimated

Any assessment that treats the fraying of the Houthis' tribal compact as a prelude to the movement's collapse would be an

analytical error. The Houthis have survived and evolved for more than three decades. They have outlasted six wars with the Yemeni government, a Saudi-led coalition campaign that cost Riyadh an estimated $200-300 billion USD, and U.S. and Israeli aerial campaigns, including Israeli strikes that killed their prime minister, chief of staff, and the commander of their missile and drone unit.[50] They remain firmly in control of most of northwest Yemen and the majority of the country's population.

Their resilience is partly structural. The Houthi leadership operates through a nodal system in which local commanders possess considerable authority over military operations, tribal management, and resource allocation.[51] This authority does not diminish when senior leaders are killed. Instead, it increases, as decision-making devolves to commanders with deep knowledge of local terrain and tribal dynamics. The Saada wars produced a generation of such commanders. These commanders were accustomed to operating without central direction, to improvising logistics, selecting targets, and making battlefield decisions on their own authority. While many of the commanders who fought in the Saada wars are dead or now members of the Houthi elite, the organizational ethos of taking the initiative and leading from the front is alive and well among the younger generation of commanders.[52] The Houthis' nodal system mirrors what Iranian strategists call mosaic defense, which is now operational in Iran.[d] Israeli strikes on leadership and a decade of intermittent aerial bombardment have reinforced these approaches. In addition to nodal leadership structures, the Houthis have spent years refining their ability to conceal key hardware and assembly facilities for their missiles and drones. Many of these facilities are now located in civilian areas and in hardened underground facilities spread across much of Yemen's mountainous northwest.[53]

The Houthis also retain significant escalatory leverage. They have attacked more than 130 vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, targeted multiple sites in Saudi Arabia, and their missiles and drones have evaded Israeli air defenses on at least six occasions.[54] In late August 2025, they targeted a tanker near Yanbu, Saudi Arabia's major Red Sea crude export terminal, which handles approximately a million barrels per day—a volume set to increase as shipments are rerouted from the Persian Gulf to avoid the Strait of Hormuz.[55] If pushed by the collapse of Iranian support, intensified Israeli strikes, a GoY-led offensive, and/or the loss of key leadership nodes, the Houthis may pursue a scorched earth posture.[56] Such a posture would see the Houthis attack key infrastructure in and outside of Yemen. The Houthis possess both the capability and the demonstrated willingness to target Saudi and Yemeni energy infrastructure. Houthi drone strikes on Yemeni oil and gas facilities in Shabwa and Hadramawt since late 2022 have effectively shut

> ## "The Houthis' ability to sustain tribal compliance has always rested on two pillars: the patronage flows that buy acquiescence and the military capabilities that deter and punish resistance. If either of these pillars is compromised, the compact weakens. If both weaken simultaneously, the instability may lead to a meaningful reordering of power in Houthi-dominated areas."

down the GoY's oil exports, eliminating the internationally recognized government's only significant source of independent revenue.[57] In a full scorched-earth scenario, high-value targets would include the East-West pipeline, Saudi refineries within drone range, and mothballed Yemeni facilities such as the Balhaf LNG terminal, whose destruction would further compromise any post-war economic recovery for Yemen.

The movement's external alliances continue to expand. The Houthis have deepened their relationships with AQAP and al-Shabaab, both of which have evolved into logistical partners that help move weapons components and other materiel through Horn of Africa smuggling corridors.[58] At the same time, the movement continues to develop alternative supply chains for its drone program. In August 2025, Yemeni authorities in Aden intercepted a container from China containing what investigators described as a complete drone and missile manufacturing kit.[59] The Houthis are hedging against the loss of any single patron by cultivating redundant relationships across state, sub-state, and criminal networks. The result is an organization that is simultaneously more vulnerable domestically and more dangerous externally than at any point in its history.

Outlook

The Houthis know that the tribes are their foundation. The movement's entire domestic strategy has been built on this understanding. But the compact they constructed was transactional, not ideological, and transactional compacts require ongoing payment, in whatever form it takes. Increasing financial pressures are driving more confiscatory measures that, in turn, require harsher crackdowns on anyone or any group that opposes their rule. At the same time, a generation is coming of age whose frame of reference is repression and economic hardship, not the shared sacrifice of the Saada wars or the sense of victory that accompanied the takeover of Sana'a. The ideological settlement the Houthis are attempting to impose—Hashemite supremacy enforced through a supervisory apparatus that overrides tribal custom—contradicts centuries of negotiated reciprocity between tribesmen and sayyids.[60] The Houthi leadership itself is also changing. Many top-tier leaders and commanders are now wealthy, more invested in the regime and self-preservation, and likely less willing to take the risks that built the movement. And now the Iranian regime, a key backer, is

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d   Iran's mosaic defense doctrine (*defa-e mozaiki*) or decentralized mosaic defense (DMD) was developed by IRGC strategists in the 2000s as a response to the perceived vulnerability of centralized command structures to U.S. precision-strike capabilities. The concept fragments military authority into semi-autonomous provincial units – likely including even smaller divisions – each capable of conducting operations independently without central approval. Iranian FM Araghchi publicly invoked the doctrine in March 2026 ("Iran's war doctrine revealed: 'Decentralized Mosaic Defense' – what it means for US, Israel," Gulf News, March 2, 2026). The Houthis' own decentralized command structure, forged during the Saada wars (2004-2010), predates their awareness of the formal Iranian concept but mirrors the same logic. See Marek Adam Brylew, "Basij-Iranian Militia as an Element of 'Mosaic Defense' and the Guarantee of the Islamic Regime," *Journal of Modern Science* 62:2 (2025): pp. 529-551.

being tested.

For tribal leaders across northern Yemen, these pressures are producing a calculus that has not existed in a decade. The Houthis' ability to sustain tribal compliance has always rested on two pillars: the patronage flows that buy acquiescence and the military capabilities that deter and punish resistance. If either of these pillars is compromised, the compact weakens. If both weaken simultaneously, the instability may lead to a meaningful reordering of power in Houthi-dominated areas. Members of the tribal elite in peripheral areas watch the same indicators and likely ask: Can the Houthis still pay? Can they still punish? Are there viable alternatives to Houthi rule? For the first time in years, the answer to the third question is not an unqualified no.

The January 2026 Saudi-backed counter-offensive against a December 2025 Southern Transitional Council (STC) offensive to take over all of south Yemen restored limited GoY authority across most of southern Yemen. Critically, extensive Saudi support for the GoY demonstrated that Riyadh is again prepared to fully back the government's security objectives.[61] Ahead of and following the Saudi-backed counteroffensive, significant progress has been made toward recentralizing chains of command within the GoY's armed forces. The oil-producing areas of the governorate of Marib—long a key Houthi objective and essential to the organization's economic viability—remain under GoY control. The prospects of a successful Houthi offensive to seize the governorate are lower than at any point since the 2020-2021 drive.[62] The GoY continues to face serious challenges: fragmented authority, limited revenue, corruption, and dependence on external patrons. But the GoY is, for now, on a trajectory toward greater capability. For tribal leaders weighing their options, a positive trajectory may matter as much as the present capacity. The answers to all three questions are shifting—slowly, but measurably—against the Houthis.

Yet, the Houthis are also more sophisticated than ever. Their supply chains are diversifying. Their alliances with AQAP and al-Shabaab provide redundant logistics and new sources of intelligence and leverage. Their security apparatus gives them granular control over tribal networks that any successor regime would struggle to replicate in the short- and medium-term. And their escalatory leverage ensures that any effort to exploit their internal vulnerabilities through kinetic means carries the risk of retaliatory strikes on energy infrastructure with global economic consequences. The Houthis are weakening. But they remain dangerous in ways that constrain the options of every actor in the region.

The tapestry of tribal support on which the Houthis rely is fraying, at least at the edges. But the Houthis are not passive weavers waiting for the fabric to unravel. They are adaptive, understand asymmetric warfare, and possess escalatory leverage. The question for policymakers is not whether the Houthis are weakening. They are. The question is whether anyone can accelerate that weakening faster than the Houthis can compensate for it, and at what cost to Yemenis and the region.   **CTC**

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From Earth Liberation to Accelerationism: A High-Level Review of Fifty Years of Domestic Infrastructure Terrorism

By Jesse Humpal

This article reviews 50 years of domestic extremist attacks and plots against U.S. critical infrastructure and infrastructure-adjacent industrial and commercial targets. Using an original open-source dataset (1970–July 2025) compiled from terrorism incident databases, government reporting, and a systematic review of federal case records, it documents how sabotage has appeared across ideologically divergent milieus, with two dominant clusters: environmental and animal-rights extremism (peaking in the late 1990s and early 2000s) and a post-2015 rise in far-right extremist infrastructure plotting, including a subset of cases that explicitly reflect accelerationist intent. The analysis distinguishes between issue-driven eco-sabotage that frequently targets grievance-linked commercial and industrial nodes and more contemporary plots that more often privilege critical systems, particularly the electric grid, for cascading disruption. A decade-by-decade narrative traces tactical evolution from arson and clandestine cells to digitally networked mobilization, firearms, and higher-casualty-risk methods. The article concludes by assessing the evolution of law-enforcement and policy responses, including post-9/11 eco-terrorism prosecutions, infrastructure reliability and physical-security standards, and more recent use of energy-facility statutes and intelligence sharing with owners and operators.

In February 2023, U.S. authorities foiled a neo-Nazi plot to sabotage five electrical substations around Baltimore, Maryland, a scheme intended to "completely destroy" power to the predominantly Black city.[1] This far-right extremism accelerationist conspiracy, driven by racist ideology, echoes a very different wave of sabotage from 25 years earlier: On October 19, 1998, eco-extremists with the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) burned down part of the Vail Ski Resort in Colorado to protest its expansion into a lynx habitat, causing an estimated $12 million in damage.[2] Though the perpetrators' worldviews could not be further apart, these incidents underscore a striking convergence: Ideologically divergent extremist movements—from 1990s radical environmentalists to 2020s accelerationists—have fixated on U.S. critical and infrastructure-adjacent targets. In this article, 'accelerationism' refers to a strategic logic that treats violence as a means to hasten social breakdown and widen conflict, rather than a single ideology; while much contemporary infrastructure plotting emerges from far-right extremist milieus, accelerationist ideas can be adopted across ideologies. However, the data also shows a consistent targeting asymmetry: Eco-extremist campaigns more often focus on infrastructure-adjacent commercial and industrial sites linked to a specific grievance, while accelerationist actors more frequently privilege truly critical systems—especially the electric grid—for cascading disruption.

Open-source data shows that since the 1970s, domestic extremist ideologies have motivated a substantial number of attacks and plots against infrastructure in the United States. For example, between 1995 and 2010, the ELF and its sister group the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) orchestrated 239 arsons and bombings across the United States in the name of defending nature and animals.[3] By the early 2000s, the FBI estimated these eco-extremists had committed over 600 criminal acts (from vandalism to arson) causing more than US$43 million in damage between 1996 and 2002.[4] Fast forward to the late 2010s-2020s, and a new wave of extremist targeting has emerged: Research by the Program on Extremism at George Washington University found that 13 white supremacists were charged in federal court for planning attacks on the U.S. energy sector from 2016 to 2022.[5] The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reports that physical attacks on the electric grid hit an all-time high in 2022, with 163 direct incidents, a 77 percent increase from the prior year.[6] These numbers include both criminal vandalism and extremist sabotage, but officials note a distinct rise in plots driven by racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVEs) this decade.

Despite their vastly different motives, these two extremes exhibit remarkable similarities in how and why they attack infrastructure.

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Both frame their crimes as urgent direct action against an intolerable status quo, but for eco-saboteurs that status quo is often a specific practice or project they want to halt, whereas for accelerationists it is a tyrannical government and the multicultural society it protects, which they seek to collapse and replace. And as the name of the ELF's 2001 communiqué "Setting Fires for Effect" suggested, both extremes believe that striking critical nodes (power grids, pipelines, railways) will send a powerful symbolic message and precipitate broader chaos or reform.[7] These commonalities, and the evolution in tactics from one era to the next, carry important implications for counterterrorism policy, infrastructure security, and resource allocation against domestic violent extremists (DVEs) of all stripes. Online ecosystems have increasingly facilitated limited cross-ideological borrowing, with tactics, manuals, and propaganda circulating across extremist milieus.

This article presents a data-driven analysis of U.S. extremist sabotage against critical and infrastructure-adjacent targets from the 1970s through mid-2025. It begins with a comprehensive quantitative overview of documented attacks and plots against the nation's energy, transportation, communication, and water infrastructure by both left-wing and right-wing extremists. This section establishes the scale and scope of the threat and identifies key patterns across time, geography, and ideology.

The article then turns to a decade-by-decade examination, tracing the evolution of tactics and motivations. It explores the early environmental and animal-rights campaigns of the ALF and ELF during the 1990s, such as the 1998 Vail arson and the subsequent FBI Operation Backfire crackdown, and follows the transition to more contemporary attacks and plots, including the 2022 Moore County, North Carolina, substation attack and the foiled 2023 Baltimore plot.

A comparative analysis follows, contrasting how violent far-left and violent far-right extremist movements differ in their motives, targets, tactics, organizational structures, and communications while highlighting points of convergence—most notably their shared "accelerationist" logic and the cross-pollination of sabotage tactics across ideological lines.

Finally, the article examines the evolution of law enforcement and policy responses, from the post-9/11 focus on eco-terrorism under Operation Backfire and the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) to more recent DHS and FBI warnings about domestic violent extremist threats to the U.S. energy sector. This section also compares prosecution patterns and sentencing outcomes under statutes such as 18 U.S.C. § 1366 (destruction of an energy facility) and terrorism enhancements, illustrating how federal agencies have adapted in responding to shifting threat landscapes.

Data Compilation: Incidents, Targets, and Trends (1970-mid-2025)

Scope and Sources

This article distinguishes between critical infrastructure (as defined by CISA sectors) and infrastructure-adjacent industrial and commercial targets—assets that enable, support, or symbolize industrial activity but whose disruption would not necessarily
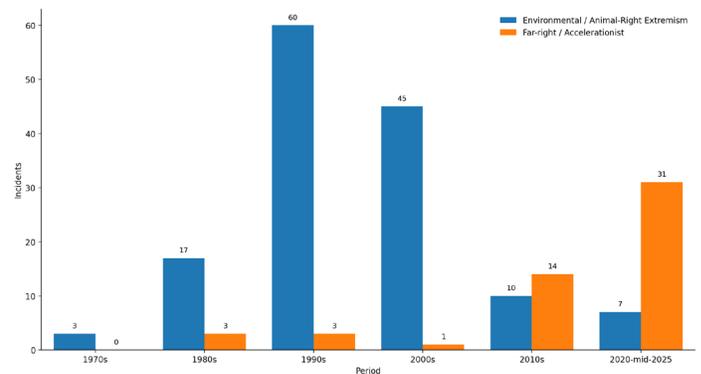
Figure 1: The temporal distribution of incidents in the core dataset, highlighting two distinct waves: a late-1990s peak associated with environmental and animal-rights extremism and a post-2015 rise in infrastructure plotting linked to far-right extremist and accelerationist actors. (N=194)

meet the threshold for 'critical' under federal definitions.[a] The dataset compiles extremist-motivated attacks and plots against such infrastructure on U.S. soil from 1970 through mid-2025. It draws on open sources including the START Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the CSIS U.S. Terrorism Incidents database, the U.S. Department of Energy's OE-417 electric-disturbance reports, U.S. Department of Justice/FBI press releases, and the George Washington University Program on Extremism's Domestic Extremism tracker.[8] Both completed attacks and foiled plots are included, provided ideological motivation is evidenced. Foiled plots were identified primarily through federal indictments, criminal complaints, plea agreements, and sentencing memoranda, supplemented by DOJ and FBI press releases, allowing for systematic coverage of disrupted plots across the full study period. Each incident was coded for date, location, target type, perpetrator affiliation, ideology, method (bombing, arson, firearm attack, cyber), casualties (if any), outcome, and source reference.

Analysis of this type of data has inherent limitations. Some of these limitations include undercounting and selection bias inherent in open-source and court-record based compilation, as well as ambiguity in attributing ideology and target classification in mixed-motive or poorly documented cases. Foiled-plot coverage is also time-skewed because disrupted plots are far more likely to be documented publicly in recent decades than in the 1970s and 1980s. To avoid using 'accelerationism' as a catch-all, cases were coded as accelerationist only when primary-source case materials evidenced accelerationist framing, such as explicit collapse-catalysis language, references to accelerationist texts or communities,

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a   According to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), "there are 16 critical infrastructure sectors whose assets, systems, and networks, whether physical or virtual, are considered so vital to the United States that their incapacitation or destruction would have a debilitating effect on security, national economic security, national public health or safety, or any combination thereof." The sectors are Chemical; Commercial Facilities; Communications; Critical Manufacturing; Dams; Defense Industrial Base; Emergency Services; Energy; Financial Services; Food and Agriculture; Government Services and Facilities; Healthcare and Public Health; Information Technology; Nuclear Reactors, Materials, and Waste; Transportation Systems; and Water and Wastewater Systems. "Critical Infrastructure Sectors," Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), U.S. Department of Homeland Security, updated 2024.

or communications describing infrastructure disruption as a mechanism to accelerate societal breakdown.

Incident Tally and Trends

Between 1970 and mid-2025, the core dataset used in this article identifies 194 infrastructure-related incidents, including both completed attacks and foiled plots, motivated by domestic extremist ideologies.[b] The overwhelming majority fall into two main ideological categories. The first is environmental and animal-rights extremism, which accounts for 142 of the 194 cases and peaks in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This infrastructure-focused subset overlaps with the much larger ELF/ALF arson-and-bombing campaign documented elsewhere, including 239 significant arsons or bombings between 1995 and 2010, though not all of those broader incidents meet this article's infrastructure-targeting criteria. The second is far-right, anti-government, and accelerationist extremism, which accounts for 52 of the 194 cases and rises markedly after 2015.[9] While a considerable portion of these incidents targeted infrastructure, not all of them did. These incidents peaked in the late 1990s, specifically between 1998 and 2001, before declining sharply after 2005. Importantly, few of these attacks were intended to harm human life, and perpetrators frequently emphasized property destruction over casualties. Statements issued by ELF and ALF cells routinely framed arson and sabotage as a means of inflicting economic costs, deterring specific practices, and drawing attention to environmental or animal-rights grievances rather than as an effort to cause physical harm.[10] Despite that restraint, the property damage was substantial: In one DHS assessment that reviewed the 1995-2010 period, 42 percent of attacks were classified as causing "substantial or very substantial" loss.[11]

The second category involves far-right, anti-government, and accelerationist extremism, which began to rise markedly after 2015. A growing number of plots against critical and infrastructure-adjacent targets have been linked to far-right domestic violent extremists, including white supremacists, neo-Nazi accelerationist cells, and anti-government militias.[12] Between 2016 and 2022, the Program on Extremism at George Washington University identified 35 federal cases involving violent extremist plots against critical infrastructure, including 16 associated with white supremacist actors; 13 of those white supremacist plotters specifically targeted the energy sector.[13] The frequency of such plots has further spiked in recent years, rising from one or two cases annually between 2016 and 2018 to double digits after 2020.[14] Where case materials explicitly show accelerationist intent, grid attacks are framed as a symbol and strategic target that, at least in the perpetrator's view, could facilitate broader systemic collapse.[15]

Target selection and methods vary between these ideological streams and eras. Eco-extremists in the 1970s through early 2000s tended to focus on symbols of environmental destruction or animal exploitation. According to DHS analysis of bombing and arson incidents attributed to the ELF and ALF milieu, 55 percent were claimed under the ELF name and 45 percent under the ALF name. Nearly two-thirds of these incidents occurred in the U.S. West, particularly in the Pacific Northwest (PNW) and California.[16] Their targets included timber company offices, meatpacking plants, university laboratories, SUV dealerships, and residential developments—occasionally extending to energy infrastructure when connected to fossil fuel or nuclear projects. Their tactics primarily involved arson and bombing, with 62 percent bombings and 38 percent arsons in a 1995 to 2010 DHS dataset, often using delayed timers and improvised incendiary devices. In infrastructure-adjacent cases, methods also included equipment sabotage such as damaging fuel lines or disabling machinery tied to targeted facilities.[17] In that same DHS 1995-2010 dataset, attacks were generally planned for times when facilities were unoccupied.

In this study's 1970 to mid-2025 dataset, far-right extremist and accelerationist actors who targeted infrastructure focused most often on the electric grid, particularly substations, transformers, and transmission lines. DOJ cases and DHS assessments show that white-supremacist conspirators view power stations as high-value targets capable of producing cascading chaos.[18] In one 2020 case, a neo-Nazi cell in Ohio plotted to shoot transformers to induce blackouts.[19] Other targets have included telecommunications towers, rail lines, and water systems.[20] The methods associated with these actors are often cruder but carry greater risk of lethal harm, including rifle fire directed at transformers, pipe bombs, and the use of commercially available explosive compounds such as Tannerite.[c] Unlike earlier eco-sabotage campaigns, several recent far-right extremist and accelerationist plots frame infrastructure disruption as a means to generate broader instability. In the 2023 Baltimore substation conspiracy, for example, one plotter described the objective as to "completely destroy this whole city," reflecting an accelerationist logic that treats infrastructure disruption as a pathway to cascading societal effects.[21] Compared with earlier eco-sabotage campaigns, these actors appear less focused on minimizing casualty risk, and some cases involve multi-site attack concepts intended to magnify disruption and complicate emergency response.[22]

Viewed at a high level, the dataset reveals clear geographic and temporal clustering patterns, alongside shared dynamics in how small-scale sabotage can generate outsized disruption. Geographically, eco-extremist incidents were concentrated in the U.S. West—Oregon, Washington, California, and Colorado— while far-right extremist infrastructure plots and attacks have been dispersed more widely across the Southeast, Midwest, and Pacific Northwest. Temporal spikes in this type of activity align with broader periods of unrest: Eco-terrorism peaked in the late 1990s before subsiding, whereas far-right extremist plots surged after 2020 amid pandemic-related volatility, civil protests, and deepening polarization. While overall fatalities remain rare in infrastructure attacks, modern grid disruptions carry far greater potential to endanger lives through secondary effects such as power outages. Prosecution trends reflect this divergence: Eco-saboteurs of the early 2000s often received sentences under 10 years, whereas recent far-right extremist offenders faced terrorism-enhanced

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b   The core dataset analyzed in this article includes N=194 coded cases involving attacks and plots against U.S. critical infrastructure and infrastructure-adjacent industrial and commercial targets. A broader reference universe of cases was reviewed during compilation, but adjacent, ambiguous, or non-qualifying incidents were excluded from the final analytic dataset.

c   Tannerite is a commercially sold "binary exploding target" product. It typically comes as two separate components, commonly an oxidizer such as ammonium nitrate and a fuel such as aluminum powder, that are mixed by the user and can detonate when initiated, often by impact from a high-velocity rifle round.

penalties of up to 20 years.[23]

Historical Trajectory by Decade: From Eco-Sabotage to Accelerationism

1970s: Beginnings of Eco-Radicalism

The dataset records just three infrastructure-related extremist incidents in the 1970s, all linked to early eco-radicalism. No far-right extremism or accelerationist plot that focused on infrastructure as a target appears in the dataset during this period.

The 1970s were the formative decade for modern U.S. environmental politics and, at the militant fringe, for the ideas that later underpinned eco-sabotage. The first Earth Day in 1970 helped catalyze mass environmental awareness, and a rapid expansion of federal environmental regulation followed, including the National Environmental Policy Act and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency.[24] For most activists, these developments reinforced lawful advocacy. For a smaller militant subset, they reinforced the belief that conventional politics was too slow to prevent irreversible harm, creating a permissive logic for property destruction framed as defensive direct action.

The term "ecotage" gained currency in this period, popularized by the 1972 publication Ecotage! and reinforced culturally by Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), which depicted sabotage of development as a form of resistance.[25] This outlook began to translate into real-world activity by the late 1970s. One early U.S. example frequently cited in open sources is a 1977 laboratory break-in at the University of California, Riverside attributed to a group described as the "Undersea Railroad," which released animals and destroyed equipment.[26] This attack established patterns that later defined eco-extremist campaigns: clandestine entry, nighttime operations, and an emphasis on property destruction rather than casualties.

On the far-right extremism side, violence in the 1970s was generally not oriented toward sustained infrastructure sabotage. More often, it focused on people, demonstrations, and symbolic adversaries through intimidation and lethal violence tied to racial terror and ideological conflict. The 1979 Greensboro massacre, in which Klansmen and neo-Nazis killed five Communist Workers Party demonstrators at an anti-Klan protest, illustrates that broader targeting pattern. More generally, U.S. terrorism in the 1970s was dominated by left-wing and Puerto Rican nationalist violence rather than the infrastructure-centered far-right extremism plotting that became more visible decades later.[27]

1980s – Radicalization and Early Infrastructure Attacks

From 1980 to 1989, the dataset captures 20 incidents, with 17 linked to environmental or animal-rights extremism and three involving early infrastructure plotting tied to individuals or groups motivated by far-right extremist ideologies.

During the 1980s, militant environmentalism shifted from fringe protest toward a more coherent movement that promoted direct action and, for a minority, sabotage as a legitimate tool of environmental defense. Earth First!, founded in 1980, helped drive this turn by rejecting compromise-oriented environmentalism and elevating confrontation as a method rather than an exception.[28] Over the decade, tactics became more adversarial, including the adoption of tree-spiking by the mid-1980s to deter logging, a practice that also increased risk to workers and equipment. In 1987, Earth First! activists sabotaged a transmission tower supplying power to a uranium mine in Arizona, further illustrating how movement rhetoric could translate into attacks on infrastructure tied to extractive industries.[29]

Animal-rights militancy also escalated. The ALF expanded laboratory raids and arsons, including a 1982 firebombing at a University of California, Davis facility, and in 1987 the FBI publicly warned of the "increasing violence of animal rights extremists."[30] On the far-right extremism side, concepts that later enabled infrastructure-focused violence also diffused, including Louis Beam's "leaderless resistance," while groups linked to Christian Identity ideology, such as The Covenant, The Sword, and the Arm of the Lord, plotted attacks on pipelines and water supplies.[31] These developments did not yet produce sustained infrastructure sabotage at scale, but they helped set conditions for the more systematic targeting that emerged later.

1990s – The Eco-Terrorism Wave ("Green Scare")

The 1990s saw a sharp increase in eco-extremist activity, with the dataset recording 60 incidents linked to ELF/ALF campaigns and three early far-right extremist plots, totaling 63 infrastructure-related acts. As shown in Figure 2, eco-extremist actors accounted for the overwhelming majority of infrastructure-related incidents during this period.

The late 1990s marked the peak of eco-terrorism activity in the United States. The ELF emerged and expanded from the United Kingdom and rapidly escalated sabotage. In one key incident, on October 19, 1998, ELF saboteurs ignited multiple incendiary devices at Vail Mountain (Colorado), burning down the Two Elk lodge and several ski lifts, causing approximately $12 million in damage.[32] The group was careful to avoid human casualties, crafting their attacks at night in empty facilities. In early 2002, FBI Domestic Terrorism Chief James Jarboe testified that ALF/ELF had committed over 600 criminal acts since 1996 and that "special interest extremists" were the most active domestic threat.[33]

The Vail arson also illustrates a broader tactical and organizational pattern that defined the late 1990s wave. ELF and ALF activity relied on autonomous cells operating under a shared banner rather than a formal hierarchy, which complicated attribution and made the movements resilient to leadership decapitation strategies. Attacks often followed a recognizable script:
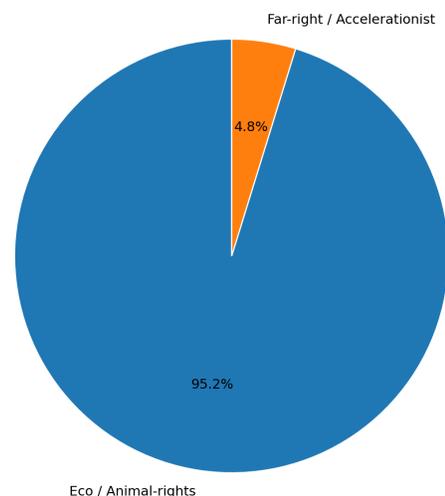

Figure 2: Distribution of extremist attacks and plots against U.S. critical infrastructure and infrastructure-adjacent industrial and commercial targets by ideological category, 1990–1999 (n=63)

clandestine surveillance of a target linked to a specific grievance, deployment of improvised incendiary devices with delayed timers, and rapid dissemination of anonymous communiqués that framed the action as defensive and morally necessary. The cumulative effect was less about seizing territory or confronting the state directly and more about coercion through economic cost, reputational damage, and deterrence. This pattern also helps explain why the same period produced comparatively few casualties but substantial property loss, and why federal counterterrorism efforts increasingly treated "special interest" extremism as a priority threat category even before the post-9/11 reorientation toward Islamist terrorism.[34]

2000s – Lull and Transition

From 2000 to 2009, the dataset documents 45 eco-extremist incidents—including many tied to Operation Backfire investigations—and one case attributed to far-right extremist actors, for a total of 46 incidents of infrastructure-focused targeting by these two threat streams.

The early 2000s were still an active period for eco-extremist sabotage, even as the wave began to crest. High-profile arsons continued into the first half of the decade, and federal investigations increasingly treated ALF/ELF activity through a post-9/11 domestic terrorism lens, leveraging conspiracy, destructive-device, and terrorism-related charging and sentencing tools that raised the stakes for participants and supporters.[35] Operation Backfire (2004-2008) dismantled the core Pacific Northwest eco-extremist cell network known among investigators as "The Family," which carried out numerous ELF and ALF arsons in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[36] A few outlier acts occurred (for example, the 2008 Seattle-area "Street of Dreams" arson), but overall activity dropped sharply.[37]

Legal tools also expanded when Congress passed the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act in 2006, broadening 18 U.S.C. § 43 and increasing penalties tied to economic damage and threats.[38] While the deterrent effect is difficult to prove conclusively, multiple analyses of Operation Backfire and post-crackdown trends find a substantial decline in activity consistent with a disruption-and-deterrence dynamic.[39] Infrastructure security also improved in response to non-adversarial system shocks, including the 2003 Northeast blackout. On the far-right extremism side, post-2008 economic dislocation and the Obama presidency contributed to radicalization; infrastructure attacks were still rare, but episodic incidents and nascent plotting began to appear.[40] This decade was the calm before the new storm.

2010s – Renewed Extremism and Convergence of Tactics

Between 2010 and 2019, 24 infrastructure-focused incidents are recorded in the dataset: 10 attributed to eco-anarchist actors, and 14 to far-right extremists or accelerationists.

The 2010s saw two related developments: a resurgence and adaptation of eco-anarchist sabotage tied to energy and pipeline opposition, and the emergence of accelerationism, often linked with far-right extremist ideas, as a distinct organizing logic.[41] The 2013 sniper attack on the PG&E Metcalf substation in California (still unsolved) became a template for grid attackers.[42] Members and supporters of accelerationist neo-Nazi networks such as the Atomwaffen Division (founded 2015) circulated online guides and discussed tactics for attacking the power grid, sharing instructions on identifying and disabling transformers and other substation
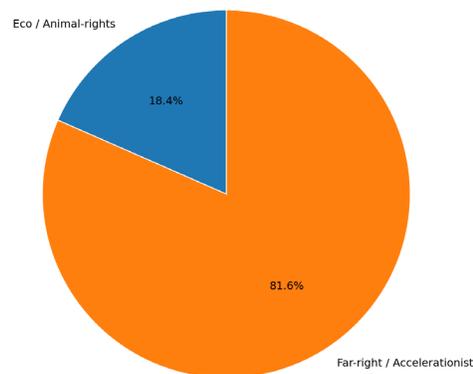

Figure 3: Distribution of extremist attacks and plots against U.S. critical infrastructure and infrastructure-adjacent industrial and commercial targets by ideological category, 2020–2025 (n=38)

equipment that could be damaged by rifle fire or explosives.[43] Eco-extremist movements had already normalized leaderless sabotage by the 1990s; during the 2010s, far-right extremist groups increasingly borrowed both this decentralized model and specific sabotage techniques, including arson and infrastructure-focused attacks. By contrast with the much larger late-1990s eco-sabotage wave, eco-extremist activity in the United States during the 2010s appears limited to a small number of isolated sabotage incidents, likely fewer than a dozen, often tied to energy and pipeline opposition. By the 2010s, however, infrastructure disruption was no longer confined to that milieu and increasingly appeared across ideological contexts.[44]

2020-Mid-2025 – Accelerationist Grid Targeting and Renewed Eco-Anarchist Sabotage

The period from 2020 through mid-2025 accounts for 38 incidents, with 31 attributed to far-right extremist or accelerationist actors and seven involving renewed eco-anarchist sabotage. Figure 3 highlights the distribution of recent incidents across ideological categories, underscoring the rise of far-right extremist and accelerationist-linked infrastructure plotting in the current period.

The COVID-19 pandemic, civil unrest, election polarization, and conspiracy ecosystems created permissive conditions for infrastructure targeting across ideologies. On the far-right extremism side, several cases reflected an accelerationist logic that treats grid disruption as a high-leverage way to strain governance and amplify social breakdown. In December 2022, the Moore County, North Carolina, substation shootings caused a serious outage affecting approximately 45,000 customers.[45] [d] In the Pacific Northwest, a late 2022 series of attacks near Tacoma, Washington, damaged multiple substations and produced significant outages, underscoring how small teams can generate outsized disruption.[46] In early 2023, authorities disrupted the Baltimore-area grid plot, and in August 2025, plotter Brandon Russell was sentenced to 20 years in federal prison for conspiring to destroy electrical facilities serving the region.[47]

In parallel, what this article calls modern eco-anarchy is not a new ideology so much as a renewed, decentralized current of anti-

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d   While it is widely speculated that the perpetrators of the Moore County substation attack were right-wing extremists, the shooters have not been apprehended as of March 19, 2026.

industrial direct action that targets energy and extractive supply chains, including fossil-fuel logistics, rather than pursuing mass-casualty violence. A concrete example is the 2020 Washington State rail "shunts" case, where federal charges alleged the use of devices placed on BNSF Railway tracks to interfere with signaling and trigger emergency braking, including for trains carrying hazardous materials.[48]

Comparative Analysis: Eco-Extremism vs. Accelerationist Extremism

This section compares two distinct threat milieus that sometimes produce superficially similar operational patterns but differ in their theory of change, targeting logic, and risk profile. The table below summarizes common tendencies, not hard rules, and there is meaningful variation within each category. Importantly, 'accelerationism' is used here as a strategic logic aimed at hastening systemic breakdown, not as a synonym for the broader far-right extremist milieu. The comparison focuses on far-right extremist actors whose case materials or propaganda explicitly reflect that accelerationist logic.

Table 1: Comparative Dimensions of Eco-Extremist and Far-Right Accelerationist Infrastructure Targeting

Dimension	Left-Wing Eco-Extremism (ELF/ALF)	Far-Right Extremist/ Accelerationist Actors (subset of far-right extremism)
Core Motive/ Theory of Change	Issue-driven coercion tied to environmental or animal-rights grievances; impose economic costs, deter specific practices, force attention	System-disruption logic; accelerate breakdown, erode legitimacy, provoke cascading failure and social conflict (including anti-state and race-war narratives in many cases)
Targeting Logic	Predominantly commercial, industrial, and research targets linked to grievance (timber, labs, construction, dealer-ships, processing facilities); critical-infrastructure or infrastructure-adjacent targets when directly tied to extractive/ energy disputes	Critical nodes prioritized for cascading effects, especially electric substations, transformers, and transmission lines; secondary enabling nodes may include telecoms, rail choke-points, and water-related facilities
Typical Tactics	Arson and improvised incendiary devices; sabotage of facilities/ equipment; delayed ignition/ time-setting common; firearms generally avoided	Firearms against electrical equipment; IEDs/ explosives and sabotage; multi-site coordination concepts; hybrid physical-cyber ideas appear in some discourse and plotting
Casualty Risk Posture	Often calibrated to reduce probability of casualties (night operations, unoccupied targets), though risk remains inherent	Higher tolerance for risk of lethal harm; means and concepts often increase likelihood of casualties to responders, bystanders, or workers even when deaths do not occur
Organization	Leaderless resistance/ autonomous cells operating under a shared banner; weak central command by design	Decentralized but digitally networked; loose online ecosystems and small cells; inspiration and guidance often diffuse through propaganda and tactical content
Communications	Anonymous communiqués, underground media, moral-justification framing; early internet use	Encrypted chats, forums, manifestos and tactical guides; memes and propaganda optimized for diffusion and replication
Operational Cadence and Geography (Typical)	Concentrated historically in the West (PNW/ California/ Colorado) with episodic spikes (late 1990s–early 2000s)	More geographically dispersed; noticeable post-2015 rise with spikes after 2020; repeated focus on grid targets in multiple regions

Three differences matter operationally. First, target type: Eco-extremists often select grievance-linked commercial or industrial nodes where disruption is symbolic and economically punitive, whereas accelerationist actors prioritize high-leverage critical nodes where they view potential for failure to cascade across communities. Second, risk posture: Eco-sabotage has historically tried to reduce the probability of casualties through timing and target selection, while accelerationist plotting tolerates higher casualty risk and frequently relies on firearms or high-energy explosives. Third, theory of change: Eco-sabotage is typically coercive and issue-

bounded, whereas accelerationism is system-disruptive and aims to amplify instability, polarize communities, and erode state capacity.

Areas of convergence are noteworthy not because eco-extremist movements and actors employing accelerationist logic share the same ideological goals, but because both have at times relied on similar operational methods of sabotage against infrastructure. Eco-extremist sabotage and infrastructure-focused accelerationist plotting are distinct phenomena, not parallel movements with shared goals. Eco-extremism is usually issue-specific and coercive, using sabotage to impose costs and deter practices viewed as environmentally destructive. Accelerationist actors, by contrast, treat attacks on infrastructure as a means of producing broader systemic disruption or collapse. The comparison is still useful at the operational level: Both have at times relied on decentralized organization, clandestine cells, and sabotage against high-visibility targets. But the differences are more important than the similarities. Eco-extremist campaigns historically focused more often on grievance-linked commercial or infrastructure-adjacent assets, whereas accelerationist actors more often target truly critical systems, especially the electric grid, for their cascading effects.

Law-Enforcement and Policy Response Trajectory (2000-2025)

This section summarizes how federal and state responses have evolved as the center of gravity in domestic infrastructure sabotage shifted. It traces the transition from early 2000s "special interest" cases associated with environmental and animal-rights extremism to the late-2010s and 2020s focus on domestic violent extremists (including racially or ethnically motivated actors) and critical infrastructure risk. The throughline is not only changing adversaries, but changing legal tools, intelligence posture, and the degree to which infrastructure protection became integrated into counterterrorism practice.

Operation Backfire (2004-2008)

The FBI's Operation Backfire dismantled the core Pacific Northwest network known as "The Family," which had carried out high-profile arsons and related sabotage under the ELF and ALF banners. The investigation solved more than 40 eco-terrorism crimes, leading to the indictment of 11 members and guilty pleas from over 15 individuals by late 2007, with sentences of up to 13 years in federal prison.[49] Courts applied terrorism enhancements even though no deaths occurred, reflecting an expansive understanding of terrorism that includes ideologically motivated property destruction; critics argued this blurred distinctions between sabotage campaigns and mass-casualty terrorism, and the debate persists.[50]

Legislation Adaptation

In 2006, Congress passed the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) to enhance penalties for sabotage tied to animal-related industries; the statute implicitly accepted that ideological property destruction could be terrorism.[51] Infrastructure protection efforts also became more formalized and enforceable. After the Energy Policy Act of 2005, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) gained authority to oversee mandatory reliability standards for the bulk power system, and the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC)'s Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP) standards became the backbone of regulated grid security.[52] Later, after heightened concern about physical attacks on substations, FERC directed development of a dedicated physical-security reliability standard (CIP-014), requiring certain transmission owners to identify critical facilities and implement physical security plans.[53]

Intelligence Adaptation, Prosecution Strategies, and Reporting

By the late 2010s and early 2020s, the U.S. intelligence community and DHS/FBI increasingly framed domestic violent extremists as a sustained terrorism threat with credible pathways to critical infrastructure targeting, including the energy sector.[54] Senior DHS intelligence leadership explicitly distinguished between routine vandalism and ideologically driven grid attacks, warning that some incidents are conducted by DVEs seeking to "engineer a societal collapse."[55] Prosecution strategy also shifted toward infrastructure-specific charging. Section 1366 of the U.S. Code (destruction of an energy facility) has become a central tool in major grid plots, including the Baltimore-area conspiracy that resulted in a 20-year federal sentence.[56] In parallel, threat reporting to the private sector became more institutionalized through sector coordinating mechanisms, Information Sharing and Analysis Center (ISAC) channels, and fusion-center dissemination, reducing reliance on ad hoc warning pathways.[57]

Gaps and Considerations

Key challenges persist: The United States lacks a federal domestic terrorism statute for ideologically motivated violence not tied to a foreign group; many small utilities lack resources to harden infrastructure; public-private intelligence-sharing remains inconsistent; and many state-level law-enforcement agencies remain oriented toward vandalism rather than ideologically motivated targeted sabotage.[58] Despite episodic attention, infrastructure-focused domestic extremism is still often handled in ideological stovepipes, and cross-ideological threat modeling, prioritization, and sustained resourcing remain uneven across agencies and jurisdictions.[59]

Conclusion

The phenomenon of 'two extremes, one grid' reveals that critical infrastructure and adjacent industrial/commercial targets have become a shared battlefield for extremist movements motivated by differing ideologies. While their worldviews could not differ more, both share interest in the same general target set—not by accident, but because infrastructure holds power in its symbolism—something all of society relies on—which makes it a highly attractive target for disruption and spectacle, and, at least in the eyes of some, to catalyze. Importantly, this partial overlap in target sets creates a strategic opportunity: Measures that harden core grid assets against one category of extremist yield spillover protection against others, even though eco-extremists and accelerationist actors have historically prioritized different types of infrastructure and pursued different strategic ends.

Although this article presents eco-extremism and accelerationist violence as distinct analytical categories, real-world actors do not always fall neatly into one camp. Some recent cases reflect ideological crossover or tactical borrowing, such as individuals adopting both anti-industrial and anti-state framing. Online ecosystems have accelerated this blending by circulating sabotage manuals, manifestos, and visual propaganda across ideological lines. Future threat modeling and policy planning should account for this fluidity, particularly as lone actors and decentralized cells increasingly draw from multiple extremist milieus.

This review of 50 years of domestic infrastructure terrorism shows that attacks on U.S. infrastructure have emerged in distinct ideological waves rather than along a single continuous trajectory. Environmental and animal-rights extremism dominated the late 1990s and early 2000s, while far-right extremism infrastructure plotting, including a subset of explicitly accelerationist cases, rose after 2015. These waves differed in target selection, methods, and theory of change: Eco-extremist campaigns more often focused on grievance-linked commercial and industrial targets and generally emphasized coercive economic disruption, whereas contemporary accelerationist actors have more often prioritized critical systems, especially the electric grid, for their potential to produce cascading effects. The broader implication is that infrastructure sabotage should be understood as a recurring tactic that can migrate across ideological milieus even when motives and strategic objectives differ. Effective policy therefore requires both precision and breadth: precision in distinguishing among perpetrators and pathways to violence, and breadth in building protective and resilience measures that remain useful across changing threat environments. CTC

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