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Mayhem, Murder, and Misdirection: Violent Extremist Attack Plots Against Critical Infrastructure in the United States, 2016-2022

Ilana Krill

Bennett Clifford

Program on Extremism, George Washington University

National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center

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Ilana Krill & Bennett Clifford
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Program on Extremism
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



NCITE NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM,
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2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20006
<https://www.extremism.gwu.edu>

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The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and nonviolent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or The George Washington University. This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-01.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	3
Literature Review	5
Methodology	10
Data and Findings	12
Attack Plots Targeting Energy Infrastructure	16
Attack Plots Targeting Transportation Systems Infrastructure.....	18
Analysis	21
Conclusion	28

Executive Summary

In the United States, critical infrastructure, or “assets, systems, and networks, whether physical or virtual, [that] 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,” are prime targets in violent extremist attack plots.¹ While a variety of violent extremist movements have attempted to assault American critical infrastructure throughout modern history, the Department of Homeland Security and other national security authorities have recently sounded the alarm that U.S.-based violent extremists have developed “credible, specific plans” to attack critical infrastructure.²

To understand the current dimensions of this threat, this paper reviews 94 cases of individuals charged in the U.S. federal court system from 2016 to 2022 with planning to conduct violent extremist attacks, 35 of whom attempted to attack critical infrastructure systems. 19 of these cases are associated with the Salafi-jihadist movement; 16 are associated with white supremacist groups. Evaluating these cases, the report finds:

- Salafi-jihadist attack planners were significantly more likely to consider critical infrastructure systems as targets for attack than their white supremacist counterparts.
- Salafi-jihadist and white supremacist attack planners attempted to target different critical infrastructure sectors, with the former focusing on the commercial facilities, government facilities, and emergency services sectors, and the latter predominantly focusing on the energy sector.
- Since 2019, white supremacist attacks plots against critical infrastructure systems have distinctly increased.
- Between 2016 and 2022, white supremacist plots targeting energy systems dramatically increased in frequency. 13 individuals associated with the movement were arrested and charged in federal court with planning attacks on the energy sector; 11 of these attack planners were charged after 2020.
- The rise of accelerationist ideology and doctrine during the past decade likely fueled the increased risk of attack plots within white supremacist milieus targeting critical infrastructure, and the energy sector in particular.

¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. “Critical Infrastructure Sectors.” Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. <https://www.cisa.gov/critical-infrastructure-sectors>

² Vavra, Shannon. 2022. “DHS Warns That Right-Wing Extremists Could Attack Power Grid.” The Daily Beast, January 25, 2022. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/dhs-warns-that-right-wing-extremists-could-attack-power-grid?ref=scroll>

Introduction

In their attempts to use violent force against civilian targets to achieve political aims, violent extremists of all backgrounds frequently choose critical infrastructure systems as targets. Simply defined, critical infrastructure comprises facilities and assets that are essential for the normal functioning of day-to-day life within a country. In the United States, a wide-reaching swath of sectors of the U.S. economy are considered critical infrastructure, from energy and transportation to agriculture and public health. The logic of terrorism targeting critical infrastructure is almost self-explanatory. Because the disruption of critical infrastructure sectors would, by the very nature of the targets in question, impede “business as usual” for large parts of American society and the U.S. government, extremists who seek to accomplish this aim tend to view critical infrastructure as an attractive target.³

Following this logic, violent extremists and terrorist organizations of numerous ideological persuasions have conducted devastating attacks on critical infrastructure in the United States. Notably, this type of attack plotting is not the sole purview of any single individual, group, or extremist movement. Regardless of ideological persuasion, terrorist attacks on critical infrastructure are ordered towards three different (but not mutually exclusive) goals. Some see targeting critical infrastructure as an efficient means of generating mass casualties during the commission of the attack. Large groups of individuals gather at particular types of facilities associated with critical infrastructure sectors and can be targeted en masse, and some attackers perceive certain kinds of critical infrastructure as less protected than others, making them easy targets. Others, understanding that a potent hit to a critical infrastructure facility can generate a wide-reaching societal disaster, target critical infrastructure to induce panic, fear, or terror in society as a pretext for gaining further support for their cause. Finally, some attackers believe that the aftermath of a successful attack on critical infrastructure will force the government to redirect national security and emergency response resources, creating a diversion that can free up space for further attack planning.⁴

Today’s terrorism threat picture in the U.S. is incredibly fluid, dynamic, and dangerous, and under this backdrop authorities are increasingly worried about an uptick in terrorist plotting against critical infrastructure. The two types of actors at the forefront of these types of planning are domestic violent extremists (DVE) and homegrown violent extremists (HVE), and the Department of Homeland Security warns that these actors increasingly “[view] attacks against U.S. critical infrastructure as a means to create chaos and advance ideological goals.”⁵ Because of this renewed focus and concern, this paper

³ Ackerman, Gary, Praven Abhayaratne, J. Bale, Anjali Bhattacharjee, Charles Blair, Lydia Hansell, Andrew Jayne, et al. 2007. “Assessing Terrorist Motivations for Attacking Critical Infrastructure.” Livermore, California: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. <https://www.osti.gov/servlets/purl/902328>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. “Summary of Terrorism Threat to the U.S. Homeland.” *National Terrorism Advisory Bulletin*. February 7, 2022. <https://www.dhs.gov/ntas/advisory/national-terrorism-advisory-system-bulletin-february-07-2022>

reviews white supremacist DVE and Salafi-jihadist HVE attack planning against critical infrastructure during the past six years, ascertaining the current trends and differences in how these actors plan their attacks and their motivations for doing so.⁶ Salafi-jihadists and white supremacists are far from the only extremist movements operating in the U.S. who have demonstrated an interest in conducting attacks on critical infrastructure.⁷ However, the report evaluates these two movements because according to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) they were the most lethal HVE and DVE groups, respectively, during the period of the study.⁸ After an evaluation of previous studies on the terrorist threat to critical infrastructure, the report analyzes 35 cases from a dataset of 94 individuals charged in federal court with planning violent extremist attacks between 2016 and 2022, highlighting key trends and the potential future developments of violent extremist attack plotting against critical infrastructure.

⁶ The United States government refers to white supremacists as “racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE) who are driven by a belief in the superiority of the white race.” “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community.” 2021. Office of the Director of National Intelligence. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

⁷ Miller, “Terrorist Attacks Targeting Critical Infrastructure in the United States.”

⁸ “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021.” 2021. U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/UnclassSummaryofDVEAssessment-17MAR21.pdf>.; Wray, Christopher. 2022. “Statement Before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies: Federal Bureau of Investigation Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2023.” Federal Bureau of Investigations. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/federal-bureau-of-investigation-budget-request-for-fiscal-year-2023>.

Literature Review

Over the last 60 years, the definition of critical infrastructure has evolved to incorporate a growing range of vital infrastructure sectors. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) defines critical infrastructure as "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."⁹ CISA separates critical infrastructure into 16 specific sectors: chemical, commercial facilities, communications, critical manufacturing, dams, defense industrial base, emergency services, energy, financial services, food and agriculture, government facilities, healthcare and public health, information technology, nuclear reactors, materials and waste, transportation systems, and water and waste. In this report, we use CISA's current definition and sectors to frame the scope of critical infrastructure targeting cases within the United States.

Terrorists and violent extremists have planned and conducted an array of attacks on critical infrastructure during the past century, but attempts by the U.S. government to more firmly designate what constitutes "critical infrastructure" are largely a product of the past 25 years. In 1996, Executive Order 13010 and the President's Commission on Critical Infrastructure Protection first qualified critical infrastructure as sectors that are "...so vital that their incapacitation or destruction would have a debilitating impact on [U.S. national] defense or economic security."¹⁰ The executive order originally listed eight critical infrastructure spheres; these have since expanded to include emerging sectors, such as the nuclear reactors, materials, and waste sector, critical manufacturing sector, defense industrial base sector, and chemical sector.¹¹ In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. government placed priority on preventing terror attacks on U.S. soil, reducing the U.S.' vulnerability to terrorism, and minimizing damage and recovering from future attacks.¹² During October 2001, Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act, which provided the current standard definition of critical infrastructure.¹³

⁹ CISA, "Critical Infrastructure Sectors."

¹⁰ "Presidential Documents, Executive Order 13010: Critical Infrastructure Protection." 1996. U.S. Federal Registrar. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1996-07-17/pdf/96-18351.pdf>.; Moteff, John, Claudia Copeland, and John Fischer. 2003. "Critical Infrastructures: What Makes an Infrastructure Critical?" U.S. Congressional Research Service - The Library of Congress. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA467306.pdf>.

¹¹ Moteff, John, and Paul Parfomak. 2004. "Critical Infrastructure and Key Assets: Definition and Identification." U.S. Congressional Research Service - The Library of Congress. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA454016.pdf>.; "Energy Sector." n.d. U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Accessed August 4, 2022. <https://www.cisa.gov/energy-sector>.

¹² "The National Strategy for the Physical Protection of Critical Infrastructure and Key Assets." 2003. The White House. https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/Physical_Strategy.pdf.

¹³ Moteff, John, and Paul Parfomak. 2004. "Critical Infrastructure and Key Assets: Definition and Identification." U.S. Congressional Research Service - The Library of Congress. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA454016.pdf>.

The terrorist threat to critical infrastructure in the U.S. is unique because during the past century, both the public and private sectors have both faced the specter of devastating terrorist attacks. Reviewing global critical infrastructure attack cases from 1933 through 2004, Gary Ackerman et al. find that embassies and consulates were the most frequently targeted within larger and smaller attack plots.¹⁴ Additionally, while governments are largely responsible for the protection of critical infrastructure, the private sector is inherently involved. A United Nations report notes that over 80% of critical infrastructure located in Western countries is privately owned, stressing the importance of policies that enforce intercommunity cooperation.¹⁵ Lordan-Perrett et al. stresses that the energy sector vitally supports socioeconomic functioning and if disrupted, would cause disastrous global damage (2019).¹⁶ As John Moteff (2010) acknowledges, some critical infrastructure sectors are intertwined; an attack on one sector could adversely impact others.¹⁷

Greater public and governmental concern surrounding future terrorist activity skyrocketed after the Oklahoma City Bombings of 1995 and the September 2001 attacks, increasing government urgency to address U.S. critical infrastructure's vulnerabilities and protection through research and public policy. In a 2016 report, Erin Miller found that over 2000 terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2015 targeted critical infrastructure within the United States and its protectorates, although attack frequency per year decreased after 1974.¹⁸ She details that commercial facilities were targeted most frequently out of all infrastructure sectors, and were most frequently targeted by environmental terrorist organizations.¹⁹ Commercial facilities are commonly considered under the scope of "soft targets," or more accessible

¹⁴ Ackerman et al., "Assessing Terrorist Motivations for Attacking Critical Infrastructure."

¹⁵ "Physical Protection of Critical Infrastructure Against Terrorist Attacks." 2017. CTED Trends Report. United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2021/Jan/cted-trends-report-march-2017-final.pdf>; Čaleta, C., and P. Shemella. 2011. "Counter Terrorism Challenges Regarding the Process of Critical Infrastructure Protection." Ljubljana, Monterey..

¹⁶ "World Development Report 1994: Infrastructure for Development." 1994. The World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/5977/WDR%201994%20-%20English.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>; Lordan-Perret, Rebecca, Austin L. Wright, Peter Burgherr, Matteo Spada, and Robert Rosner. 2019. "Attacks on Energy Infrastructure Targeting Democratic Institutions." Energy Policy Volume 132 0301–4215. University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Studies, The Paul. Scherrer Institute. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301421519303957>; Hurley, Jr., Daniel C., James F. X. Payne, and Mary T. Anderson. 2013. "Risk Mitigation in the Electric Power Sector: Serious Attention Needed." Armed Forces Communication and Electronics Association Cyber Committee, Critical Infrastructure: Electric Power Subcommittee. https://www.afcea.org/committees/cyber/documents/afcea_critical_infrastructure_final.pdf.

¹⁷ Moteff, John D. 2015. "Critical Infrastructures: Background, Policy, and Implementation." Congressional Research Service. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesecc/RL30153.pdf>.

¹⁸ Miller, Erin. 2016. "Terrorist Attacks Targeting Critical Infrastructure in the United States, 1970-2015." Report to the Office of Intelligence and Analysis, U.S. Department of Homeland Security. College Park, Maryland: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/DHS_I%26A_GTD_Targeting%20Critical%20Infrastructure%20in%20the%20US_June2016.pdf.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

public spaces such as markets and stadiums.²⁰ Next, government facilities were targeted the second most frequently by a variety of organizations, with “left-wing” militants responsible for 14% of the attacks.²¹ Other scholars including Robert Clark and Rolf Deininger (2000) discuss the vulnerability of water, chemical, and energy infrastructure, indicating a need for continued discussion of flexible target hardening.²²

Since the 1970s, these scholars also find that a wide range of terrorist groups have been responsible for multiple critical infrastructure attacks within the United States. Ackerman et al. (2006) found that religious terror organizations have increasingly targeted global critical infrastructure during recent years and conducted a comparable number of critical infrastructure attacks to secular-utopian groups.²³ However, they note that transnational Islamist terrorist groups, domestic right wing extremist organizations, and radical ecology organizations may have the highest potential of committing attacks within the United States.²⁴

How terrorists decide to target critical infrastructure sectors and which sectors they choose to target are decision-making processes that are subject to a significant amount of debate within the academic community, with a variety of scholars evaluating a range of factors that underlie target selection. Terrorists consider their group’s operational objectives, structures, and perceived capabilities when determining targets, and therefore are more likely to elect less protected targets (also known as soft targets) than more secure or “hard” targets.²⁵ Availability of resources and members can impact a group’s operational capacity, which may significantly determine viable targets.²⁶ For example,

²⁰ “The Protection of Critical Infrastructures against Terrorist Attacks: Compendium of Good Practices.” 2018. United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate.
https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2021/Jan/compendium_of_good_practices_eng.pdf.

²¹ Miller, “Terrorist Attacks Targeting Critical Infrastructure in the United States.”

²² Kroll, Danj. 2012. “The Terrorist Threat to Water and Technology’s Role in Safeguarding Supplies.” In *International Seminar on Nuclear War and Planetary Emergencies*. Vol. 45th Session: The Role of Science in the Third Millennium. https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814531788_0030.; Clark, Robert M., and Rolf A. Deininger. 2002. “Protecting the Nation’s Critical Infrastructure: The Vulnerability of U.S. Water Supply Systems.” *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 8 (2): 73–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.00126>.; Giroux, Jennifer, Peter Burgherr, and Laura Melkunaite. “Research Note on the Energy Infrastructure Attack Database (EIAD).” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 6 (2013): 113–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26297069>. Birkett, David Michael. 2017. “Water Critical Infrastructure Security and Its Dependencies.” *Journal of Terrorism Research* 8 (2): 1–21. <http://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1289>.; UN CTED, “Physical Protection of Critical Infrastructure Against Terrorist Attacks.”

²³Ackerman et al., “Assessing Terrorist Motivations for Attacking Critical Infrastructure.”

²⁴ *Ibid*, page 172.

²⁵ *Ibid*.; Woo, Gordon. 2002. “Understanding Terrorism Risk.” Newark, California: Risk Management Solutions.; Drake, C. J. M. 1998. “The Role of Ideology in Terrorists’ Target Selection.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10 (2): 53–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0954659808427457>.

; Renfro, Nancy A., and Joseph L. Smith. 2016. “Threat / Vulnerability Assessments And Risk Analysis.” Applied Research Associates, In. https://www.wbdg.org/resources/threat-vulnerability-assessments-and-risk-analysis?r=env_atria.

²⁶ Drake, “The Role of Ideology in Terrorists’ Target Selection.”

government facilities may be more heavily guarded and have extensive barriers to entry compared to transportation infrastructure such as highways; with limited resources and capabilities, terror organizations and non-state actors would be more likely to elect the “easier” target. Charles Drake suggests that highly symbolic or functionally important infrastructure are more attractive terrorist targets, as their disruption may elicit greater psychological damage of civilians or increased casualties.²⁷ Despite this, inherently harder targets, no matter how ideal, can discourage attack plots.²⁸

In recent years, as the terrorist and violent extremist threat to critical infrastructure has metastasized, there has also been a renewal of government and academic focus on these issues and debates. Most recently, in June 2022, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) Bulletin warned of a heightened risk of terrorist attacks against public facilities, private institutions, and critical infrastructure.²⁹ The alert also assessed that these risks significantly expanded during the past five years, as domestic extremists developed specific plots against the energy sector.³⁰ The recent June 2022 bulletin adds to a steady drumbeat warnings from DHS in the past year about the potential for terrorist attacks on critical infrastructure. For instance, a January 2022 memo warned energy stakeholders of potential physical damage to energy infrastructure, explaining that domestic extremists feel more capable of attacking the energy sector without being detained due to the infrastructure’s widely dispersed state.³¹ Then, in February 2022, DHS reemphasized domestic extremists’ renewed focus on targeting electric and communications infrastructure, “including by spreading false or misleading narratives about 5G cellular technology” through Telegram and other media channels.³² In addition to the increased tactical and operational capacity of white supremacists, law enforcement has recorded numerous Salafi-jihadist inspired plots targeting infrastructure, including an attack against the U.S. Military Academy at West Point as recently as 2021.³³

Extensive further research is necessary to adequately address the uptick of white-supremacist and Salafi-jihadist terror attacks against critical infrastructure sectors in recent years. In this report, we

²⁷ *Ibid.*; Ackerman et al. 2007. “Assessing Terrorist Motivations for Attacking Critical Infrastructure.”

²⁸ *Ibid.* all.

²⁹ “National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin - June 7, 2022.” 2022. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/ntas/alerts/22_0607_S1_NTAS-Bulletin_508.pdf.

³⁰ Johnson, Bridget. “DHS: Extremists Continue to Plot, Encourage Physical Attacks on Electricity Infrastructure.” *Homeland Security Today*. January 25, 2022. <https://www.hstoday.us/featured/dhs-extremists-continue-to-plot-encourage-physical-attacks-on-electricity-infrastructure/>

³¹ *Ibid.*; Walton, Robert. 2022. “Extremists Have Developed ‘Credible, Specific Plans’ to Attack the US Power Grid, DHS Says in New Warning.” *Utility Dive*, January 26, 2022. <https://www.utilitydive.com/news/extremists-have-developed-credible-specific-plans-to-attack-the-us-power/617741/>.

³² DHS, “Summary of Terrorism Threat to the U.S. Homeland.”; “Critical Infrastructure News.” 2022. Maryland Coordination and Analysis Center (MCAC). <https://www.mcac.maryland.gov/newsroom/Critical%20Infrastructure%20News/departement-of-homeland-security-issues-a-new-ntas-bulletin>.

³³ “Complaint.” 2021. *United States v. James Bradley and Arwa Muthana*. United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, April 1, 2021. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1382551/download>

analyze the propensity for such critical infrastructure attacks through ideological and operational lenses, and distinguish a stark distinction between white supremacist and Salafi-jihadist's attack patterns.

Methodology

This report evaluates terrorist attack plots targeting critical infrastructure in the United States that were planned by homegrown violent extremists (HVE) and domestic violent extremists (DVE). To do so, it draws from a sample of 39 Salafi-jihadist and 55 white supremacist attack planners that were charged in U.S. federal court for their alleged attack plots between January 1, 2016 and August 1, 2022. Comparisons between these two movements can yield important insights for risk assessments of their capacities and interest in targeting critical infrastructure.

To gather this data, the report draws from broader databases of extremists charged in U.S. federal court maintained by the Program on Extremism at George Washington University. The selection criteria mirror an April 2022 Program on Extremism report comparing attack planning between these two movements: individuals included in the report sample must have been charged in U.S. federal courts between January 1, 2016 and August 1, 2022 and alleged to have planned or conducted violence in the U.S. in furtherance of the “goals, objectives, or ideologies of the white supremacist or Salafi-jihadist movements.”³⁴

The report uses this data to answer several research questions. First, it ascertains the frequency of attack plots by these types of extremists that target critical infrastructure, defined by the Department of Homeland Security as “sectors whose assets, systems, and networks...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” and delineated into 16 unique critical infrastructure sectors.³⁵ By analyzing court documents, media reports, and interviews with law enforcement and intelligence officials about individual cases in the dataset, the report attempts to determine the percentage of white supremacist and jihadist attack plots during this time period that targeted critical infrastructure, and the most frequently targeted critical infrastructure sectors in each group.

Second, through combining statistical data and case study analysis, the report examines whether there are any significant differences in how Salafi-jihadists and white supremacists target critical infrastructure in the U.S. To accomplish this, the report will attempt to identify quantitative and qualitative similarities and differences between Salafi-jihadist and white supremacist attack plots in terms of how frequently critical infrastructure is targeted by each group, which sectors are most frequently targeted, and whether each group appears to have a predilection for any specific sector, target, or attack method. Comparative analysis of this type can assist in the development of risk assessments and threat actor profiles for each movement, helping law enforcement, intelligence, and

³⁴ Clifford, Bennett, and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens. 2022. “Imitators or Innovators? Comparing Salafi-Jihadist and White Supremacist Attack Planning in the United States.” Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, National Counterterrorism, Innovation, Technology, and Education Center. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Imitators-or-Innovators_Clifford-Meleagrou-Hitchens_NCITE_04212022.pdf.

³⁵ CISA, “Critical Infrastructure Sectors.”

other officials responsible for protecting critical infrastructure in assessing the threats from homegrown and domestic violent extremists to U.S. critical infrastructure sectors.

Because of the selection criteria for including cases in the sample, there are several limitations to the findings of this report. First, and most notably, the violent extremist threat to critical infrastructure is far broader than white supremacist and Salafi-jihadist threat actors. During the time period of the study, an array of violent extremist actors, including but not limited to non-Salafi jihadists (e.g., in groups like Hezbollah), militia violent extremists, anarchist and left-wing violent extremists, violent extremists inspired by conspiracy theories like QAnon, and single-issue violent extremists (e.g., abortion-related, environmental and animal rights groups) have carried out or plotted significant attacks against U.S. critical infrastructure.³⁶ While notable in their own right, these plots are outside the scope of this study. Moreover, cases of individuals charged only at the state level (and not the federal level), attack planners who died during the commission of their attacks, and attack planners who were never arrested, charged, or indicted are not included in the sample.

³⁶ For instance, see Kokinos, Anyssia, Nakissa Jahanbani, Jon Lewis, and Devorah Margolin. 2022. "Hezbollah's Operations and Networks in the United States: Two Decades in Review." Washington: Program on Extremism at George Washington University. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Hezbollah%27s_Operations_and_Networks_in_the_United_States_June30_2022.pdf; Clifford, Bennett, and Jon Lewis. 2022. "'This Is the Aftermath': Assessing Domestic Violent Extremism One Year After the Capitol Siege." Washington: Program on Extremism at George Washington University. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/This%20is%20the%20Aftermath.pdf>; "Anarchist/Left-Wing Violent Extremism in America: Trends in Radicalization, Recruitment and Mobilization." 2021. Washington: Program on Extremism at George Washington University. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Anarchist%20-%20Left-Wing%20Violent%20Extremism%20in%20America.pdf>; Loadenthal, Michael. 2021. "Anti-5G, Infrastructure Sabotage, and COVID-19." *GNET* (blog). January 19, 2021. <https://gnet-research.org/2021/01/19/anti-5g-infrastructure-sabotage-and-covid-19/>; Ault, Nicole. 2022. "The Attacks on Crisis-Pregnancy Centers." *WSJ*, June 20, 2022, sec. Opinion. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-attacks-on-crisis-pregnancy-centers-janes-revenge-abortion-roe-v-wade-violence-destroyed-11655653644>; "Pair charged with interfering with safety on railroad tracks." 2020. Department of Justice Press Release. November 30, 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdwa/pr/pair-charged-interfering-safety-railroad-tracks>

Data and Findings

Of the 94 cases of individuals who are alleged to have planned violent extremist attacks in the U.S. between 2016 and 2022, 55 (59%) were classified as white supremacists and 39 (41%) as jihadists. 35 of the 94 cases (37%) involved some level of planning attacks on critical infrastructure, including 16 individuals charged for their roles in white supremacist plots and 19 charged with jihadist-related attack planning. On the Salafi-jihadist side, 17 out of these 19 alleged plotters were affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); the remainder were al-Qaeda supporters. While only six of the 16 white supremacist plotters had a discernible, tangible connection to a named organization (including three members of the Base, two members of the Atomwaffen Division, and one member of the National Socialist Movement), 14 out of the 16 were known participants in online networks connected to the neo-Nazi accelerationist movement. The impact of this doctrine on plots against critical infrastructure will be examined in the following analysis section.

By comparing these data within their respective sample populations, we find that approximately 50% of the jihadist cases within the sample included some level of planning to conduct an attack on critical infrastructure whereas only 29% of the white supremacist cases involved this type of planning. Therefore, we find that within the overall sample, Salafi-jihadist attack planners were significantly more likely to plan attacks on critical infrastructure than their white supremacist counterparts.³⁷



Several factors could possibly explain this difference. First, and most importantly, the overall trajectory of Salafi-jihadist and white supremacist attack planning in the U.S. during the past decade generally shows that the former movement tends towards counterforce (e.g., against government, military, and law enforcement targets) and the latter towards countervalue (e.g., against specific groups or individuals within society) targets.³⁸ As a result of the Salafi-jihadist core belief that they are locked into

³⁷ A hypothesis test for population proportion yielded $p=.02619$.

³⁸ Jones, Seth, Catrina Doxsee, Grace Hwang, James Suber, and Nicholas Harrington. 2020. "The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States." Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states>; Argentino, Marc-Andre, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. 2021. "Violent Extremist Innovation: A Cross-Ideological Analysis." NCITE Report.

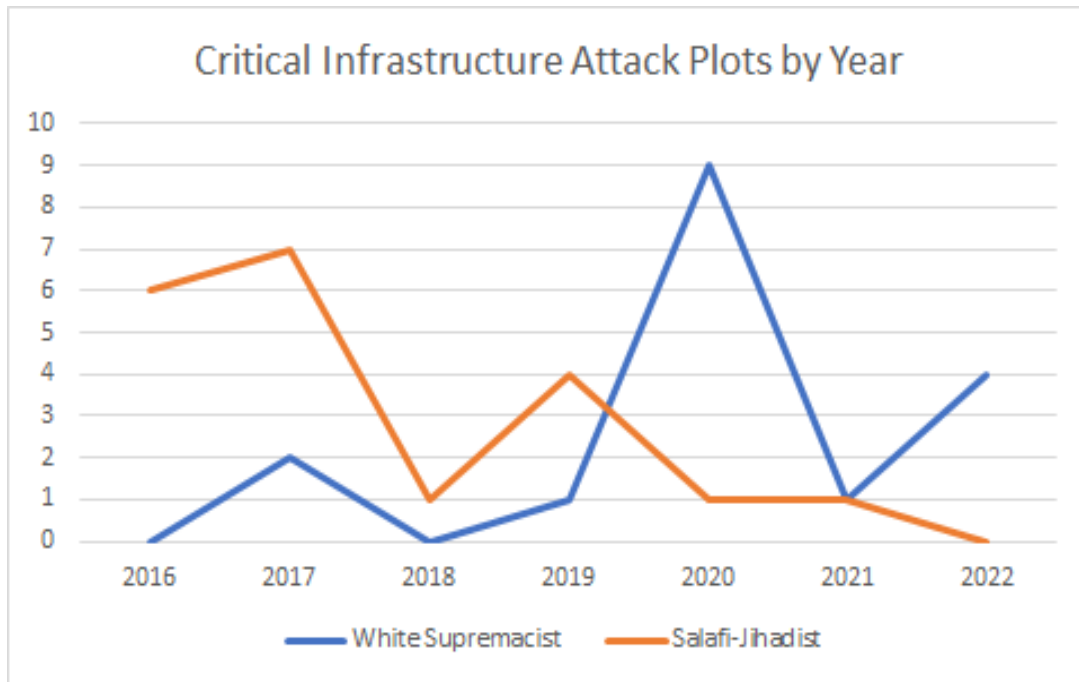
an intractable conflict with Western governments and militaries, they err towards targeting sites related to the U.S. government, armed forces, or law enforcement—many of which are classed as critical infrastructure.³⁹ In comparison, white supremacists are more likely to single out and target people within society, especially targets related to racial or religious minorities. More broadly, however, the difference could also be attributed to other factors: for instance, individual jihadists also tend towards considering a wider scope of targets for their attacks than white supremacists, and may incidentally be more likely to include critical infrastructure as one out of many potential sites for an attack.⁴⁰

There are also substantial differences between the two movements in *when* plots against critical infrastructure were most frequent. The banner years for Salafi-jihadist attack planning-- both those targeting critical infrastructure and in general-- were in 2016 and 2017. In these years, out of a total 25 cases involving attack planners, 13 targeted critical infrastructure. Since that time, the number of Salafi-jihadist cases steadily tapered off, with a minor uptick in 2019. In contrast, white supremacist attack planning cases were most frequent in 2018 (15 cases), 2019 (13 cases), and 2020 (12 cases). However, the proportion of white supremacist attack plots involving critical infrastructure dramatically increased in 2020 and 2022; nine out of the 12 attack plots (75%) in 2020 and all four of the attack plots in 2022 targeted infrastructure.

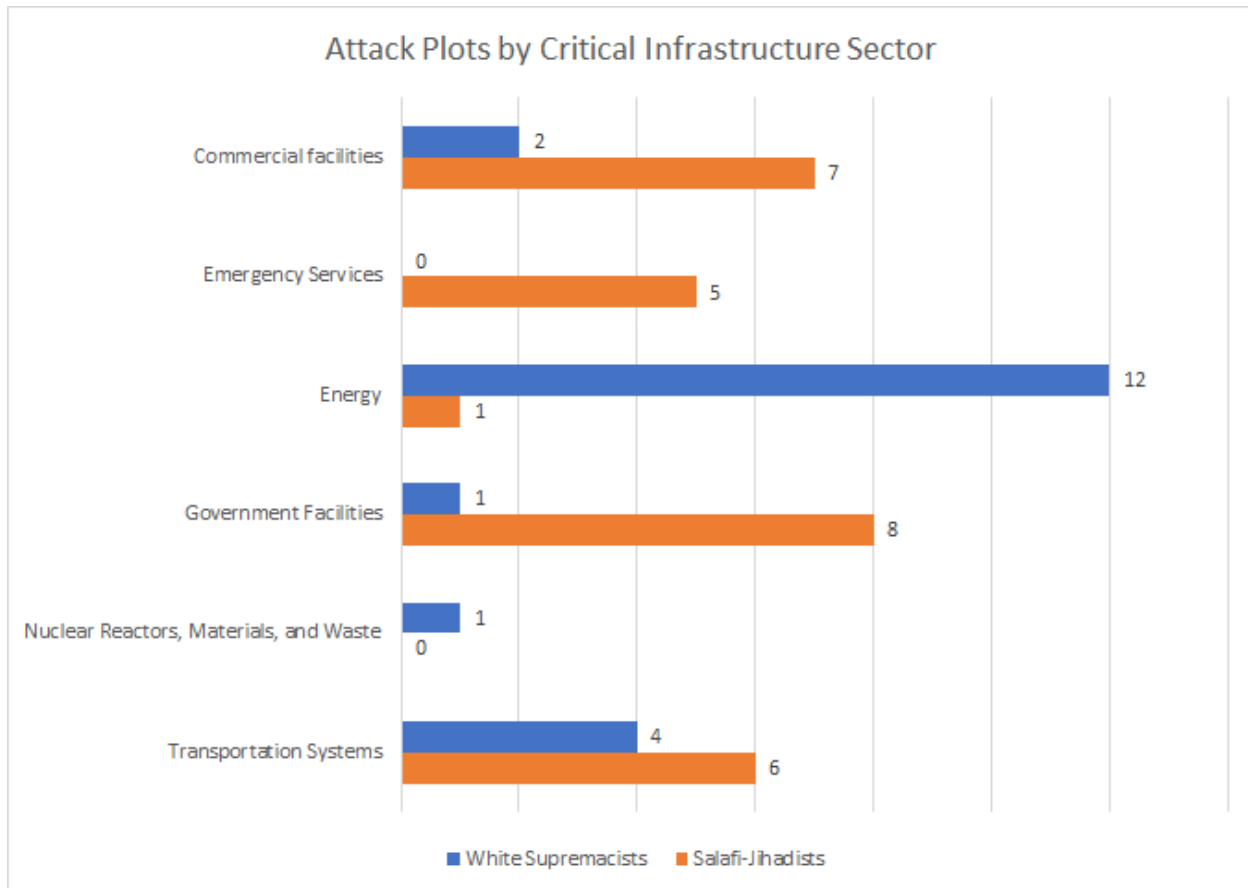
International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation. <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ICSR-Report-Violent-Extremist-Innovation-A-Cross%E2%80%91Ideological-Analysis.pdf>

³⁹ Pape, Robert A. 2003. "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism." *The American Political Science Review* 97 (3): 343–61; Moghadam, Assaf. 2009. "Motives for Martyrdom: Al-Qaida, Salafi Jihad, and the Spread of Suicide Attacks." *International Security* 33 (3): 46–78. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2009.33.3.46>; Harris-Hogan, Shandon. 2015. "Understanding the Logic: An Analysis of Jihadist Targeting and Tactics in Western Countries from 2000 to Mid-2012." *Security Challenges* 11 (1): 73–89; Gruenewald, Jeff, Brent R. Klein, Joshua D. Freilich, and Steven Chermak. 2019. "American Jihadi Terrorism: A Comparison of Homicides and Unsuccessful Plots." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31 (3): 516–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1253563>.

⁴⁰ Clifford and Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Imitators or Innovators."



Discrepancies between jihadist and white supremacist attack plots on critical infrastructure are even more apparent when examining the data on target selection by critical infrastructure sector. During this time period, only six of the 16 critical infrastructure sectors were targeted by either jihadists or white supremacists; the most frequently targeted sectors were the energy sector (13 cases), transportation systems sector (11 cases), and the government facilities and commercial facilities sectors (9 cases each). Other targeted sectors included the emergency services sector (5 cases), and the nuclear reactors, materials, and waste sector (1 case).



However, there are very few instances of overlap between the critical infrastructure sectors targeted by jihadists and white supremacists. The only sector that was targeted in more than two jihadist and white supremacist plots during this time period was the transportation systems sector: seven alleged jihadists and four white supremacists were charged with planning to attack transportation infrastructure. But even within this category, there are few commonalities when targeting data are broken down further into the seven sub-sectors included within the transportation systems sector as defined by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.⁴¹ Five out of the seven jihadist plots targeting transportation systems were focused on the mass transit and public rail subsector, one targeted the pipeline systems subsector, and the last plot targeted the highway and motor carrier subsector. In contrast, one out of the four white supremacist plots targeted the mass transit and public rail subsector, while three targeted the highway and motor carrier and the freight rail subsectors.

For the rest of the critical infrastructure sectors, the data show that during this time period, jihadist and white supremacist attack plots on critical infrastructure directed their focuses towards widely different targets. For instance, the energy sector—the most-targeted area within the sample—was the target in

⁴¹ "Transportation Systems Sector." n.d. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Accessed July 26, 2022. <https://www.cisa.gov/transportation-systems-sector>.

13 cases, 12 of which were white supremacist-related. The dynamic is similar with the government facilities, commercial facilities, and emergency services sectors, which were predominantly the focus of jihadist attack planners. Overall, the differences between jihadist and white supremacist target selection in plots focused on critical infrastructure are statistically significant.⁴²

Attack Plots Targeting Energy Infrastructure

Perhaps the most striking anomaly within the data are the number of white supremacist plots focused on the energy sector and the related nuclear reactor, materials, and waste sector. The 13 cases of individuals who reportedly planned to conduct attacks on a variety of energy infrastructure—from small assaults on local power lines to potentially devastating attacks on power grids or nuclear facilities—represent 87% of the white supremacist-related cases in which critical infrastructure was targeted. 11 of these cases involve individuals charged in 2020, 2021, and 2022. The increasing frequency of these plans, combined with their potential cataclysmic effects, warrants further analysis to determine the factors behind white supremacists' targeting of the energy sector.

The first of these cases within the sample took place in 2017, when Brandon Clint Russell, a founder of the neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division (AWD), was arrested in Florida and charged in federal court with unlawfully possessing an explosive device and explosive material.⁴³ Russell, a former Florida National Guardsman, was in possession of several types of explosive precursor material, firearms, white supremacist propaganda and paraphernalia, and a cooler containing the manufactured explosive compound hexamethylene triperoxide diamine (HTMD).⁴⁴ At trial, one of Russell's roommates and a former AWD member told jurors that he intended to target a number of different locations for explosive attacks using this material, including a Jewish synagogue, power lines, and perhaps most concerningly, a nearby nuclear reactor site.⁴⁵ Among the propaganda seized from Russell's apartment during the search were several books about the functioning of nuclear reactors and nuclear accidents.⁴⁶ Two years later, another AWD affiliate was involved in a highly similar plot involving the construction of improvised

⁴² A Chi-square test of equal frequencies yielded $p = 0.00282196259$.

⁴³ Thompson, A. C. 2018. "An Atomwaffen Member Sketched a Map to Take the Neo-Nazis Down. What Path Officials Took Is a Mystery." ProPublica. November 20, 2018. <https://www.propublica.org/article/an-atomwaffen-member-sketched-a-map-to-take-the-neo-nazis-down-what-path-officials-took-is-a-mystery?token=e3k6mE9frXgAOt3zvKfhyLDrUGgrhmOb>.

⁴⁴ "Neo-Nazi Leader Sentenced to Five Years in Federal Prison for Explosives Charges." 2018. Department of Justice Press Release. January 9, 2018. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/neo-nazi-leader-sentenced-five-years-federal-prison-explosives-charges>

⁴⁵ Russell was arrested in May 2017 at a fast food restaurant in Florida, alongside another member of the Atomwaffen Division, in possession of an assault rifle and over one thousand rounds of ammunition. Law enforcement believe that he was en route to the Turkey Point Nuclear Generating Station outside of Homestead, Florida. "United States' Motion for Upward Departure and/or Upward Variance and Sentencing Memorandum." 2018. United States of America v. Brandon Clint Russell. United States District Court for the Middle District of Florida. January 7, 2018. Case: 8:17-cr-00283-SCB-JSS. https://www.facingsouth.org/sites/default/files/Russell_Sentencing.pdf; Thompson, A.C. 2018. "Documenting Hate: New American Nazis." FRONTLINE, November 20, 2018. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/documenting-hate-new-american-nazis/>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

explosive devices (IEDs) to target federal law enforcement buildings and power grid substations.⁴⁷ Beau Merryman, a resident of Marion County, Texas, pleaded guilty to distributing information related to constructing explosive devices and was sentenced to 41 months in prison in 2022.⁴⁸ Russell also pleaded guilty and was given a five-year sentence in early 2018.⁴⁹

After Merryman's arrest, there were three other plots involving small groups of white supremacists who attempted to conduct attacks on energy infrastructure. In early 2020, the FBI arrested Brian Mark Lemley, Jr., Patrik Jordan Matthews, and William Garfield Bilbrough IV; they were each charged with several federal firearms offenses and harboring a fugitive.⁵⁰ The three men were members of another neo-Nazi group, the Base, and engaged in a series of tactical exercises with firearms to prepare themselves for a series of attacks to destabilize the U.S.⁵¹ In 2019, while a major anti-gun control rally was taking place in Virginia, the trio discussed a plot to "create...some instability" by "derail[ing] some rail lines," "shut[ting] down the highways" and "get to every single thing you can take out—power lines, everything," with the goal of "kick[ing] off the economic collapse of the U.S. within a week after the Boog starts."⁵² Lemley and Matthews were arrested in Delaware in January 2020 and were each later sentenced to nine years in federal prison.⁵³

Simultaneously, a five-man team of neo-Nazis located in several states reportedly attempted to organize a paramilitary unit and coordinate attacks in the U.S. on behalf of the group.⁵⁴ Each member of the team had previous military experience; three were former United States Marines who were stationed together at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina.⁵⁵ They allegedly met on the neo-Nazi online forum Iron March and used an encrypted messaging application to share information with one another about gathering firearms and explosives for use in an attack.⁵⁶ Federal prosecutors argued that the group's intended target for a large-scale attack was a power grid substation in the Northwest "for the purpose of creating general chaos and to provide cover and ease of escape in those areas in which they planned to undertake assassinations and other desired operations to further their goal of creating

⁴⁷ "Marion County Man Sentenced for Distributing Bombmaking Instructions." 2022. U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. March 17, 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edtx/pr/marion-county-man-sentenced-distributing-bombmaking-instructions>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ DOJ, "Neo-Nazi Leader Sentenced to Five Years"

⁵⁰ "Two Members of the Violent Extremist Group 'The Base' Each Sentenced to Nine Years in Federal Prison for Firearms and Alien-Related Charges." 2021. U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. October 28, 2021. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-md/pr/two-members-violent-extremist-group-base-each-sentenced-nine-years-federal-prison>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² This is a reference to "the Boogaloo," a codeword within far-right movements used to refer to a second American civil war. Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Third Superseding Indictment." 2021. United States of America v. Liam Montgomery Collins, Paul James Kryscuk, Jordan Duncan, Justin Wade Hermanson, and Joseph Maurino. United States District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina. August 18, 2021. Case: 7:20-CR-167-1M2. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Collins%20et%20al%20Third%20Superseding%20Indictment.pdf>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

a white ethno-state.”⁵⁷ Liam Collins, Paul Kryscuk and Jordan Duncan, three members of the alleged conspiracy, were arrested and charged in October 2020, the cell’s other members were included in a superseding indictment in 2021.⁵⁸

Finally, in February 2022, the Department of Justice charged Christopher Brenner Cook, Jonathan Allen Frost and Jackson Matthew Sawall, of Ohio, Texas, and Wisconsin, respectively, with conspiring to provide material support to terrorists.⁵⁹ This charge, which is not typically issued in DVE cases, was utilized by the DOJ because the men planned to attack several power grid substations throughout the U.S., thus constituting a violation of providing material support to groups of individuals who attempt to destroy an energy facility.⁶⁰ Using a private chat group, the three co-conspirators distributed information about attacking a grid substation, sharing white supremacist propaganda, a Department of Energy report about grid stations, and a list of substations throughout the U.S.⁶¹ Each member of the group would be responsible for an attack on a regional power grid center, which they believed would trigger mass unrest in the U.S., generate an economic collapse, and plunge the country into a race war.⁶² Weeks after their arrest, the three men pleaded guilty in late February 2022 and await sentencing.⁶³

Attack Plots Targeting Transportation Systems Infrastructure

The critical infrastructure sector with the second-highest number of plots in the sample is the transportation systems sector. Unlike the energy sector, there are a comparable number of jihadist and white supremacist plots targeting transportation systems, from roads and highways to railways and subways. Despite their similar frequency, however, there are significant differences that are apparent in the data between *how* jihadists and white supremacists target transportation. The first discrepancy was mentioned previously; jihadists tend towards attacking mass transit and public transportation infrastructure while white supremacists focused on roads and highways. But additionally, the objective of white supremacists and jihadists in attacking transportation systems appears to be different, with jihadists perceiving their attacks on transportation infrastructure as the main objective of their operations while white supremacists view them as the first step in a campaign of terrorist violence.

For an example of the latter viewpoint, the previously mentioned conspiracy involving the Base members Lemley, Matthews and Bilbrough involved a slightly undefined attack plan in which the three men would first target power lines, derail freight rail lines, and “shut down the highways” in an attempt to distract law enforcement, while their comrades-in-arms started a broader effort to collapse the U.S.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “Information.” 2022. United States of America v. Christopher Brenner Cook, Jonathan Allen Frost and Jackson Matthew Sawall. United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio. February 7, 2022. <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.ohsd.264990/gov.uscourts.ohsd.264990.3.0.pdf>

⁶⁰ “Three Men Plead Guilty to Conspiring to Provide Material Support to a Plot to Attack Power Grids in the United States.” 2022. Department of Justice Press Release. February 23, 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/three-men-plead-guilty-conspiring-provide-material-support-plot-attack-power-grids-united>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

government through the use of force.⁶⁴ In cases like these, actors view attacking transportation systems not only as a “soft target,” but also believe in the disruption of economic channels like the electric grid system and the freight rail system as a way of temporarily disrupting American economic life, causing general unrest and mass panic.⁶⁵ That effect, in their perception, would have made it easier to rally Americans to their cause and prolong their further plans for violence beyond the attack.⁶⁶

This differs from the logic of jihadist attacks on transportation considerably. While wreaking economic havoc or causing panic is a preferred outcome, it is not the main objective *per se* of choosing transportation infrastructure as a target. For jihadists, the goal of targeting transportation infrastructure is to pick a relatively unprotected space in which large crowds of people gather, thus allowing the attacker to kill as many people as possible in their attack.⁶⁷ Within the sample, this is reflective of the jihadist attack plots targeting transportation, in which the attackers and would-be attackers in question envisioned their plots as the final stage, not the beginning stage, of their violent acts on behalf of their movement.

In 2016, three men from Canada, Pakistan, and the Philippines were charged with plotting an IED attack on the New York subway system and other major tourist attractions in New York City. Abdulrahman Elbahnasawy, Talha Haroon, and Russel Salic were involved in an international scheme in which the three ISIS supporters planned to construct explosive devices using triacetone triperoxide (TATP), place them in subway stations and at Times Square, detonate them and then target any remaining survivors using firearms.⁶⁸ During one conversation, Haroon told his co-conspirators that targeting a subway stop was “perfect” because of the large numbers of passengers, and planned to “shoot as many passengers on the train as possible...when we run out of bullets we let the [explosive] vests go off.”⁶⁹ This signals that in this plot, target selection was motivated by kill count more than causing a disruption to critical infrastructure. Unlike the white supremacist examples, a larger slate of attacks following the initial attack was not in the gameplan, as the attackers were planning to deploy explosive vests that would result in their own deaths.

⁶⁴ DOJ, “Two Members of the Violent Extremist Group ‘The Base’ Each Sentenced to Nine Years”

⁶⁵ Asal, Victor H., R. Karl Rethemeyer, Ian Anderson, Allyson Stein, Jeffrey Rizzo, and Matthew Rozea. 2009. “The Softest of Targets: A Study on Terrorist Target Selection.” *Journal of Applied Security Research* 4 (3): 258–78.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19361610902929990>; Ware, Jacob. 2019. “Siege: The Atomwaffen Division and Rising Far-Right Terrorism in the United States.” ICCT Policy Brief, July 2019. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/07/ICCT-Ware-Siege-July2019.pdf>

⁶⁶ *Ibid* all.

⁶⁷ For instance, see Jenkins, Brian Michael, and Bruce R. Butterworth. 2018. “Train Wrecks and Track Attacks: An Analysis of Attempts by Terrorists and Other Extremists to Derail Trains or Disrupt Rail Transportation.” San Jose: Mineta Transportation Institute. https://transweb.sjsu.edu/sites/default/files/1794_Jenkins_Train-Wrecks-Train-Attacks.pdf.

⁶⁸ “Superseding Information.” 2016. United States of America v. Abdulrahman El Bahnasawy. United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. October 13, 2016.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191ff/ElbahnasawySupersedingInformation.pdf>

⁶⁹ “Government’s Sentencing Memorandum.” 2018. United States of America v. Abdulrahman El Bahnasawy. United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. March 9, 2018.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191ff/Abdulrahman%20El%20Bahnasawy%20Government%20Sentencing%20Memorandum.pdf>

In a similar attempt in December 2017, an ISIS supporter in New York City attempted to detonate a homemade explosive device on his person in a subway station under a Port Authority terminal during rush hour.⁷⁰ The device, carried by Akayed Ullah, failed to detonate completely, and the ensuing blast injured Ullah and three others.⁷¹ Ullah was arrested after being taken to the hospital and admitted to investigators that he conducted the bombing on behalf of ISIS, telling police that he intended to “terrorize as many people as possible.”⁷² He later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison.⁷³

⁷⁰ “Complaint.” 2017. United States of America v. Akayed Ullah. United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. December 12, 2017. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Ullah%20Complaint.pdf>

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “Akayed Ullah Sentenced To Life In Prison For Bombing New York City Subway Station In 2017 On Behalf Of ISIS.” 2021. Department of Justice Press Release, April 22, 2021. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/akayed-ullah-sentenced-life-prison-bombing-new-york-city-subway-station-2017-behalf>.

Analysis

This report observes that white supremacist and Salafi-jihadist terror attacks over the last five years have targeted mostly separate critical infrastructure sectors. White supremacists overwhelmingly focused on the U.S. power grid and energy systems, while a majority of recorded Salafi-jihadist attack planning cases targeted government facilities, emergency services, and commercial facilities. While both types of extremists attacked the transportation sector at comparable rates, there was minimal overlap in all other critical infrastructure sectors. Their stark divergence in attack targets between the two groups is largely indicative of their different identifiable adversaries and operational goals.⁷⁴

Salafi-jihadists and white supremacists' ideological motivations are vastly different, therefore differentiating target selections. Ideology is considered vital to how humans view the world around them, perceive threats, and shape perspectives.⁷⁵ As terrorists perceive and define enemies, in turn they may "legitimize" targets that they perceive to deserve harm, in alignment with and justified by their belief systems.⁷⁶ Terrorist organizations across all different veins of extremist ideology, therefore, may prioritize different infrastructure sectors as it would hit closer to the heart of their labeled enemies.

Historically, global Salafi-jihadist organizations have launched attacks on critical infrastructure with the intent of causing mass casualties and inflicting psychological damage against perceived adversaries.⁷⁷ Salafi-jihadist terror organizations radicalize individuals under an ideology that identifies the West, especially Western governments, as the enemy; this underpins the target selection of government facilities. Additionally, while past Salafi-jihadist critical infrastructure attacks in the West have not consistently yielded high casualty rates, plots with significant mortality levels targeted places of gathering, including commercial facilities designated for entertainment, shopping, and events.⁷⁸ Despite hardened security in and around government and commercial infrastructure over the last decade, terror organizations have continued to adapt from such counterterrorism measures by altering target selections and adapting operational techniques to circumvent security barriers. Moving forward, government institutions may note how the most recent critical infrastructure attacks addressed security measures to narrow the gaps within existing infrastructure protection methods.⁷⁹

Furthermore, Salafi-jihadist propaganda and instructional material, disseminated online, enables decentralized networks to gain knowledge, furthers ideological support, and convinces readers that

⁷⁴ Clifford and Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Imitators or Innovators"

⁷⁵ Drake, "The Role of Ideology in Terrorists' Target Selection."

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Clifford and Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Imitators or Innovators"

⁷⁸ "Commercial Facilities Sector" n.d. U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Accessed August 4, 2022. <https://www.cisa.gov/commercial-facilities-sector>.

⁷⁹ Sandler, Todd. 2013. "The Analytical Study of Terrorism: Taking Stock." *Journal of Peace Research* 51 (2): 257–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313491277>.; Clifford and Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Imitators or Innovators"

violence against the enemy is necessary.⁸⁰ For instance, al-Qaeda and ISIS' official publications are designed with messaging to convince readers to combat social injustice and crises with primarily extreme, violent solutions.⁸¹ These narratives are compounded by instructional material, which Salafi-jihadists like the attempted Port Authority bomber Akayed Ullah used to conduct attacks on critical infrastructure.⁸² As new magazine releases continue to disseminate technical and operational information for critical infrastructure targeting, the U.S. government should continue monitoring attack and weapon-building instructional material within propaganda to evaluate critical infrastructure vulnerabilities and the adaptation strategies of violent extremists.

While Salafi-jihadist attack plots in the U.S. became increasingly few and far between over the course of the period observed in the study, there are few signs that Salafi-jihadist organizations or the attackers they inspire are any less committed to conducting attacks on critical infrastructure. Although the total number of Salafi-jihadist cases in the sample decreased steadily between 2016 and 2022, the proportion of those cases involving critical infrastructure targets remained relatively constant. Moreover, in terms of overall frequency, Salafi-jihadist attack planners were significantly more likely to have considered attacking critical infrastructure than white supremacists, and directed those attack plots towards a broader array of American critical infrastructure systems, most notably towards commercial facilities, government facilities, emergency services and transportation systems. Therefore, despite a more acute threat to critical infrastructure from white supremacists that has become prevalent during the past three years, there are few reasons to suggest that Salafi-jihadist HVEs have eschewed their focus on these targets. As the already-fractured domestic terrorism threat environment continues to broaden, sober assessments this demographic within sector-specific risk analyses will continue to be vital.

In contrast to jihadists, while some white supremacists also attempt to conduct mass-casualty attacks, there is a greater operational focus on terrorism as a means to achieve civil unrest, confusion, and disruption of the societal status quo. Hence, critical infrastructure attacks serve a dual purpose for white supremacists, accomplishing the operational goals of fomenting societal division as well as being a step towards their broader strategic and ideological goals of triggering a societal collapse. Specifically, many actors who adhere to the doctrine of accelerationism have engaged in plots targeting critical infrastructure in the United States in recent years. Fundamentally, accelerationism can be best understood as "a set of tactics and strategies designed to put pressure on and exacerbate latent social

⁸⁰ Lakomy, Miron. 2020. "Between the 'Camp of Falsehood' and the 'Camp of Truth': Exploitation of Propaganda Devices in the 'Dabiq' Online Magazine." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, February. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1711601>.

⁸¹ Ingram, Haroro J. 2017. "Learning from ISIS's Virtual Propaganda War for Western Muslims: A Comparison of Inspire and Dabiq." *The International Centre for Counter-terrorism - The Hague*. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2017/07/INGRAM-nato-chapter-21JUL17.pdf>.

⁸² Ibid; "Complaint." 2017. *United States of America v. Akayed Ullah*. United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. December 12, 2017. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Ullah%20Complaint.pdf>.

divisions, often through violence, thus hastening societal collapse.”⁸³ In recent years, white supremacist actors motivated by accelerationism have sought to commit acts of violence to speed up the process of societal degradation, so as to rebuild an ideal fascist and white supremacist society.⁸⁴

The resurgence of accelerationist movements in the United States has seen many amorphous networks latch onto concepts popularized by key neo-Nazi and white supremacist ideologues from the mid and late 20th century. Multiple accelerationist groups, including the Atomwaffen Division and National Action, emerged from Iron March, an online forum which served as an incubator for like-minded individuals to connect and seed their ideological worldview in an online radicalization pressure chamber.⁸⁵ Indeed, 14 out of the 16 white supremacists in the sample who planned to attack critical infrastructure either participated in the Iron March forum or other online spaces connected to the network that it spawned. Through similar online forums and the publication of accelerationist propaganda across a range of social media platforms, accelerationist actors have been able to mobilize domestic extremists from multiple ideological mindsets through “mobilizing concepts”.⁸⁶ These concepts allow the formation of coalitions which transcend narrow ideological frameworks, further muddying the threat profile of domestic violent extremists.⁸⁷

Narratives and grievances latched onto by accelerationist actors aim to inspire violence in the hopes of a cascading wave of further acts of violence - regardless of the source - with the hopes that this pressure can collapse the system from within. Recent examples of Neo-Nazi and white-supremacist movements have acclaimed accelerationist goals as they support the reorganization of society void of racially and ethnically diverse populations, and seek to commit acts of targeted violence in furtherance of this goal. Multiple white supremacists recorded in our dataset, including Atomwaffen Division founder Brandon Clint Russell, were active members of domestic accelerationist groups and plotted attacks against the energy sector, given the sector’s unique positioning as a lifeline to all other critical infrastructure sectors

⁸³ Kriner, Matthew. 2022. “An Introduction to Militant Accelerationism.” The Accelerationism Research Consortium, May 2022. <https://www.accresearch.org/shortanalysis/an-introduction-to-militant-accelerationism>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Johnson, Bethan, and Matthew Feldman. 2021. “Siege Culture After Siege: Anatomy of a Neo-Nazi Terrorist Doctrine.” The Hague, Netherlands: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT). <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2021/07/siege-culture-neo-nazi-terrorist-doctrine.pdf>; Kriner, “An Introduction to Militant Accelerationism.”; Scrivens, Ryan, Thomas W. Wojciechowski, and Richard Frank. 2020. “Examining the Developmental Pathways of Online Posting Behavior in Violent Right-Wing Extremist Forums.” *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*, October. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2020.1833862?journalCode=ftpv20>; Conway, Maura, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan MacNair. 2019. “Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends.” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT). <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/11/Right-Wing-Extremists-Persistent-Online-Presence.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Miller-Idriss, Cynthia and Hughes, Brian. “Uniting for Total Collapse: The January 6 Boost to Accelerationism.” 2021. *CTC Sentinel* 14 (4). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/uniting-for-total-collapse-the-january-6-boost-to-accelerationism/>; Miller-Idriss, Cynthia, and Brian Hughes. 2021. “Blurry Ideologies and Strange Coalitions: The Evolving Landscape of Domestic Extremism.” *Lawfare*, December 19, 2021. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/blurry-ideologies-and-strange-coalitions-evolving-landscape-domestic-extremism>

⁸⁷ Ibid. all.

and hinder everyday life in the United States.⁸⁸ Special attention needs to be given towards enhancing the U.S. energy sector's operational security, both physically and virtually, as the energy sector continues to become a lynchpin to societal functioning.

Additionally, accelerationist neo-Nazi propaganda material such as James Mason's *Siege* and *The Turner Diaries* have had a profound influence on the mobilization trajectories and targeting decisions of today's white supremacist terrorists. James Mason, a prominent neo-Nazi figure, is credited with popularizing the concept of "Siege Culture" among white supremacist organizations, which advocates for violent fascist revolutions that reject democracy, multiculturalism, and the current system of governance in the United States. Given groups such as Atomwaffen Division and the National Socialist Order's intertwining with Siege Culture, the groups' critical infrastructure attacks cannot be completely separated from *Siege's* influence.⁸⁹ *The Turner Diaries*, authored by white supremacist and National Alliance founder William Luther Pierce, has also been widely distributed and influential among accelerationist, neo-Nazi organizations for its descriptive quasi-blueprints for attacking the government and critical infrastructure, including the energy sector.⁹⁰ More than 40 years since its publication, the *Turner Diaries* continues to influence many domestic extremists to target critical infrastructure in the fight against a supposed 'tyrannical' federal government. Described as arguably the most important single work of white nationalist propaganda in the English language, attacks detailed in the *Turner Diaries* have been credited with providing inspiration for numerous domestic terrorists. Most prominently, the novel had an outsized impact on Timothy McVeigh, who bombed the Alfred E. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 by partially designing his explosives-rigged van after a specific bombing within the novel.⁹¹

Following the ideological standard of *SIEGE* and the *Turner Diaries*, detailed instructions for attacking critical infrastructure are found in white supremacist manuals and propaganda distributed over Telegram channels. A recent publication from the accelerationist Telegram channel and media outlet Terrorgram entitled *The Hard Reset* glorifies white supremacist attacks and gives explanations for sector-specific critical infrastructure targeting. Starting off a multi-page entry on attacking cell towers, anonymous authors wrote "early 2020 in the West marked the early periods of individuals, young and old burning down their local 5G towers."⁹² Additional "critical reading material" for accelerationists

⁸⁸ DOJ Press Release, "Neo-Nazi Leader Sentenced to Five Years in Federal Prison for Explosives Charges."

⁸⁹ "Atomwaffen and the SIEGE Parallax: How One Neo-Nazi's Life's Work Is Fueling a Younger Generation." 2018. Southern Poverty Law Center. February 22, 2018. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/02/22/atomwaffen-and-siege-parallax-how-one-neo-nazi-s-life-s-work-fueling-younger-generation>.

⁹⁰ Berger, J.M. 2016. "The Turner Legacy: The Storied Origins and Enduring Impact of White Nationalism's Deadly Bible." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT). <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2016/09/ICCT-Berger-The-Turner-Legacy-September2016-2.pdf>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Posts on Terrorgram Telegram channel collected by Program on Extremism staff, 2022.

include Mike Ma's *Harassment Architecture*, which include calls for bombing the electrical grid.⁹³ Ma's distinct style of issuing instructions, prefacing his description of several specific methods to conduct attacks against critical infrastructure with the qualifier "I hear some people...", are frequently replicated in graphics that are distributed through online accelerationist platforms.⁹⁴

In part due to their ideological vision and the longstanding influence of these materials, this report finds that white supremacist attack planners were laser-focused on conducting attacks on the energy sector during the last six years as a pretext for the anticipated collapse of American government and society. DHS recently identified the energy sector at an increased threat in an intelligence briefing, emphasizing the uncanny number of attacks compared to other critical infrastructure sectors and the potentially disastrous effects of a large-scale terrorist attack on the power grid.⁹⁵ According to CISA, the energy sector is "uniquely critical as it provides an 'enabling function' across all critical infrastructure sectors."⁹⁶ From an extremists' operational perspective, energy sector targeting would increase the probability of disrupting dependent critical infrastructure as an added bonus. Given the energy sector's strategic functions, its target value is increased for accelerationist groups that strive commit terror attacks that disable or completely knock out society's ability to function.⁹⁷

As previous research has indicated, "terrorists often learn from those which came before them, while adapting to new and emerging challenges."⁹⁸ This continued learning process is augmented by published and disseminated extremist propaganda and manuals that provide knowledge on how to commit attacks against critical infrastructure at large. White supremacists and Salafi-jihadists alike have widely distributed magazines, posters, memes, and other propaganda through communication applications that reference or call for attacks against critical infrastructure.⁹⁹ Across Telegram channels, white supremacists and accelerationists have rallied around calls to target the electrical grid¹⁰⁰ and burn 5G towers,¹⁰¹ among other calls for violence.¹⁰² Many of these individuals revel in the concept of

⁹³ Ma, Mike. 2019. *Harassment Architecture*; Loadenthal, Michael. "Infrastructure, Sabotage, and Accelerationism." Global Network on Extremism and Technology (NCITE). <https://gnet-research.org/2021/02/15/infrastructure-sabotage-and-accelerationism/>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Vavra, "DHS Warns That Right-Wing Extremists Could Attack Power Grid."

⁹⁶ CISA, "Energy Sector"

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Clifford, Bennett, and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens. 2022. "Imitators or Innovators? Comparing Salafi-Jihadist and White Supremacist Attack Planning in the United States." Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, National Counterterrorism, Innovation, Technology, and Education Center. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Imitators-or-Innovators_Clifford-Meleagrou-Hitchens_NCITE_04212022.pdf.

⁹⁹ Loadenthal, Michael. "Infrastructure, Sabotage, and Accelerationism." Global Network on Extremism and Technology (NCITE). <https://gnet-research.org/2021/02/15/infrastructure-sabotage-and-accelerationism/>.

¹⁰⁰ "The Base." 2020. Anti-Defamation League. January 16, 2020. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/base>.

¹⁰¹ Loadenthal, "Infrastructure, Sabotage, and Accelerationism."

¹⁰² Ibid.

launching consistent attacks while avoiding detention by law enforcement and death. For example, during April 2013, a sniper attacked the electrical grid at a METcalf power station in California, cutting fiber cables and firing over 100 rounds of bullets at transformers before disappearing. Many white supremacists have praised the unknown attacker's escape and envision long successions of attacks as core to their missions. This includes five extremists who were indicted in 2020 for plotting to burn down electricity transformers and substations across northwestern U.S; two of these were active members of the Iron March forum.¹⁰³ In lieu of the energy sector's abundant yet dispersed nature, increased consideration surrounding specific target hardening methods for energy facilities is vital in the upcoming years.

The renewed focus of American white supremacist groups on attacking energy infrastructure using new, innovative methods parallels broader developments in the international white supremacist scene, especially among groups with strong ties to American neo-Nazi accelerationists. Outside of the U.S., attack plotters have experimented with plans of attack that, albeit rudimentary, signal this movement's commitment to disrupting the power grid on a grand scale. For instance, former British Army corporal Mikko Vehvilainen, a member of the British neo-Nazi group National Action, was arrested in 2018 after he recruited other British soldiers to join the group and prepare for what he believed was an impending race war.¹⁰⁴ Among the slew of weapons and propaganda found during a search of Vehvilainen's home was a crudely-constructed electromagnetic pulse (EMP) device.¹⁰⁵ These devices are intended to disrupt or destroy the functioning of the power grid and any electrical devices within a particular area.¹⁰⁶

While EMP threats to critical infrastructure are more frequently associated with state actors as opposed to violent non-state actors, at various times during the past twenty years policymakers have been concerned about the potential for violent extremists to harness EMP technology to disrupt U.S. infrastructure.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps the most-discussed scenario for EMP terrorist attacks is the potential for extremists to construct, using fissile material, a nuclear weapon that could be detonated in the earth's atmosphere to produce a blast of electromagnetic radiation, disabling all electrical devices within a

¹⁰³ USA v. Collins et al, "Third Superseding Indictment."

¹⁰⁴ Keate, Georgie. 2018. "British Army soldier Mikko Vehvilainen 'was preparing to fight race war.'" March 14, 2018. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/british-army-soldier-mikko-vehvilainen-was-preparing-to-fight-race-war-gvvsgfnr6>

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ "Strategy for Protecting and Preparing Against Threats of Electromagnetic Pulse and Geomagnetic Disturbances." 2018. United States Department of Homeland Security. October 9, 2018.

https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/18_1009_EMP_GMD_Strategy-Non-Embargoed.pdf

¹⁰⁷ "Terrorism and the EMP Threat to Homeland Security." 2005. Hearing Before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security. March 18, 2005.

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-109shrg21324/html/CHRG-109shrg21324.htm>; "Electromagnetic Pulse: Threat to Critical Infrastructure." 2014. Hearing Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Infrastructure Protection, and Security Technologies. May 8, 2014.

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhr89763/html/CHRG-113hhr89763.htm>; Kyl, Jon. 2005. "Unready For This Attack." *Washington Post*, April 16, 2005. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2005/04/16/unready-for-this-attack/653980ad-056e-456d-82fb-065719cda0b1/>

particular radius from the blast.¹⁰⁸ However, some sources also discuss the construction of a high-power microwave (HPM) device, which uses more easily-accessible components including chemicals and batteries to manufacture a small-scale device.¹⁰⁹ In the latter scenario, a violent extremist group would theoretically be able to more easily conduct an EMP attack, but the disruption to critical infrastructure would be far more limited.¹¹⁰

Ideology, detailed resources, tactical and operational capabilities are highly influential for both white supremacists and Salafi-jihadists when selecting and targeting critical infrastructure sectors. While both groups exhibited interest in attacking transportation systems, a majority of attacks in the last five years indicate a stark contrast between ideal target types, and therefore organizational priorities and capabilities. Through active learning, terrorists develop new strategies to adapt to the hardening of critical infrastructure.¹¹¹ Thus, consistent governmental review, technological hardening of critical infrastructure, and public-private partnerships may strengthen the United States' capacity to adapt to the current threat environment to prevent future attacks. Especially as green energy technology diversifies and provides additional viable collateral targets for white supremacists, the U.S. government and private partners should place greater focus towards protecting the energy grid given its strategic value.

¹⁰⁸ "High-Altitude Electromagnetic Pulse (HEMP) and High Power Microwave (HPM) Devices: Threat Assessments." 2008. Congressional Research Service, July 21, 2008. https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20080721_RL32544_9e6f2375816d0968cb1a62fe43056072492ded0a.pdf

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Clifford and Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Imitators or Innovators"

Conclusion

For the past twenty-five years, the protection of critical infrastructure from terrorist attacks has been a major homeland security priority across Presidential administrations. This correlates to waves of efforts by international and domestic terrorists to strike U.S. critical infrastructure sectors, with the goals of causing mass casualties through murder, societal chaos through mayhem, and/or obstruction of the U.S. counterterrorism mission through misdirection. Sadly, there are few signs in the American violent extremist landscape today that would suggest that reductions in vigilance or in efforts to improve the resiliency of critical assets are warranted. As new violent extremist movements, organizations, and threats come to the fore, the newest iterations of American HVE and DVE attack planners seem as interested as their predecessors in assaulting the systems and sectors that are necessary for the normal functioning of daily life in the U.S.

This report highlighted one of the reasons that American national security officials consider the current terrorism threat picture as one of the most combustible and deadly in decades, namely the continued efforts by American violent extremists of all stripes to attack critical infrastructure. Salafi-jihadist HVE and white supremacist DVE attack planners are placing critical infrastructure at the top of their respective target lists, with approximately one out of every two jihadist attack plotters and one out of three white supremacists arrested during the past six years considering attacks on infrastructure. In distinct ways, these groups have spread out their targeting across a growing range of the economic, political, and societal sectors that make up America's critical assets, although each have developed special areas of focus. Perhaps the most specific of these threats came in the form of white supremacist attack plots against energy infrastructure, with 13 cases of individuals connected to white supremacist movements attempting to conduct attacks on power lines, the energy grid, and even a nuclear reactor site.

This anomaly in the data is not a coincidence, as for the past several years, white supremacist propaganda and its associated online ecosystem have both honed in on energy facilities, encouraging supporters of the movement to conduct attacks on energy supply, in the hopes that it will trigger a cataclysmic confrontation in American society and collapse the country from within. The rise of accelerationism, which is responsible for much of this paradigm shift within American white supremacist circles, is at play in examining many of the individuals' alleged motivations for seeking to attack energy systems. There are two takeaways from this finding for American counterterrorism officials. First, from a protective standpoint, sector-specific efforts focused on energy infrastructure security and resilience against violent extremist attacks may be prudent. An increase in information sharing between the U.S. government and third-party ownership of energy facilities about violent extremist threats can aid greatly in this endeavor, as can intra-government collaboration between DHS/CISA, the Department of Energy, and federal law enforcement agencies.¹¹²

¹¹² "Critical Infrastructure Protection: CISA Should Improve Priority Setting, Stakeholder

At a more strategic level, the rise in targeting of critical infrastructure inspired by accelerationist ideology should be broadly concerning, because at its core accelerationist doctrine is ideologically agnostic and has been an inspiration for a wider degree of domestic violent extremists beyond white supremacists. If accelerationism-- or the view that violence should be ordered towards the collapse of American society-- begins to influence other extremist milieus, a potential result is a growing number of plots targeting critical infrastructure as a way of achieving that goal. Already, there are concerns that far-left and anarchist groups in the U.S. are continuing their historical legacy of targeting infrastructure for attack and sabotage, albeit with a modern accelerationist twist.¹¹³ For example, in 2018 the FBI arrested two self-proclaimed Ohio anarchists, Elizabeth Lecron and Vincent Armstrong, who were plotting several terrorist attacks on local targets of interest. One of these plots involved an attempt by the pair to construct an explosive device and bomb a local oil pipeline.¹¹⁴

Moving forward, more research is necessary to determine how the efforts of other violent extremists to target critical infrastructure--especially DVEs influenced by conspiracy theories like QAnon, militia violent extremists, single-issue violent extremists (especially pro- and anti-abortion violent extremists and animal rights groups), and anarchist/far-left violent extremists--compare to the movements examined in this report. In addition, as national security officials consider the possibility of cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure, mainly from actors associated with foreign governments, risk assessments of violent extremist threat actors in this arena could add to the overall threat picture and provide a point of comparison between violent extremists' physical and virtual attacks on critical infrastructure.

Involvement, and Threat Information Sharing." 2022. Government Accountability Office. March 2022, GAO-22-104279. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-104279.pdf>

¹¹³ Loadenthal, "Infrastructure, Sabotage, and Accelerationism."

¹¹⁴ "Toledo Woman Sentenced for Planning Two Terrorist Attacks." 2019. U.S. Department of Justice Press Release, November 20, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndoh/pr/toledo-woman-sentenced-planning-two-terrorist-attacks>

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