IMITATORS OR INNOVATORS?

Comparing Salafi-Jihadist and White Supremacist Attack Planning in the United States

Bennett Clifford
Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens
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NCITE
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About the Authors

Bennett Clifford studies violent extremist movements and organizations in the United States, as well as in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Balkans. His work focuses on terrorist operational and strategic planning, in addition to the adaptation of digital communications technologies by violent extremist groups. Bennett is the author of *Homegrown: ISIS in America* (IB Tauris, 2020) and several full-length reports for the Program on Extremism. His research has been featured in several academic and popular publications, including the Atlantic, the Washington Post, Lawfare, and the CTC Sentinel.

Bennett holds a Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy degree from the Fletcher School and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Politics and International Affairs from Wake Forest University. Prior to joining the Program on Extremism in 2017, he worked for several research organizations in the country of Georgia. Bennett conducts research in English, Georgian, Russian, and Spanish.

Dr. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens is the Research Director of the Program on Extremism at The George Washington University. Prior to joining the Program on Extremism, Dr. Meleagrou-Hitchens was the Head of Research at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) and a lecturer on terrorism and radicalization at the War Studies Department in King's College, London.

His PhD research focused on the impact of the Yemeni-American jihadist ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki, providing an intellectual history of his ideological development and an analysis of his impact on the spread of global jihadist ideology in the West. The study, titled *Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki's Western Jihad*, was published by Harvard University Press in May 2020. He has also authored numerous articles on the topics of terrorism and radicalization, and his work has appeared in various outlets, including The Wall Street Journal, BBC, CNN, Foreign Policy, and Foreign Affairs.

About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at 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 George Washington University. This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-01.

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Executive Summary

As the threat from white supremacist and Salafi-jihadist extremists to the United States grew in prominence in recent years, the two movements have become the subjects of several comparative studies. These works frequently focus on contrasting their methods of radicalization, recruitment, use of digital communications technologies, and connections to transnational extremist movements, but only a handful concern their methods of planning attacks on American soil.

This report seeks to add to this emerging literature by examining what, if any, relationships there are between the tactics and targets chosen by white supremacist and Salafi-jihadist terrorists in America. In doing so, it will also contribute to our understanding of how, and indeed if, modern terrorists in America are learning from each other or from the current American counterterrorism posture. This report finds that:

- Jihadist and white supremacist attack planners in the U.S. selected different targets for their attacks. Jihadists tended towards attacking "hard targets" (for instance, military bases and law enforcement facilities) and devising plots to assassinate individuals. White supremacists erred towards "soft targets," especially religious institutions and houses of worship.
- Jihadists were more likely than white supremacists to consider multiple targets for their attacks.
- The tactics of jihadists and white supremacists were relatively similar in frequency to one another. Both movements' attack plotters relied heavily on plots involving firearms and explosives, but also experimented with non-conventional means such as vehicle rammings, arson, and train derailments.
- Despite some evidence of ideological cross-pollination, particularly in the form of manifestos and instructional material, evidence of direct learning between jihadist and white supremacist attack planners in the U.S. is limited.
- Independent innovation in the face of U.S. domestic counterterrorism approaches is a more likely explanation for similarities in targets and tactics between white supremacists and jihadists than cross-group tactical imitation.

Introduction

The report compares the tactics and targets of American white supremacist and jihadist extremist attack plotters charged in United States federal court between 2014 and 2019. Beginning with an overview of terrorist organizational learning, cross-group imitation, and tactical innovation, it examines why there is a concern that attack plotters associated with the white supremacist and jihadist movements may be learning from one another. The next section provides an explanation of the report's methodology, which involves an analysis of the tactics and targets of 93 terrorist plots and attacks in the U.S between 2014 and 2019, 53 of them Salafi-jihadist and 40 white supremacist. Using case studies, it compares prominent examples of jihadist and white supremacist plots with similar methods to evaluate similarities and differences in attack planning strategies. Finally, highlighting data from the sample and the results of the case study analysis, the concluding section assesses that similarities between these two movements' tactics and targets are less likely to be the result of cross-group imitation and more likely the result of independent innovation and in-group imitation.

Background: Terrorist Learning, Imitation, and Innovation

Research on the history and evolution of terrorism suggests that terrorists often learn from those which came before them, while also adapting to new and emerging challenges. Perhaps the most influential work on this is Rapaport's wave theory of terrorism, in which he presents the history of terrorism as made up of four waves—anarchist, anti-colonial, new left and the current religious wave.[1] Each wave of terrorists, according to Rapaport, adopted tactics from the previous wave, while also adapting to new threat environments and ideological orientations.[2] While he notes that each wave of terrorism produces technical works that contribute to a "science" of terrorism which influences successor terrorist groups, Rapaport also argued that one key driver of terrorist tactical innovation was the emergence of new technologies.[3] From the advent of dynamite offering terrorists handheld explosives for the first time, to the emergence of the internet, technology has also acted as one of the key influences on emerging terrorist tactics.[4] From a range of sources, terrorists engage in organizational learning, which Jackson defines as the "process through which members of a group acquire new knowledge that can be applied in strategic decision-making, tactical planning or design, and operational activities," can also inform terrorist tactics, techniques, and procedures.[5]

One driver of organizational learning is imitation, when groups are attuned to the decision-making processes of their terrorist competitors and integrate lessons from these processes into their own approach. A commonly cited example of this is the use of suicide bombing. A tactic often associated with Salafi-jihadists, studies have shown that it was used by at least two previous terrorist groups, beginning with the Marxist-influenced Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, who then inspired terrorist group Hezbollah to use a similar tactic against American targets in Lebanon.[6] Similarly, al-Qaeda's use of hijacking was inspired by the preceding wave of left-wing terrorists who hijacked planes with the intention of using hostages to pressure states into accepting their demands.[7] Al-Qaeda combined this tactic with suicide attacks to develop one of the most devastating and innovative terrorist attacks in history on September 11, 2001.[8]

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[1] Rapoport, David. 2019. "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism." In Transnational Terrorism, by Steven M. Chermak and Joshua Freilich. London, UK: Routledge.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Jackson, Brian A. 2004. "Organizational Learning and Terrorist Groups." Washington: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR133.html.

[6] Pape, Robert A. 2003. "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism." The American Political Science Review 97 (3): 343–61.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

This type of learning has also historically taken place between extreme right-wing terrorists and jihadists. Since the emergence of jihadism as the main international terrorist threat, the first major high-casualty right-wing terrorist attack was Anders Breivik's 2011 bombing of the Norwegian government quarter in Oslo and shooting massacre of 69 people on the island of Utøya.[9] Helping to usher in a new era of extreme right-wing mass casualty terrorism, Breivik was inspired tactically by the activities of al-Qaeda at the time, when franchises such as AQAP had begun to call for lone-actor attacks in the West.[10] In his manifesto, Breivik writes that, "solo-cell systems in combination with martyrdom is the most efficient and deadly form of modern warfare. This strategy was adapted by Jihadist groups. And now we will be using it as well."[11] He also noted how such a tactic was even more beneficial for white Europeans extremists because they would enjoy "more 'invisibility' than individuals who have Arabic/Asian appearance and customs."[12] After his attack, it also emerged that Breivik had initially planned to kidnap the former Norwegian Prime Minister and record himself beheading her, a tactic which he claimed during his trial was directly inspired by al-Qaeda in Iraq.[13] Breivik also learned from the mistakes of European jihadists who unsuccessfully attempted to make homemade bombs, and perfected his own bomb partly as a result of this.[14] Indeed, significant sections of his manifesto are dedicated to reviewing and learning from the successes and failures of jihadists in the West.

Today, there is also evidence of members of the white supremacist online ecosystem sharing jihadi training and tactical manuals. This is common on platforms such as Telegram where white supremacists are particularly active. In 2019, for example, ISIS-bomb making videos were circulated on Telegram channels associated with Feuerkrieg Division, an international neo-Nazi movement popular with Americans, and part of the wider online white supremacist Siege movement.[15] While in America these connections have not yet manifested offline, in France a participant in another Siege

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[9] "Norway's July 22, 2011, Terror Attack: A Timeline." 2021. AP News. July 29, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/europe-norway-bd6c9d2efd6ce2148c3d85cb79d73af9.

[10] Ranstorp, Magnus. 2013. "'Lone Wolf Terrorism'. The Case of Anders Breivik." Sicherheit Und Frieden (S+F) / Security and Peace 31 (2): 87–92; Berntzen, Lars Erik, and Sveinung Sandberg. 2014. "The Collective Nature of Lone Wolf Terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the Anti-Islamic Social Movement." Terrorism and Political Violence 26 (5): 759–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.767245; Macklin, Graham, and Tore Bjørgo. 2021. "Breivik's Long Shadow? The Impact of the July 22, 2011 Attacks on the Modus Operandi of Extreme-Right Lone Actor Terrorists." Perspectives on Terrorism 15 (3): 14–36.

[11] Breivik, Anders Behring. 2011. "2083 – A European Declaration of Independence." p.927

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Sandbu, Martin. 2012. "Breivik 'Planned to Behead' Norway's Ex-PM." Financial Times, April 19, 2012. https://www.ft.com/content/37d6da1a-89f9-11e1-87f0-00144feab49a.

[14] Ranstorp, "Lone Wolf Terrorism."

[15] Makuch, Ben, and Mack Lamoureux. 2019. "Neo-Nazis Are Glorifying Osama Bin Laden." Vice (blog). September 17, 2019. https://www.vice.com/en/article/bjwv4a/neo-nazis-are-glorifying-osama-bin-laden.

related Telegram group was arrested in 2021 for planning attacks in the country. French law enforcement found that the suspect, identified only as Leila B., drew inspiration from both jihadist and neo-Nazi ideology, and likely accessed ISIS bomb making manuals circulated in a Telegram channel belonging to the neo-Nazi accelerationist group Atomwaffen Division.[16]   In the United Kingdom, an 18 year-old neo-Nazi named Jack Reed was convicted of plotting attacks including firebombing synagogues.[17] While steeped in neo-Nazi ideology, he was found to have consulted al-Qaeda and ISIS bomb making guides in preparation for his attacks.[18] In 2018, another neo-Nazi group, The Base, recommended *The Management of Savagery* to its online followers.[19] The book, written by al-Qaeda strategist Abu Bakr Naji in 2004, is regarded as one of the most influential texts for ISIS strategists who oversaw the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.[20]

However, the sharing of a particular tactic or target preference between jihadists and white supremacists is not *ipso facto* evidence that the groups are learning from each other. Terrorist groups also learn from their adversaries, and react to the strategies and operations of government counter-terrorism authorities. When this process occurs, terrorist organizational learning takes place in the form of innovation or transference. For instance, it is also often pointed out that al-Qaeda's (and later ISIS') embrace of the lone actor model of terrorism to target the West was first developed by American white supremacists in the late 1980s, including Louis Beam.[21]   While it is tempting to conclude that jihadists learned this approach directly from white supremacists, it is more likely that they, just as the white supremacists who came before them, were reacting to new challenges and pressures on the ground. Louis Beam developed the 'lone wolf' strategy directly in response to the increasing use of informants by the FBI and subsequent rise in arrests of prominent white supremacists in America.[22]

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[16] Pham-Le, Jeremie. 2021. "«Je voulais mettre cette bombe dans l'église» : révélations sur l'adolescente de Béziers qui projetait un attentat." leparisien.fr. April 17, 2021. https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/je-voulais-mettre-cette-bombe-dans-leglise-revelations-sur-ladolescente-de-beziers-qui-projetait-un-attentat-17-04-2021-TH7TMLMZB5DXXBQHSK7V7PTD54.php.

[17] These dynamics are covered more broadly in Davey, Jacob, Milo Comerford, Jakob Guhl, Will Baldet, and Chloe Colliver. 2021. "A Taxonomy for the Classification of Post-Organisational Violent Extremist & Terrorist Content." London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/A-Taxonomy-for-the-Classification-of-Post-Organisational-Violent-Extremist-Terrorist-Content.pdf.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Lia, Brynjar. 2008. "Doctrines for Jihadi Terrorist Training." Terrorism and Political Violence 20 (4): 518–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550802257226.

[21] Gill, Paul. 2015. Lone-Actor Terrorists: A Behavioural Analysis. London: Routledge. 4. Gill also notes that Beam was inspired by the work of retired American CIA intelligence officer Col. Ulius Amoss, who developed the 'phantom cell' strategy in the 1950s as a contingency should the US be taken over by Communists.

[22] *Ibid.*

Similarly, in the years following 9/11, American counter-terrorism reacted swiftly and efficiently to put in place a range of measures which made entering the U.S. to commit a terrorist attack undetected extremely difficult.[23] This, along with overseas operations which squeezed terrorist safe havens that provided training to international terrorists intent on attacking America, led al-Qaeda strategists to explore other options which would allow them to retain some kind of terrorist presence in America and the wider Western world.[24] While many cite the shared interests of jihadists and white supremacists alike in low-budget, low-sophistication tactics that proliferated in recent years (e.g., truck rammings, lone-actor shootings, and knife attacks), the evidence to establish that tactical cross-pollination is the sole cause is scant. For instance, despite the examples of white supremacists' borrowing of jihadist instructional material, there is little evidence of jihadists citing white supremacists when arguing for the use of lone actor tactics.

It is therefore important to also highlight that research on terrorist learning finds that tactics pursued by terrorists are not only influenced by the tactics of predecessors, but by the strategies used by states to counter them. So-called 'target hardening', the result of counter-terrorism policies making previous terror targets more difficult to access, can lead to innovation or transference. This is defined as "unintended policy-induced change in terrorist behavior, which includes displacement of the mode or venue of attack."[25] Some of the earliest work on this, for example, found that the securing of American embassies, partly spurred on by the 1979 hostage crisis at the U.S embassy in Iran, led to a significant reduction in embassy attacks throughout the 1980s, but an increase in assassinations of high-value American targets outside of embassy grounds.[26] More recently, it has been argued that the increase of airline security around the world after 9/11, which made plane hijackings much more complex for terrorists, was among the reasons that the cell which carried out the Madrid bombings in 2004 chose commuter trains as their target. With almost no security checks needed to board a train, it proved a soft and yet equally effective target for al-Qaeda.[27]

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[23] "9/11 Commission Report." 2004. https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. 2020. Homegrown: ISIS in America. London, UK: I.B. Tauris; Bergen, Peter. 2017. United States of Jihad: Who Are America's Homegrown Terrorists, and How Do We Stop Them? Illustrated Edition. New York: Broadway Books;

[24] Lia, Brynjar. 2009. Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri. 1st edition. New York: Oxford University Press; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander. 2020. Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki's Western Jihad. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[25] Sandler, Todd. 2014. "The Analytical Study of Terrorism: Taking Stock." Journal of Peace Research 51 (2): 257–71.

[26] Enders, Walter, and Todd Sandler. 1993. "The Effectiveness of Antiterrorism Policies: A Vector-Autoregression-Intervention Analysis." American Political Science Review 87 (4): 829–44. https://doi.org/10.2307/2938817.

[27] Enders, Walter, and Todd Sandler. 2011. The Political Economy of Terrorism. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511791451.

Innovation and transference, along with terrorist use of the most effective tools available to them, appears to be most relevant to the American case. Despite some of the European examples discussed above and the interest in jihadist tactical materials among American white supremacists online, the findings of this study suggest that there is only limited evidence of direct learning between jihadists and white supremacists when it comes to plots and attacks in the U.S.

Research Question and Methodology

This report relies on a sample of 93 individuals who were charged in U.S. federal court between 2014 and 2019 and were alleged to have planned or conducted violent attacks in the U.S., in furtherance of Salafi-jihadist or white supremacist causes or ideologies. 53 of these cases involved reported affiliates of Salafi-jihadist groups and 40 involved white supremacists.[28] These cases were selected from wider Program on Extremism databases of individuals charged with violent extremist activity in the U.S. according to several criteria: they must have been 1) charged in U.S. federal courts between 2014 and 2019; 2) alleged to have planned or conducted violent activity in the U.S., and 3) alleged to have planned or conducted their activity to further the goals, objectives, or ideologies of the white supremacist or Salafi-jihadist movements.[29] Several types of cases were excluded from the sample, including those charged in state-level courts, attack planners who were disrupted by other means (including their own deaths) before being charged, and attack planners who were never publicly charged or indicted.[30]

The comparisons between the attack planning methods of these two groups involve two forms of analysis. First, drawing from allegations in federal court documents obtained through Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER), the report classifies each case by several variables related to the target, method, and result of the attack.[31] These include the category of target of the attack, the specific target of the attack, the planned method of attack, whether the attack plot was carried out, and casualties and deaths resulting from the attack, if any. Comparing the frequency of these variables across the two categories forms the basis for statistical comparison and analysis.

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[28] Further information about the methodology used to classify these individuals can be found in Clifford, Bennett. 2021. "Racially/Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist (RMVE) Attack Planning and United States Federal Response, 2014-2019." Washington: George Washington University Program on Extremism.https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/RMVE%20Attack%20Planning%20and%20United%20States%20Federal%20Response.pdf.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*, "Public Access to Court Electronic Records." n.d. PACER: Federal Court Records. Accessed March 16, 2022. https://pacer.uscourts.gov/.

Second, the report conducts a paired case-study analysis of plots by selecting plots with a similar method of attack from both groups. By thoroughly analyzing the details from these case studies, the report attempts to determine the process by which each attack planner selected the type and target of their attack. To answer the research question, this analysis will especially focus on any evidence (or lack thereof) of cross-pollination in attack planning tactics, techniques and procedures amongst white supremacists and Salafi-jihadists, as well as any evidence related to how the attack planners adapted to law enforcement tactics or conducted operational security measures to avoid interdiction.

Data and Findings

Between 2014 and 2019, there were major divergences in the target selections of white supremacist and Salafi-jihadist attack planners. After categorizing the targets of the 93 attack plotters into general groupings, using the Prosecution Project's classification methodology, we found that there were 11 different categories of attack target within the sample.[32] While some overlaps in target selection exist between followers of the two movements, two major differences exist in the targets of attack plots by Salafi-jihadist and white supremacist actors.

First, during this time period jihadist plots tended to exhibit a greater degree of diversity in target selection. This phenomenon, which is illustrated in Figure 1, is observed throughout the dataset, as well as in individual cases. Between 2014 and 2019, jihadists targeted 10 out of the 11 types of targets on more than one occasion. In contrast, white supremacists targeted only three types of targets more than once. It seems that this discrepancy is the function of certain types of targets— especially religious institutions—drawing a lion's share of white supremacist plotting. Plots by white supremacists targeting synagogues, mosques, and historically Black churches occurred in more than 50% of the cases in the dataset. As a whole, jihadists were less focused on any individual target category; the most frequent type of jihadist target (individual persons) only made up 34% of the total, and in contrast to white supremacists, plots were relatively and evenly distributed across categories. Additionally, individual jihadist attack planners were more likely to consider multiple types of targets than white supremacists. 23 of the 53 jihadist plotters (43%) evaluated multiple target categories for their attack, in comparison to only one out of the 40 white supremacist plotters (0.025%).

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[32] "Overview & Project Description." n.d. The Prosecution Project. Accessed March 25, 2021. https://theprosecutionproject.org/overview-project-description/.

Figure 1: Comparative Frequency of Attack Target Categories

Category	White supremacist	Jihadist
Religious institutions	20	6
Individual person(s)	1	18
Public site: event	9	9
Municipal site: local law enforcement	0	13
Federal site: military	0	12
Federal site: nonmilitary	1	8
Public site: commercial	1	7
Mass transportation: ground	1	6
Private site: business/corporate property	1	3
Educational institution	0	3
Private site: residential	3	0
Unspecified/unknown/undeveloped	7	2

The difference in the frequencies of target selection between Salafi-jihadists and white supremacists during this time was found to be statistically significant.[33] By glancing at the data alone, it is clear that certain target categories appeared to be the almost uncontested domain of either the Salafi-jihadist or white supremacist attack planners. For instance, white supremacists' focus on religious institutions was far greater in frequency than Salafi-jihadists, and the opposite is true for military and local law enforcement targets. This may be because the identification of relevant adversaries is different between the movements. Jihadists claim that their primary enemies are the governments and militaries of the countries that oppose them, and tend towards "counterforce" attacks, while white supremacists view their primary enemy as certain groups of people within a society (especially religious and racial minorities) and therefore prefer "countervalue" attacks.[34] The one target type with notable overlap is public events, but in looking closer at the specific sites of planned attacks within this category, there is still a major qualitative difference between white supremacist and jihadist attack plots. White supremacists mainly targeted left-wing protests and counterprotests, while jihadists

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[33] A Chi-square test of equal frequencies yielded a Chi-square value of 58.423385468277 and p=7.194e-9.

[34] Jones, Seth, Catrina Doxsee and Nicholas Harrington. 2020. "The Tactics and Targets of Domestic Terrorists." Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2020. http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200729_Jones_TacticsandTargets_v4_FINAL.pdf

tended to target concerts, conventions, and major parades. This is likely because the goal of targeting public events was different between the two groups: jihadist plotters aimed for mass-casualty attacks whereas white supremacist plotters wanted to conduct hand-to-hand violence against counter-protestors.

Nevertheless, jihadists and white supremacists more often rely on the same types of attack methods than they do targets. Among both groups, two methods of attack—using firearms and using explosive devices-- were by far the most prevalent. As Figure 2 shows, 45% of the sampled white supremacist plots involved the use of firearms, and 37.5% involved the use of explosives. Among jihadist plots, these numbers are slightly greater, as 56% of jihadist plotters considered the use of explosives and 58% firearms. The prevalence of these two attack methods can be tied to several influences, including successful, prominent attacks committed by supporters of both movements utilizing these methods and, in the case of shooting plots, the ease of access of firearms in the U.S.

Figure 2: Comparative Frequency of Attack Tactics

Category	White supremacist	Jihadist
Firearms	18	31
Explosives	15	30
Assault	8	0
Stabbing	0	6
Arson	3	3
Sabotage	2	1
Vehicle Ramming	1	2
Poison	1	1
Unspecified	1	0

However, both groups' supporters also experimented with other types of less-traditional attack methods. Some of these types, such as attack plots using knives (including stabbing attacks and beheading plots) appear to be more highly favored amongst jihadists than white supremacist plotters. The reverse is true for hand-to-hand assaults, which during this time period were the mainstay of white supremacist street fighting groups like the Rise Above Movement but never constituted a part of any jihadist plot.[35] On four other less-traditional types of attack, however, both jihadists and white supremacists found a common interest. Three of these types—vehicle ramming, arson, and sabotage

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[35] Thompson, A.C., Ali Winston, and Darwin Bond Graham. 2017. "Racist, Violent, Unpunished: A White Hate Group's Campaign of Menace." ProPublica. October 19, 2017. https://www.propublica.org/article/white-hate-group-campaign-of-menace-rise-above-movement?token=HBUNV5Tf9ZzqZHhB8l4xVd3TMiWmT2cb.

(in this case, in the form of train derailments)—are worthy of further inquiry, as the frequency of these types of attacks among both movements are highly similar.[36]

The case study analysis in the following selection focuses on these three less-traditional attack methods for several reasons. First, there is a point of comparison—at least one jihadist and one white supremacist plot was carried out using the method in question. Second, and more importantly, because this report intends to analyze the degree of innovation and adaptation by American extremist attack planners, comparing methods that require some degree of deviation from tried-and-true attack planning methods on their own accord will yield more interesting comparisons and insights into attack planning strategy. For more common methods (especially firearms and explosives attacks), it is far more difficult to determine whether the deliberative process that led to their use is a function of in-group imitation, cross-pollination, or transference. Because of this, the case studies focus on comparing jihadist and white supremacist use of three different attack planning methods: vehicle rammings, arson, and train derailment.

Vehicle Ramming Attack Plots: Sayfullo Saipov and James Alex Fields, Jr.

Vehicle rammings, or "deliberately [aiming] a motor vehicle at a target with the intent to inflict fatal injuries or cause significant property damage by striking [the target] with concussive force," became an increasingly popular, notorious, and effective method for terrorist attacks in the West during the past several years.[37] Jihadist, white supremacist, and other violent extremist propaganda have all extolled vehicle ramming as a cost-effective and laudatory method of carrying out terrorist attacks.[38] Concurrently, vehicle ramming plots constituted several of the most high-profile terrorist attacks

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[36] The fourth method, attacks using poison, is not analyzed in case studies in this report. It is difficult to draw comparisons between jihadist and white supremacist poison plots during this time period because the major example of a white supremacist allegedly plotting a poison attack, William Christopher Gibbs, had an unknown target or specific method of dispersing the poison. Moreover, charges against Gibbs were eventually dismissed, leading to little additional insight about his alleged plot. Joyner, Chris. 2018. "Ricin Charges Dropped against Georgia White Supremacist." The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, October 2, 2018.

[37] This definition is a paraphrasing of the Department of Homeland Security's definition, cited in Martinez, Peter. 2017. "TSA Issues Security Warning about Vehicle-Ramming Threat." CBS News. May 4, 2017. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tsa-issues-security-warning-vehicle-ramming-threat/

[38] Argentino, Marc-Andre, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. 2021. "Violent Extremist Innovation: A Cross-Ideological Analysis." NCITE Report. 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; "Vehicle-Borne Attacks: Tactics and Mitigation." 2020. National Counterterrorism Center. https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/NCTC-FBI-DHS_Vehicle-Borne_Attacks-_Tactics_and_Mitigation-survey.pdf.

targeting North America and Western Europe in recent memory—most lethal of which was a 2016 truck-ramming in Nice, France by an Islamic State supporter which killed 87 and injured over 400.[39]

Of the four terrorist attack methods examined here, vehicle rammings are especially important to analyze for any potential of tactical cross-pollination because there is more evidence on a global scale that both Salafi-jihadists and white supremacists are actively promoting their use. Argentino, Maher and Winter found that exhortations by ideologues and members of online communities to commit vehicle rammings were a core feature uniting jihadist and white supremacist propaganda.[40] Jenkins and Butterworth, analyzing over 180 vehicle-ramming attacks that occurred globally between 1963 and 2019, found jihadists and white supremacist actors responsible for 12 and 11 vehicle-ramming incidents, respectively.[41] Neumann argues that this method's popularity is due in large part to the low cost and legality of would-be attackers obtaining all the components (e.g., a vehicle) necessary for the attack.[42]

Another possible motivator of the rise in vehicle rammings by violent extremists during the past several years is the frequent occurrences of the method in extremist inspirational and instructional material. In jihadist spaces, both al-Qaeda and ISIS alike have included manuals for conducting vehicular assault in their English-language magazines, with the former advising followers to weld steel grates to pickup trucks and use them in attacks and the latter urging jihadists in the West to rent even larger vehicles to kill as many people as possible.[43] The method also has frequently appeared in white supremacist and other far-right extremist propaganda, especially targeting Black Lives Matter demonstrations and other protests against police violence.[44]

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[39] "Vehicle Ramming Security Awareness for Soft Targets and Crowded Places." 2018. Department of Homeland Security. https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Vehicle%20Ramming%20-%20Security%20Awareness%20for%20ST-CP.PDF.

[40] Argentino, Marc-Andre, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. 2021. "Violent Extremist Innovation: A Cross-Ideological Analysis." NCITE Report. 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.

[41] Jenkins, Brian Michael, and Bruce R. Butterworth. 2019. "'Smashing Into Crowds' -- An Analysis of Vehicle Ramming Attacks." San Jose: Mineta Transportation Institute. https://transweb.sjsu.edu/sites/default/files/SP-1119-Vehicle-Ramming-Attacks.pdf.

[42] Neumann, Peter R. 2018. "Don't Follow the Money," December 8, 2018. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-06-13/dont-follow-money.

[43] Reed, Alastair, and Haroro J. Ingram. 2017. "Exploring the Role of Instructional Material in AQAP's Inspire and ISIS' Rumiyah." In . European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC). https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/reeda_ingramh_instructionalmaterial.pdf.

[44] ; Allam, Hannah. 2020. "Vehicle Attacks Rise As Extremists Target Protesters." NPR, June 21, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2020/06/21/880963592/vehicle-attacks-rise-as-extremists-target-protesters.

But in the U.S., where legally gathering firearms or explosive precursor material is easier, only a few individuals from these movements charged in federal court plotted vehicle-ramming attacks between 2014 and 2019. The first person in the sample to have been charged in relation to a vehicle-ramming was a white supremacist. On August 12, 2017, James Alex Fields, Jr. drove his 2010 Dodge Challenger coupe into a crowd of protestors in Charlottesville, Virginia who were demonstrating against the 2017 Unite the Right rally, an assembly of white supremacist and other far-right groups.[45] Fields Jr., a committed white supremacist and a member of the Vanguard America group, had traveled from Ohio the night before to join the Unite the Right rally.[46] A search conducted after Fields' arrest found dozens of social media posts reflecting his anti-Semitic and anti-Black outlook, neo-Nazi sentiments, and previous advocacy of using vehicles to target protestors for attacks.[47]

After demonstrating with other white supremacists at the Unite the Right rally, Fields Jr. acted in accordance with these social media postings. As he returned to his parked car in downtown Charlottesville, he passed a group of counter-protestors on the street.[48] Minutes later, he drove to a location on Fourth Street where the counter-protestors were standing, accelerated his vehicle, and plowed into the crowd, killing one demonstrator and injuring over 30.[49] After the attack, Fields Jr. attempted to flee in his vehicle, but was quickly apprehended about one mile from the site of the vehicle-ramming.[50]

Less than three months later, another attack plotter in the sample drove a rented flatbed truck across pedestrian and bike lanes on the West Side Highway in New York City, hitting several pedestrians and a school bus.[51] Upon colliding with the bus, an individual later identified as Sayfullo Saipov exited the truck with several non-lethal firearms; a police officer on-scene shot and subdued him.[52] As a result of the attack, eight people were killed and 11 injured. A subsequent search of Saipov's truck found

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[45] "Sentencing Memorandum of the United States." 2019. United States of America v. James Alex Fields, Jr. United States District Court for the Western District of Virginia. June 21, 2019. Case: 3:18-CR-00011. https://bloximages.newyork1.vip.townnews.com/dailyprogress.com/content/tncms/assets/v3/editorial/3/58/3583aab0-947b-11e9-a1b1-bff25d1795d6/5d0d67df1c6cf.pdf.pdf

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] *Ibid.*

[48] *Ibid.*

[49] *Ibid.*

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] "Sayfullo Saipov Charged With Terrorism and Murder in Aid of Racketeering in Connection With Lower Manhattan Truck Attack." 2017. Department of Justice Press Release. November 21, 2017. https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/sayfullo-saipov-charged-terrorism-and-murder-aid-racketeering-connection-lower-manhattan.

[52] *Ibid.*

documents referencing ISIS and a cellphone that contained ISIS propaganda and searches for truck rentals.[53]

After being taken to the hospital, Saipov reportedly waived his right to counsel and told the FBI that he was inspired by ISIS propaganda to conduct an attack in the U.S. and had been planning to do so for a year.[54] Saipov told investigators that a week before the attack, he rented a similar truck so that he could practice turning and maneuvering the vehicle.[55] He also reportedly claimed to have planned for a mass-casualty attack, first driving his vehicle down the West Side Highway's pedestrian lanes and continuing onwards to the Brooklyn Bridge with the goal of "[killing] as many people as he could."[56] Saipov chose October 31st as the date for his attack because he allegedly believed that more people would be out celebrating the Halloween holiday, creating more targets for his attack.[57]

Fields' and Saipov's vehicle ramming attacks were similar in method but different in almost every other regard. Three major differences stand out. Saipov's attack was allegedly highly premeditated: by the time he conducted the vehicle ramming on a fixed target on a particular date, he had already been planning to conduct an attack for an entire year, and even took steps to "test-run" the attack by renting a truck a week before.[58] Although Fields traveled to Charlottesville with the intent of committing violence, there is no evidence that he planned a vehicle ramming on counter-protestors at any time before the day of the attack.[59] Moreover, while Saipov rented a flatbed truck specifically for the attack in the hopes that a larger vehicle would kill more people, Fields used his own personal car.[60] Lastly, and most importantly, evidence of the ideological and instructional influence of both men's respective movements (jihadi and white supremacist propaganda promoting vehicle rammings) were found in post-attack searches, but there was no evidence of Saipov consulting or referencing white supremacist material on truck rammings, or Fields consulting jihadist material.[61] In total, both seem to have independently reached the decision to conduct a vehicle ramming from very different orientations and therefore carried out their attacks using different tactics.

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[53] *Ibid.*

[54] "Complaint." 2017. United States of America v. Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov. United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. November 1, 2017. https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/1008081/download

[55] *Ibid.*

[56] *Ibid.*

[57] *Ibid.*

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] USA v. James Alex Fields, Jr., "Sentencing Memorandum."

[60] *Ibid.*; USA v. Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov, "Complaint."

[61] *Ibid.* all.

Arson Attack Plots: Tnuza Jamal Hassan and John Timothy Earnest

Like vehicle rammings, various violent extremist groups have promoted arson attacks as a lower-budget, logistically feasible alternative to bombings and shootings. In May 2019, the National Counterterrorism Center assessed "with moderate confidence" that terrorists would "continue emphasizing arson as an attack tactic in order to further their cause."[62] Not only are arson plots relatively simple to plan and execute, requiring plotters to acquire standard, run-of-the-mill precursor ingredients, but when combined with other methods, they can create major impediments to law enforcement's ability to interdict and respond to attack plotters.[63] NCTC assessed that arsonists with a nexus to violent extremism can "present even more difficulties to responding personnel, including the potential for ambushes (luring), intentional depletion of resources (diversion), and follow-on or secondary attacks."[64]

In recent years, promoting arson has become a more consistent theme within terrorist propaganda and instructional material, particularly among Salafi-jihadists. In 2012, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)'s magazine *Inspire* instructed its followers in the construction of incendiary devices that could be used in deliberately setting fire to urban areas and forests.[65] A subsequent *Inspire* issue in 2013 encouraged jihadists to set fire to vehicles, turning them into car bombs.[66] These themes were replicated in the fifth issue of ISIS' English-language magazine *Rumiyah*. In an installment of a series called "Just Terror Tactics," ISIS advised its followers on selecting targets, acquiring precursor material, and other tactics to use while conducting an arson (including how to claim the attack on behalf of the organization).[67]

Within the sample, three jihadists planned arson attacks along similar lines as jihadist instructional material, with one successfully conducting an arson on behalf of a jihadist group. In February 2018, the DOJ charged Tnuza Jamal Hassan with attempting to provide material support to al-Qaeda, arson, and making false statements.[68] Hassan, who was a 19-year-old university student at the time of her attack, set fire to several buildings at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota on January 17,

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[62] "Recognizing Arson with a Nexus to Terrorism." 2017. National Counterterrorism Center. https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/First_Responders_Toolbox-Recognizing_Arson_With_a_Nexus_to_Terrorism_Originally_Published-14_April_20171_May_2019-survey.pdf.

[63] *Ibid.*

[64] *Ibid.*

[65] *Ibid.*; Reed and Ingram, "Exploring the Role of Instructional Material"

[66] *Ibid.*

[67] *Ibid.*

[68] "Minneapolis Woman Charged With Terrorism Offenses, Arson, And Making False Statements." 2018. Department of Justice Press Release. February 7, 2018. https://www.justice.gov/usao-mn/pr/minneapolis-woman-charged-terrorism-offenses-arson-and-making-false-statements.

2018, including one facility that housed a daycare for children.[69] However, the fires were quickly extinguished by first responders, and no one was injured or killed.[70]

Hassan conducted her arson after she was prevented from traveling to Afghanistan to join al-Qaeda in September 2017, making her what Daniel Byman and others refer to as a "frustrated foreign fighter."[71] A former student of the university she later attacked, Hassan also distributed letters to other students encouraging them to join al-Qaeda.[72] She told investigators that she viewed the arsons as a form of "legitimate jihad" in retaliation for U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.[73] The DOJ assessed that "many of the fires set by the defendant caused little damage," arguably signaling that they were reflective of a lower-sophistication arson tactic.[74] Nevertheless, Hassan's stated intent was to burn the school to the ground and kill as many people as possible, and she told investigators that the school "[was] 'lucky "she did not know how to build a bomb because she would have used that instead in her acts of jihad."[75]

On the other side of the sample, three white supremacist plots involved an arson component. The plot most operationally similar to Hassan's occurred in the early morning hours of March 24, 2019 when John Timothy Earnest breached an outer gate of the Dar-ul-Arqam mosque in Escondido, California and attempted to light the mosque on fire using gasoline and matches.[76] Several people who were sleeping at the mosque detected the smell of smoke and quickly called the fire department, who extinguished the fire before any individuals were injured or killed.[77] However, the arsonist, who was not immediately identified, also left graffiti in the mosque's parking lot.[78] Referencing the white supremacist perpetrator of the March 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand that had

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[69] *Ibid.*

[70] *Ibid.*

[71] Byman, Daniel. 2017. "Frustrated Foreign Fighters." Lawfare. July 12, 2017. https://www.lawfareblog.com/frustrated-foreign-fighters.

[72] "Memorandum in Support of Detention." 2018. United States of America v. Tnuza Jamal Hassan. United States District Court for the District of Minnesota. February 9, 2018. Case: 0:18-cr-00026-PJS-SER. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Tnuza%20Hassan%20Memorandum%20in%20Support%20of%20Detention.pdf

[73] *Ibid.*

[74] *Ibid.*

[75] *Ibid.*

[76] Winsor, Morgan. 2019. "Arsonist Who Burned California Mosque Referred to New Zealand Attack in Graffiti: Police." ABC News. March 25, 2019. https://abcnews.go.com/US/arsonist-burned-california-mosque-referred-zealand-attack-graffiti/story?id=61919931; Stanley-Becker, Isaac. 2019. "A California Mosque Was Set Ablaze in 'Clear Homage' to the New Zealand Terrorist Attack." Washington Post, March 25, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/03/25/california-mosque-was-set-ablaze-clear-homage-terrorist-attack-new-zealand/.

[77] *Ibid.* all.

[78] *Ibid.* all.

taken place two weeks before the arson, and the shooter's preferred social media platform, the graffiti at Dar-ul-Arqam read "For Brenton Tarrant -t. /pol/."[79]

Earnest was not identified as the Dar-ul-Arqam arsonist until April 27, 2019, after he entered the Chabad of Poway synagogue in Poway, California and opened fire with an AR-15 rifle, killing one congregant and injuring three.[80] After being apprehended, Earnest admitted to police and in a manifesto posted to 8chan just prior to the Poway shooting that he was also responsible for the Dar-ul-Arqam attack, describing his own attack planning process and attempting to inspire future arsons.[81] "People grossly overestimate the police's ability to solve 'crimes' like 'arson," Earnest wrote, "If your goal is strictly carnage and the highest score—I'd highly recommend you look into flamethrowers (remember kids, napalm is more effective than gasoline)...I know you're out there Fire-anon, make us proud."[82]

Hassan's and Earnest's respective arsons were similar in intent and method; both had the goal of causing mass casualties and used relatively low-tech tactics to start fires at their respective targets. Other jihadists and white supremacists have considered more sophisticated means of setting fires. Amer Sinan Alhaggagi, an ISIS supporter arrested in 2017, told an undercover FBI agent of his wide-reaching plans for conducting a slew of terrorist attacks in the San Francisco Bay Area, including a plot to use incendiary devices to trigger a large-scale wildfire in the Berkley Hills.[83] On the other side, Feuerkrieg Division member Conor Climo planned to use homemade devices, such as Molotov cocktails, to firebomb a Messianic Jewish synagogue in Las Vegas, Nevada. [84]

In comparison to the vehicular ramming attacks discussed above, this sample of arson plots appears to have more tactical similarities across the two groups of case studies. Both Hassan and Earnest used

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[79] Lovett, Ian, and Georgia Wells. 2019. "'So What's His Kill Count?': The Toxic Online World Where Mass Shooters Thrive." Wall Street Journal, September 4, 2019, sec. US. https://www.wsj.com/articles/inside-the-toxic-online-world-where-mass-shooters-thrive-11567608631.

[80] *Ibid.*, "John Earnest Pleads Guilty to 113-Count Federal Hate Crime Indictment in Connection with Poway Synagogue Shooting and Mosque Arson." 2021. Department of Justice Press Release. September 17, 2021. https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdca/pr/john-earnest-pleads-guilty-113-count-federal-hate-crime-indictment-connection-poway.

[81] Ware, Jacob. 2020. "Testament to Murder: The Violent Far-Right's Increasing Use of Terrorist Manifestos." The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep23577.pdf.

[82] Earnest, John T. 2019. "An open letter." 8chan.

[83] "United States' Sentencing Memorandum." 2018. United States of America v. Amer Sinan Alhaggagi. United States District Court for the Northern District of California. December 4, 2018. Case 3:17-cr-00387. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/alhaggagi%20government%20sentencing%20memorandum.pdf

[84] "Order of Detention Pending Trial." 2019. United States of America v. Conor Climo. United States District Court for the District of Nevada. August 9, 2019. Case: 2:19-cr-00232. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Conor%20Climo%20Detention%20Order.pdf

low-budget materials to conduct arsons against soft targets, possibly as an opening salvo in a string of other attacks of higher sophistication. What is still lacking, however, is any evidence that jihadists used white supremacist materials (or vice versa) in the planning stages of their arson plots. In Hassan's case, the arson seemed to be a substitute for a more high-sophistication method that was beyond the perpetrator's perceived abilities, and she conducted the arson according to the jihadist "playbook" set out in *Inspire* and *Rumiyah*. In contrast, Earnest not only failed to cite any jihadist material in his own planning process, but conducted the entire attack as a follow-on to an attack by another white supremacist against Muslims. Thus, as with vehicle rammings, comparing jihadist and white supremacist arson plots in this time period yields little to no evidence that the movements are tactically learning from one another.

Train Derailment Attack Plots: Amir Said Rahman Al-Ghazi and Taylor Michael Wilson

Extremist plots to sabotage or derail trains are unique in that they are ubiquitous across multiple categories of violent extremist ideology, including the ideologies examined in this report, and that they are one of the only categories of terrorist attack that *ipso facto* targets critical infrastructure.[85] In the past, jihadists and white supremacists have both experimented with the idea of derailing a train somewhere in the U.S. or elsewhere, but the bulk of these attempts were conducted instead by anarchist violent extremists, ecoterrorists, or other left-wing violent extremist groups.[86] Like arsons, extremists have attempted to conduct train derailments as a standalone tactic (usually involving the use of improvised explosive devices to sabotage the train and achieve high casualties or attract media focus on their cause), and/or as the pretext for another attack tactic (such as stopping a train and conducting an attack on its passengers).[87]

Among terrorist organizations with a focus on targeting the U.S., al-Qaeda has arguably been the most vocal in its support for this method. According to documents found during the 2011 raid of Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, the former al-Qaeda leader was considering a plot to "derail a passenger train as it crossed a high bridge, sending the coaches plunging into a river or deep valley, potentially killing hundreds."[88] The 17th issue of AQAP's *Inspire* magazine, released in 2017, included detailed instructions on sabotaging trains, evaluating dozens of instances of train

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[85] 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.
[86] *Ibid.*
[87] *Ibid.*
[88] *Ibid.*

derailments in the U.S. that led to significant casualties and exhorting supporters to study train routes and schedules to find the right time for an attack.[89] The issue also details how to build and use a portable device for derailing trains.[90]

In September of 2014, an ISIS supporter from Ohio named Amir Said Rahman al-Ghazi (born Robert McCollum) communicated with another purported ISIS sympathizer about planning a jihadist attack in the U.S.[91] He first indicated his plans to attack a police station, but eventually rejected the idea, telling the other individual that he would need "100 brothers" to successfully conduct the attack.[92] Instead, he told the sympathizer, who unbeknownst to al-Ghazi was an FBI confidential source, that he wanted to attack U.S. infrastructure by derailing a train.[93] al-Ghazi claimed that this would force the U.S. to "look twice in their own backyard," and that he preferred this method of attack because he "wasn't interested in a 'martyrdom operation'…he 'wanted to get away with it' and…he wanted to do something that would keep him 'out of the limelight.'"[94]

In subsequent conversations with other confidential sources, al-Ghazi would frequently and intermittently change the target and method of his proposed attack, telling his counterparts about his plans to attack oil pipelines, hijack trucks, and conduct "drive-by" shootings on police officers.[95] The goal of each of these methods was to "implement chaos to facilitate a way for jihad," mainly through using violence aimed at infrastructure as a means of inciting societal fears and calling likeminded jihadists to action.[96] However, because al-Ghazi took no overt acts beyond the initial conversation with the confidential human source about the train derailment plot, further details about how he intended to conduct the attack are not available in the public record.[97]

In contrast, one white supremacist within the sample was able to successfully carry out a sabotage attack on a train. On October 19, 2017, Taylor Michael Wilson, a member of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement, boarded an Amtrak passenger train traveling from Los Angeles, California to St.

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[89] Reed and Ingram, "Exploring the Role of Instructional Material"; Philp, Catherine. 2017. "Al-Qaeda Calls for Jihadists in the West to Derail Trains." The Times, August 17, 2017, sec. news. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/al-qaeda-inspire-magazine-urges-jihadists-in-west-to-derail-trains-7ngd0jmdm.

[90] *Ibid*. all.

[91] "Affidavit in Support of an Application for a Criminal Complaint and Arrest Warrant." 2015. United States of America v. Amir Said Rahman al-Ghazi. United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/McCollum%20Affidavit.pdf

[92] *Ibid*.

[93] *Ibid*.

[94] *Ibid*.

[95] *Ibid*.

[96] *Ibid*.

[97] *Ibid*.

Louis, Missouri.[98] Two days later, as the train entered Furnas County, Nebraska, Wilson got into an argument with another passenger.[99] Reportedly under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, Wilson breached a secure compartment of a train car, activated the emergency brake, and cut the lights in the passenger cars.[100] As passengers escaped, Amtrak conductors subdued Wilson, who was armed with a handgun.[101] Investigators found NSM propaganda and several weapons on his person, and Wilson told police that his goal in conducting the attack was to "save the train from the black people."[102] The FBI subsequently conducted a search of Wilson's residence that yielded Nazi propaganda, a play Wilson wrote about taking over the U.S., and several illegal firearms.[103] Interestingly, it also yielded some of Wilson's writings about ISIS, and prosecutors at his trial claimed that he had purchased a plane ticket to travel to Syria.[104]

Comparisons between al-Ghazi and Wilson's respective plots are difficult because the former was not carried out to fruition, and the latter yielded little evidence that Wilson planned in advance of his journey to disrupt the train. Both individuals seemed to view sabotage as a pretext for other plots: for al-Ghazi, a derailment would be the first step in a series of attacks targeting American critical infrastructure and for Wilson, it would be immediately followed by attacks on the passengers of the train that he brought to an emergency stop. Unlike in other case studies, there is some information of ideological cross-pollination based on evidence presented during court hearings for Wilson. According to prosecutors, Wilson also wrote and considered traveling in support of ISIS, despite being a card-carrying member of a white supremacist group.[105] Nevertheless, it is unclear and based on the evidence, unlikely, that this ideological crossover prompted Wilson's decision to choose on a particular tactic and target for his attack plot.

[98] "Missouri Man Sentenced for Disabling an Amtrak Train in Nebraska." 2018. Department of Justice Press Release. October 12, 2018. https://www.justice.gov/usao-ne/pr/missouri-man-sentenced-disabling-amtrak-train-nebraska.
[99] *Ibid.*
[100] *Ibid.*
[101] *Ibid.*
[102] *Ibid.*
[103] *Ibid.*
[104] Patrick, Robert. 2018. "St. Charles Man Pleads Guilty to Amtrak-Related Terrorism Charge in Nebraska." STLtoday.Com. July 12, 2018. https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/st-charles-man-pleads-guilty-to-amtrak-related-terrorism-charge-in-nebraska/article_903dc438-5a8d-53a5-8a27-f29655d6bb7e.html.
[105] *Ibid.*

Concluding Analysis

This report found that similarities between jihadist and white supremacist attack planning in the U.S. from 2014 to 2019 were few and far between. Three main distinctions can be drawn. First, jihadists and white supremacists directed their violent attacks towards dissimilar targets, with the former aiming the bulk of its activity towards conducting violence against military and law enforcement sites and assassinating individual foes of the jihadist movement and the latter attempting mass-casualty attacks on houses of worship. Second, white supremacists were significantly more likely to lock on to specific targets, while their jihadist counterparts considered multiple options for their attack plots. Finally, despite significant overlaps in attack methods, little evidence exists in paired case studies that jihadists adopted white supremacist tactical guidance in planning to use a particular attack method, or vice versa. The confluence of these three differences suggests that white supremacist and jihadist attack plotters were more likely to independently settle on their preferred targets and tactics rather than interpolate the game plans of their ideological counterparts.

The data from this U.S. case study, therefore, fails to support the hypothesis that American jihadists are learning how to use specific attack tactics from American white supremacists, or vice versa. It is much more likely that both groups, in light of the U.S. government's counter-terrorism approach, prefer particular targets and methods to maximize their chances of attack success and minimize the chance of interdiction. During the period examined by this study, intense law enforcement scrutiny on large-scale terrorist attack planning (on the scale of operations exhibited by each group in incidents like the September 11 attacks or in the April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing) forced violent extremists

in the U.S. to adapt.[106] Increasing the chance of conducting successful attacks in the face of stronger anti-terrorism laws, the prevalence of undercover law enforcement employees and confidential human sources, and the double-edged sword of new technologies for operational security required modifications to attack planning postures. These came in the form of attack playbooks that are ubiquitous within this study—lone-actor hootings, "do-it-yourself" explosives techniques, and non-conventional attack methods like knife attacks, arson, vehicular rammings, train derailments, and poison attacks.[107]

The hypothesis that similarities in attack planning methods among jihadis and white supremacists are largely the product of transference, or reactions to shifting counterterrorism approaches, is supported by a wider swathe of this study's data. Throughout the cases in this report, jihadis and white supremacists alike frequently discussed the operational feasibility of their plots, imposed operational and communications security measures and countermeasures, and sought guidance from likeminded supporters of their extremist movement on how to carry out a plot while avoiding the long arm of the law. But in this context, it may be more informative to ascertain what they do not discuss—specifically the influence of other extremist movements on their tactical decision-making. Therefore, while it is clear from this study's data that both jihadists and white supremacist attack planners in the U.S. are learning and adapting, it appears to be mainly learning from their counterterrorist adversaries and like-minded supporters of their movement rather than from their ideological counterparts.

Thus, while examples of cross-movement imitation within the case studies examined in the report are scant, evidence of transference in the form of attack plotters citing the avoidance of law enforcement in deliberation over their preferred target and method appears in several cases. Perhaps nowhere is this dynamic clearer than in John Timothy Earnest's manifesto posted to 8chan, in which he makes the case to other participants in the white supremacist movement that arsons against houses of worship are an effective method specifically because they exploit gaps in law enforcement response:

> "Something to note, people grossly overestimate the police's ability to solve 'crimes' such as 'arson' and 'murder.' Lots of threads about 'Feds are talking to me guys because I post on 8chan, it's so spooky' are 'organically' popping up. What a load of shit meant to try to scare the goyim [non-Jews] and prevent retaliation. I scorched a mosque in Escondido with gasoline a week after Brenton Tarrant's sacrifice and they never found shit on me…it is so easy to log on to Minecraft and get away with burning a synagogue (or mosque) to the ground if you're smart about it."[108]

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[106]Bjelopera, Jerome. 2017. "Domestic Terrorism: An Overview." Congressional Research Service. https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R44921.pdf.

[107] Hoffman, Bruce. 2014. "Low-Tech Terrorism." The National Interest, no. 130: 61–71.

[108] Earnest, "An open letter."

This example combines three elements of transference in modern-day terrorism. First, Earnest promoted arson because he viewed it as a way of circumventing law enforcement scrutiny. In his view, setting fires would force the police to exhaust additional resources to determine whether the fire was deliberately set or not, decreasing the investigators' ability to identify the attacker and their motive.[109] Second, Earnest provided additional operational security tips to would-be arsonists, in the hopes that they would further decrease the chances of successful interdiction. These include not leaving DNA at the scene of the crime, not bringing electronics, and not talking about the attack to others.[110] Finally, Earnest pointed to federal law enforcement using digital communications as a method of identifying and prosecuting violent extremists. As a result, Earnest used coded language (for instance, adding the qualifier "in [the video game] Minecraft" to any statement encouraging a crime) and encouraged his followers to refrain from discussing attack plans online.[111] The inclusion of these aspects within his attack plot suggests that avoiding law enforcement was a critical variable in his own decision to select his target and tactic.

Other examples of transference in the case studies come in the form of target and tactic non-selection. Before he settled on another plan, Amir Said Rahman al-Ghazi briefly considered a large-scale attack on a police station in the U.S. However, he turned away from the plot because he was uninterested in a "martyrdom operation," telling a confidential informant that he was more interested in a method that would keep him "out of the limelight" and that he "wanted to get away with it."[112] As al-Ghazi was interested in launching a string of attacks, starting out with low-grade assaults and steadily escalating to larger plots involving more attackers, preventing law enforcement disruption in the initial stages was necessary.[113]

In addition to the evidence supporting the transference hypothesis, the case studies also demonstrate that attack plotters are engaging in organizational learning through in-group imitation. In the vehicle ramming cases explored above, both Sayfullo Saipov and James Alex Fields Jr. relied on instructional or inspirational material produced by like-minded followers of their own movements to plan their attack. This would appear to suggest that, at least in the American context, the choice by white supremacists and jihadists to conduct vehicular assaults is predicated less on copying the tactics of the other group and more on inspirational previous examples of each group independently conducting vehicle rammings. This parallels the literature on the role of terrorist instructional material more

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[109] *Ibid.*
[110] *Ibid.*
[111] *Ibid.*
[112] USA v. al-Ghazi, "Affidavit"
[113] *Ibid.*

broadly, which has found that while extremists broadly consume broadly defined types of extremist material in constructing their plots, they rarely cross ideological lines in doing so.[114]

The sum of evidence from these case studies, therefore, suggest that any similarities in terrorist attack targets or tactics between white supremacists and jihadists are more likely the result of innovation in the face of the U.S.' counterterrorism posture and in-group imitation rather than cross-group imitation. Nevertheless, there are three caveats to this assessment. First, this study and its conclusions are highly limited by its focus on the U.S. context. As the introductory section of this paper claimed, evidence from other contexts outside of the U.S. (particularly in the United Kingdom and Western Europe) does show that elements of the jihadist and white supremacist movements are drawing from one another's tactical guidance and instructional material. To date, most of this transactional relationship has been a one-way street, with white supremacists utilizing jihadist instructional material and jihadists largely eschewing white supremacist material. While it is possible that these dynamics could play a greater role in attack plots in America in the future, it still remains likely that terrorist groups will view adapting to current counterterrorism as a higher priority than adapting to new tactical concepts used by other groups. This is because learning how to avoid the wide-reaching capabilities and aggressive approach of federal law enforcement in interdicting and prosecuting terrorist attack planners is after all, a strategic prerequisite to other forms of terrorist learning.

Second, the rise of post-organizational terrorism, particularly its neo-Nazi accelerationist form, could lead to increased incidences of tactical cross-pollination. This case study, which is limited in its analysis to federal charges that occurred between 2014 and 2019, includes a few cases involving members of accelerationist groups but excludes several notable cases from 2020 and 2021. Accelerationists associated with the so-called "skullmask" network have been especially deferent to the jihadist movement through the employment of memetic references (e.g., referring to their struggle as a "white jihad," idolizing figures in the jihadist movement, or sharing jihadist propaganda) and through interpolating ideological concepts.[115] In the past, online elements of these networks have distributed jihadist instructional material for attacks, but in this study's dataset there are no examples

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[114] Holbrook, Donald. 2019. "What's on the terrorists' bookshelves? Mapping demand-side dimensions of 'terrorist' media." European Counter Terrorism Centre Advisory Network on Terrorism and Propaganda Conference, April 2019. https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/holbrook_terrorist_media.pdf

[115] See for instance: Newhouse, Alex. 2021. "The Threat Is the Network: The Multi-Node Structure of Neo-Fascist Accelerationism." CTC Sentinel 14 (5). https://ctc.usma.edu/the-threat-is-the-network-the-multi-node-structure-of-neo-fascist-accelerationism/; Upchurch, H.E. 2021. "The Iron March Forum and the Evolution of the 'Skull Mask' Neo-Fascist Network." Combating Terrorism Center at West Point 14 (10). https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-iron-march-forum-and-the-evolution-of-the-skull-mask-neo-fascist-network/; Ayad, Moustafa. 2021. "Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures." London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf.

of American white supremacists utilizing this material in attack planning. It is conceivable, however, that U.S. white supremacist attack planners may increasingly rely on jihadist material to plan their attacks. Notably, at least one post-2019 case study involving a neo-Nazi accelerationist in the U.S. involved a significant jihadist influence on their attack plot.[116]

Moreover, we cannot discount the role or influence of the general zeitgeist and osmotic effect that attacks conducted but either movement can have. Vehicle ramming in particular came into the public consciousness as a result of its promotion by AQAP and its subsequent use by ISIS attackers which gained wide media attention across the Western world.[117] While attackers may not specify that they were inspired by different extremist groups, and may show no direct signs of having done so, there may well be a subconscious adoption of these approaches due to the coverage and attention they receive within our societies.[118]

This research has provided a snapshot of white supremacist and jihadist terrorist tactics and target selection in America and provided a number of useful conclusions which may help policymakers and law enforcement better understand the trajectories of each threat. However, more research is crucially needed, especially in comparing the American case to its broader Western context, and in evaluating whether the growing ideological and memetic convergence between the neo-Nazi accelerationist and jihadist movements has diffused to the level of individual attack plots. Ultimately, however, it is reasonable to expect that the tactical approaches adopted by jihadists and white supremacists in the U.S. will be more dependent on innovation to avoid the expansive American counterterrorism posture than on imitation of their terrorist competitors.

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[116] "Sealed Complaint." 2020. United States of America v. Ethan Phelan Melzer. United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. June 4, 2020. https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/1287701/download

[117] Veilleux-Lepage, Yannick. 2017. "How and Why Vehicle Ramming Became the Attack of Choice for Terrorists." The Conversation. March 29, 2017. http://theconversation.com/how-and-why-vehicle-ramming-became-the-attack-of-choice-for-terrorists-75236

[118] Kearns, Erin M., Allison E. Betus, and Anthony F. Lemieux. 2021. "When Data Do Not Matter: Exploring Public Perceptions of Terrorism." Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 44 (4): 285–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1543145.