



Militia Violent Extremists in the United States: Understanding the Evolution of the Threat

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International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism

PDX Proudboys

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Policy Brief

May 2022



International Centre for
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Abstract

Militia violent extremists (MVEs) pose a growing threat within the United States. MVEs were the most prominent and well-organised participants in the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol and have plotted numerous acts of lethal violence against law enforcement, government officials, and civilians in the past decade. MVEs are motivated by a belief that private citizens must use violence to resist government overreach, combat purported tyranny, or maintain law and order. While participants in the broader militia movement embrace similar beliefs, MVEs are distinguished by their willingness to carry out violence.

MVEs typically organise in small local or regional militias, though many movement participants do not affiliate with a specific organisation. The modern militia movement developed at the end of the twentieth century, but social media has transformed the movement's structure and fuelled its growth. Movement members have organised loose umbrella networks at the national level, most notably the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, while others have coalesced around specific memes or ideas, including the accelerationist Boogaloo movement, border defence, opposition to federal stewardship of public land, and opposition to COVID-19 public health measures. MVE violence has been similarly diverse. In addition to the attack on the U.S. Capitol, MVEs have attempted to kill law enforcement officers, plotted to kidnap government officials, and engaged in multiple standoffs with law enforcement in response to government action.

Because the MVE movement is largely domestic, US policymakers have several options for countering this threat. The US government can limit radicalisation through transparency around its domestic activity, thereby countering the anti-authority sentiments and conspiracy theories that fuel the movement. Further, federal legislation targeting militia activity and improved counter-extremism training can provide law enforcement with the tools necessary to address MVE-linked criminal activity.

Keywords: militias, domestic violent extremism, terrorism, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Boogaloo, conspiracy theories

Introduction

In the United States, militia violent extremists (MVEs) embrace violence in service of anti-government and anti-authority ideology. MVEs are just one part of the militia movement: movement adherents who cannot be regarded as violent extremists hold similar suspicions of government but eschew violence.

There is significant overlap between the ideas of the nonviolent and violent aspects of the militia movement, and both aspects must be examined to adequately understand MVEs. This policy paper introduces MVEs alongside the broader militia movement, including the movement's history, organisation, ideology, and violent activity. However, it is important to distinguish between nonviolent militia activists and those who engage in violent extremism. Most activists in the movement do not engage in violent activity, and in the US, advocacy of militia ideology decoupled from violent extremism is protected by First Amendment rights to free speech and assembly. Americans also enjoy Second Amendment rights to bear arms. Despite the use of the term militia to describe the movement, not all adherents belong to an organised paramilitary group. Indeed, such groups may sometimes be unlawful even if they are non-violent as many states bar unauthorised private militia groups.¹

The threat MVEs pose to US law enforcement, government officials, and civilians has grown following an increase in militia group membership since 2008. Federal, state, and local law enforcement continue to disrupt plots targeting government employees and the broader public. MVEs have also become a regular presence at violent protests. The most prominent display in this regard was the 6 January 2021 attack on the US Capitol, during which MVEs were part of the group that sought to interfere with certification of the 2020 US presidential election results. While MVEs represented only a small percentage of participants, there is evidence that members of the MVE contingent prepared for the attack and deployed a range of violent tactics during the events of 6 January.²

Though MVEs and the associated militia movement exist primarily in the United States, the movement has spread to Canada. Certain national militia networks in the United States have established chapters there, and the Canadian government has designated both the Three Percenters and Proud Boys as terrorist entities.

Historical Background

The modern militia movement came to fruition in the 1980s and 1990s. Though it would be wrong to conflate contemporary militias with white supremacist groups as a general matter, the foundations of the militia movement developed in large part from the organised white power movement that emerged following the end of Vietnam War in the mid-1970s.³ White power activists of the era began forming paramilitary organisations and engaging in military training, hallmarks of the later militia movement.

¹ For a state-by-state overview of these laws, see "Addressing Political Violence, Unlawful Paramilitaries, and Threats to Democracy: State Fact Sheets," Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection, Georgetown University Law Center, n.d., <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/icap/our-work/addressing-the-rise-of-unlawful-private-militias/state-fact-sheets/>.

² Mark Hosenball, "Florida Oath Keepers Member Pleads Guilty to Jan. 6 Capitol Riot Charges," Reuters, September 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/florida-oath-keepers-member-pleads-guilty-jan-6-capitol-riot-charges-2021-09-15/>; US Department of Justice, press release, "Six California Men, Four of Whom Self-Identify as Members of 'Three-Percenter' Militias, Indicted on Conspiracy Charges Related to Jan. 6 Capitol Breach," June 10, 2021.

³ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 2, 190-93.

They also began crafting and refining ideological tenets adopted by the later militia movement, including opposition to the US government and an embrace of conspiracy theories claiming that the federal government sought to impose a tyrannical state.⁴ The modern militia movement maintained the anti-government ideology of the earlier white power movement but dropped many of its explicitly racist trappings.

The militia movement grew throughout the 1990s, fuelled by what many Americans viewed as unjustified and gratuitous violence against civilians by federal law enforcement. Two highly publicised incidents supercharged the movement. The first was the August 1992 standoff at Ruby Ridge in Idaho between federal agents and the Weaver family, which turned violent, leading to the shooting deaths of Weaver's wife and teenage son by federal agents. Less than a year later, federal law enforcement initiated a siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. After multiple confrontations that involved both a shootout and the use of tear gas, a fire broke out in the compound. Over 70 Branch Davidians died in the siege, primarily during the fire.⁵

The April 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building by Timothy McVeigh also had a profound impact on the movement. While McVeigh did not maintain a persistent association with a specific militia group, his ideology reflected the movement's core concern about government overreach and tyranny.⁶ The bombing's impact on the movement was mixed. It led to an initial spike in militia group membership as national media, which sometimes erroneously portrayed McVeigh as a militia member, engaged in extensive reporting on the movement. However, militia membership shrank in the years following the bombing as movement activists distanced themselves from the horrors of the Oklahoma City attack and as the federal government pursued more aggressive law enforcement action against MVEs.⁷

Following a decline from the late 1990s through the early 2000s, the militia movement began expanding around 2008. Multiple factors fed the movement's rise, including the election of Barack Obama, the first black US president. The financial crisis of 2007-08 created a broader pool of potential members as economic insecurity fed the growth of anti-government movements across the political spectrum. Social media platforms had recently achieved widespread adoption and would become important drivers of militia organisations' growth. The establishment of prominent national militia networks, notably the Three Percenters, provided readily digestible ideological frameworks that could be used as a template by militia activists. Beginning in 2016, the militia movement increasingly focused on countering its civilian political opponents, in part because some militia activists viewed President Donald Trump as an opponent of the same state institutions whose expansion they feared. This perception temporarily reduced or tempered anti-government tendencies in parts of the movement, at least to some extent.

4 Ibid., p. 93.

5 Mark Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy: The Militia Movement from Ruby Ridge to Y2K," *American Behavioral Scientist* 44:6 (February 2001), pp. 961-62.

6 Tracy McVeigh, "The McVeigh Letters: Why I Bombed Oklahoma," *The Guardian*, May 6, 2001.

7 Thomas Korosec, "Oklahoma Bombing Was Beginning of End for Militias," *The Houston Chronicle*, April 20, 2005; Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy," pp. 963, 966-68.

Organisation

Small Militias. The militia movement, including both nonviolent and violent extremist elements, is primarily organised into small paramilitary groups that typically draw recruits from a particular state or locality. Some are chapters or branches of larger national organisations, though such groups often operate largely independently of centralised leadership.⁸ Militia groups often splinter or collapse multiple times due to diverging goals, accusations of corruption, or personality clashes among members. While local militias are the most important units of organisation, movement members also maintain regional or national interpersonal ties that spread ideology and tactics, and bind the movement together.

Individual Movement Members. The movement also includes activists who are not “official” members of an organised group, but rather exist within a broader pro-militia ecosystem. Indeed, the militia movement, while best known for the organised paramilitary groups that are the source of its name, emphasises the responsibility of private individuals to combat tyranny.⁹ Even without clear organisational ties, these individuals may participate in events with militia groups or associate with a particular umbrella network or ideology. The blurred line between militia groups and independent activists poses a challenge to law enforcement attempting to address the MVE threat.

National Networks and Umbrella Organisations. National militia networks provide an ideological template for local groups and individual activists. These national networks spread specific forms of militia ideology and facilitate joint activities, including training and rapport building, that include local groups or individual members.¹⁰ Despite the importance of national networks in disseminating specific ideologies, they generally do not retain significant centralised control. The local militia is consistently the movement’s core unit of organisation. National militia networks generally avoid public expressions of violent extremist ideology, and their leaders should not necessarily be considered violent extremists. However, individual militias and activists affiliated with these networks have engaged in extremist activity, even as national leaders disavow or refuse to publicly support them.

The Oath Keepers is a national network of militias that seeks to mobilise current and former law enforcement officers, members of the US military, and first responders to defend citizens’ constitutional rights against perceived government interference and overreach.¹¹ The network operates under the auspices of a single umbrella group, and is thus one of the most well-organised militia networks—which is not to say that it is either particularly well organised or centrally directed. While the Oath Keepers’ ideological materials largely focus on encouraging law enforcement officers and active duty military members to resist unconstitutional orders, members of the group participated in the January 2021 attack on the US Capitol. Oath Keepers—including founder and leader Elmer Stewart Rhodes III—have been charged with seditious conspiracy for coordinating efforts “to oppose by force the lawful transfer of presidential power” before and during the attack.¹²

8 Catrina Doxsee, “Examining Extremism: The Militia Movement,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, August 12, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-militia-movement>.

9 For example, the ideologies embraced by both the Three Percenters and the Light Foot Militia has encouraged this concept.

10 See “The Washington State Three Percenters Bylaws: A Guide to Being a Three Percenter,” Washington 3%, archived October 7, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211008004808/https://wa3percent.org/application/files/9615/9176/5989/bylaws.pdf>

11 “About Oath Keepers,” Oath Keepers, archived January 3, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210103020410/https://oathkeepers.org/about/>.

12 Indictment, United States v. Rhodes, 1:22-cr-00015 (D.D.C., January 12, 2022), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/press-release/file/1462346/download>.

Several members of the network, including its founder, also participated in a 2014 armed standoff in Bunkerville, Nevada between federal agents and the family of Cliven Bundy.¹³

The Three Percenters (sometimes styled as III% or Threepers) is a diffuse national network of militia groups and independent activists. Three Percenters idealise local militias, mythologising the power of small groups of armed “patriots.” Their name refers to the myth that only three percent of the American population took up arms against the British during the Revolutionary War. The network emphasises the belief that individual patriots must be prepared to deploy violence against the government in defence of liberty, in particular the right to bear arms.¹⁴ The network is not unified under coherent leadership. Regional and national umbrella organisations have emerged and dissolved over time, often coexisting as largely independent organisations, though possibly with overlapping membership.¹⁵

Three Percenters participated in the January 2021 attack on the US Capitol. Members’ participation in the attack led one of the remaining national groups to dissolve, noting in a final message that “other ‘Three Percenter’ groups no longer hold the values and morals that we have held in our organization for so long” and stating that their role in the Capitol attack cast the movement in a “negative light.”¹⁶ Individuals associated with the Three Percenters have used or planned to use firearms and explosives in plots targeting law enforcement officers, private businesses, an abortion clinic, a mosque, and housing complexes inhabited by immigrants.¹⁷ There is a growing fear among militias like the Three Percenters, evident in social media postings, that federal law enforcement is moving aggressively to infiltrate these groups in response to the events of 6 January 2021.

Social Media. Social media has been essential for the expansion of the militia movement, including MVEs. Movement members use social media to form groups, spread their ideology, document group activities, and fundraise. Militia activists have relied particularly heavily on Facebook, exploiting the site’s functionality to attract views and recruits¹⁸. Some militia-linked Facebook pages have attracted as many as 500,000 followers.

¹³ Jessica Garrison, Ken Bensinger & Salvador Hernandez, “Person One,” Buzzfeed, March 4, 2021.

¹⁴ Mike Vanderboegh, “A Brief Three Percent Catechism – A Discipline Not for the Faint Hearted,” blog post, Sipseystreetirregulars, June 29, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210923134939/https://sipseystreetirregulars.blogspot.com/2014/06/a-brief-three-percent-catechism.html>.

¹⁵ For example, the III% Security Force, III% United Patriots, and The Three Percenters-Original. See Jordan Green, “III% Security Force Deposits National Leader, Reorganizes Under New Name,” Triad City Beat, August 25, 2019, <https://triad-city-beat.com/iii-security-force-deposits-national-leader-reorganizes-new-name/>; “Who Are the III% United Patriots,” III% United Patriots, archived July 6, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190706191206/http://3percent.org/about.html>; Sarah Ladd, “Did Three Percenters Back Beshear Effigy at Rally?: What to Know About the Kentucky Group,” Nashville Courier Journal, May 26, 2020, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2020/05/26/what-to-know-about-kentucky-three-percenters-group/5258749002/>; “Three Percenters,” Anti-Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/three-percenters>.

¹⁶ “Final Statement,” The Three Percenters - Original, February 21, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210310130503/https://thethreepers.org/2021/02/ttpos-final-statement/21/>.

¹⁷ Will Sommer, “Militia Leader Plotted to Kidnap and Kill Cops to Win New Followers, Feds Say,” Daily Beast, May 12, 2020; Chuck Goudie, Ross Weidner & Christine Tressel, “White Rabbit Militiaman Changes Mind, Will Plead in Domestic Terror Case,” ABC7 Eyewitness News, September 18, 2018, <https://abc7chicago.com/white-rabbit-militiaman-changes-mind-will-plead-in-domestic-terror-case/4280107/>; Tim Stelloh, “Man Who Tried to Blow Up Oklahoma City Bank in Anti-Government Plot Sentenced to 25 Years,” NBC News, March 23, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-who-tried-blow-oklahoma-city-bank-anti-government-plot-n1167156>; Masood Farivar, “Muslims, Immigrants on US Militias’ New Enemies List,” Voice of America, April 24, 2018.

¹⁸ April Glaser, “Anti-Immigrant Armed Militias Posted Videos and Fundraised Through Facebook for Months,” Slate, April 22, 2019; “Facebook’s Militia Mess,” Tech Transparency Project, March 24, 2021, <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/facebooks-militia-mess>.

As Facebook has more aggressively enforced its policies regarding extremist content, militia groups have moved to other sites, including Telegram, MeWe, RocketChat, Keybase, Zello, and TikTok. Militia activists have also turned to at least one movement-specific site: MyMilitia, a militia-focused alternative social media site. Among the functions the site offers is a geographic search tool that can help users find militias in their area to join.¹⁹

Ideology

Members of the militia movement believe that private citizens must be prepared to resist government overreach, combat tyranny, or maintain law and order. While many movement members believe that violence may someday be required, MVEs believe that violence is already necessary.

The broader militia movement's ideology is most often organised around fear of government overreach or state collapse, but it is not consistently anti-government. Its adherents maintain a complex relationship with government authority that often clashes with the ideology of other militia activists. Traditional militia ideology holds that the US government is or threatens to become a tyrannical regime, and that it must be opposed by private citizens. However, many militia activists support particular facets of government, such as local law enforcement, border defence, or individual political figures (e.g., Donald Trump) while rejecting and opposing others.²⁰ Support for elements of the US government has been divisive for militia activists and has led to ideological division.²¹

Defence of the right to bear arms is a core motivation for the movement. Militia members are concerned with infringements on gun rights because they believe that private gun ownership is a critical defence against government tyranny. Many militia adherents fear that gun control will be the first step in establishing an authoritarian regime over the American people.

Some militia groups infuse their fear of tyranny with conspiracy theories. One common theory focuses on a purported world government, frequently portrayed as the "Zionist Occupied Government," or ZOG, for its alleged concentration of power in the hands of a cabal of elite Jewish powerbrokers, including Wall Street titans and Hollywood executives. Other iterations of this theory that are less overtly indebted to antisemitism hold that the US government is controlled by a secret world government, often called a "New World Order," or that the US government is trying to institute such a regime.

These beliefs sit at the ideological heart of most militia groups and MVEs. However, several subsets of the militia movement, as well as the causes that intersect with it, have their own parochial ideologies.

¹⁹ Homepage, MyMilitia.com, archived September 21, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210921140222/https://www.mymilitia.com/>.

²⁰ See Militia Standards and Principles of the Light Foot (Idaho: Idaho Light Foot Militia, April 2020), p. 2.

²¹ "The Boogaloo Movement," Anti-Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/boogaloo>.

The Boogaloo. The Boogaloo movement (sometimes referred to as the “Boogaloo Bois”) is an anti-government movement that believes civil war is imminent. Many believers are accelerationists who seek to bring about this conflict.²² The Boogaloo movement is distinct from, but overlaps with, the militia movement, and Boogaloo ideology and iconography can serve as a mobilising or radicalising meme for many militia activists.²³ Some Boogaloo extremists operate independently, but others have formed militias.²⁴ Still other Boogaloo adherents explicitly reject the militia movement, claiming that its members were overly tolerant of President Trump. Boogaloo adherents have been connected to the January 2021 attack on the US Capitol and have been arrested or pleaded guilty to various crimes, including the murder of law enforcement officers.²⁵ In recent weeks, Boogaloo members have surfaced in Ukraine, seeking to fight the Russians.²⁶

Border Militias. A subset of militias located in the southwestern United States is primarily concerned with migration and crime along the US-Mexico border. Some of these militias have engaged in armed vigilante patrols along the border to prevent migrants from entering the US and have detained individuals at gunpoint.²⁷ At least one member of a border militia has been convicted of impersonating a Border Patrol agent.²⁸

Anti-Public Land Militias. Militia groups in the American West are often aligned with the broader anti-public land movement, whose members believe that the government’s stewardship of large tracts of land in the region is illegitimate. This is most evident in the involvement of MVEs in the armed occupation by members of the Bundy family of federal land in Bunkerville, Nevada and the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon.²⁹

White Supremacist Militias. Some militia activists participate in other militias or form their own militia groups organised, in part, around their belief in white supremacy. Such individuals or groups are often concerned with non-white immigration, and white supremacist MVEs may target ethnic or religious minorities with violence. The Boogaloo movement in particular has extensive overlap with accelerationist white supremacist ideologies that call for violent revolution, though other elements of the movement have sought to reject racism.³⁰

22 Matthew Kriner & Jon Lewis, “The Evolution of the Boogaloo Movement,” CTC Sentinel 14:2 (February 2021), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-evolution-of-the-boogaloo-movement/>.

23 See discussion in Emma Grey Ellis, “The Meme-Fueled Rise of a Dangerous, Far-Right Militia,” Wired, June 10, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/boogaloo-movement-protests/>; “Cynthia Miller-Idriss on the Mainstreamization of Extremist Ideas,” Illiberalism Studies Program, George Washington University, August 9, 2021, <https://www.illiberalism.org/cynthia-miller-idriss-on-the-mainstreamization-of-extremist-ideas/>.

24 Gisela Pérez de Acha, Kathryn Hurd & Ellie Lightfoot, “‘I Felt Hate More Than Anything’: How an Active Duty Airman Tried to Start a Civil War,” PBS Frontline, April 13, 2021.

25 Andrew Blankstein & Ben Collins, “Alleged ‘Boogaloo’ Extremist Charged in Killing of Federal Officer During George Floyd Protest,” NBC News, June 16, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/airman-charged-killing-federal-officer-during-george-floyd-protests-california-n1231187>.

26 Matt Stieb, “The Beefing Boogaloo Boys of Ukraine,” New York Magazine, March 17, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/american-military-volunteers-ukraine.html>.

27 Alex Horton, “‘George Zimmerman on Steroids’: How Armed ‘Militias’ Roam the Border in Legal Grey Areas,” Washington Post, April 24, 2019.

28 US Department of Justice, press release, “Man Sentenced to 21 Months in Prison for Impersonating a Border Patrol Agent,” October 20, 2020.

29 Sarah Childress, “The Battle Over Bunkerville: The Bundys, the Federal Government and the New Militia Movement,” PBS Frontline, May 16, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-battle-over-bunkerville/>; Sam Levins, “Oregon Militia Stand Their Ground But Local Residents Want ‘These Thugs’ Gone,” The Guardian, January 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jan/09/oregon-militia-wildlife-refuge-harney-county-residents-wary>.

30 Alex Newhouse & Nate Gunesch, “The Boogaloo Movement Wants to be Seen as Anti-Racist, But It Has a White Supremacist Fringe,” Middlebury Institute of International Studies Center on Extremism, Terrorism, and Counterterrorism, May 30, 2020, <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/boogaloo-movement-wants-be-seen-anti-racist-it>.

The majority of militia activists cannot be accurately described as white supremacists, and many militias include, or are occasionally primarily composed of, non-white individuals.

Anti-Public Health Measures Militias. Beginning in 2020, some militia activists and MVEs have mobilised to oppose public health measures imposed in response to COVID-19. These movement members view temporary government restrictions on routine activity as a pretextual power-grab. Their grievances have been fuelled in part by a diverse array of conspiracy theories promulgated during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding both the virus's origin and also the purpose of responsive public health measures. Most militia activists concerned about public health measures have channelled their efforts into nonviolent protest and other legitimate political activity. But select MVEs have instead plotted violence against government officials who implement or enforce these restrictions.³¹

Sovereign Citizens. The militia movement has extensive overlap with the sovereign citizen movement.³² Both are largely driven by rejection of government authority, and sovereign citizens may form or participate in militia groups.³³ Criminal activities by sovereign citizen violent extremists have been motivated by elements of MVE ideology and vice versa.³⁴

Violent Activities

Though MVEs represent only a small portion of the militia movement, they pose a threat to law enforcement, government officials, and private citizens, particularly those they view as political opponents.

Attacks Against Law Enforcement and Government Officials. MVEs have plotted lethal violence targeting law enforcement and government officials. Such attacks have been motivated both by general opposition to purported government tyranny and also specific retaliation for law enforcement action against MVEs. Firearms and explosives, including improvised explosive devices (IEDs) such as pipe bombs, are common elements of these plots.³⁵ MVEs have also plotted to kidnap and kill officials and law enforcement, including a high-profile 2020 plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan from her residence.

MVEs have been accused of conspiring to interfere with the functions of the US government as part of the January 2021 attack on the US Capitol. Though participants in the event adhered to a variety of ideologies, several MVEs have pleaded guilty to or were charged with crimes in connection with the attack. The MVEs involved demonstrated some preparedness, plotting their activities in advance, raising funds, and bringing tactical equipment and weapons to Washington, DC. In an open letter published on the Oath Keepers website, released before the 6 January riot, Rhodes noted that the Oath Keepers would “have well-armed and equipped [quick reaction force] teams on standby, outside DC.”³⁶

31 Tresa Baldas & Paul Egan, “FBI: Virginia Governor Also Targeted in Militia Kidnapping Plot,” Detroit Free Press, October 13, 2020.

32 Sovereign citizens are US citizens who claim to have special knowledge or heritage that renders them immune from government authority.

33 Examples of militias organized within the sovereign citizen movement include the Rise of the Moors and the Alaska Peacekeeper Militia.

34 Casey Grove, “Alaska Militia Leader Schaeffer Cox’s Murder Conspiracy Sentence Cut by 10 Years,” Alaska Public Media, November 6, 2019, <https://www.alaskapublic.org/2019/11/06/alaska-militia-leader-schaeffer-coxs-murder-conspiracy-sentence-cut-by-10-years/>.

35 Kirk Siegler, “Militia Leader Who Tried to Bomb a Remote Federal Cabin Pleads Guilty,” NPR, April 26, 2018; Federal Bureau of Investigation, press release, “Three Men Charged with Conspiracy to Possess Destructive Devices,” February 21, 2014.

36 Mike Giglio, “The Lonely Revolutionary,” The Intercept, March 8, 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/03/08/oath->

MVEs have also engaged in armed standoffs to block law enforcement action. Some of these actions were immediate responses to interactions with law enforcement. For example, in July 2021 members of the Rise of the Moors sovereign citizen militia instigated an armed standoff with police who approached while their vehicles were stopped on the side of a highway.³⁷ In the American West, the most prominent standoffs involving militia groups and law enforcement have occurred during disputes over federal control of land, as discussed earlier.

Mass Casualty Attacks. MVEs have occasionally plotted mass casualty attacks. MVEs have usually selected targets based on their racial, ethnic, or religious identity, or their immigration status.³⁸ These plots involved a mix of tactics, including use of firearms, explosives (both purchased and homemade), and vehicle-borne IEDs, and, in one instance, a biological weapon.³⁹

Violence During Protests. Most violence perpetrated by MVEs against civilians has occurred during protests. MVEs have used violence intended to be less-than-lethal against political opponents, including participants in Black Lives Matter protests and anti-fascist, anarchist, and other left-wing activists. Violence has been largely characterised by brawling or the use of weapons like clubs, batons, and paintball guns. Other militia activists attend protests while displaying firearms. While the legality of attending a protest with a firearm is subject to local and state laws and is afforded protections by the First and Second Amendments, the participation of armed members of the movement at such events poses a risk of violence.

On at least four occasions, MVEs associated with the Boogaloo movement have tried to commit lethal attacks at protests. In May 2020, Boogaloo extremists in Minneapolis tried to exacerbate civil unrest, firing shots into an abandoned police building.⁴⁰ The same month, two men in Oakland, California, used the distraction of protests to kill a federal security officer guarding a courthouse in a drive-by shooting. The shooter, Steven Carrillo, later ambushed local and state law enforcement who were trying to arrest him, killing one and injuring two.⁴¹ In Las Vegas, three members of the “Battle Born Igloo” group were arrested while traveling to a protest with firearms, fireworks, and Molotov cocktails.⁴² And three men arrested in June 2020 plotted to use Molotov cocktails to carry out a firebomb attack during protests over COVID-19 restrictions.⁴³

keepers-january-6-stewart-rhodes-trump/.

37 Ryan W. Miller, “11 Arrested in Massachusetts Standoff: Here’s What We Know About the Group and Moorish Sovereign Movement,” USA Today, July 4, 2021.

38 Chuck Goudie, Ross Weidner & Christine Tressel, “White Rabbit Militiaman Changes Mind, Will Plead in Domestic Terror Case,” ABC 7 Eyewitness News, September 18, 2018, <https://abc7chicago.com/white-rabbit-militiaman-changes-mind-will-plead-in-domestic-terror-case/4280107/>; Federal Bureau of Investigation, press release, “Justice in Kansas: Three Men Sentenced in Conspiracy to Bomb Somali Immigrant,” April 12, 2019.

39 Cory Matteson, “Militia Man Guilty on Firearms Charge,” Casper Star-Tribune, August 4, 2007, https://trib.com/news/local/militia-man-guilty-on-firearms-charge/article_ffff3d64-1082-5464-85f7-573ee9af4546.html; Amy Forliti, “Trial to Begin for Man Accused in Minnesota Mosque Bombing,” Associated Press, November 1, 2020; “FBI Arrests 4 Georgia Militia Members,” Associated Press, November 1, 2011.

40 Gisela Pérez de Acha, Kathryn Hurd & Ellie Lightfoot, “‘I Felt Hate More Than Anything’: How an Active Duty Airman Tried to Start a Civil War,” PBS Frontline, April 13, 2021.

41 “Alleged ‘Boogaloo’ Member Pleads Guilty to Killing Federal Guard During 2020 Protests,” Associated Press, February 11, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/11/1080311940/alleged-boogaloo-member-pleads-guilty-to-killing-federal-guard-during-2020-prote>.

42 Leah Sottile, “The Chaos Agents,” The New York Times, August 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/19/magazine/boogaloo.html>.

43 Michelle L. Price & Scott Sonner, “Prosecutors: 3 Men Plotted to Terrorize Vegas Protests,” Associated Press, June 3, 2020.

Critical Infrastructure and Industrial Targets. MVEs have plotted attacks against industrial targets and critical infrastructure. Such plots tend to be intended to spark a civil war or broader insurrection against the US government.⁴⁴ While potentially destructive, such plots by MVEs are rare.

Robbery and Other Criminal Activity. On seemingly rare occasions, MVEs have plotted crimes intended to finance or otherwise support their ideologically motivated activities. MVEs have robbed stores and drug dealers to finance operations. Other MVEs have plotted to raid National Guard armouries for weapons that they wanted to use in their efforts to launch an insurrection.⁴⁵

Transnational Connections

The militia movement exists largely within the United States, with a history and ideology grounded in American political traditions. It has not gained significant traction abroad, with the notable exception of Canada, which is home to a more limited militia movement, largely inspired by the US-based movement. While US militia networks are active in Canada, open sources provide little evidence that Canadian cells are actively collaborating with their US counterparts. Canadian militia groups appear to be driven largely by anti-immigrant sentiment rather than anti-government beliefs.

The militia network with the greatest apparent activity in Canada is the Three Percenters. The network has grown rapidly since 2015, establishing chapters in Alberta and Ontario and attracting members in every province.⁴⁶ Canadian chapters have been largely focused on opposing Muslim immigration. Canadian chapters have engaged in a range of activities to prepare for violence, including paramilitary training, which is potentially illegal under Canadian law.⁴⁷ The Canadian government designated the network as a terrorist organisation on 25 June 2021, citing violent activities by members of Three Percenter groups in the United States.⁴⁸

Policy Recommendations

Given that the MVE threat is highly concentrated in the United States, US policymakers can adopt several policy approaches to address the challenges posed by militia violent extremist groups:

1. **Avoid “Feeding the Narrative.”** One aspect of MVEs’ core outlook is that a resort to violence is justified by government excesses. Indeed, the US government has at times, particularly in the 1990s, engaged in actions that strengthened rather than refuted this outlook. In seeking to address the challenged posed by MVEs, government at all levels should ensure that strategies and tactics employed are rights-protective and sufficiently transparent to reduce the attractiveness of this outlook over time.

44 Larry Dougherty, “Militia Leader Draws Prison Term,” Tampa Bay Times, September 27, 2005; “Alleged Plotters Face Trial,” Southern Poverty Law Center, June 15, 1998.

45 Ibid.; David Hanners, “Terror Suspect Plotted to ‘Cut Off’ Montevideo, Minn., FBI Says,” Pioneer Press, July 23, 2013, <https://www.twincities.com/2013/07/23/terror-suspect-plotted-to-cut-off-montevideo-minn-fbi-says/>.

46 Mack Lamoureux, “Inside Canada’s Armed, Anti-Islamic ‘Patriot’ Group,” Vice News, June 14, 2017.

47 Ibid.; Canadian Criminal Code (R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46), Section 70, last amended August 8, 2021, <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-46/section-70.html>.

48 Catharine Tunney, “Three Percenters, Neo-Nazi Group Added to Canada’s Terrorist List,” CBC News (Canada), June 25, 2021.

2. Consider Federal Militia Legislation. The Biden administration’s National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism notes that there are legal prohibitions in all fifty US states against “certain private militia activity.”⁴⁹ As national security law expert Mary McCord has argued in Congressional testimony, Congress should also consider federal militia legislation, which would have to remain “carefully worded to ensure it does not infringe on constitutional rights and is not susceptible to misuse to target vulnerable populations.”⁵⁰

3. Counter-Extremism Training for Law Enforcement. The MVE movement poses a threat to law enforcement but also sometimes aims its recruitment efforts at current and former members of law enforcement. Counter-extremism training should work to increase awareness of relevant radicalisation processes by educating members of law enforcement on how to identify and inoculate themselves from the tactics used by recruiters and strengthen critical thinking and digital literacy skills so they are better protected from the effects of online and offline manipulation and messaging. Providing members with an understanding of extremists’ recruiting processes may help prevent them from unwittingly sympathising with, gravitating toward, or possibly joining either a MVE group or another group associated with violent extremism.

4. US-Canada Cooperation. MVEs are primarily concentrated in the United States but the movement has gained traction in Canada. Information sharing between the two governments could be important in the future to track the development of cross-border chapters and to respond to certain violent acts. Any collaboration between the US and Canada needs to be sensitive to the concerns raised in our previous recommendation about not feeding the narrative of governmental abuse of power.

5. Work to Defang Conspiracy Theories that Justify Violence. One common thread between MVEs and other domestic extremist movements that have come to embrace violence against innocent people is the embrace of conspiracy theories that seemingly justify these violent acts. Though conspiracy theories have existed since ancient times, and they will always find a fringe of true believers, government at all levels can reduce the pull of conspiracy theories that justify violence through an intentional program of transparency and openness. For example, the government should consider developing a set of transparency protocols that set standards for informing the public in advance of certain events that can lend themselves to conspiracy theories, such as Jade Helm 15 (a particularly large 2015 military training exercise in Texas and other US states that produced an unusual amount of conspiracy theories holding that the exercise was an attempt to implement martial law).

49 National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf>.

50 Mary B. McCord, “Confronting Violent White Supremacy: Examining the Rise of Militia Extremism,” testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, May 26, 2021, <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/icap/wp-content/uploads/sites/32/2021/05/2021.05.26-McCord-CRCL-Subcommittee-Hearing.pdf>.

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