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Intelligence and Analysis Division

WHITE PAPER SERIES

2020 Election Series: Overview of Domestic
Threats to the 2020 Election

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INTENT

This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.



2020 Election Series: Overview of Domestic Threats to the 2020 Election

Introduction

As the 2020 election approaches, concerns remain high regarding threats from foreign and domestic actors. The previous paper in this series detailed the threats emanating from foreign adversaries such as Russia, China, and Iran, all of whom are seeking to disrupt the U.S. electoral process in various ways. However, a number of domestic threat actors, both left- and right-wing, remain capable of conducting various forms of threat activity associated with the election. Protests driven by civil rights issues and criticism of law enforcement have been widespread over the past few months, occasionally becoming violent and/or destructive in nature. Depending on the outcome of the election, various groups could mobilize in support or opposition to the election results. Moreover, it is possible that official election results may not be available for days (or even weeks) following Election Day, which could lead to premature claims of victory or a contested election. Additionally, there is a recent history of domestic terrorism acts by both left- and right-wing actors. Lone actors, small groups, or even structured organizations may carry out politically motivated attacks during this turbulent period. This paper will examine the potential threats emanating from the extreme left- and right- wings of the American political spectrum, to include individuals espousing extreme ideologies, to organized extremist movements. While this paper is not an all-inclusive assessment of potential threats, it highlights the potential for election-related protest/civil disturbance activity and potential domestic terrorist activity over the coming weeks and months.

Domestic Extremism Environment in the U.S.

The U.S. is home to various domestic extremist groups whose members engage in (or have the potential/propensity to engage in) various activities that range from peaceful protest activity, to civil disturbance activity, to hate crimes and/or terrorist activity. Membership in many of these groups is typically protected by the rights to free speech and free association. Such groups are also often decentralized or may consist of loosely-affiliated members bonded by shared ideology. Examples of such groups include “Antifa”/Anti-Fascist Groups, White Nationalist/Separatist Groups, Black Nationalist/Separatist Groups, Anti-Government/Militia/Patriot”Boogaloo” Groups, Single-Issue Groups (Anti-Abortion, Pro-Second Amendment), and “Sovereign Citizens.”

These groups may be appealing recruit pools for known/suspected/designated terrorist organizations. Individuals who espouse extremist/fringe ideologies may be susceptible to recruitment by individuals with shared/similar beliefs, and could be motivated/radicalized to commit terrorist acts. Alternatively, individuals could self-radicalize, and ultimately reach the conclusion that their ideology warrants the commission of violent acts. Still, many members of these groups will only engage in peaceful activities, to include protest activity and online speech. Such activity is typically constitutionally protected, even when certain messages are hateful, false, or misleading.



Some of the aforementioned groups embrace conspiracy theories to varying degrees, which may drive nonviolent or violent activities. Some groups are wholly motivated by specific conspiracy theories. Additionally, malicious actors may engage in misinformation/disinformation campaigns designed to influence members of such groups. As noted in the previous white paper in this series, foreign actors such as Russia are extremely active in promoting misinformation/disinformation. However, misinformation/disinformation can also originate from domestic sources.

Domestic Extremism and the 2020 Election

The current political situation surrounding the 2020 election potentially increases the threat from extremist groups and individuals as described above. An official or claimed victory by the incumbent President Donald Trump would likely mobilize left-wing groups and individuals to commit civil disturbance (and potentially terroristic) activities, which could potentially provoke a response from right-wing actors. Conversely, an official or claimed victory by President Trump's challenger, former Vice President Joe Biden, would likely mobilize right-wing groups and individuals to commit similar activities, provoking a response from left-wing actors.

Claimed victories could also coincide with a variety of "contested election" scenarios. The 2020 election has been complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in an increase in mail-in voting. Some potential scenarios that would create a "contested election" include a delay in election results due to mail-in ballot counting, close results (potentially in key swing states), allegations of voter fraud (whether founded or unfounded), or legal disputes that would need to be settled in the courts.¹ While it is difficult to speculate exactly what would occur in each of these scenarios, it is likely that political tensions would increase, and extremist actors on both sides of the political spectrum would be more likely to engage in various forms of threat activity.

Left-Wing Threat Actors

An examination of politically motivated attacks and plots in the United States over the last 25 years by the Center for Strategic International Studies published this July revealed a massive disparity in the perpetrators of violence. Since 2010, 117 victims were killed in right-wing violence and 21 people were killed in left-wing violence. The report revealed that right-wing attacks and plots have been the majority of all terrorist incidents in the United States since 1994. Furthermore, right-wing extremists perpetrated two thirds of incidents recorded 2019 and over 90% between 1 January and 8 May 2020.^{2,3}

Based on history of 21st century incidents, it is more likely that acts of violence or domestic terrorism relating to the presidential election will be carried out by right-wing extremists. However, there is still the possibility that left-wing actors may commit crimes, civil disturbance activity, or acts of domestic terrorism. An examination of recent large-scale protests reveals potential trends in the use or escalation of left-wing protests to commit property crimes or acts of violence. Additionally, there have been attempts and threats of domestic terrorism against right-wing politicians by left-wing actors.

Current left-wing threat actors are unlikely to identify as members of specific groups. While right-wing extremists have been identified as members of structured organizations, left-wing actors tend



to be members of more nebulous ideologies, lacking a strict hierarchy or set of beliefs and goals. This can make the identification of left-wing threat actors more challenging. However, there are still decentralized groups such as Antifa, which consists of a “loose collection of local/regional groups and individuals” who “believe in active, aggressive opposition to far right-wing movements.”⁴ There is also a somewhat centralized “parent” organization of Antifa groups called the Torch Network, which maintains chapters in major U.S. cities.⁵

Additionally, there are still case studies, recent trends, and reporting that can be used to reasonably assess potential actions that may be taken by left-wing threat actors prior to, during, and after the 2020 presidential election.

Protest Activity/Civil Disturbance

As examined in past white papers, left-wing actors have, in recent events, tended to host large, organized rallies or protests. Large protests have the potential to occur following the release of results of the 2020 election, regardless of results. The protests witnessed in 2020, while largely peaceful, have also resulted in property damage and incidents of physical confrontations. The escalation of peaceful protests to incidents of civil disturbance can have a variety of causes. The escalation may be triggered by extremist left-wing actors present, committing acts of property crime or violent crimes. Additionally, right-wing extremist actors have a history of integrating themselves into some peaceful protests. They then attempt to commit incendiary acts under the guise of protestors, hoping to trigger additional incidents of property crime, violent crime, or full riot, stirring outrage against the original protestors. The left-wing rooted protests may also attract non-political, malicious actors, who seek to take advantage of potential civil unrest for personal gain.⁶ Clashes between protestors and counter-protestors have been frequently recorded over the course of the 2020 election. At political rallies for right and left candidates, supporters and protestors have been frequently both present and, at times, lead to physical confrontations.⁷ Additionally, rallies affiliated with traditional left-wing and right-wing causes have seen the presence of counter protestors.^{8,9}

Domestic Terrorism

As previously discussed, history shows right-wings extremists to be more likely to perpetrate acts of violence and domestic terror in the United States. However, there have been recent incidents of and attempts at domestic terrorism by left-wing actors. The 2020 CSIS report showed that from January to August of 2020, far-left terrorist attacks and plots targeted demonstrators 42% of the time, and government, military, and police the remaining 58% of the time. Despite this limited recent history of left-wing lone actors, the possibility remains that an election-related incident of domestic terrorism may be perpetrated by a left-wing extremist.³

One well-known recent act of domestic terrorism committed by a left-wing extremist is the congressional baseball shooting that occurred in 2017. After preparing for months, an Illinois man opened fire at a practice session for the annual congressional baseball game for charity. The shooter specifically targeted what he knew to be the Republican congressmen’s practice time, resulting in the death of the shooter and 6 injuries. The perpetrator of the attack had “reportedly expressed strident anti-Republican views on social media and directed particular ire at Trump after he became



president,” in addition to volunteering for the Democratic presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders.¹⁰

During the 2016 presidential campaign, then-nominee Donald Trump hosted a campaign event in Las Vegas, Nevada. There, a British man who had driven to the rally from California tried to grab a policeman’s gun. The man had reportedly been attempting to kill Trump, planning the assassination attempt for approximately a year.¹¹ In September 2020, a Canadian woman was accused of sending letters to the White House that contained ricin. The letter contained a note with language accusing President Trump of ruining the U.S. and leading the country to disaster as well as threats of additional letters and a potential shooting. Six other letters from the same location, containing a similar substance, were sent to individuals in Texas employed at penitentiaries and detention centers in the state, where the suspect had been held the year before. These attempted acts of terrorism, while not from self-identified left-wing actors, were perpetrated by actors who were apparently anti-right-wing. Similar acts have the potential to occur following the repercussions of the 2020 election.¹²

Finally, on 29 September 2020, a self-proclaimed Antifa member shot and killed a member of a far-right group known as Patriot Prayer in Portland, OR. Patriot Prayer and left-wing groups (to include Antifa) have clashed on a number of occasions in Portland, though violence between the two groups had not resulted in any fatalities. A member of the University of Maryland’s criminology department stated that the incident “could potentially be included in the university’s Global Terrorism Database as the first act of terror linked to Antifa.”¹³

Outlook

Despite the nebulous ideology and less violent trends seen in left-wing actors as compared to right-wing actors, the possibility remains that during or following the 2020 election, left-wing actors may engage in a variety of threat activity. This includes acts such as riot engagement, property destruction, physical confrontations, targeted attacks, active assailant events, and assassination attempts. Based on recent trends, it is likely that threats from left-wing actors will emerge in conjunction with large protests or rallies.

Right-Wing Threat Actors

The rise of right-wing threat actors in America has given cause for concern to law enforcement, the intelligence community, and society as a whole. Many of these groups differ in their approach and justification for their actions. Some, such as the Oathkeepers, claim to defend the United States Constitution (with force, if necessary); or, they perceive themselves as vanguards of patriotism and western civilization, such as the Proud Boys. Others at the fringes advocate for Neo-Nazism and white supremacy, including Atomwaffen Division and the Hammerskins. The “Boogaloo Bois,” are advocating for a second civil war. Many groups are motivated by conspiracy theories, misinformation/disinformation, and revisionist history. While the groups may differ in their goals, they share antipathy with the mainstream media, progressive elected leaders, and various left-wing groups and individuals (to include the aforementioned left-wing threat actors). In addition to their organized activities, all of these right-wing groups use the Internet and social media to communicate and plan their activities, and all have the potential to incite “lone wolf” actors who



may commit acts of political violence and/or terror under their banners. As the 2020 Presidential Election approaches, incidents of pre-planned, coordinated direct action may also occur.

Protest Activity/Civil Disturbance

Right wing groups have hosted notable demonstrations in recent years, to include the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA. The rally, which was hosted by a number of prominent white nationalists, was met with counter-protestors. The two groups clashed, though the event is perhaps most notorious for a vehicle attack in which one of the white nationalist attendees rammed his car into a large group of counter-protestors, killing 1 and injuring 19 others.¹⁴ While right-wing groups do host protests and other demonstrations, recent events have highlighted the presence of right-wing actors attending left-wing protests and demonstrations as an opposition movement. The examples below highlight such trends.

Founded in 2009, the Oath Keepers are one of the largest armed militia groups in the United States. They, along with similar groups, began counter-protesting and guarding small businesses at the demonstrations that occurred across the country following the death of George Floyd in May. The group recruits former military, law enforcement, and emergency responders with the promise of comradeship and an opportunity to defend the Constitution.¹⁵ Recently, they attended late-September protests in Louisville, KY and have pledged to serve as unappointed “poll watchers” on Election Day.^{16, 17}

The Proud Boys were created in 2016 as a “men’s drinking club” with a political ideology. Its members call themselves “western chauvinists” and, while they claim to denounce bigotry and racism, the group has been mired in controversy and accusations of extremism from its inception.¹⁸ They frequently counter-protest at social justice demonstrations, and have held their own rallies in support of free speech and law enforcement. They often clash with left-wing groups, including Antifa. A Proud Boys event in Kalamazoo in August devolved into street violence between the group and the Michigan People’s Defense League.¹⁹ Recently, the group provided security at a political rally in Milton, FL that featured Republican Congressman Matt Gaetz as a speaker.²⁰

The Boogaloo movement arose on internet message boards in the late 2010’s. Adherents embrace a range of ideologies from libertarianism to white supremacy. All believe in the coming of a second civil war. Following the death of George Floyd, “Boogaloo Bois” have attended protests armed, wearing Hawaiian shirts and paramilitary gear.^{21, 22} This activity, while not inherently illegal (depending on local gun laws), can lead to escalation of tensions and potential confrontations/clashes.

Domestic Terrorism

As the 2020 Presidential Election draws near, the potential for right-wing direct action increases. Several groups, including the aforementioned groups, are preparing to act as self-appointed poll watchers, counter-protestors, and volunteer security forces during and immediately after the election. While some of this activity may be constitutionally protected under the 1st and 2nd Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, the potential for violence exists. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) states that cities in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Oregon are at the highest risk of increased militia activity, while there is the



potential for moderate activity in North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, California, and New Mexico.²³ This may include activities that meet the definition for domestic terrorism.

In early October 2020, state and federal law enforcement disrupted a plot by members of the “Wolverine Watchmen” militia to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan. The men opposed Governor Whitmer’s COVID-19 lockdown measures. The FBI became aware of the operation in early 2020 and used an informant to track the plan’s progress.²⁴ Depending on the outcome of the election, additional pre-planned, coordinated actions against elected officials, rival left-wing groups, or other symbolic targets may be initiated by right-wing extremists.

In some cases, “Boogaloo Bois” have tried to escalate violence. On 29 May 2020, an Air Force Staff Sergeant and an accomplice affiliated with the movement shot at two Federal Protective Service officers in Oakland, killing one and wounding another. Both were later arrested and charged. On 23 October 2020, a Texas man was charged by the Department of Justice with one (1) count of rioting. In late May, he had traveled to Minneapolis, where he opened fire with a semiautomatic rifle at the Minneapolis Police Third Precinct building. He was also affiliated with the Boogaloo movement and was acquainted with the Oakland shooter.^{21, 22}

There are also potential terrorism threats emanating from extreme Neo-Nazi groups such as Atomwaffen Division and Order of the Nine Angles (O9A). These groups are clandestine, enigmatic, and include elements of satanism and praise for Islamic terrorists. Their ideology is rooted in white supremacy and anti-Semitism, with the goal of inciting a “race war.” While Atomwaffen Division’s active membership has reportedly been “decimated” following a series of arrests from 2019-2020, the group’s underground nature does not preclude the possibility of future activity. O9A is based in the United Kingdom, though its ideology has spread to U.S. followers. In June 2020, a U.S. Army soldier affiliated with O9A faced terrorism charges for attempting to provide information regarding his unit’s deployment in order to facilitate an attack on the unit by jihadist groups.^{25, 26}

Outlook

Right-wing actors have a demonstrated, recent history of domestic terrorist activity, and may conduct targeted attacks, active assailant events, and assassination attempts. Right-wing actors may also agitate and/or co-opt left-wing demonstrations, and engage in physical confrontations. These situations can be exacerbated by right-wing actors’ prevalent use of firearms (to include openly carrying military-style rifles, where legal).

Conclusion

The domestic threats from the left- and right-wing threat actors detailed above vary widely in nature, severity, likelihood, and tactics. Moreover, it is difficult to forecast the outcome of the upcoming election, which includes the possibility of an unclear/contested outcome. A number of variables remain in-play with regard to potential threat activity that may occur in conjunction with the 2020 election. Still, the potential for widespread protest activity (which may escalate into violent, destructive civil disturbances) remains elevated as a result of the election. Additionally, the potential for politically-motivated terrorism remains a serious concern. While it would be ideal



if the election could transpire in a state of relative peace and civility, the next paper in this election-focused series is slated to address the various threat activities that occur in wake of Election Day.

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