Far-right extremism in the US meets inadequate government response

The response of US authorities to the growth in extreme-right violence and hate groups has been uneven and often inadequate. James Blake examines the nature of the threat and the gathering countermeasures

Key Points

- Attacks in the US by extreme-right activists pose the most significant domestic terrorist threat, with fatalities far exceeding those caused by Islamist extremism.
- Despite efforts by the FBI, the growing threat from the extreme right has not been adequately addressed, in part due to a lack of political will at the state and federal levels.
- It is likely that the number and severity of attacks by far-right extremists will increase in the short-to-medium term, targeting migrants, minorities, and targets associated with the far-left in US politics.

A 3 August attack on a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, killed 22 people and shocked the United States, prompting a renewed debate about gun control, nationalist rhetoric, and concern for the safety of migrants. However, the incident did not occur in isolation: extreme right-wing extremism now poses the most significant terrorism threat in the US.

A January 2019 study by the Anti-Defamation League revealed that more than 50 people were killed in 2018 as a result of extreme-right attacks, an increase of more than 35% from 2017. The same report stated that approximately three-quarters of extremist attacks in the US were linked to the extreme-right, which was more than three times the number of incidents related to radical Islamists. Meanwhile, a February 2019 report from the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) stated that the number of hate groups in the US had reached a record high of 1,020 in 2018.

Threat drivers

Underlying racial tension has long been an undercurrent in US culture. Experts such as the renowned academic Bruce Hoffman have highlighted that right-wing extremism has been an issue in the US for many decades, including the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 that claimed 168 lives and was “the worst act of homegrown terrorism in the nation’s history”, according to the FBI. Statistics show that the number of extreme-right attacks is on the rise.

Several events have exacerbated this threat, including the election of Barack Obama as the country’s first black president in 2008, which marked a watershed for white nationalists. Their concern was amplified following widespread media coverage of the European refugee
crisis in 2015–2016, when millions of Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian migrants and refugees fled to Europe, placing pressure on the continent’s social fabric.

Since 2018, the US has experienced an increase in asylum seeker claims; for instance, according to data from US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the number of arrivals classed as ‘apprehensions’ and ‘inadmissibles’ for May, June, and July were all more than double the same months in 2018. This is due to a combination of conflict and climate change in Central America that has driven growing numbers of people to attempt to enter the US. The potential for migration to change the country’s ethnic dynamic has acted as a recruitment tool for many far-right groups.

Members of the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan (KKK) argue with a counter-protester during a rally in Madison, Indiana, US, on 31 August 2019. Emboldened extreme-right organisations pose the single greatest terrorism threat to US state stability. (Megan Jelinger/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Populist rhetoric focused on alienating migrants and refugees has further driven support for far-right extremism. For instance, US President Donald Trump has used derogatory language towards migrants and refugees, labelling them as “rapists” and “criminals”. Meanwhile, the rise of social media platforms – in particular Gab – has enabled far-right groups and their members to effectively expand their messaging and recruitment, in addition to sharing messages about tactics, ideology, and doctrine.
The number of far-right groups and members is rising, and Jane’s also assesses that the capabilities of these groups are likely to increase. One of the main reasons for this trend is the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which has attracted far-right groups globally and from the US. Arkadiusz Legieć, an analyst at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), estimates that up to 17,000 people have travelled to eastern Ukraine to fight. According to Dr Kacper Rekawek, an academic who monitors the conflict, this number includes around 35 far-right extremists from the US.

Since early 2018, according to the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, several members of a white supremacist group based in southern California – the Rise Above Movement (RAM) – have travelled to Germany, Italy, and Ukraine to gather for the anniversary of Adolf Hitler’s birthday, while meeting members of other white nationalist groups. This international travel and sharing of ideas increases the likelihood of the cross-pollination of tactics, communications, and skillsets. It suggests the possibility of white supremacists boosting their capabilities, and potentially forming more complex groups.

There is already evidence that extreme-right groups and individuals are becoming increasingly sophisticated and innovative in their tactics. For example, Cesar Sayoc mailed 16 improvised explosive devices to 13 high-profile Democrats and their supporters in late 2018. Although a New York court sentenced him to 20 years in prison in August 2019, other groups are on the rise, including the Patriot Boys, a group designated by the SPLC as a hate group.

**Authorities’ response**

International efforts to prevent, monitor, and disrupt such groups have taken place amid a global trend of growing far-right extremism. For instance, Germany and the UK have made structural changes around the organisations that are responsible for managing the threat. In 2018, the UK Security Service (MI5) took over the lead for intelligence related to far-right extremism threats from the police. The German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz: BfV) plans to increase the staffing of its Department Two – which is responsible for monitoring far-right extremism – by approximately 50%, its director Thomas Haldenwang told German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 21 December 2018.

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