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Confronting the Rise of Domestic Terrorism in the Homeland

Statement for the Record

Good morning, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Rogers, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the FBI's efforts to combat the threat posed by domestic terrorism. While the threat posed by terrorism has evolved significantly since 9/11, preventing terrorist attacks from foreign and domestic actors remains the FBI's top priority. We face persistent threats to the homeland and to United States interests abroad from foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), homegrown violent extremists (HVEs), and domestic terrorists, also referred to as domestic violent extremists. The threat posed to the United States has expanded from sophisticated, externally directed plots to include individual attacks carried out by HVEs, who are inspired by FTOs to take action within the United States. We now see similar insular, self-radicalized actors in the domestic terrorism realm.

The FBI categorizes terrorism investigations into two main programs: international terrorism and domestic terrorism. International terrorism includes cases in which subjects are members of designated FTOs, state sponsors of terrorism, and HVEs. The latter are individuals inside the United States who frequently are inspired by what we refer to as global jihad, who have been radicalized primarily in the United States, and who are not receiving individualized direction from FTOs. Domestic terrorists are individuals who commit violent criminal acts in furtherance of ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as racial bias and anti-government sentiment.

Our operational tempo has risen significantly in the last few years and has remained high. Still, we, along with our law enforcement partners, face significant challenges in identifying and disrupting HVEs and domestic terrorists who seek to perform terrorist attacks within the United States. This is due, in part, to the ease of online self-radicalization to violence and the corresponding lack of direct connections between unknown radicalized violent extremists and known terrorists or FTOs, which shortens the window of opportunity for our investigative teams to identify and disrupt an individual before that individual decides to act.

Domestic terrorism is defined by statute as any act dangerous to human life that violates U.S. criminal laws and appears to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping. The act in question must occur primarily within the jurisdiction of the United States. We believe domestic terrorists pose a present and persistent threat of violence and economic harm to the United States; in fact, there have been more arrests and deaths caused by domestic terrorists than international terrorists in recent years. We are most concerned about lone offenders, primarily using firearms, as these lone offenders represent the dominant trend for lethal domestic terrorists. Frequently, these individuals act without a clear group affiliation or guidance, making them challenging to identify, investigate, and disrupt.

The FBI classifies domestic terrorism threats into four main categories: racially motivated violent extremism, anti-government/anti-authority extremism, animal rights/environmental extremism, and abortion extremism. The drivers of these domestic violent extremists include perceptions of government or law enforcement overreach, socio-political conditions, and reactions to legislative actions, and they remain constant. Although domestic terrorism activity may fall outside of these four categories, the vast majority of our investigations can be characterized as one of the above. We anticipate racial minorities, the United States government, and law enforcement will continue to be significant targets for many domestic terrorists. Domestic terrorists have targeted law enforcement officers both proactively and directly as primary targets, as well as reactively, within the context of routine duties or other law enforcement encounters. Individuals adhering to racially motivated violent extremism ideology have been responsible for the most lethal incidents, however, and the FBI assesses the threat of violence and lethality posed by racially motivated violent extremists will continue.

Radicalization to violence of domestic terrorists is increasingly taking place online, where violent extremists can use social media for the distribution of propaganda, recruitment, target selection, and incitement to violence. Through the Internet, violent extremists around the world have access to our local communities to target and recruit and spread their messages of hate on a global scale, as we saw in the recent attack in Christchurch, New Zealand. In recent years, we increasingly have seen domestic terrorists communicating with like-minded individuals overseas and the domestic terrorists traveling to meet with these individuals. The increasingly global nature of the threat has enabled violent extremists to engage other like-minded individuals without having to join organized groups. We are working with our foreign partners to investigate subjects in their countries who may be radicalizing Americans to take violent action inside this country.

In line with our mission to protect the American people and uphold the Constitution of the United States, no FBI investigation can be opened solely on the basis of First Amendment-protected activity. Thus, the FBI does not investigate mere association with groups or movements. In order to predicate a domestic terrorism investigation of an individual, the FBI must have information that the individual is perpetuating violent, criminal actions in furtherance of an ideology.

As the threat to harm the United States and United States interests evolves, we must adapt to and confront these challenges, relying heavily on the strength of our federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, and international partnerships. Along with our domestic and foreign partners, we constantly collect and analyze intelligence concerning the ongoing threats posed by FTOs, HVEs, and domestic terrorists. We also continue to emphasize the importance of information sharing with federal, state, local, tribal and territorial agencies assigned to our Joint Terrorism Task Forces around the country, and with our military and international partners.

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Rogers, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify concerning the evolving terrorism threat to the homeland. Be assured the FBI continues to strive to work and share information more efficiently, and to utilize all lawful investigative techniques and methods to combat these terrorist threats to the United States. We are grateful for the support that you and this committee have provided to the FBI. I look forward to answering any questions you might have on this topic.



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