

SPECIAL REPORT: PART 2 OF 2

# U.S. Domestic Political Stability and Security

A Strategic Estimate for 2024 and Beyond





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## A Strategic Estimate for 2024 and Beyond

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*The content and views expressed in this special report are those of the authors and should not be taken to reflect an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy.*

COVER: Members of the Idaho Liberty Dogs, a far-right extremist group, wear guns on their hips as they protest outside of the first ever Pride festival in Nampa, a rural community in Idaho, in June 2024. (Kyle Green for The Washington Post via Getty Images)

#### The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

**Our mission** is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

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## Introduction

The United States' social fabric is pulled taut, and higher political tensions and more frequent acts of political violence are expected to strain it further. The anticipated increase in violent actions -- which are unacceptable, regardless of the perpetrator -- will be a hallmark of the run up to (and the months following) the November U.S. presidential election.

The first part of this two-part Special Report examined threats to democratic governance, such as creeping illiberalism, threats against elected officials, and election interference, along with

sociopolitical factors like conspiracy theories. This second part examines the behaviors of key actors shaping the U.S. domestic political and security landscape: former President Donald Trump and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, religious activists, and gender- and sexuality-centered actors. This installment will also delve into the effects of overseas conflicts, particularly in Ukraine and Gaza, that could contribute to political violence in the U.S., as well as disruptive technologies and their potential uses to foment discord.

## Theme 3: Sociopolitical Actors and Movements

As noted in Part 1 of this publication, there are two umbrella categories of actors relevant to the present analysis: the far left and the far right. This dual framework is applied here to discuss key actors and movements shaping America's domestic sociopolitical and security environment.

### Donald Trump and the MAGA Movement

The election of President Donald Trump in November 2016 was a watershed event for U.S. extremism because, for the first time, white supremacists and antigovernment extremists felt their respective causes were being openly heard, mainstreamed, and somewhat endorsed by the president of the United States. Trump's policy positions and remarks regarding illegal immigrants, Muslims, third-world countries, the "fake news," Democrats, and the 2020 election still resonate with the public and echo far-right extremist

positions today. Since 2016, Trump's influence and de-facto grip on the Republican Party machinery has only tightened; recent 2024 Republican National Committee elections resulted in a slate of Trump loyalists, including his daughter-in-law Lara, being installed and party platforms growing more hard-line, consistent with the political and policy preferences he expresses.

His influence upon the Republican Party and wider political right has deepened since he survived an attempted assassination on July 13, 2024. The defiant and iconic imagery associated with his survival has energized Trump's base of supporters and provided him additional political momentum going into the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee.<sup>1</sup>

A further of measure of Trump and his MAGA movement's influence is regarding political violence. Bucking a decades-long trend, far-right extremism continued to sustain its mobilization under a Republican-led administration. For example, during Trump's



People listen to former U.S. President Donald Trump at a campaign rally at the Trump National Doral Golf Club on July 9, 2024, in Doral, Florida. (Joe Raedle / Getty Images)

administration, the Southern Poverty Law Center identified an annual average of 611 far-right antigovernment groups, compared to an average of 148 during the George W. Bush administration.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the former Trump administration also took aim at the violent far left during and after







the 2020 civil unrest throughout the U.S., calling movements like Black Lives Matter and antifascism (antifa) “extremists” and “terrorists” as well as allocating federal law enforcement resources to target these groups for investigation. They did not apply the “terrorist” or “extremist” labels as quickly, or at all, to those violent far-right attackers involved in mass shootings, arsons, and other criminal and violent actions.

Trump’s pandering to the far right, demonization of the far left, and deliberate attacks on mainstream news media organizations, government institutions, and the system of governance illustrates the sophisticated nature in which the domestic violent extremism (DVE) threat has evolved and proliferated in recent years. Trump’s influence over the domestic terrorism landscape (fueling both far-right and far-left extremism) will continue throughout 2024 and into 2025. If he is reelected president, he is expected to attempt to maximize executive power by further eroding democratic norms and institutions. This will include attempting to evade potential personal legal accountability for any alleged crimes, pardoning his convicted supporters – including Jan. 6 insurrectionists – of crimes, making federal changes to electoral systems that will effectively benefit him and his supporters, and attempting to use federal agencies to engage in politically motivated investigations, arrests, and prosecutions of political opponents.

Continued growth in recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization among extremists on both the

far left and the far right can be expected, as can an increase in violent clashes between far-left and far-right extremist actors. This will reinforce a dynamic of symbiotic radicalization and retaliatory violence. Moreover, any legal actions and attempts to suppress Trump’s ability to run for office could be triggers for acts of domestic terrorism. Despite the recent outpouring of public support for him and widespread bipartisan condemnation of the assassination attempt against him, Trump nevertheless remains a highly polarizing figure. Trump will continue to serve as a lightning rod for both violent far-right extremists, who view him as someone who legitimizes their beliefs, and far-left extremists, who view him as the personification of authoritarianism and a threat to democracy and vulnerable minority groups that must be opposed.

Holding all other variables constant, even if Trump does not win the presidency in November, a reduction in DVE activity for the next four years or more is not expected. If Trump is reelected, fear and anger will motivate DVEs on the far left while violent extremists on the far right will be driven by elation. Violent mobilization and countermobilization will continue into 2028. Based on past trends, this analysis predicts that a victory by President Joe Biden or another Democratic Party candidate would only reinforce far-right extremist recruitment, radicalization, and violent mobilization fueled by ideologically driven fear and anger about potential policies that the far-right considers an erosion of their rights and way of life.

## Religious Actors

Historically, religious traditions and leadership have played important roles in shaping the political identity, institutions, and direction of the United States. They remain influential today and therefore merit specific analytic attention.

On the wider political right are religious nationalists. These include actors from a wide range of faith traditions including Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism. Of these three categories, Christian nationalists<sup>3</sup> are the most influential in the United States, largely due to their sheer size within the wider American electorate (and are thus the focus of this assessment).

While conservative Christian forms of political expression were not always so hard line, 50 years of steady social change, demographic transformation, and the decline of churches has radicalized large segments of the wider U.S. Christian right.<sup>4</sup> This process was accelerated under Trump to the point that evangelicalism, particularly among white people, is now strongly entangled with support for him, the MAGA movement, and far-right nationalism.<sup>5</sup>

Substantial segments of other Christian denominations and sects such as Catholics,<sup>6</sup> Mormons,<sup>7</sup> Eastern Orthodox,<sup>8</sup> and other forms of non-evangelical Protestantism engage in various expressions of far-right Christian nationalism. However, the most dominant segment within the wider milieu of Christian nationalism appears to be white, right-wing evangelical





Protestants. Although whites are the single largest racial demographic among Christian nationalists, the movement has significant numbers of Protestant Black, Latinx, and Asian supporters. As one study notes, Christian nationalism “is certainly a white-driven movement with mostly white adherents, but it is by no means an exclusively white movement.”<sup>9</sup> These racial/ethnic minority Christian nationalists will likely be an important component of the MAGA movement’s public framing and outreach toward broader racial/ethnic minority communities that it has often struggled to win over.

In recent years, a resurgence of Christian nationalism in the U.S. has been linked to several political and social issues. Prevalent expressions of Christian nationalism, such as Dominionist theology – which promotes a politically expansive interpretation of the Bible to often include advocacy for a theocratic government – frequently inform political worldviews antithetical to liberal democratic institutions and norms. Christian nationalists often promote a view of the United States as a Christian nation. This can include prioritization of religious values over democratic principles such as freedom of speech and separation of church and state.<sup>10</sup> They are also strongly opposed to perceived threats to “traditional marriage,” which they define as being solely between one heterosexual cisgender male and one heterosexual cisgender female, and they oppose most, if not all, forms of abortion.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, given the movement’s entanglement with support for Trump and the wider MAGA movement, Christian

nationalists have also expressed support for election denialism, the erosion of protections for religious and racial minorities, and restrictions of reproductive rights.<sup>12</sup>

Political mobilization among Christian nationalists has accelerated since 2020<sup>13</sup> due to a deliberate, well-orchestrated campaign by religious ministries, conservative political figures, and other well-known personalities such as retired Gen. Michael Flynn to “reAwaken America,”<sup>14</sup> [sic] and “win back the country for Jesus”<sup>15</sup> under the banner of “spiritual warfare.”<sup>16</sup> Although its beliefs are centered on religion, in its political practice, Christian nationalism generally focuses on fears related to the shifting demographics in America, declining church attendance, and perceived grievances such as decaying public morality, the erosion of parental rights and threats to family units, and, increasingly, conspiracy theories related to current events.<sup>17</sup> Most of its political mobilization is in the form of lawful political advocacy and attempts to make changes in policy and legislation. Nevertheless, Christian nationalists’ proposed legislative changes and the discourse behind them effectively demonize, dehumanize, and discriminate against many racial, religious, and sexual/gender minority groups, as well as political opponents – including other Christians who disagree with their views.<sup>18</sup>

Christian nationalism is also the ideological basis for the recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization of many DVEs on the far right. Christian nationalists

who hold exclusionary and discriminatory beliefs, at their most extreme, inform the development of ideologies that inspire acts of violence and terrorism. For example, the 2019 Poway, California, synagogue shooting – modeled after the Christchurch, New Zealand, attacks – was carried out by a white supremacist who held far-right views. The shooter’s manifesto included numerous references to the Bible, Christian nationalism, and the belief that the United States should be a white Christian nation.<sup>19</sup> Christian nationalism was also one of the main overarching ideologies that inspired the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol complex.<sup>20</sup>

This analysis assesses that Christian nationalists will continue to play an integral role in the domestic political landscape, especially in the run up to the 2024 elections. They are expected to continue expressing opposition to abortion; rolling back efforts to expand rights for people identifying as LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning and others) and inclusivity within schools, sports, and bathrooms; and supporting legislation that would effectively privilege Christianity in public policy (e.g., prayer in schools). Christian nationalists are also anticipated to keep expressing opposition to “wokeness,” engage in pro-Israel countermobilization on college campuses, and engage in election denialism and thus support greater restrictions on voter access to the ballot in the name of election integrity.







Pro-Trump Christian nationalist Jericho Marchers hold religious icons and an American flag as they march past the Pennsylvania State Capitol in March 2021, after meeting with several Republican state legislators. (Paul Weaver / SOPA Images / LightRocket via Getty Images)

However, it is also anticipated that Christian nationalism, whether as a primary motivating ideology or secondary belief set, will continue to inspire acts of violence. It will likely continue to be the leading motivating ideology inspiring anti-abortion violence and will be an integral part of far-right violence committed against members of the

LGBTQ+ community. Consistent with past behaviors and trends, it is also highly likely to manifest as an ideational undercurrent that is blended in with other far-right sub-ideologies and movements such as antigovernment militia extremism, QAnon, and other fringe elements of the MAGA movement.

Although given comparatively less analytic attention, religious actors affiliated with the wider political left also play extremely influential roles in U.S. politics. This includes traditionally African-American Protestant Christian congregations (“the Black Church”), sociopolitically liberal mainline Protestant churches, some Catholics – particularly Latinx congregants and those following Catholic social teaching – and, for the most part, non-Orthodox Jewish denominations.<sup>21</sup> Leaders and followers of these religious traditions have been central to social change currents like the Civil Rights Movement.

More recently, religious actors on the political left include members of other faith traditions. Nevertheless, whereas Christian nationalists tend to be fairly homogenous in their religious and racial/ethnic composition, as one study points out, “There is no unified strand of progressive religious activism in the U.S. Instead, there are multiple, often overlapping progressive movements that draw on religious symbols and practices in various ways to fuel their work on different issues.”<sup>22</sup> As a result, religious left-wing actors, as a whole, are typically less cohesive. Therefore, they are judged to be less politically influential among the wider political left than Christian nationalists are on the wider political right.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, consistent with other research, this analysis judges religious left actors to maintain significant influence on the wider political left because of





their ability to mobilize networks of supporters as well as credibly frame sociopolitical issues in moral terms, just as Christian nationalists do on the wider political right. In fact, they are expected to expand their influence on the wider political left, in large part to counter the theological and other religious justifications made by Christian nationalists in support of Trump and the MAGA movement. Mobilization of religious left actors will overwhelmingly take the form of nonviolent activism, including voting, lobbying, political assemblies, and civil disobedience, drawing from a long tradition of such mobilization tactics that stretches back to the Civil Rights Movement.

Finally, consistent with other mainstream left-wing actors, religious left mobilization is expected to intensify over the next 12 months, especially in the run up to Election Day. This is in part because religious left actors, like other political actors, are mobilized by election campaigns. Many are also engaged in a wider countermobilization against far-right actors, especially Christian and other religious right nationalists. Although the desire to effectively countermobilize against the far right will provide some additional temporary cohesion to an otherwise diverse and oft-internally divergent religious left, its potential effect will be dampened by differences among elite religious actors, such as Black Church and non-Orthodox Jewish community leaders over the conflict in Gaza.<sup>24</sup>

## **Gender- and Sexuality-Based Mobilization**

Although the United States has been on a general trajectory toward greater enfranchisement of women and gender/sexual minorities, many associated issues continue to be the subject of social controversy and heated political debate. In turn, these issues have often been the cause or justification for mobilization, including violence, by actors on both ends of the political spectrum.

While wider American society across the political spectrum has generally become more accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, for at least the past five years, there has also been growing organized backlash to growing acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. Most of the flashpoints have centered on controversies over teaching LGBTQ+ content in school curricula and defining what is socially acceptable for inclusion of transgender individuals, including access to bathrooms, participation in sports, medical care, and general public visibility. These heated debates also come amid controversies over the teaching of elements of “Critical Race Theory” (CRT)<sup>25</sup> in K-12 schools and colleges, as well as enacting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies at universities and workplaces. Christian nationalists have been central to this wider gender- and sexuality-based backlash mobilization, as these issues have long been central issues of interest in their sociopolitical ideologies and worldviews.

In addition, Christian nationalists have increasingly mobilized in response to the growing social empowerment of women who challenge patriarchal and sexist norms and structures. The emergence of the #MeToo movement in 2017 and Women’s Marches in particular have had significant impact on societal attitudes toward women across the political spectrum, especially on the wider political left and center. This has simultaneously resulted in a prevalent reactionary discourse among large segments of the wider political right, including far-right actors. Much of this is expressed as “anti-wokeness” (i.e., opposition to CRT and DEI) by reactionary mainstream right-wing actors,<sup>26</sup> whereas Male Supremacy (also often referred to as the “Manosphere” or extreme misogyny) has emerged both a standalone far-right sub-ideology<sup>27</sup> and a central ideational undercurrent across the wider pantheon of far-right movements.<sup>28</sup>

Central among the issues related to women and gender is reproductive rights in general, and access to abortion in particular. In general, the wider political left seeks to maintain or expand reproductive rights, including abortion access, whereas large segments of the wider political right seek to block the expansion of these rights and restrict abortion further or ban it entirely. While a longstanding divisive issue in American society, reproductive health care has taken on added attention and importance among mobilized political actors since 2022, when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the *Roe v. Wade* decision that allowed abortion to







**“ Political mobilization by the wider political left and right are centered on lawful advocacy, including issue awareness campaigns, political lobbying, organizing, and political assemblies. ”**

be legalized across the country. When decided by the court in 1973, *Roe v. Wade* immediately catalyzed movements to both expand and restrict abortion access, with peripheral elements who were willing to use violence found among the groups wanting to restrict access.

Political mobilization by the wider political left and right are centered on lawful advocacy, including issue awareness campaigns, political lobbying, organizing, and political assemblies. Consistent with the views of other experts, this analysis anticipates that actors on the mainstream political right will continue to publicly express views and advance legislation at state and federal levels that will effectively restrict LGBTQ+ curricula in schools and restrict transgender individuals' access to bathrooms, gender-affirming medical care, and sports participation. It also anticipates there will continue to be a backlash toward “wokeness” and broader efforts to combat sexism and misogyny in society. In terms of social impact, this will have the cumulative effect of 1) keeping these debates/controversies in the public square, 2) given the heated and often-vitriolic nature of the opposition to these issues, effectively demonizing and dehumanizing individuals in targeted communities, and 3)

creating an increasingly permissive sociopolitical environment for violence to occur.

As far as reproductive rights and abortion access are concerned, mainstream right-wing actors are mainly focused on restricting abortion at the state level. However some national-level political candidates appear to be softening their rhetoric post-2022 Supreme Court decision, with some saying they oppose complete bans that would not, for example, include medical exemptions for terminating pregnancies that would be fatal to the mother.<sup>29</sup> In June 2022, far-right extremists showed up to 14% of all anti-abortion political assemblies, up from 1% in 2020.<sup>30</sup> However, by 2023 it appears that far-right actors' attention shifted to other areas of gender and sexuality, such as drag shows and school board proposals to incorporate LGBTQ+ content in their curricula, which prompted protests. Despite this wane in attention by most other far-rightists, single-issue far-right violent anti-abortion extremists continued to engage in a sustained effort to violently disrupt abortion facilities and threaten providers, even after the Supreme Court decision. In 2023, there were at least two high-profile attacks against facilities, including an arson against a clinic in Peoria, Illinois, on Jan. 15, 2023,<sup>31</sup> and a combined car ramming and attempted

arson incident on May 20, 2023, in Danville, Illinois.<sup>32</sup>

By contrast, while there was some far-left violent mobilization after the 2022 U.S. Supreme Court overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, it appeared to be short-lived and mostly directed at property rather than people. Most notable in this brief burst of violence were 24 instances of vandalism and arson by loose network of violent far-leftists describing themselves as “Jane’s Revenge.”<sup>33</sup> The authors of this analysis identified a single case of a pro-choice extremist targeting a person: In June 2022, a lone actor – outraged by the school mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas, and the then-pending decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* – called 911 and stated his intent to kill Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh and was quickly arrested.<sup>34</sup>

The rise in public attention regarding these controversies also coincided with armed mobilization and violence against LGBTQ+ individuals and institutions. For example, a December 2022 study by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Project found:

Anti-LGBT+ organizing has contributed to the starkest increase in far-right activity this year (14% of demonstrations involving far-right groups in 2022 have been anti-LGBT+, up







from less than 3% last year). Anti-LGBT+ demonstrations have been on the rise across the country more broadly, with over 130 demonstrations already this year, up from nearly 60 last year, and six in 2020.<sup>35</sup>

The same study went on to note that there was a strong positive correlation between nonviolent anti-LGBTQ+ activity and the documented occurrence of anti-LGBTQ+ political violence.<sup>36</sup> In effect, anti-LGBTQ+ activity was central to maintaining far-right mobilization and public relevance less than two years after the Jan. 6 insurrection on Capitol Hill.<sup>37</sup> This was especially evident for the Proud Boys, for whom despite the centrality of hypermasculinity in their organizational culture and beliefs,<sup>38</sup> LGBTQ+ issues were, until recently,<sup>39</sup> a secondary focus of their rhetoric and activities.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, this also coincides with a rise in other forms of violence, such as hate crimes. According to the FBI's most recent hate crime statistics, in 2022 there were 1,947 reported hate crimes based on sexual orientation in the U.S.<sup>41</sup> This is nearly a 14% increase over 2021, which saw the number of hate crimes soar.<sup>42</sup> Further, there were 469 reported hate crimes related to the victim's gender identity in 2022.<sup>43</sup> This is a 33% jump from the previous year.<sup>44</sup> These figures clearly illustrate the heated nature of this divisive social issue in the U.S. It's important to understand that hate crimes are often underreported, so the actual number of incidents may be much higher. Further, many hate crime

laws vary from state to state, leading to reporting irregularities.<sup>45</sup>

Whereas many hate crimes tend to be spontaneous and often opportunistic, violent hate with a social or political agenda directed at an entire community to instill fear or attempt to change government policy meets the definition of terrorism. Upon meeting these criteria, some violent attacks against members of the LGBTQ+ community can be considered acts of domestic terrorism, especially when they attack gathering locations, businesses affiliated with the community, and places of worship. The incidents shown below are indicative of domestic terrorist attacks and terrorist plots targeting the LGBTQ+ community.

Whereas large segments of the wider political right were mobilized in opposition to certain aspects of the growing inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons, large segments of the wider political left were mobilized in support of it. Most of the political left's mobilization has been directed toward advancing or defending LGBTQ+ content in school curricula, inclusion for transgender people, and blocking local and state legislation perceived to be anti-LGBTQ+.

In response to far-right armed protests, threats, and attempted acts of violence at and around LGBTQ+ events and establishments, heavily armed far-leftists have often shown up to act as vigilante security.<sup>49</sup> Far-left actors such as individuals

## Cases Targeting LGBTQ+ Community

- **On March 22, 2020**, a man fired several rounds from an AK-47 rifle at the residence of a lesbian woman in Basin, Montana. After arresting the suspect, authorities learned of his self-described mission to rid the town of its lesbian, queer, and gay community. He was sentenced to 18 years in federal prison.
- **On Nov. 19 and 20, 2022**, a white supremacist entered Club Q, a gay bar in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and opened fire with an AR-15-style rifle, killing five people and wounding 17 others. Friends of the suspect told authorities he had previously expressed hatred toward the LGBTQ+ community, the police, and minorities. Investigators also discovered a photo of a rifle scope targeting a gay pride parade in a message sent by the suspect prior to the mass shooting.<sup>46</sup>
- **On March 25, 2023**, a white nationalist used Molotov cocktails in an attempt to burn an LGBTQ+ affirming church in Chester Township, Ohio, to the ground. Federal, state, and local authorities investigated the incident as a hate crime and arrested the offender, who was sentenced to 18 years in federal prison.<sup>47</sup>
- **On Oct. 30, 2023**, an arsonist set fire to a gender-affirming medical clinic in Decatur, Georgia. The fire was contained, and no injuries were reported. The FBI is investigating the fire as a hate crime.<sup>48</sup>





associated with the antifa movement as well as paramilitary organizations such as the John Brown Gun Club and Socialist Rifle Association have engaged in armed countermobilization. These kinds of situations substantially raise the risk of violence, including mass shootings.

Currently, it appears as though LGBTQ+ issues, while remaining important for the wider political right's mobilization, including the far right, have once again become a secondary issue. This is likely

due to the centrality of the 2024 elections and the emerging salience of Trump's messages, which are largely focused on demonizing the wider political left and eschewing specific controversies associated with LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion. However, this could easily change if right-wing political actors once again decide that LGBTQ+ issues are beneficial to their political endgame.

Outside abortion access, male supremacist beliefs, such as extreme misogynist involuntary

celibates (incels) and Men's Rights Activists continue to be energized and, in some cases, mobilized to violence by perceived social gains made by women at the expense of male enfranchisement.

The incident chronology table illustrates the dangerous, violent nature of male supremacist extremism.

## Theme 4: External Shocks

### Foreign Conflicts

Foreign conflicts are known to impact the social and political landscapes at home and abroad. The conflicts in Ukraine and Israel/Gaza have been energizing far-right and far-left extremism in the U.S., respectively. These conflicts will have an enduring impact on DVEs as they touch on many of the social and political issues found in the U.S. such as social injustice, colonialism, anti-authority sentiment, antisemitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and Christian nationalism. In addition, U.S. political and military assistance to Ukraine has provided additional incentive for Russia to engage in mis/disinformation campaigns with the intent to influence electoral outcomes and, by extension, policies toward its interests.

### Israel-Hamas Conflict

Should violence between Israel and Hamas persist in the Gaza Strip, far-leftists are expected to continue engaging in disruptive direct-action tactics to highlight the plight of the Palestinian cause and express discontent over Biden's policies in the region. In reaction to ongoing

### Cases of Violent Male Supremacy

- **On Nov. 2, 2018**, a misogynist incel extremist entered a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida, and shot seven people, killing two women. The suspect later killed himself as police converged on the scene.
- **On June 7, 2020**, a misogynist incel extremist was arrested after blowing off his hands with an improvised explosive device in Richlands, Virginia. Authorities learned the suspect was experimenting with bomb-making to target "hot cheerleaders" and other women.
- **On July 20, 2020**, a lawyer who ideologically identified with the far-right Men's Rights Activist movement visited the home of federal Judge Esther Salas and shot her husband and son, killing the latter. The offender was later found dead from what authorities believed were self-inflicted gunshot wounds.<sup>50</sup>
- **On July 21, 2021**, a self-described incel extremist was arrested for reportedly plotting a mass shooting at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. He was charged with attempting to commit a hate crime and possession of a machine gun.<sup>51</sup>
- **On May 8, 2023**, a white supremacist with misogynistic and incel extremist beliefs conducted a mass shooting at an outlet mall in Allen, Texas, killing eight people and injuring seven others. Local law enforcement fatally shot him.<sup>52</sup>
- **On Oct. 23, 2023**, a self-described former misogynist incel was charged with threatening to commit a mass shooting at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The suspect had prior arrests on drug and gun charges.<sup>53</sup>





A pro-Palestinian demonstrator shouts slogans while joining in an anti-NATO demonstration, ahead of a NATO summit in Washington, D.C. (Probal Rashid / LightRocket via Getty Images)

developments in Gaza, far-right extremists will seek to exploit domestic moral outrage through a combination of mis/disinformation online, as well as reactionary violence directed at pro-Palestinian protests as well as Arabs and Muslims in general.

Spanning decades, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Territories has led to violence and terrorism between the two sides, often resulting in civilian casualties and human rights violations. The conflict's effects go well beyond the immediate region and have been a political flashpoint in many parts of the world, including the United States. Domestically, the current Israel-Hamas conflict has led to increased political mobilization on the broader political left and right. This has also resulted in noticeable fractures on both sides of the political spectrum.

Nevertheless, there seems to be substantially greater discontent and dissent within the wider political left. This is most dramatically manifested by primary voting campaigns that urged Democratic Party supporters to vote “uncommitted” instead of for Biden to protest his administration's current policies toward Gaza and the Palestinians. It has also manifested in other ways, such as political assemblies, nonviolent civil disobedience, and other disruptive direct-action tactics, especially in and around university campuses. While there have been highly publicized cases of harassment and occasional threatening language, the campus protests have been overwhelmingly nonviolent. To the extent violence has been observed, systematic analysis of nationwide campus protests suggests it mostly occurs during police interventions rather than when police did not intervene.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, there are signs of potential escalation into violence. On June 17, 2024, a pro-Palestinian violent far-leftist was charged in three arson attacks against University of California Berkeley property earlier that month.<sup>55</sup> Four days later, a group of pro-Palestinian protesters violently clashed with pro-Israel counterprotesters outside of a Los Angeles synagogue that was holding an event promoting real estate sales in Israel.<sup>56</sup> While details of the incident are still emerging, it occurs against a wider backdrop of inflammatory and violence-glorifying rhetoric among some far-left pro-Palestinian actors that has been directed at both right-wing and left-wing targets.<sup>57</sup>

There is some indication that pro-Palestinian leftists are also planning to disrupt the upcoming 2024 Democratic Party convention in Chicago in a manner intended to draw parallels to the way Vietnam War protesters disrupted the 1968 Democratic Party convention, also held in Chicago. This includes potentially baiting police into engaging in violent overreach. Absent a cease-fire agreement and other policy changes toward the region, left-wing fractures are anticipated to deepen in the months ahead of the 2024 election and for several months after.

While far-left actors appear to be the most energized and mobilized by the current Israel-Hamas conflict, far-right actors have also sought to insert themselves into the issue. One way they are doing this is by disseminating false information online to further stoke anger.<sup>58</sup> For example, one of







the leading purveyors of conflict-related mis/disinformation is Jackson Hinkle, whose following on the social media platform X skyrocketed from 417,000 to 2.5 million since Oct. 7, 2023.<sup>59</sup> Another way is by engaging in countermobilization through political assemblies on college campuses. As college campuses are increasingly confronted with pro-Palestinian protests and encampments, which are largely driven by far-left actors, some far-right Christian nationalists have started showing up to campuses,<sup>60</sup> such as Columbia University and the University of Southern California, to hold “United for Israel” marches.<sup>61</sup>

Beyond voting, protests, and direct-action tactics, the conflict has also inspired individuals to attempt or execute acts of violence. In mid-October 2023, the FBI and DHS warned of a rise in hate crimes as the Israel-Hamas conflict intensifies.<sup>62</sup> “Targeted violent attacks may increase as the conflict progresses,” a DHS assessment said, “escalations in the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas almost certainly will increase the threat of terrorism and targeted violence” in the United States.<sup>63</sup>

Domestic extremism linked to the Israel-Hamas conflict can manifest in different ways, including hate crimes against both Jews and Muslims, violent protests, and various extremist ideologies such as antisemitism and Islamophobia gaining strength.<sup>64</sup> Individuals or groups in the U.S. may engage in violent extremist behavior that targets individuals or communities based on their

perceived association with either side of the conflict. Extremist behavior from both sides can often manifest as violence and further polarize competing groups, communities, and the nation. In fact, U.S. counterterrorism experts noted late last year that DVEs are

exploiting the Israel-Hamas conflict tensions with calls for violence and hate.<sup>65</sup> The chronology below of select incidents illustrates violent crimes against Muslims, Arabs, and Jews associated with social tensions surrounding the Israel-Hamas conflict.

## Cases Related to the Israel-Hamas War

- **On Oct. 11, 2023**, a man with a history of gun violence and right-wing anti-Islam extremism posted an online threat inviting people over social media to “hunt Palestinians” in Dearborn, Michigan. Local police arrested the man the next day.<sup>66</sup>
- **On Oct. 14, 2023**, a man repeatedly stabbed a 6-year-old Palestinian boy in his apartment in Plainfield, Illinois. Authorities have labeled the vicious attack a hate crime due to the child’s ethnicity.<sup>67</sup>
- **On Oct. 19, 2023**, a Jordanian citizen with a Palestinian passport was arrested in Houston, Texas, on gun possession charges. The suspect reportedly had posted online about his support for killing Jews.<sup>68</sup>
- **On Oct. 25, 2023**, a man broke into a Jewish family’s home and began yelling pro-Palestinian slogans as well as saying, “Kill Jews.”<sup>69</sup>
- **On Nov. 4, 2023**, a student of Muslim Arab background was allegedly intentionally struck by a car whose driver yelled, “F--- you and your people.”<sup>70</sup>
- **On Nov. 27, 2023**, an assailant shot three Palestinian students as they walked down a sidewalk in Burlington, Vermont, wearing keffiyehs, traditional Palestinian scarves. Other motives, such as a robbery or domestic dispute, have been ruled out.<sup>71</sup>
- **On Feb. 4, 2024**, an armed man confronted a group of pro-Palestine protesters in Austin, Texas. He proceeded to get into an argument with them and stabbed one while yelling racial epithets at them. The suspect has been charged with a hate crime.<sup>72</sup>
- **On April 30, 2024**, a group of counterprotesters, without evidence of instigation, violently attacked a pro-Palestinian protest encampment at the University of California, Los Angeles. More than 100 videos examined by The New York Times found “counterprotesters attacking students in the pro-Palestinian encampment for several hours, including beating them with sticks, using chemical sprays and launching fireworks as weapons.”<sup>73</sup>





## War In Ukraine

In general, within the United States, there is a consensus of support for Ukraine across the political spectrum, save for some dissenting voices on the far left and far right.

The war's impact on the domestic security and extremism landscape within the U.S. is centered on its influence upon violent far-right extremists. Authorities remain concerned about the security impact U.S. residents with far-right beliefs may have upon their

return to the United States after fighting in foreign conflicts. The primary concern is that these foreign fighters may return to their home countries with more sophisticated paramilitary training, increased weapons skills, refined military tactics, and actual combat experience gained from fighting in Ukraine and then apply them to carry out domestic terrorist attacks. The incidents shown below documents some of these concerns related to Ukrainian foreign fighters.

Some may have links to domestic or foreign extremist groups, such as the Azov Battalion, or committed possible war crimes. Much like the 2009 DHS far-right extremist report warning of violent American far-right groups recruiting returning military veterans to boost their violent capabilities, returning foreign fighters from Ukraine pose a similar, albeit smaller, type of threat. There's also the likelihood of foreign fighters, especially those with military backgrounds, returning home with psychological issues or hard-line grievances. If left unaddressed, these conditions could lead someone to adopt extremist beliefs or join a violent extremist movement as well as plot or carry out violent criminal activity or acts of terrorism.<sup>80</sup>

The longer the war in Ukraine lasts, and the more foreign mercenaries who are drawn into the conflict, the greater the risk of returning foreign fighters being radicalized on the battlefield or targeted for recruitment by far-right extremists upon their return. Finally, the conflict theater has become a laboratory for fighters, including far-right extremists, to engage in technological and tactical innovations, such as the use of aerial drones (see below for more), for operational tradecraft purposes. The prolonging of the conflict, and far-right involvement in it, will increase the risk of malevolent creativity and lethal innovation that could inform future terrorist operational behaviors in the United States.

### Cases of Ukrainian Foreign Fighters

- **In April 2018**, one of two suspects fled to Ukraine after allegedly murdering a couple in Florida. The other is in custody awaiting trial. The suspect, who fled has been linked to far-right extremist groups in Ukraine, and there were concerns that one or both suspects may have been involved in extremist activities in the United States.
- **In September 2019**, the FBI arrested a man for distributing explosives information and threatening interstate commerce after providing bombmaking instructions online and conducting potential target selection. The suspect reportedly spoke to others on social media about wanting to travel to Ukraine to fight with a far-right military group.<sup>74</sup>
- **In 2019**, Ukrainian intelligence reportedly deported two American foreign fighters after learning they had ties to far-right extremism. One is reportedly a former U.S. Marine and former member of a neo-Nazi group called "The Base."<sup>75</sup>
- **In April 2022**, a Virginian member of the Boogaloo Bois, an antigovernment militia movement, was injured while fighting in the Donetsk region in Ukraine and taken to a local hospital for treatment.<sup>76</sup>
- **In August 2022**, media sources reported that 10 members of the Boogaloo Bois were preparing to travel to Ukraine to fight the Russians.<sup>77</sup>
- **On April 13, 2023**, the FBI arrested a 21-year-old National Guardsman in North Dighton, Massachusetts, who allegedly leaked classified documents related to the war in Ukraine. The suspect reportedly expressed white supremacist and antisemitic beliefs on his social media accounts.<sup>78</sup>
- **In July 2024**, an 18-year-old New Jersey man reportedly on his way to Ukraine to fight was arrested for allegedly plotting an attack on a U.S. electrical substation to advance the white supremacist cause.<sup>79</sup>





## Emerging Disruptive Technologies

According to a 2022 National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) report, “In the coming years, the development of emerging and disruptive technologies may transform the capabilities of terrorists, complicating investigations and responses to attacks.”<sup>81</sup> The NCTC report lists the following ways terrorists may use these emerging technologies, such as enabling radicalization to violence and recruitment, augmenting planning and training, and employing new attack methods.<sup>82</sup> Among the many emerging technologies, the three most likely and impactful to DVEs are 3D printing (specifically related to “ghost guns” and illicit firearms parts), uncrewed aerial systems (UAS), and artificial intelligence (AI).

### Additive Manufacturing (“3D Printing”)

Additive manufacturing, otherwise known as 3D printing, is an emerging technology with a wide range of potential uses in areas ranging from commercial manufacturing to medical care. However, it is already known that potentially hostile actors can use this technology for malevolent purposes. The most likely application of this technology over the next 12 months among those actors is the creation and distribution of “ghost guns” and illegal firearms parts (such as auto sears). They currently pose several security-related challenges concerning regulation, accessibility, lack of serial numbers, potential for misuse, and other legal concerns

related to the production and distribution of weapons.

3D-printed firearms and gun parts are typically not subject to the same regulations, oversight, and safety standards as traditional firearms. This makes them virtually untraceable and more prone to malfunctions and accidents. In addition, these types of firearms often lack serial numbers and can be made from composite materials (instead of metal) that circumvent screening efforts such as X-ray machines and law enforcement tracing efforts if used in a violent crime.

Of particular concern to law enforcement are 3D printed auto sears, which can easily turn a semi-automatic firearm into a fully automatic machine gun.<sup>83</sup> This technology could boost the violent capabilities of DVEs. For example, a reported far-right antigovernment extremist was arrested in Ranson, West Virginia, in 2020 for illegally manufacturing over 600 plastic auto sears using a 3D printer, then attempting to sell the illegal gun parts.<sup>84</sup> Further, 3D printers have become more accessible and affordable, which means that malicious individuals (including violent criminals, extremists, and terrorists) could easily produce such weapons that are difficult to detect and trace, thus providing a covert capability for introducing illegal firearms and other weapons into controlled or sensitive areas.

Thus far, there have only been a few incidents involving 3D-printed firearms with potential ties to domestic extremists and terrorists. For example, in January 2024,

two alleged anarchists were arrested on charges of stockpiling an arsenal of ghost guns and improvised explosive devices at their apartment in Queens, New York.<sup>85</sup> Authorities say the suspects also had a “hit list” that mentioned unidentified law enforcement personnel, judges, politicians, and celebrities.<sup>86</sup> Also, in March 2023, an Army soldier who embraced neo-Nazi ideology was charged with the possession of a 3D-printed ghost gun with no serial number in Fayetteville, North Carolina.<sup>87</sup> Evidence discovered on the suspect’s electronic devices included a note about a goal to “remove as many [black and brown people] from Hoke, Cumberland, Robeson and Scotland Counties by whatever means need be.”<sup>88</sup>

Despite past attempts by far-right extremists to construct chemical, biological, or radiological weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and execute attacks using them,<sup>89</sup> a combination of technical barriers and the centrality of gun culture<sup>90</sup> makes the manufacture of WMDs with 3D printed parts improbable – but not impossible – over the next 12 months. A similar observation and conclusion can be drawn regarding far-right extremists and 3D printing of explosives; its likelihood is somewhat higher than the 3D printing of WMDs, but still considerably lower than firearms production.<sup>91</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest far-left extremists are interested at any commensurate level in 3D printing for illegal weapons manufacturing the way many far-right extremists are, though there are some anecdotal cases







of far-leftists claiming to (legally) manufacture and use 3D-printed firearms.<sup>92</sup> Therefore this analysis assesses the far-left extremist threat in this context to be small, but non-negligible.

### Extremist Use of Uncrewed Aerial Systems

Extremist use of UAS, often called aerial drones, is a growing concern abroad as well as at home. UAS has been used by both far-left and far-right domestic extremists. On the far left, actors have previously used UAS for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) purposes, specifically to monitor the activities of far-right extremists.<sup>93</sup> They have also used them to disseminate propaganda. The far right has similarly attempted – and failed – to use the systems for ISR purposes but were much more successful at using them to spread propaganda.<sup>94</sup> While some analysts remain skeptical of far-right extremists' capabilities to fully harness the operational potential of UAS for executing acts of violence,<sup>95</sup> there is evidence to suggest they are sharing knowledge among themselves and learning from innovations being made in the Russia-Ukraine conflict theater.<sup>96</sup>

In contrast, the growing potential UAS terrorist threat has also prompted significant research into developing effective countermeasures such as drone detection and tracking systems, RF (radio frequency) jammers, direct energy weapons, GPS (global positioning system) spoofing, drone interception technology, and other technologies. Such

## Emerging Disruptive Technologies

Innovations in military and commercial technologies and their applications to operational practices of domestic extremists



### Uncrewed Air Systems

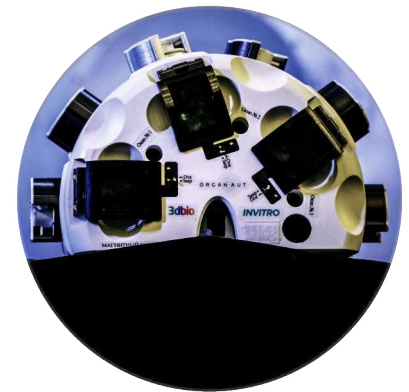
Usually comprised of a vehicle, remote controller, and command system, UAS are slowly being adopted by domestic extremists for surveillance and propaganda dissemination purposes. They are likely to influence operational tradecraft in the future.

### 3D Printing

Highly favored by far-right extremists to manufacture firearms or firearm parts, 3D printing will impact the next 12 months leading up to and beyond the presidential election. Additionally, there is anecdotal evidence that far-leftists are starting to embrace this technology.



Source: Daryl Johnson and Alejandro Beutel



### Artificial Intelligence

The two most likely uses of AI in the next 12 months are the scaling up of disruption campaigns by far-right election denialists and the targeted dissemination of propaganda and disinformation by domestic far-rightists and state actors like Russia and China.

countermeasures will supplement law enforcement's developed and employed operational capabilities.

Between the slow and limited embrace of UAS by far-left and far-right extremists and the rapid pace of technological

countermeasures being employed by security actors, its short-term (12 month) impact on DVEs is judged to be minimal. This technology is significantly more likely to influence operational tradecraft over a longer period (possibly five or more years),

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**“ Within the DVE space, AI algorithms could be used to spread extremist propaganda and disinformation online, which can contribute to the recruitment of vulnerable individuals to extremist movements and causes as well as to radicalize extremists further toward violence and criminal activity. ”**

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especially if the Russia-Ukraine conflict continues, allowing far-right extremists additional time to learn, innovate, and transfer knowledge and skills to others.

### **The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Domestic Extremism**

Like other emerging disruptive technologies, AI has enormous positive potential in areas of medicine, science, commerce, technology, and the arts. However, it can also be exploited for malicious purposes by hostile actors. Regarding threats to democracy, AI has the potential to be used for rapidly scaling up mis- and disinformation campaigns that threaten the integrity and public trust in procedural foundations like election systems. For example, far-right organizations that openly express election denialism and seek to contest the validity of voter registration rolls are aided by tools that involve AI technology.<sup>97</sup>

Experts are also concerned that artificial intelligence can be used to rapidly enhance the production, quality, and dissemination of mis- and disinformation, including digital audio fabrication and deepfake visual materials.<sup>98</sup>

As noted in Part 1, this analysis expects that hostile actors are more likely to employ “cheapfake” audiovisual content, given the relative familiarity and popularity of its tools of production and its persuasive effects, which are comparable to deepfakes’. Malicious actors are still expected to make limited, but perhaps highly strategic use of deepfakes over the next 12 months. Although the empirical effects of mis/disinformation on voting behaviors and political attitudes appear to be modest, in highly competitive elections, even the smallest shifts in beliefs and behaviors can make a significant difference in political outcomes. Beyond short-term impacts like voting outcomes, sustained and pervasive exposure to such content, if left unchecked and not mitigated by education in media and information literacy can considerably erode trust in electoral processes and sow confusion among voters in the medium- to long term.<sup>99</sup>

Within the DVE space, AI algorithms could be used to spread extremist propaganda and disinformation online, which can contribute to the recruitment of vulnerable individuals to extremist movements and causes as well as to radicalize

extremists further toward violence and criminal activity. Another potential negative impact of AI on DVEs is the potential for bias and discrimination to continue increasing. AI algorithms are only as unbiased as the data they are trained on, and if the data used to train AI systems is biased or discriminatory, the resulting algorithms may also be biased or discriminatory. This can lead to the targeting of certain groups or individuals based on their race, religion, sexual orientation, or other characteristics, which can further exacerbate social and political tensions in an already strongly divided country like the United States.

### **Conclusion**

A confluence of at least a dozen factors has created an atmosphere conducive to violent extremism and domestic terrorist attacks in the U.S. Contributing factors such as the looming 2024 presidential election, the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas conflict, the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation, growing misogyny, Trump’s enduring ability to agitate the extreme ends of the political spectrum against each other, and other deeply polarizing





social and political issues will spur violent extremism in America in 2024, 2025, and the ensuing years. These contributing factors have also manifested in increased threats to lawmakers and election officials (and volunteers), a rising number of extremist politicians and candidates, publicly elected extremist supporters, the spread of disinformation, and heated dehumanizing rhetoric that allows both far-right and far-left extremism to thrive.

Anti-law enforcement sentiment has also flourished, adding further concern about the destabilization

of society through attacks on the rule of law and order. This, in turn, increases the risk of political violence and domestic terrorism. Unfortunately, when such an environment flourishes, it leads to a divided society where some individuals are not afraid to confront authority, legal processes, and societal norms with violence through mass casualty attacks, targeting of minorities, authority figures, faiths, women, and others.

A repeat of the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol cannot be ruled out, although the probability of a similar attack occurring is

highest against a state capital building. Other violent scenarios could include assassinations of political figures as well as violent acts targeting polling stations, government meetings and facilities, law enforcement, and the courts. For these reasons, policymakers should always remain vigilant, prepared, and conscientious of this ever evolving and dangerous internal threat that should not be underestimated, easily dismissed, or forgotten. This year and several years beyond will be fertile ground for DVEs to flourish and continue to operate in a heightened threat environment. □

## Biographies



**Daryl Johnson** is one of the foremost experts on domestic extremist groups in the U.S. He is a Non-Resident Fellow at the New Lines Institute.



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