

**Testimony of J. Richard Cohen**  
**President, Southern Poverty Law Center**  
**before the**  
**Subcommittees on National Security and Government Operations**  
**Committee on Oversight and Government Reform**  
**U.S. House of Representatives**

**Radicalization in the U.S and the Rise of Terrorism**  
**June 23, 2016**

My name is Richard Cohen. I am an attorney and the president of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a civil rights organization founded in 1971. For more than three decades, we have been monitoring, issuing reports about, and training law enforcement officials on far-right extremist activity in the United States. Although it is not the focus of our work, we also have written about the threat of homegrown Islamic extremists.<sup>1</sup> I previously have testified before the House Committee on Homeland Security and have served on the Department of Homeland Security's Countering Violent Extremism Working Group. I am honored to appear before you today.

I'd like to make three points this afternoon.

First, the threat of terrorism from non-Islamic homegrown extremists is not only serious but evolving. Many of the recent attacks have been committed by self-radicalized extremists—acting alone or in pairs—who were not directed by any particular organization but were rather inspired by their radical ideology.

Second, we must ensure that the government's attention to the threat of Islamic extremism does not cause it to fail to devote the resources necessary to combat homegrown violent extremism based on other ideologies. All forms of extremist violence are dangerous to our nation and must be vigorously confronted.

Third, we must recognize that stigmatizing Muslims will fray the bonds of trust between their communities and the police that are so essential to effective law enforcement, and may, in fact, push some toward the very extremism we want to combat.

**The Threat of Non-Islamic Domestic Terrorism is Serious and Evolving**

In the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we began to detect a significant increase in non-Islamic extremist activity in the United States. The number of hate groups—organizations that vilify entire groups of people based on their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or some other characteristic—nearly doubled during a 10-year span, from 457 in 1999 to 926 in 2008. This growth continued during the first two years of the Obama Administration, to a record 1,018 groups in 2011. In our view, the most important factor driving the increase was a backlash to our country's changing

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., Booth Gunter and Brian Levin, "Ten Years After," *Intelligence Report*, Southern Poverty Law Center, Aug. 24, 2011, at <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/ten-years-after>; and Ryan Lenz and Mark Potok, *The Age of the Wolf*, Southern Poverty Law Center, Feb. 12, 2015, at <http://www.splcenter.org/lone-wolf>

demographics. For many on the radical right, President Obama's election symbolized the kind of "change" they fear.

Although the growth in the number of hate groups began before President Obama took office, his election did coincide with another phenomenon: the dramatic resurgence of a far-right antigovernment movement. This movement emerged in its current form during the 1990s in response to federal gun control measures and the deadly standoffs at Ruby Ridge and Waco. It comprises hundreds of armed militias and other organizations that typically subscribe to a hodgepodge of antigovernment, conspiratorial theories, including the belief that U.S. political and economic elites are part of international conspiracy to create a one-world government known as the "New World Order." It also includes so-called "sovereign citizens," who believe they are immune from most federal and state laws and have committed a variety of violent acts.<sup>2</sup>

This radical antigovernment movement, which was responsible for numerous terrorism plots in the 1990s, saw a steep decline in activity in the years following the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building by movement sympathizer Timothy McVeigh and remained largely moribund until the election of President Obama. In 2008, we counted 149 groups. By 2012, there were 1,360—an increase of more than 800 percent.

Radical-right group activity peaked during the 2011-2012 period. Since then, we have seen a slight decline in both the number of hate groups (now at 892) and radical antigovernment groups (now at 998).

The surge in domestic extremism has been accompanied by an alarming level of violence—both from antigovernment extremists and from racist extremists.

In 2013, West Point's Combating Terrorism Center found that right-wing violence in the 2000-2011 period surpassed that of the 1990s by a factor of four.<sup>3</sup> In July 2014, a DHS intelligence assessment noted a "spike within the past year in violence committed by militia extremists and lone offenders who hold violent anti-government beliefs."<sup>4</sup> In February 2015, a DHS report warned of attacks by sovereign citizens, citing 24 acts of ideology-based violence, threats or plots (mostly against law enforcement targets) since 2010.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the data we've collected reflects an uptick in racist crimes and terrorist plots in recent years.<sup>6</sup> At least seven law enforcement officers have been killed by antigovernment extremists since 2008.

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<sup>2</sup> "Sovereign Citizens: A Growing Domestic Threat to Law Enforcement," FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, Counterterrorism Analysis Section, September 2011, at <https://leb.fbi.gov/2011/september/sovereign-citizens-a-growing-domestic-threat-to-law-enforcement>

<sup>3</sup> *Challengers from the Sidelines: Understanding America's Violent Far-Right*, Arie Perliger, Combating Terrorism Center, Jan. 15, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> *Domestic Violent Extremists Pose Increased Threat to Government Officials and Law Enforcement*, Office of Intelligence and Analysis, Department of Homeland Security, July 22, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> *Sovereign Citizen Extremist Ideology Will Drive Violence at Home, During Travel, and at Government Facilities*, Office of Intelligence and Analysis, Department of Homeland Security, Feb. 5, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> *Terror from the Right: Plots, Conspiracies and Racist Rampages since Oklahoma City*, Southern Poverty Law Center, at <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/terror-from-the-right>.

In a study released in March, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism found that between 1990 and 2014, far-right domestic extremists were responsible for four times as many ideologically based homicidal incidents as extremists associated with Al Qaeda and related movements. During the 2005-2014 period, the ratio was 3:1.<sup>7</sup> Given the toll of the deadly 9/11 attack, however, the number of deaths over the 25-year period was significantly lower from far-right extremist attacks than from attacks by radical Islamic extremists.

While numerous recent terror plots have emanated from militia groups, overall we have seen a significant shift in the nature of homegrown extremist violence. For the most part, violence comes not from those formally affiliated with extremist organizations but from lone wolves. These acts are, for obvious reasons, the most difficult for law enforcement to detect in advance and prevent—even when an actor is or has been under scrutiny, as we saw in Orlando.

Last year, we issued a study—*The Age of the Wolf*—finding that 46 of 63 domestic terror incidents (74%) culled from academic databases and the SPLC’s own research files over the previous six years were the work of a single person. Ninety percent were the work of no more than two people. Our report also found that a domestic terrorism incident, either an attack or foiled plot, occurred on average every 34 days during the period examined, from 2009 to 2014.<sup>8</sup>

In many ways, white supremacist Dylann Roof, the alleged shooter in the June 17, 2015, massacre at Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, represents the new face of domestic terror: the extremist who acts alone after being radicalized and inspired online by an extremist ideology.

Roof had not been a member of a racist hate group. Instead, he had been radicalized and indoctrinated into the world of white nationalism entirely online. In a 2,400-word manifesto, he described becoming “racially aware” in the echo chamber of white supremacist websites following the controversy over the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. On the site of the racist Council of Conservative Citizens, he found demonizing propaganda about black-on-white crime. He wrote that he “saw the same things happening in England and France, and in all the other Western European countries,” then “found out about the Jewish problem.” As he was murdering his victims, Roof told them that black people were “taking over our country” and “rap[ing] our women.”

Coinciding with the rise in lone wolf attacks, we’ve seen an explosion of racist and other far-right activity on the Internet, where extremists can disseminate and absorb propaganda in relative anonymity and find validation and common cause with other extremists.

Since the year President Obama was inaugurated, for example, the number of people registered on Stormfront, perhaps the most important neo-Nazi web forum, has doubled—to more than 300,000. About two-thirds of the site’s registered users are from this country. In addition to registered members, the site attracts millions of visitors who are fed a steady stream of crude racist and anti-Semitic vitriol.

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<sup>7</sup> *Twenty-Five Years of Ideological Homicide Victimization in the United States of America*, Report to the Office of University Programs, Science and Technology Directorate, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, March 2016.

<sup>8</sup> *The Age of the Wolf*, Southern Poverty Law Center, Feb. 12, 2015, at <http://www.splcenter.org/lone-wolf>.

The Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, who slaughtered 77 people in 2011 because he thought they were enabling Muslim immigration, was, at one time, a registered user of Stormfront. Our 2014 report on Stormfront—which provides a window into the online radicalization process—showed that its registered users have committed nearly 100 murders, including Breivik’s, since 2009.<sup>9</sup> Almost all of the killers had regularly posted comments on Stormfront and other racist sites in the 18 months prior to their attacks. The forum appears to have helped nurture and rationalize their racial hatred.

Stormfront is merely one example of easy-to-find web forums that promote racial hatred. Frazier Glenn Cross, the former neo-Nazi leader who killed three people he mistook for Jews in Overland Park, Kansas, in 2014 regularly posted comments on Vanguard News Network, a forum with the slogan “No Jews. Just Right.” Racist and anti-Semitic threads can be found on many other sites, including mainstream forums like Reddit, which now has a community of crudely anti-black sites known as “the Chimpire.” In addition, hate music used to recruit young people can be purchased from even some of the largest online music retailers, though several—including iTunes and Spotify—have taken steps to remove such music.

Despite the trend toward lone wolf violence, there is still violence associated with extremist organizations, including the radical, antigovernment militia movement.

The potential for deadly militia violence was on vivid display in April 2014, when the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) attempted to confiscate cattle belonging to Cliven Bundy on federal land in Nevada after Bundy refused to pay more than \$1 million in grazing fees and fines. Hundreds of armed militiamen from across the country showed up to defend Bundy. The BLM effort was abandoned when militia snipers lined hilltops and overpasses with rifles trained on federal enforcement officials.

Earlier this year, we saw another militia operation. Armed militiamen, including two of Bundy’s sons, took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon and occupied it for 41 days. One of them was killed as he apparently reached for a gun during the arrest of several leaders of the occupation.

### **The Government Must Recognize and Combat All Forms of Violent Extremism**

After the deadly Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, then-Attorney General Reno formed a special task force to coordinate the country’s response to the threat of domestic terrorism. The task force was scheduled to hold one of its monthly meetings on September 11, 2001, but did not do so for obvious reasons. But the task force did not miss just one meeting. As the country’s focus shifted to the new and devastating threat of Islamic terrorism, the task force did not meet again for 13 years. Only after Frazier Glenn Cross killed three people in Kansas in April 2014 and public pressure mounted did the Justice Department reestablish the task force.

The shift in focus to the threat of terrorism from Islamic extremists in the aftermath in 9/11 was not surprising. That event was the Pearl Harbor of our time. It led to the creation of the

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<sup>9</sup> *White Homicide Worldwide*, Southern Poverty Law Center, April 16, 2014, at <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/White-Homicide-Worldwide>.

Department of Homeland Security, as well as to our country's involvement in two wars. But as the history of the Justice Department's task force reflects, the pendulum swung too far in the direction of Islamic terrorism, at the expense of other threats, after 9/11.

The shadow of 9/11 has not been the only factor leading to a reduction in the resources and attention paid to non-Islamic terrorism in our country. Partisan politics also appear to have played a role. In April 2009, DHS released an unclassified intelligence assessment to law enforcement officials entitled *Right-wing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment*.<sup>10</sup> Yet, despite the report's accuracy, then-DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano withdrew it following an outcry by those who claimed, falsely, that the report tarred conservatives as potential domestic terrorists. More significantly, the DHS unit responsible for the report was allowed to wither. In the wake of the controversy over the report, the *Washington Post* reported that DHS "cut the number of personnel studying domestic terrorism unrelated to Islam, canceled numerous state and local law enforcement briefings, and held up dissemination of nearly a dozen reports on extremist groups."<sup>11</sup>

Daryl Johnson, the former DHS senior domestic terrorism analyst who was the principal author of the 2009 DHS report, wrote on *The New York Times* website on June 24, 2015, that "through reckless neglect at nearly all levels of government, domestic terrorism not tied to Islam has become a cancer with no diagnosis or plan to address it." There are, he wrote, hundreds of government analysts looking for Islamist threats but "mere dozens" monitoring non-Islamic threats.<sup>12</sup>

Over the last two years, my colleagues and I have seen renewed attention to the threat of non-Islamic terrorism at both the Justice Department and DHS. Still, there are indications that radical-right terrorism continues to take a back seat to radical Islamic terrorism.

In February 2015, for example, when President Obama addressed the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, which I attended, the first terrorist incident he mentioned was the Oklahoma City bombing. But the discussion at the summit itself focused almost exclusively on the threat of Islamic terrorism. Similarly, last year—just two weeks after the Charleston massacre—the House Committee on Homeland Security released a Terror Threat Snapshot that contained no mention of the threat of terror from the radical right.<sup>13</sup>

Surely, the impetus for today's hearing was the terrorist attack in Orlando less than two weeks ago. Yet, the House has still not held a hearing on the danger to federal employees and

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<sup>10</sup> PDF on Southern Poverty Law Center website, at [http://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/resource/DOJ\\_rwextremism2009.pdf](http://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/resource/DOJ_rwextremism2009.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> "Homeland Security Department curtails home-grown terror analysis," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2011, at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/homeland-security-department-curtails-home-grown-terror-analysis/2011/06/02/AGQEAaDLH\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/homeland-security-department-curtails-home-grown-terror-analysis/2011/06/02/AGQEAaDLH_story.html).

<sup>12</sup> "For Domestic Hate, Apply the Vigor and Strategy Used for Muslim Terror," Daryl Johnson, *The New York Times*, June 24, 2015, at <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/24/charleston-and-the-threat-of-homegrown-hate-groups-for-domestic-hate-apply-the-vigor-and-strategy-used-for-muslim-terror>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/documents/July%20Terror%20Threat%20Snapshot%200.pdf>.

federal lands as a result of the militia standoffs at the Bundy ranch in Nevada and the Malheur refuge in Oregon.

### **The Government Must Avoid Stigmatizing Muslim Community**

In its first report on community policing, the Department of Justice emphasized that, “Without trust between police and citizens, effective policing is impossible.”<sup>14</sup> The various programs under the banner of Countering Violent Extremism emphasize the same point.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the reality is, the relationship between law enforcement and Muslim communities in America is often frayed.

According to a recent study funded by the Justice Department and conducted by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security,<sup>16</sup> there are numerous factors behind the tension and mistrust. But they start with the Muslim community’s perception – one based on fact – that a double standard is at work – that they are singled out for special community policing programs because law enforcement officials look at them with suspicion.

This sense of being unfairly targeted is magnified by the belief – one also based on fact – that informants are being deployed in Muslim communities, particularly in their places of worship. It is exacerbated by the discrimination Muslims often experience in their daily lives, the excessive scrutiny they experience at airports, and the vilification to which they are routinely subject in the media and entertainment industry. Furthermore, according to the Triangle Center study,

This virulent anti-Muslim bigotry has even infected our political process with 16 state legislatures enacting laws intending to ban legal application of Islamic principles in courts, some members of Congress calling into question the loyalty of Muslim American civil servants, and presidential candidates stating that a Muslim should not be able to serve in high office or that certain mosques should be closed. The trends have only been compounded in the aftermath of the Paris and San Bernardino attacks, which generated open public discussion about religious tests to determine admissibility of refugees, religion-based surveillance, and, of course, the proposal by one presidential candidate to temporarily bar foreign born Muslims from entering the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Incendiary anti-Muslim rhetoric can play into the hands of recruiters for ISIS and other Islamic extremists.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Understanding Community Policing: A Framework for Action* at vii, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, August 1994, at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/commmp.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> *Report on the National Summit on Empowering Communities to Prevent Violent Extremism* at 8, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> *The Challenge and Promise of Using Community Police Strategies to Prevent Violent Extremism*, Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, Duke University, January 2016.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 23-24 (footnotes omitted).

<sup>18</sup> Liam Stack, “Qaeda Affiliate Uses Video of Donald Trump for Recruiting,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 1 2016, at [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/02/world/africa/al-qaeda-uses-video-of-trump-for-recruiting.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/02/world/africa/al-qaeda-uses-video-of-trump-for-recruiting.html?_r=0).



The FBI's treatment of the Charleston and Orlando killings reflects an aspect of the double standard at work here. Within hours of the massacre at the gay nightclub in Orlando by a U.S.-born Muslim, the FBI labeled it terrorism. In the days following the Charleston attack last year, on the other hand, FBI Director James Comey said the killings of African-American churchgoers by a white supremacist was not an act of terror.<sup>19</sup> Both cases, however, fit the definition of terrorism under federal law,<sup>20</sup> as did the actions of the antigovernment militiamen at the Bundy ranch in 2014 and the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge earlier this year.

Since 9/11, we've seen three distinct spikes in hate crimes targeting Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims, another factor that contributes to the Muslim community's sense of alienation and one that may contribute to radicalization.<sup>21</sup> The first spike began immediately after the deadly attacks launched by Al Qaeda that killed almost 3,000 innocent victims, including a number of Muslims. The FBI hate crime statistics for 2001 showed a 1,600 percent increase in anti-Muslim hate crime incidents in the United States—481 incidents reported to the FBI, compared to 28 reported a year before.<sup>22</sup>

The second spike came in 2010 amid the heated rhetoric surrounding a proposed Islamic cultural center near the site of the World Trade Center attack—the so-called “ground-zero mosque.” The FBI statistics showed then a 50 percent rise in hate crimes targeting the Muslim community.<sup>23</sup>

The third spike began in 2015, a year marked by Islamic extremist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, and by the incendiary, anti-Muslim rhetoric in the presidential campaign. One Muslim-American organization reported that last year there were more attacks on mosques—vandalism, harassment and intimidation—than in any other year since it began tracking them. Most of the attacks occurred after the Nov. 13 terrorist attacks in Paris.<sup>24</sup>

Following 9/11, President George W. Bush delivered a series of speeches in which he said Muslims and Arabs were not our enemies. He also appeared publicly with imams and other Muslim leaders. At least in part because of his leadership, anti-Muslim hate crimes decreased in 2002 by about 67 percent – a remarkable drop. The lesson, of course, is that it matters what our leaders say from their bully pulpits.

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Husband, FBI Director Says Charleston Shooting Not Terrorism,” Mediaite, June 20, 2015, at <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/fbi-director-says-charleston-shooting-not-terrorism/>

<sup>20</sup> See 28 USC §2331.

<sup>21</sup> Triangle Center Study at 23; Jeff Guo, “Hating Muslims Plays Right Into the Islamic State’s Hands,” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 17, 2015, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/11/17/isis-wants-you-to-hate-muslims/>.

<sup>22</sup> Because of limitations in the collection of data, these numbers vastly understate the problem; more than half of all hate crimes are never reported to police and many others are incorrectly categorized.

<sup>23</sup> “FBI: Dramatic Spike in Hate Crimes Targeting Muslims,” *Intelligence Report*, Southern Poverty Law Center, March 1, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> “Number of Incidents Targeting U.S. Mosques in 2015 Highest Ever Recorded,” Council on American-Islamic Relations,” December 17, 2015, at <https://www.cair.com/press-center/press-releases/13313-mosques-targeted.html>

### **A Modest Proposal Regarding NICS**

We have not taken a position on the various gun control bills that recently have been introduced. We have, however, one suggestion for the FBI that may be helpful in preventing terrorist acts.

Federal firearm licensees, such as the one that sold Omar Mateen, the Orlando killer, his weapon, are required to run background checks using the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). The fact that the FBI had investigated Mateen for possible terrorist activity did not serve as a basis under existing law to prevent or delay his weapon purchase. But, had the fact of the investigation been flagged in the system and the FBI then been alerted to the purchase, the Bureau possibly would have had an opportunity to contact Mateen and assess his intentions. My understanding is that flagging persons suspected of possible terrorist activity in this fashion would not require additional legislation.

Thank you.



Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
Witness Disclosure Requirement – "Truth in Testimony"  
Required by House Rule XI, Clause 2(g)(5)

Name: J. Richard Cohen

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1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2012. Include the source and amount of each grant or contract.

None

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2. Please list any entity you are testifying on behalf of and briefly describe your relationship with these entities.

I'm testifying in my capacity as the president of the  
Southern Poverty Law Center.

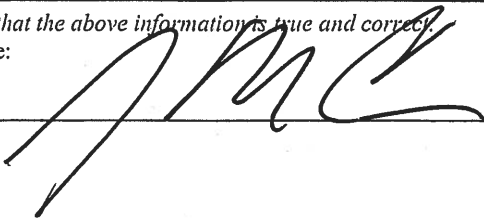
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3. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) received since October 1, 2012, by the entity(ies) you listed above. Include the source and amount of each grant or contract.

None

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I certify that the above information is true and correct.  
Signature:



Date:

6/22/16

### **Biographical Statement: J. Richard Cohen**

Richard Cohen is an attorney and the president of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights organization founded in 1971. For more than three decades, the Center has been monitoring, issuing reports about, and training law enforcement officials on far-right extremist activity in the United States. Mr. Cohen has previously testified before the House Committee on Homeland Security and has served on the Department of Homeland Security's Countering Violent Extremism Working Group.