# The Right's Time to Fly?

## Exploring the Possibility of Right-Wing Extremists' Use of UAVs

**Håvard Haugstvedt**

Published online: 26 Apr 2021.

Submit your article to this journal 🗗

Article views: 57

View related articles 🗗

View Crossmark data 🗗

# The Right's Time to Fly?
## Exploring the Possibility of Right-Wing Extremists' Use of UAVs

Håvard Haugstvedt

UAVs have been used by non-state actors in the past decade. However, no known attack by right-wing extremists has been carried out using them. Håvard Haugstvedt reviews recent developments in attacks – through online activity in open forums and by examining groups that have already used UAVs in their operations – by such actors, to explore the possibility of right-wing extremists adopting UAVs. The article argues that right-wing extremist groups lack a strong entity, such as a state, backing their development and operations. However, terrorist groups learn from one another, and as extreme right-wing ideologies have gained currency among some members of the military and law enforcement agencies, the capability to develop and use UAVs may be more possible than that which has been revealed thus far. Nonetheless, this article casts doubt on right-wing extremists' capability and desire to incorporate UAVs into a violent repertoire that has historically been composed of fists, fires and firearms.

O n 15 March 2019, right-wing terrorist Brenton Tarrant attacked two mosques in Christchurch, killing 51 and injuring 49.[1] He found inspiration in the manifesto and actions of Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian right-wing terrorist who murdered 77 people in 2011.[2] Tarrant's attack in Christchurch was unique as it lead to mass casualties and was livestreamed on Facebook as it happened.[3] The latter represents a strategic shift from earlier attacks by right-wing extremists, who normally do not actively communicate their course of action to a wider audience.[4] Additionally, in July 2020, it was revealed to the public that Tarrant had conducted reconnaissance of the mosque area by using a UAV some weeks prior to his attack.[5] This

is significant as it is the first known incident of a right-wing extremist using a UAV in preparation or execution of an attack. Prior to this, the only similar known incident is that of German right-wing extremists *planning* to use bomb-laden model airplanes to attack political adversaries in 2013.[6] The primary non-state users of UAVs in the Middle East include the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen.[7] This leads to the question: why have some violent groups adopted UAVs into their repertoire while others have not?

According to Brian A Jackson, terrorist organisations do not innovate technologically for the sake of innovation, but because they believe that there is something to be gained by it. This

1. *BBC News*, 'Christchurch Shootings: Brenton Tarrant Pleads Guilty to 51 Murders', 26 March 2020.
2. Asne Seierstad, 'The Anatomy of White Terror', *New York Times*, 18 March 2019.
3. Graham Macklin, 'The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age', *CTC Sentinel* (Vol. 12, No. 6, July 2019).
4. Daniel Koehler, 'Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe: Current Developments and Issues for the Future', *PRISM* (Vol. 6, No. 2, 2016), pp. 84–104.
5. Patrick Gower, 'Exclusive: Christchurch Gunman Flew a Drone Over Mosque Weeks Before March 15 Shooting', *Newshub*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2020/07/exclusive-christchurch-gunman-flew-a-drone-over-mosque-weeks-before-march-15-shooting.html>, accessed 23 July 2020.
6. Cheryl K Chumley, 'German Police Thwart Neo-Nazi Plot to Use Model-Airplane Bomb', *Washington Times*, 13 September 2013.
7. Asaad Almohammad and Anne Speckhard, 'ISIS Drones: Evolution, Leadership, Bases, Operations and Logistics', International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, May 2017; Conflict Armament Research, 'Iranian Technology Transfers to Yemen: "Kamikaze" Drones Used by Houthi Forces to Attack Coalition Missile Defence Systems', March 2017.

Despite expressing some interest on the internet, right-wing extremists have provided few indications that they are planning to use UAVs. *Courtesy of Adobe Stock/Naypong Studio*

innovation is dependent on a group's desire to acquire new technologies, and the existence of technical and infrastructure capabilities.[8] This article seeks to explore the possibility of right-wing extremists adapting armed or unarmed UAVs by examining the use of other strategies, tools and tactics, and exploring the characteristics of groups that have used UAVs. Additionally, content from online forums and channels associated with right-wing extremism and prior research on how extremists and terrorists learn from one another is taken into account. Engaging with these perspectives and sources might reveal where this particular subject is heading and prepare security services and law enforcement agencies for potential future threats.

## Contemporary Right-Wing Extremist Violence

Right-wing extremists have been responsible for the majority of terror attacks in the US since the mid-1990s. In the past six years, the number of attacks and plots from such actors has grown substantially, and accounted for 90% of all terror attacks from January to May 2020.[9] In addition, right-wing extremist attacks accounted for 117 fatalities in the US, as opposed to 95 by jihadist extremists and 21 by left-wing extremists, since 2010.[10] In February 2020, the FBI recognised racially motivated domestic violent extremists as a national threat, alongside homegrown extremists in general, and foreign terrorist organisations.[11] In Western Europe, there

---

8.   Brian A Jackson, 'Technology Acquisition by Terrorist Groups: Threat Assessment Informed by Lessons from Private Sector Technology Adoption', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (Vol. 24, No. 3, May 2001), pp. 183–213.

9.   Seth G Jones, Catrina Doxsee and Nicholas Harrington, 'The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States', CSIS Brief, June 2020.

10.  Lois Beckett, 'Anti-Fascists Linked to Zero Murders in the US in 25 Years', *The Guardian*, 27 July 2020.

11.  Christopher Wray, 'FBI Oversight', Statement Before the House Judiciary Committee, Washington, DC, 5 February 2020.

were four violent attacks motivated by right-wing extremism in 2019 with fatal outcomes and at least 112 severe but non-fatal attacks. From a long-term perspective, these numbers are relatively low, but 2019 marks the second most deadly year out of the past six.[12] Attacks were carried out by beating/kicking victims and using knives or other blunt instruments in 71 of 116 incidents in 2019, while firearms or explosives were used in 25 incidents.[13] In the US, weapons used in right-wing terror attacks from 1994 to 2020 have mainly been incendiaries, explosives (such as Molotov cocktails and homemade bombs) and firearms.[14] This indicates a low level of technological sophistication, possibly somewhat higher in the US than in Western Europe. While there are large online communities where right-wing extremists interact, physical attacks are predominantly carried out by so-called 'lone actors' against ethnic and religious minorities.[15]

## Right-Wing Adoption of Tools and Tactics

This section does not cover all of the tactics and tools used by right-wing extremists in acts of terror or violence, but rather sheds light on a few key contemporary aspects. Tarrant's livestreaming of his Christchurch attack has inspired other right-wing extremists to do the same. This occurred during the El Paso, Halle and Bærum attacks the same year.[16]

Prior to Christchurch, right-wing extremists had not communicated their actions in the same ways as militant Islamists. The latter have used common and fully open online platforms to intimidate opponents, attract new recruits and increase funding.[17]

Vehicle ramming attacks (VRAs) are another tactic used by right-wing extremists. In a review of cases in the Global Terrorism Database from 1999 to 2017, 85% of VRAs in terrorist attacks occurred between 2014 and 2017, first in the Middle East, and later in North America and Western Europe.[18] The latter attacks in Western Europe, and the first attacks in North America, were associated with individuals who sympathise with or support the Islamic State. Examples of these attacks were those conducted in Barcelona, London, Nice and Berlin.[19] Vehicles as weapons for the far right reached public attention in the US in 2017 when a participant at the Charlottesville rally drove his car into protesters, killing one and wounding several others.[20] Additionally, from 27 May to 7 July 2020, 72 VRAs were recorded in the US.[21]

An examination of these international cases reveals that they are mainly carried out by lone actors from a variety of backgrounds. In a study of 62 cases from Israel and the West Bank, none of the VRAs were committed by terrorist organisations, and only 14.5% of perpetrators had previously engaged in acts of terrorism.[22] In the US, many of the VRAs are carried out by right-wing extremists, but also by people from other backgrounds, and those

---

12. Jacob Aasland Ravndal et al., 'RTV Trend Report 2020: Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990-2019', C-REX Research Report, No. 1, 2020.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Seth G Jones, Catrina Doxsee and Nicholas Harrington, 'The Tactics and Targets of Domestic Terrorists', CSIS Brief, July 2020.

15. Ravndal et al., 'RTV Trend Report 2020'; Koehler, 'Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe'; UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), 'Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right Wing Terrorism', CTED Trends Alert, April 2020, <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/news/2020/04/01/cted-launches-trends-alert-extreme-right-wing-terrorism/>, accessed 29 July 2020.

16. Ravndal et al., 'RTV Trend Report 2020'; Graham Macklin, 'The El Paso Terrorist Attack: The Chain Reaction of Global Right-Wing Terror', *CTC Sentinel* (Vol. 12, No. 11, December 2019).

17. Gunnar J Weimann, 'Competition and Innovation in a Hostile Environment: How Jabhat Al-Nusra and Islamic State Moved to Twitter in 2013–2014', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (Vol. 42, No. 1–2, February 2019), pp. 25–42.

18. Ari Weil, 'Protesters Hit by Cars Recently Highlight a Dangerous Far-Right Trend in America', *NBC News*, 12 July 2020; Vincent Miller and Keith J Hayward, '"I Did My Bit": Terrorism, Tarde and the Vehicle Ramming Attack as an Imitative Event', *British Journal of Criminology* (Vol. 59, No. 1, January 2019), pp. 1–23.

19. Holly Yan, 'Vehicles as Weapons: Muenster Part of a Deadly Trend', *CNN*, 7 April 2018.

20. Phil McCausland et al., 'Charlottesville Rally Turns Deadly: One Killed After Car Strikes Crowd', *NBC News*, 12 August 2017.

21. Weil, 'Protesters Hit by Cars Recently Highlight a Dangerous Far-Right Trend in America'.

22. Simon Perry, Badi Hasisi and Gali Perry, 'Who Is the Lone Terrorist? A Study of Vehicle-Borne Attackers in Israel and the West Bank', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (Vol. 41, No. 11, November 2018), pp. 899–913.

with less clear motivations.[23] The surge in VRA cases in North America has coincided with the emergence of memes in far-right online environments that dehumanise protesters in the streets, who have 'given up their rights'.[24] Strategies to dehumanise the ideological opponent are also used by jihadist groups to prepare their followers or soldiers for acts of degradation and violence towards their enemies.[25]

## Groups That Have Adopted UAVs Into Their Repertoire

While contemporary right-wing extremists have yet to use UAVs for attacks, jihadist groups and other militant non-state actors have already done so. UAVs have primarily been adopted by non-state actors operating in the Middle East, such as Hamas, Hizbullah, the Islamic State, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and the Houthis.[26] These groups have acquired armed UAVs in addition to the more widely available commercial types for reconnaissance. The latter has also been used by Al-Qa'ida, the Taliban, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab.[27] In addition, pro-Russian militias in Ukraine and Mexican drug cartels have used both armed and unarmed UAVs in their operations.[28]

The use of UAVs by non-state actors has been publicly known since 2014, and especially so since 2016 when the Islamic State started refitting commercial UAVs with explosives in Iraq and Syria.[29] Research conducted on the actions of such groups has revealed evidence of 3D printing of some parts of the UAV itself, or parts fitted to the explosive being dropped from the UAV.[30] While there is a case under criminal prosecution in the UK involving an Islamic State sympathiser who allegedly researched how to develop a commercial UAV for use in a terror attack, overwhelming evidence suggests that the use of

23. Weil, 'Protesters Hit by Cars Recently Highlight a Dangerous Far-Right Trend in America'.

24. *Ibid.* Dehumanisation is a process of redefining a group or an individual as not human. A historical example of this is referring to people as 'rats' or 'vermin'. This process may, for some, contribute to legitimising behaviour that otherwise would be considered immoral. For more on dehumanisation, see Albert Bandura, Bill Underwood and Michael E Fromson, 'Disinhibition of Aggression Through Diffusion of Responsibility and Dehumanization of Victims', *Journal of Research in Personality* (Vol. 9, No. 4, December 1975), pp. 253–69.

25. Simon Cottee, 'The Pornography of Jihadism: What ISIS Videos and X-Rated Movies Have in Common', *The Atlantic*, 12 September 2014; Sara Hamad Alqurainy, Hamedi M Adnan and Abubakar Usman Abubakar, 'The Road to the Slaughter: ISIS Process of Dehumanizing the Enemy', *Opcion* (Vol. 35, No. 19, 2019), pp. 2757–74.

26. Alex Yang, 'Eye in the Sky: The Militarization of Drones by Non-State Actors', *Penn Political Review*, 8 November 2018; UN Security Council, 'Full Military Incursion Would Overwhelm Ability to Respond, Officials Tell Security Council, Warning of Potential Catastrophe for 3 Million Syrians, 17 May 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13812.doc.htm>, accessed 20 July 2020; Don Rassler, 'The Islamic State and Drones: Supply, Scale, and Future Threats', Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2018.

27. Jared Keller, 'The Taliban Have Been Using Drones to Watch US Troops "24/7" in Afghanistan', *Business Insider*, 14 December 2018; Uthman Abubakar, 'Nigeria: Boko Haram Using Drones to Monitor Troops' Operations - Borno Governor', *allAfrica*, 31 July 2019, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201907310116.html>, accessed 29 May 2020; Scott Crino and Andy Dreby, 'Drone Technology Proliferation in Small Wars', *Small Wars Journal*, 2 October 2019; Steven Stalinsky and R Sosnow, 'A Decade of Jihadi Organizations' Use of Drones – From Early Experiments by Hizbullah, Hamas, and Al-Qaeda to Emerging National Security Crisis for the West as ISIS Launches First Attack Drones', MEMRI, 21 February 2017, <https://www.memri.org/reports/decade-jihadi-organizations-use-drones-%E2%80%93-early-experiments-hizbullah-hamas-and-al-qaeda>, accessed 13 April 2020.

28. Warsaw Institute, 'New Russian Equipment for Pro-Russian Separatists in Donbas', 22 August 2018, <https://warsawinstitute.org/new-russian-equipment-pro-russian-separatists-donbas/>, accessed 1 July 2020; John P Sullivan, Robert J Bunker and David A Kuhn, 'Mexican Cartel Tactical Note #38: Armed Drone Targets the Baja California Public Safety Secretary's Residence in Tecate, Mexico', *Small Wars Journal*, 6 August 2018.

29. Don Rassler, Muhammad Al-'Ubaydi and Vera Mironova, 'The Islamic State's Drone Documents: Management, Acquisitions, and DIY Tradecraft', Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 31 January 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/ctc-perspectives-the-islamic-states-drone-documents-management-acquisitions-and-diy-tradecraft/>, accessed 8 August 2019; Dan Gettinger and Arthur Holland Michel, 'A Brief History of Hamas and Hezbollah's Drones', 14 July 2014, <https://dronecenter.bard.edu/hezbollah-hamas-drones/>, accessed 22 April 2019.

30. Tyler Koslow, 'Concerns Mount Over ISIS Making 3D Printed Bombs', All3DP, 6 December 2016, <https://all3dp.com/3d-printed-bombs-isis/>, accessed 11 August 2020; Kelsey D Atherton, 'Ukraine Experiences the Future of War', C4ISRNET, 20 March 2019, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/unmanned/2019/03/20/ukraine-forces-encountered-3d-printed-drone-bombs/>, accessed 8 August 2020.

UAVs in terror plans or attacks are usually associated with larger organisations.[31]

Earlier incorporation of UAVs into non-state groups appears dependent on key personnel with sufficient competency and skills in engineering or aviation, such as Hamas's Mohamed Zaouari,[32] and the Islamic State's Fadhel Mensi and Basil Hassan.[33] In the case of Hizbullah and the Houthis, Iran appears to have filled this function. While the country has denied being involved in the Houthi UAV attacks on Saudi Arabia, evidence and indications of Iranian involvement have been identified in independent investigations of the components in the UAVs used by the Houthis.[34] Importantly, the use of armed UAVs in attacks by non-state actors has almost exclusively occurred in active conflict zones in the Middle East.[35] One incident worth noting as a deviation from this pattern is the failed UAV attack against Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in 2018.[36]

## Online Activities

Extremists have been increasingly banned from established social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and instead are migrating to Telegram[37] and WhatsApp,[38] which offer advanced encryption options, closed channels and the option to permanently delete posted material. The migration from Facebook to Telegram has resulted in a substantial audience reduction for right-wing extremists. However, what they have lost in potential numbers they might have gained in a decrease in transparency.[39]

The author's review of the scholarly literature, news reports and other sources indicated that these sources were not sufficient to reveal evidence of right-wing extremists using UAVs in plans, preparations or attacks. Therefore, a search of online discussion forums and channels was performed. This search aimed to identify discussions about procuring, refitting or modifying UAVs, or about how groups such as the Islamic State have done this in the past.

Research on right-wing extremists has found indications of online activities prior to their use of violence.[40] On 6 January 2021, the storming of Capitol Hill in Washington by QAnon supporters, right-wing extremists and other anti-government militia appeared to come as a surprise to law enforcement, over-running the relatively small Capitol Police and resulting in the death of five people.[41] However, this demonstration was not organised in the dark corners of the internet alone, but also on Facebook and Instagram.[42] Among others, investigative journalists at *Bellingcat* have shown how forum discussions gave indications of what later unravelled

31.   *BBC News*, 'Terror Accused Hisham Muhammad "Was Planning Lone-Wolf Drone Attack"', 28 July 2020.

32.   *BBC News*, 'Hamas Accuses Israel of Killing Its Tunisian Drone Expert', 17 December 2016.

33.   Almohammad and Speckhard, 'ISIS Drones'; Mette Mayli Albæk et al., 'The Controller: How Basil Hassan Launched Islamic State Terror into the Skies', *CTC Sentinel* (Vol. 13, No. 5, May 2020), pp. 1–11.

34.   UN Security Council, 'Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen', S/2020/70, 27 January 2020; Conflict Armament Research, 'Evolution of UAVs Employed by Houthi Forces in Yemen', February 2020, <https://www.conflictarm.com/download-file/?report_id=3185&file_id=3189>, accessed 28 February 2020.

35.   Håvard Haugstvedt and Jan Otto Jacobsen, 'Taking Fourth-Generation Warfare to the Skies? An Empirical Exploration of Non-State Actors' Use of Weaponised Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs—"Drones")', *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Vol. 14, No. 5, 2020), pp. 26–40.

36.   Colin P Clarke, 'Approaching a "New Normal": What the Drone Attack in Venezuela Portends', RAND Blog, 13 August 2018, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/08/approaching-a-new-normal-what-the-drone-attack-in-venezuela.html>, accessed 19 October 2020.

37.   Aleksandra Urman and Stefan Katz, 'What They Do in the Shadows: Examining the Far-Right Networks on Telegram', *Information, Communication and Society* (20 August 2020), DOI:10.1080/1369118X.2020.1803946.

38.   Gordon Rayner, 'WhatsApp Accused of Giving Terrorists "a Secret Place to Hide" as It Refuses to Hand Over London Attacker's Messages', *The Telegraph*, 26 March 2017.

39.   Urman and Katz, 'What They Do in the Shadows'.

40.   Heidi Beirich, 'White Homicide Worldwide: Stormfront, the Leading White Supremacist Web Forum, Has Another Distinction — Murder Capital of the Internet', Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), SPLC Intelligence Report, Summer 2014.

41.   Ted Barrett, Manu Raju and Peter Nickeas, 'US Capitol Secured, 4 Dead After Rioters Stormed the Halls of Congress to Block Biden's Win', *CNN*, 6 January 2021.

42.   Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny, 'Extremists Made Little Secret of Ambitions to "Occupy" Capitol in Weeks Before Attack', *NBC News*, 8 January 2021.

in Washington.[43] This was also identified by the FBI prior to the attack.[44]

Research on right-wing extremists in the UK shows that those who carried out acts of violence were significantly more likely to have learned tactics online compared with those who have not engaged in attacks, especially attacks against harder targets or when using more sophisticated tools, such as improvised explosive devices. Right-wing extremists are also more likely than their jihadist-inspired counterparts to engage in extreme online forums, as opposed to email and chat rooms.[45]

Mattias Wahlström and Anton Törnberg argue that social media, in particular, has the capacity to create discursive opportunity structures for likeminded people, facilitate trans-local group dynamics, and offer effective ways of planning and coordinating activities, such as attacks.[46] These three aspects are reflected in both the predictions for and the events leading to the storming of the Capitol on 6 January.[47]

An obvious challenge is distinguishing what is 'just talk' from that which might indicate actual planning, preparation or willingness to carry out violence motivated by right-wing extremism. However, the above shows that right-wing extremists do use forums and channels to communicate, and that those willing to carry out acts of violence might be more present on such forums, to learn and prepare. As such, searching for discussions about UAVs in the online realms of right-wing extremists has the potential to uncover indications of interest in UAVs by such groups.

Over 200 open channels on Telegram, as well as groups on imageboards such as Endchan and 8kun,[48] which are frequently used by those with right-wing extremist views, were searched manually through text queries (including 'drone', 'UAV', 'UAS' and others) and extensive 'browsing'. Several German Telegram channels were found in Aleksandra Urman and Stefan Katz's source material, and these were used in the search.[49] While researchers have previously identified at least one invite-only Telegram channel where Islamic State members with technical degrees discussed the development of UAVs,[50] the search for this led to only a few relevant posts being identified. These either described the significance of UAVs in modern warfare, or referred to incidents where UAVs were used in attacks in the Middle East. Some channels featured videos of UAV strikes in conflict zones in the Middle East and UAV concept models, and – in one case – a mock-up of a low-budget UAV using relatively accessible parts. However, the latter lacked any in-depth description of how to construct the UAV beyond the name and function of the parts in the image. In sum, the review of open forums and channels associated with right-wing extremists did not identify posts or discussions about using off-the-shelf UAVs, adapting or modifying them.

## Terrorist and Extremist Groups' Learning

Terrorism through history is described by David C Rapoport as occurring in 'waves'. According to Tom

43. *Bellingcat*, 'How the Insurgent and MAGA Right Are Being Welded Together on the Streets of Washington D.C.', 5 January 2021.

44. Devlin Barrett and Matt Zapotosky, 'FBI Report Warned of "War" at Capitol, Contradicting Claims There Was No Indication of Looming Violence', *Washington Post*, 13 January 2021.

45. Paul Gill et al., 'Terrorist Use of the Internet by the Numbers: Quantifying Behaviors, Patterns, and Processes', *Criminology and Public Policy* (Vol. 16, No. 1, 2017), pp. 99–117.

46. Mattias Wahlström and Anton Törnberg, 'Social Media Mechanisms for Right-Wing Political Violence in the 21st Century: Discursive Opportunities, Group Dynamics, and Co-Ordination', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (4 April 2019), DOI:10.1080/09546553.2019.1586676.

47. Daniel L Byman and Colin P Clarke, 'Why the Risk of Election Violence Is High', *Fixgov*, a blog of the Brookings Institution, 27 October 2020; Tina Nguyen and Mark Scott, '"Hashtags Come to Life": How Online Extremists Fueled Wednesday's Capitol Hill Insurrection', *Politico*, 7 January 2021; Anti-Defamation League, 'Extremists and Mainstream Trump Supporters Plan to Protest Congressional Certification of Biden's Victory', 4 January 2021, <https://www.adl.org/blog/extremists-and-mainstream-trump-supporters-plan-to-protest-congressional-certification-of>, accessed 13 January 2021.

48. Endchan, 8chan and 8kun, among others, are message and imageboards with various 'sub-channels'. Topics such as child pornography, white supremacism and violence have been found, and several of these sites have been shut down or filtered out from results in search engines.

49. Urman and Katz, 'What They Do in the Shadows'.

50. Stalinsky and Sosnow, 'A Decade of Jihadi Organizations' Use of Drones'.

## The Right's Time to Fly?

Parker and Nick Sitter, it comes in 'strains'.[51] Regardless of the label given, history has demonstrated that terrorists observe, adapt and learn from one another and their adversaries. For example, James J F Forest has discussed how Al-Qa'ida learned strategies and tactics from Hizbullah, and vice versa.[52] Another example of an organisational learning process is that of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, which has learned from both Al-Qa'ida and government counterterrorism strategies.[53]

VRA tactics used in the West Bank and Israel have been adopted and used in the US, particularly in the past couple of years, in what Mia Bloom describes as a migration of tactics from jihadists to right-wing extremists.[54] Contemporary extremist and far-right groups have evolved from local, or national, to global networks and cross-border brotherhoods, resembling those of Islamic extremists.[55] Right-wing extremists have also been found to learn from the Islamic State's bomb-making manuals, as well as their use of bomb-making videos in their own propaganda.[56] Possibly more surprisingly, a writer affiliated with a neo-Nazi group, the Atomwaffen Division (AWD), wrote that the culture of martyrdom in groups such as the Islamic State and the Taliban is to be admired, urging young men to give their lives for their cause.[57] The AWD has, as an exception among right-wing extremist groups, used UAVs in propaganda videos, displaying some level of professionalism in photography and video editing.[58] In addition, in September 2019 the US Department of Justice charged two US citizens, who identified as members of the Boogaloo Bois,[59] with attempting to provide weapons and suppressors to Hamas.[60] According to the press release, the two were members of the sub-group Boojahideen, a linguistic spin-off of the name Mujahideen.[61] These two examples of right-wing actors giving praise to, or collaborating with, militant Islamists might substantiate Assistant Attorney General John C Demers's comments which described the arrest of the Boogaloo Bois 'as a disturbing example of the old adage, "The enemy of your enemy is your friend"'.[62]

---

51. David C Rapoport, 'The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism', in Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M Ludes (eds), *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), pp. 46–73; Tom Parker and Nick Sitter, 'The Four Horsemen of Terrorism: It's Not Waves, It's Strains', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vol. 28, No. 2, March 2016), pp. 197–216.

52. James J F Forest (ed.), *Teaching Terror: Strategic and Tactical Learning in the Terrorist World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

53. Carolin Goerzig, 'Terrorist Learning in Context – The Case of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (Vol. 12, No. 4, October 2019), pp. 629–48.

54. Mia Bloom, 'Vehicle Ramming: The Evolution of a Terrorist Tactic Inside the US', *Just Security*, 16 July 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/71431/vehicle-ramming-the-evolution-of-a-terrorist-tactic-inside-the-us/>, accessed 24 August 2020.

55. Milo Comerford, 'How the Far Right is Adopting the ISIS Global Model', *CNN*, 16 March 2019; Bridget Johnson, 'White Supremacist Threat Has "Striking Resemblance" to Jihadism, Experts Tell Congress', *Homeland Security Today*, 17 September 2019, <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/white-supremacist-threat-has-striking-resemblance-to-jihadism-experts-tell-congress/>, accessed 11 August 2020.

56. Alice Scarsi, 'UK Terror Warning: Far-Right Extremists Using ISIS Bomb Manuals – "Significant Danger"', *Express*, 2 April 2019; Ben Makuch and Mack Lamoureux, 'Neo-Nazis Are Glorifying Osama Bin Laden', *VICE*, 17 September 2019.

57. Makuch and Lamoureux, 'Neo-Nazis Are Glorifying Osama Bin Laden'.

58. Counter Extremism Project, 'Extremist Content Online: ISIS Issues Threats In Spain, Iraq', 18 November 2019, <https://www.counterextremism.com/press/extremist-content-online-isis-issues-threats-spain-iraq>, accessed 28 August 2020.

59. The Boogaloo Bois is a loosely connected anti-government, pro-gun militia-type movement, also harbouring individuals with far-right ideologies. The movement received mass media attention after the 20 January 2020 pro-gun rally in Richmond, Virginia. For more on the Boogaloo Bois, see Robert Evans and Jason Wilson, 'The Boogaloo Movement Is Not What You Think', *Bellingcat*, 27 May 2020.

60. US Department of Justice, 'Two Self-Described "Boogaloo Bois" Charged with Attempting to Provide Material Support to Hamas', Justice News, 4 September 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-self-described-boogaloo-bois-charged-attempting-provide-material-support-hamas>, accessed 5 September 2020.

61. Angela Ramirez, 'American "Boojahideen": The Boogaloo Bois' Blueprint for Extreme Libertarianism and Response to the Biden Administration', *Terrorism Monitor* (Vol. 19, No. 1, 15 January 2021).

62. Phil Helsel, 'Two Men Allegedly Linked to "Boogaloo" Accused of Offering to Work with Hamas', *NBC News*, 5 September 2020.

## Recruiting Military or Law Enforcement Personnel

For extremist groups, former or active members of the armed forces or law enforcement are held in high regard as their training (close combat, tactical formations, use of surveillance techniques, handling explosives, counterintelligence) provides valuable knowledge and experience.[63] Additionally, right-wing former or active service members are more likely to obtain weapons than their jihadist counterparts with a US military background.[64] For these reasons and others, prior investigations have revealed that right-wing extremists have actively recruited individuals with military backgrounds.[65] The concern about right-wing extremism in the armed forces of Western countries has increased as a result of the following revelation: there is a worrying number of right-wing extremists in law enforcement[66] and in the armed forces of the US, Canada and Germany, among others.[67] Additionally, due to the growing number of right-wing extremists among its members, the KSK, a command unit of the German special forces, has been partially dissolved.[68] As a concerning number of present or former military service members have been found to be involved in right-wing extremist groups, or sympathising with such groups, why have we not seen an increase in the use of UAVs for planning, preparation or execution of terror attacks?

## Concluding Remarks

The searches conducted in open forums and channels, all displaying graphic extremist propaganda, did not return substantial evidence of discussions related to UAVs among right-wing extremists. This does not necessarily imply that there is no evidence of such discussions taking place, and could mean that right-wing extremists discuss weaponry and tactics, such as UAVs, offline or in closed or invite-only channels.

Extremists and terrorist organisations observe and learn from others' tactics, failures and successes. This might also be the case for right-wing extremists considering UAVs. In addition, as 3D printing becomes less expensive and knowledge might flow between organisations, the skills and parts necessary to modify a commercial-grade UAV into one with the capacity to place or drop explosives on to a target might become more available. The presented examples of group learning and inspiration suggest that the UAV tactics and strategies employed by, among others, the Islamic State and the Houthis might be under consideration by right-wing extremists. However, the groups that have acquired armed UAVs, particularly Hizbullah and the Houthis, stand out in terms of having a large regional state actor, Iran, supporting them.[69] Additionally, such attacks have been carried out almost exclusively in conflict zones.[70] In the cases

63. Daniel Koehler, 'A Threat from Within? Exploring the Link Between the Extreme Right and the Military', *ICCT Policy Brief* (September 2019); Christopher Jones, 'The American Military's Extremist Problem', *The Week*, 12 May 2019.
64. David Sterman, 'The Greater Danger: Military-Trained Right-Wing Extremists', *The Atlantic*, 24 April 2013.
65. Brian Montopoli, 'DHS Report Warns of Right Wing Extremists', *CBS News*, 14 April 2009; FBI Counterterrorism Division, 'White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement', 17 October 2006.
66. Michael German, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism, White Supremacy, and Far-Right Militancy in Law Enforcement', Brennan Center for Justice, 27 August 2020, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/hidden-plain-sight-racism-white-supremacy-and-far-right-militancy-law>, accessed 17 August 2020; FBI Counterterrorism Division, 'White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement'.
67. Theo Malhotra, 'Right-Wing Extremism in the Canadian Military', *McGill Journal of Political Studies*, 23 February 2020, <https://mjps.ssmu.ca/2020/02/23/right-wing-extremism-in-the-canadian-military/>, accessed 16 May 2020; Sterman, 'The Greater Danger'; Leo Shane III, 'Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism Up Again in Poll of Active-Duty Troops', *Military Times*, 6 February 2020; Meghann Myers, 'Far-Right Groups Like the "Boogaloo" and "O9A" Continue to Attract Troops and Veterans', *Military Times*, 23 June 2020.
68. *BBC News*, 'Germany's Far Right: Elite KSK Commando Force "to be Partially Disbanded"', 30 June 2020.
69. Conflict Armament Research, 'Iranian Technology Transfers to Yemen'; Milton Hoenig, 'Hezbollah and the Use of Drones as a Weapon of Terrorism', Federation Of American Scientists, 5 June 2014, <https://fas.org/pir-pubs/hezbollah-use-drones-weapon-terrorism/>, accessed 29 April 2020; Counter Extremism Project, 'Hezbollah', 2020, <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/hezbollah>, accessed 17 July 2020.
70. Haugstvedt and Jacobsen, 'Taking Fourth-Generation Warfare to the Skies?'.

of the Islamic State and Hamas, key personnel with aviation or engineering experience have provided each group with the competency and capacity to take its operations to the skies. As far as what is publicly known, right-wing extremist groups lack large entities, such as state actors, to support them in organisational and strategic development. This hurdle may be overcome by the unsettling support for such groups from former and current military and law enforcement personnel. This capacity may substitute for a state actor in terms of providing experience and know-how procured through active service, inside or outside conflict zones. As such, this tool might be closer to their grasp than what would be expected based on the evidence of their past plans or actions.

> Law enforcement and security agencies should pay considerable attention to known right-wing extremists who display an interest in modifying commercial-grade UAVs

While there are a vast number of groups and organisations that fit into the far- and extreme-right spectrum, attacks are still predominately being carried out by lone actors or more unorganised groups, targeting government officials or minorities.[71] This might explain why ground, rather than aerial, vehicles are their weapons of choice: they are commonly available; preparing to use them does not provoke suspicion; and they have the capacity to inflict massive damage on their victims. The use of cars, not UAVs, fits the pattern of right-wing violence in its present and historical forms by being a tool that a lone actor can use without advanced training or preparation, as opposed to the more sophisticated UAV. This is also in line with the history of terrorism in general, where easy-to-produce, cheap and portable weapons have been found to be the most attractive.[72]

By assessing their possible desire and capability, the findings in this article cast doubt on whether right-wing extremist groups are likely to use UAVs in their actions. However, if the migration of tools and tactics from militant Islamists to right-wing extremists persists, this might change. Large mobilisations of individuals and groups from across the US, as evidenced on 6 January, might indicate stronger organisational ties between US groups, and a better capability to pool knowledge and know-how.

However, using a UAV entails potential disadvantages if spotted or actively communicated to the public, as was observed in right-wing attacks in 2019. As UAVs in the hands of terrorists have been deemed a potential security threat,[73] an attack on government officials or opposing ideological groups outside conflict zones would likely set off pervasive government measures to identify and apprehend the responsible actors. UAVs, armed or unarmed, represent an increase in sophistication, and might therefore draw sufficient unwanted attention from law enforcement or security agencies to motivate right-wing extremists to keep their 'boots on the ground'. If, however, mass communication of extremist ideology and actions is the goal – as observed several times during 2019 – UAVs represent an alarmingly effective tool to both execute and communicate right-wing terrorism to a global audience.

## Recommendations

The likelihood of right-wing extremists using armed UAVs in attacks is considered low. However, this might change as transnationality, cross-group connections and the knowledge pool grow, and as potential influence might come from groups with experience or the capability to modify and use UAVs. Taking into account the political situation in the US, where turmoil among Donald Trump supporters

---

71. CTED, 'Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right Wing Terrorism'; Koehler, 'Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe: Current Developments and Issues for the Future'; Anders Ravik Jupskås and Carles Viñas, 'Far Right Violence in Spain Is More Organized and Against Political Opponents Than in the Rest of Western Europe', *RightNow!*, a blog of C-REX, 25 June 2020, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2020/far-right-violence-in-spain.html>, accessed 29 July 2020.

72. Rapoport, 'The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism'.

73. Nik Martin, 'Drones Could Be Used in Terror Attacks, EU Security Chief Fears', *DW*, 3 August 2019.

Håvard Haugstvedt

reached a critical point at the storming of Capitol Hill, law enforcement and security agencies should pay considerable attention to known right-wing extremists who display an interest in modifying commercial-grade UAVs. Scrutiny should be directed towards those with experience in using such technology and/or explosives from previous military or law enforcement careers, or those with known ties to violent non-state actors who have previously used armed UAVs in attacks. ■

**Håvard Haugstvedt** is a PhD Research Fellow at the Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger. He is an experienced social and prevention worker, now studying prevention work

targeting radicalisation and violent extremism, as well as how violent non-state actors have incorporated UAVs into their repertoire.

Research for this article did not seek to map out right-wing extremist online forums in particular, who their users are, how they interact or the frequency of interactions. Further, the author did not download user data or their activity, such as images, videos or memes, by themselves or in relation to specific users or channels. As such, no data on users – neither using their real names nor online identities – was stored or categorised. Therefore, this research has not been submitted for ethical evaluation to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.