Use of Memes by Violent Extremists

Violent extremists are supplementing their traditional messaging—which can rely heavily on lengthy, academic-style recitations and philosophical arguments—with memes that are faster and easier to consume. Such content allows quick sharing of vast amounts of information with like-minded end users and can normalize or lessen the gravity of violent extremist narratives. It is important for first responders to understand how violent extremist narratives are being spread using memes, while also respecting constitutionally protected rights and appreciating that the memes discussed in this paper (or others like them) may be shared by those who are not connected to violent extremism.

- In July 2021, ISIS supporters used an identified social media platform to spread viral memes promoting violence against the West.

- In June 2020, a Texas man was indicted after he threatened to ambush and kill a police officer in a livestream video. Before the incident, the man shared memes from social media pages linked to violent extremism. He was sentenced to 50 years in prison for attempted murder of a police officer.

The ambiguity of memes[a] can allow for some violent content or content shared by violent extremists to evade potential review and removal. This type of messaging can represent a less indirect introduction to violent extremist

SCOPE: This product provides awareness and examples of memes that violent extremists use to supplement their traditional messaging.

A **meme** is an idea, behavior, or style that spreads—often by means of imitation and from person to person—usually carrying symbolic meaning that represents a particular phenomenon or theme. The use of a meme or associated image does not necessarily signify a connection to violent extremism. The most common memes, known as image macros, are presented in a single image overlaid with text.

Note: This product contains US person information that has been deemed necessary for the intended recipient to understand, assess, or act on the information provided. It should be handled in accordance with the recipient's intelligence oversight and/or information-handling procedures. Many of the activities described herein may involve constitutionally protected activities and may be legal on their own but, when observed in conjunction with additional facts of violent extremism and/or other mobilization indicators, may provide warning of mobilization to violence. Action should not be taken solely based on the exercise of constitutionally protected rights.

[a]See Appendix for examples of memes that align with content from violent extremists.

ideology and is sometimes used as a recruiting tool to identify those who react positively as potential targets for recruitment.

- The contextual information that violent extremists use in memes changes regularly as users add their own interpretations and content. Combined with the fact that some memes advocating violence may at first appear innocuous, this can make it challenging for law enforcement and content moderators to decipher violent content, identify it for removal, and detect potential threats.

- Violent extremists' use of memes varies across social groups.

CREDIBLITY AND INFLUENCE: Violent extremists use memes to create collective identities and foster notions of in-groups and out-groups. Dehumanization allows for moral disengagement, which, in turn, can justify inhumane conduct toward those considered the "other." Violent extremists may use online communication channels—including Internet-based anonymous image boards, social media, and video games—to heighten the credibility and global reach of their violent messaging (images, memes, videos). They may also use memes to attract or facilitate the involvement of the digital-native generation (which is initially drawn to the visual culture), normalize tolerance of violent extremist ideals, and recruit followers.

INDICATORS: Possible observable indicators from the *US Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators (2021 Edition)[b]* booklet that may signify a person is radicalizing and mobilizing to violence—and may be contained in violent messaging, including memes—are:

- Disseminating one's own martyrdom or last will video or statement (for example, a preattack manifesto or final statement).

- Attempting to radicalize others—especially family members and peers—to violence.

- Praising or researching to emulate past successful or attempted attacks or attackers.

- Changing vocabulary, style of speech, or behavior to reflect a hardened point of view or new sense of purpose associated with violent extremist causes, particularly after a catalyzing event.

CONSIDERATIONS: Understanding violent extremists' use of memes for radicalization[c] to violence can be difficult because the exact meaning and purpose of memes are difficult to clearly distinguish what content is harmful or malicious. This may be more challenging with aesthetically pleasing imagery used to disguise or distract from their real messages. Collaboration with private-sector partners and community actors, including technology

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[b]Mobilization is the process by which radicalized individuals take action to prepare for or engage in violence or material support for violence to advance their cause.
[c]Radicalization occurs when an individual evolves from adherence to a nonviolent belief system to a belief system that includes the willingness to actively advocate, facilitate, or use unlawful violence as a method to effect societal or political change.

companies and community leaders, may improve methods to identify, interpret, and understand the various forms of violent extremist messaging memes and build community resilience to these messages. The following are some considerations to address such challenges:

- Work with private-sector partners to interpret digital and visual culture to better understand codes and nuances of meme subtext (the study of memes and their implicit or metaphorical meaning and use by violent extremists).

- Be familiar with tactics, techniques, and procedures in violent extremist messaging to identify suspicious behaviors (online postings from violent extremists threatening law enforcement and military).

- Combine computer-based methods with human analysis to help capture subtext behind violent extremist content.

- Establish policies and procedures with respect to how cyber platforms handle potential violent extremist messaging; this can include ensuring evidence is properly collected, documented, and maintained through a chain of custody.

- Gather possible evidence that can assist law enforcement in identifying persons who have radicalized or mobilized to violence, facilitate information sharing between public safety and private-sector entities, and be used in court as derogatory information.

- Practice cyber security precautions when vetting Internet data (for example, downloading content versus taking a screenshot) in case it contains malicious code.

- Report suspicious activity through established reporting mechanisms that can aid investigations in comprehensively assessing all available information. Sharing pre-incident terrorism indicators and other related criminal activity is key to preventing acts of terrorism while protecting privacy and civil rights and liberties.

- Understand the purpose of the identified meme and determine how to respond to the potential threat. This can be achieved by evaluating: what is being communicated (*Is the message a fictional, vague, or aspirational threat?*); who is communicating the message (*Has the meme been previously recycled, repurposed, linked from another author, or used elsewhere?*); and what are the potential effects (*What is the tactic, technique, procedure, and target [entity, facility, location, or person]?*).

RESOURCES

- **DHS**

  o **Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)** is responsible for protecting the Homeland's critical infrastructure from physical and cyber threats. It provides cyber security tools, incident-response services, and assessment capabilities to safeguard the networks that support federal civilian departments' and agencies' essential operations. https://www.dhs.gov/CISA

- - **CISA's National Risk Management Center** also maintains a resource library of tools and resources related to mis-, dis-, and malinformation. https://www.cisa.gov/mdm-resource-library

  - **State and Local Fusion Centers** are uniquely situated to empower frontline law enforcement, public safety, fire service, emergency response, public health, and private-sector security personnel to lawfully gather and share threat-related information. Fusion centers have specialized units that monitor social media and can receive suspicious activity reporting to further vet the information through the local Joint Terrorism Task Force for follow-up investigations. https://www.dhs.gov/fusion-center-locations-and-contact-information

- **DOMESTIC SECURITY ALLIANCE COUNCIL** is a strategic partnership between the US Government and US private industry that enhances communication and promotes the timely and effective exchange of security and intelligence information. https://www.dsac.gov/

- **FBI**

  - **Infraguard** is a partnership between the FBI and the private sector. It is an association of persons who represent businesses, academic institutions, law enforcement agencies, and other participants dedicated to sharing information and intelligence to prevent hostile acts against the United States. https://www.infragard.org/

  - **National Domestic Communications Assistance Center** was formed by FBI, with the primary purpose of developing technology to assist federal, state, and local law enforcement regarding communication services, technologies, and electronic surveillance. https://ndcac.fbi.gov/

  - **The National Virtual Translation Center (NVTC)** is an FBI-managed federal government center created to serve the US government's translation needs. The NVTC was established by Congress in 2003 to provide timely, accurate, and cost-effective translations in support of national interests. https://www.fbi.gov/about/leadership-and-structure/intelligence-branch/national-virtual-translation-center

- **US VIOLENT EXTREMIST MOBILIZATION INDICATORS (2021 Edition)** is an NCTC, DHS, and FBI triseal product that provides a list of observable behaviors that may help determine whether individuals are preparing to engage in violence. For inquiries or more information, contact mib@nctc.gov or visit https://go.usa.gov/xEKgd.

- **INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHIEFS OF POLICE TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA RESOURCES** https://www.theiacp.org/resources/technology-and-social-media

- **THE NATIONWIDE SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY REPORTING (SAR) INITIATIVE** is a joint collaborative effort by DHS, FBI, and state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement partners. This initiative helps prevent terrorism and related criminal activity by establishing

a national capacity for gathering, documenting, processing, analyzing, and sharing SAR information. Access SAR Training at: http://nsi.ncirc.gov/training_online.aspx.

- **REAL-TIME OPEN SOURCE ANALYSIS GUIDE**
  https://it.ojp.gov/GIST/1200/Real-Time-and-Open-Source-Analysis--ROSA--Resource-Guide

- **REGIONAL COMPUTER FORENSIC LAB** is a one-stop, full-service forensics laboratory and training center entirely devoted to the examination of digital evidence in support of criminal investigations, such as terrorism. https://www.rcfl.gov/

- **JCAT Website and Products:**

JCAT Website and Toolboxes

https://www.dni.gov/index.php/nctc-how-we-work/
joint-ct-assessment-team/first-responder-toolbox

APPENDIX

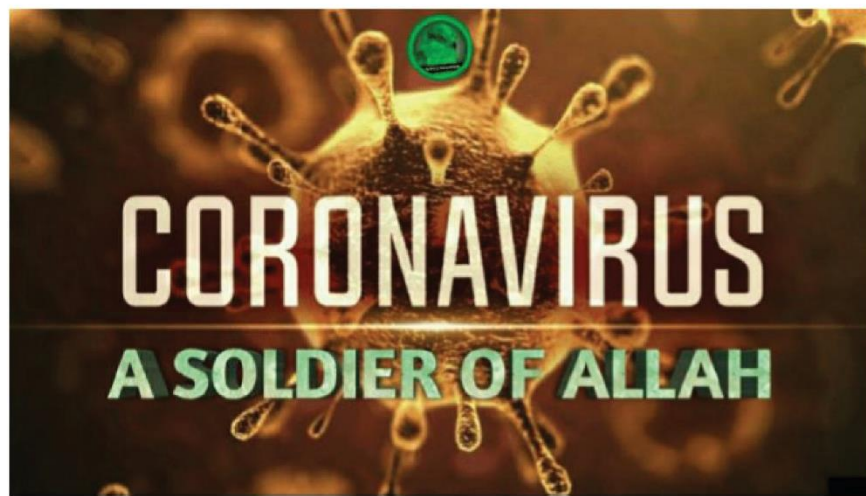| EXAMPLES OF MEMES USED BY VIOLENT EXTREMISTS	
Foreign terrorist organization–inspired	 Pro-ISIS supporters promoting violence against the White House Pro-ISIS supporters urging would-be attackers to use simple or easily accessible weapons to conduct attacks

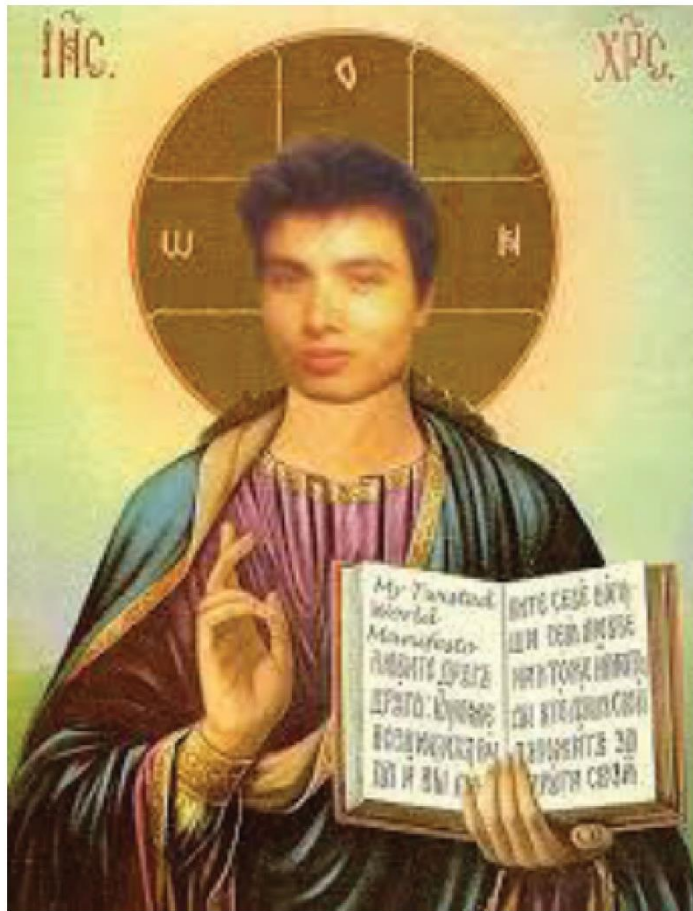| Foreign terrorist organization–inspired (continued)	 Pro-ISIS meme making fun of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's turn toward the West Pro-ISIS meme suggesting coronavirus is working with the group to kill enemies

| **Involuntary celibate (Incel)–associated**

Incel violent extremists (IVE) are those who seek to commit violence in support of their belief that society unjustly denies them the sexual or romantic attention to which they are entitled. | The "Saint Elliot" meme depicting now-deceased IVE Elliot Rodger[USPER] (an idealogue of the IVE community) as a saint. In May 2014, Rodger conducted an attack at a California university, killing six and injuring 14. |

White Boy Summer (WBS)

Some racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVE) use WBS memes to promote racism and misogynistic rhetoric and to incite violence. Some RMVEs have adopted WBS as a slogan and use it for their own purposes. WBS is referenced in the 136-page *Militant Accelerationism: A Collective Handbook*, published in June 2021, which is popular with RMVEs.

Hitler approved WBS.

Anti-Semitic uses of WBS, such as this one, include references to Nazi war atrocities as the "original WBS" and suggest that Adolf Hitler was the embodiment of WBS.

Told my barber I needed the Ted Kaczynski haircut, he came through just in time for White Boy Summer™

WBS meme referencing "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski[USPER] (a popular figure among RMVEs)

RMVE references to previous attackers	
	This meme told would-be attackers that if this person could conduct an attack, so could they. The image portrays a masked individual walking away from a parked Ryder[USPER] van—the same rental company Timothy McVeigh[USPER] (now-deceased) used to conduct the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, bombing in 1995—with the words "America is dead! Long live America!"
	Example of a meme that has circulated on RMVE and militia violent extremist sites—seeking retribution for US Government siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in April 1993

PRODUCT FEEDBACK FORM

(U) JCAT MISSION: To improve information sharing and enhance public safety. In coordination with the FBI and DHS, collaborate with other members of the IC to research, produce, and disseminate counterterrorism (CT) intelligence products for federal, state, local, tribal and territorial government agencies and the private sector. Advocate for the CT intelligence requirements and needs of these partners throughout the IC.

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ADDITIONAL COMMENTS, SUGGESTIONS, OR QUESTIONS.

WHAT TOPICS DO YOU RECOMMEND?