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BLACK HEBREW ISRAELITES: FROM SOFT VIOLENCE TO KINETIC ACTION

Briefing Note

December 18, 2019

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PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this briefing note is to examine the escalation to violence of Violent Transnational Social Movements (VTSMs), specifically the Black Hebrew Israelites (BHI). The BHI is a more than 100-year-old group that has arguably been in the political background for the past two decades and appears to have escalated from using soft violence tactics to kinetic violence after the Jersey City Deli Shooting. This briefing note primarily focuses on the BHI and their role as a VTSM that uses soft violence and symbolic power as means to deliver their message. For further information on VTSMs, please visit the Canadian Centre for Identity-Based Conflict.

SECURITY PROBLEM

The BHI movement, despite being over 100 years old, has infrequently been publicly studied or reported on for the past 20 years. However, they have now moved into the forefront of the conversation on VTSM. This is because the BHI arguably uses soft violence and symbolic power to spread their messages. On January 18th, 2019, tensions were inflamed between three groups with distinct identities. The BHI appeared to have used racial slurs based on identity and social hierarchy against the Covington Catholic School boys that were wearing "Make America Great Again" hats (Chappell, 2019). On December 10th, 2019, a shooting in Jersey City, resulting in 4 deaths, was allegedly linked to the BHI through investigation. The BHI's escalation to kinetic violence reaffirms that the contemporary focus on Islamic Extremism appears to create cognitive bias which results in limited analysis of Right-Wing Extremist actors and other VTSMs' potential for kinetic violence.

KEY FACTS

On December 10th, 2019, three civilians and a police officer were killed by two suspects (possibly a third suspect which has yet to be confirmed at the time of this note) allegedly linked to the BHI in a mass shooting in Jersey City that erupted as police were investigating a rental van that was believed to be linked to a murder. After shooting a detective, the three suspects escaped in a rental van before deliberately barricading themselves in the JC Kosher Supermarket. Subsequently, three civilians - two of which were members of the Hasidic community - and the two suspects were found dead inside. Following the shootout, a pipe bomb and manifesto were found within the rental van. According to the New York Times, one of the suspects appears to have published anti-Semitic and anti-police posts online (Gold & Watkins, 2019).

According to the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry (CARM.org), the broader Black Jewish Identity movement consisting of BHI have the following traits (i.e. polycentric, reticulate and segmentary) which are consistent with the VTSM model (Kellshal, 2018; Turner and Slick, 2019). According to CARM, the BHI currently do not appear to have a primary leader or a central headquarters. The estimated number of members range between 40,000 to 200,000, and when broken down, appear to be from diverse backgrounds and utilize various sect names which function in fragmentary ways (e.g. Commandment Keepers, The Law Keepers, House of Judah, and African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem). The BHI movement, which appears to have no official writings, are arguably guided by various religious writings

when deemed appropriate for their doctrine; these religious writings include the following: King James' version of the Bible, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Book of Enoch & Book of Jasher, with some BHI using the Talmud. The BHI seem to claim Hispanics, Native Americans, and Negros as the real Israelites. The BHI posit that white people are seen as conspirators who attempt to persecute the black people and hide their true identity as Israelites. Many BHI members see white people as almost subhuman, consequently, dividing groups and leaving the potential to clash with other groups who may believe that their race is superior to others.

The last known publicly accessible report on the BHI was in 1999, which was authored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under Director Louis Freeh (FBI, 1999). The BHI have no known extremist affiliations, but they have allegedly participated in violent acts in the 1990s (FBI, 1999, p. 43). They were also the subjects of allegations of racial supremacy by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) (SPLC, 2008).

The BHI Facebook page, *The Black Hebrew Israelites United*, has garnered around 39,971 likes and has received a lot of attention for allegedly espousing racist commentary and posts. Many people are shaming the page administrators for going after children and promoting racism. Since the incident with the Covington Catholic School boys in January 2019, the BHI Facebook page has increased by 6000 likes as of December 11th 2019. Before January 18th 2019, the date of the incident, every one of the 14 viewable reviews had been positive. Since then, reviews of the Facebook page have been negative. As of December 11th 2019, the overall recommendation of the BHI Facebook page is 1.7 out of 5, based on the ratings of 313 users.

In an apparent standoff between the Covington Catholic School boys and Nathan Phillips - a Vietnam War veteran and Indigenous American activist - Nick Sandmann, one of the Covington Catholic School students, was seen smirking at Phillips. Phillips was singing a traditional Indigenous American song and beating a ceremonial drum (Chappell, 2019). In the background, numerous predominantly white teenage males are seen yelling at Phillips (Mervosh & Rueb, 2019; O'Connor, 2019).

BACKGROUND

The BHI were established between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries, claiming to be descendants of Hebrews in the Bible (Kestenbaum, 2019). The BHI spread their message by preaching at street corners. Their message is simple, the BHI allege that there are 12 chosen tribes among God's people and they are all black (Eligon, 2019). In 1999, the FBI authored a report called Project MEGIDDO, which gauged the likelihood of religious movements, who had significant attachments to the year 2000, committing violence against the general population (FBI, 1999). In the report, the FBI mentioned that "certain segments of the BHI movement were preparing for a race war to close the millennium" (FBI, 1999, p. 43). In 2008, the BHI were declared black supremacists by the SPLC (SPLC, 2018). In their Winter 2008 issue, the SPLC noted that the BHI movement had extremist offshoots who were prone to violence and professed racial idealism. The SPLC indicated that there is a "rising extremist sector within the Hebrew Israelite movement whose adherents believe that Jews are devilish impostors" (SPLC, 2008).

In January 2019, BHI activists gathered on the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. They allegedly shouted racist slurs to Indigenous American protesters at the Indigenous Peoples March and students from a Catholic Boys School in Covington, Kentucky, participating in the March for Life (Mervosh & Rueb, 2019; O'Connor, 2019). In response, the boys were seen chanting school songs and dancing (Bekiempis, 2019). A Vietnam War veteran and Indigenous activist, Nathan Phillips, allegedly attempted to diffuse the standoff between the Covington Catholic School boys and the BHI activists (Bekiempis, 2019; Mervosh & Rueb, 2019; O'Connor, 2019). Several elders, with Phillips among them, sang songs while beating

ceremonial drums in a circle of Covington students, who appeared to be shouting at the Native American elders. It is unclear what the boys were shouting, but some allegedly chanted "build the wall," alluding to American President Donald Trump's campaign promise to build a wall along the Mexican border. A number of students in the video could be seen wearing "Make America Great Again" hats (Chappell, 2019). This incident, combined with the New Jersey shootings, conceivably shows an escalation to violence. It appears that a small percentage of the BHI commit violent acts, while the larger group may not advocate for violence (Southern Poverty Law Centre, 2008).

KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The BHI can arguably be defined as a VTSM because their movement is polycentric, reticulate, and segmentary. Their use of soft violence - yelling racist slurs at opposition groups - is indicative of a perceived symbolic power and fragmentation of societal fabric. This means that the BHI see themselves as racially dominant over other groups. The 2019 Jersey City shooting appears to be the first incident of kinetic violence perpetrated by the BHI.

The implications of this event are a coherent snapshot of how VTSMs act when escalating from soft to kinetic violence. The current social environment has become more fragmented, which may lead to more groups escalating to violence. The reticulate nature of the BHI is similar to other groups seen in North America, therefore other groups can look to the BHI as an example of escalation from soft to kinetic violence. VTSM actors generally have a wide geographic range for their activities, specifically there has been evidence of the BHI being active in the United States and Canada.

Looking at the events that unfolded at the Lincoln Memorial on January 18th 2019, it is clear that tensions between three groups with very different political agendas were inflamed by competing conceptions of what it means to be American (NY Times, 2019). There was no violence, but the implication of three groups in conflict and the national conversation spurred in reaction to their behaviour suggests the presence of group v.s. group conflict outlined in the definition of Fifth Generation Warfare (Kelshall, 2018). Furthermore, the Jersey shootings illustrate how the shooters may have acted on their own, fulfilling the specific issue of eliminating white jews which conforms to BHI's belief that 'Blacks are the only true Jews'.

The BHI's actions appear to be consistent with the Brixton UK's BHI rhetoric expressed during an interview; the leader of the group, Ashan Ban-Yahawadah, is noted as saying that "we want the police to get involved because we're the real policemen. We're the real law-givers. We're reading out of the book of the law" (Weich, 2019, para. 11). This could suggest that the BHI is functioning as a transnational social movement, sharing a common message, no specific leadership, and morphing into different groups when they are scrutinized.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES TO BE CONSIDERED

- Could this have been a drug deal gone bad? This perspective is supported by the seemingly random encounter of a police officer on patrol finding people parked and requiring a curb side inspection.

- Is this a suicide by cop scenario? Although the suspects did barricade themselves in the supermarket, in the moment of the assessment, the suspects could have made the decision to "go down with a fight" and not be taken alive.

- Is there a serial killer? During the summer of 2019, a taxi driver had been murdered in New York City with similar wound patterns. It is possible that two taxi (livery drivers) murders were the start of, or continuation of a serial killing spree targeting taxi operators who are from the middle east.

- Could the Jersey City shooting be a test run for a future terrorist attack? The New York City World Trade Centre attack (1993) and Oklahoma City bombing at Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building (1995) had similar rental vehicles carrying explosives.

- Are the perpetrators of the violence affiliated with another group that we are unaware of thus far? This could have been an organized crime or gang-related incident that quickly escalated.

WHAT IS NOT KNOWN

It is not known whether the 1999 FBI report and its findings are relevant in 2019. Despite the BHI being a 100-year-old organization, not much is publicly known about them. Therefore, it is unknowable whether the BHI will act on their rhetoric/doomsday messages. Furthermore, despite a publicly available report on the extremist tendencies of the BHI, there appears to be no follow-up reports or actions against the BHI. It is also unclear as to whether the BHI have a larger following that is motivated to respond to accusations of racial supremacy or identity-based violence. A question of interest is whether the 'extremist fringe' sects of the BHI have a strong following overseas. There appear to be cohorts of BHI in Israel and in the US, but their affiliations and levels of cooperation are so far undiagnosed.

NEXT STEPS

- The BHI movement appears to have little publicly accessible information from law enforcement agencies and are not obviously the subject of extensive research, therefore, law enforcement's top priority should be to generate a report on their behaviours and motivations.

- The BHI seem to have been largely ignored as a fringe religious group. However, as indicated by the SPLC and the FBI, the movement has had extremist elements in the past; such elements should therefore be monitored for possible extremist or violent activities.

- With the escalation to kinetic violence seen in the 2019 Jersey City shooting, an environmental scan should be conducted to determine the potential for violence from other VTSMs in retaliation. Although hate crime in the United States must be proven to have prejudice before being classified as a crime, incidents with unknown perpetrators - including online incidents - should arguably be documented in a national centre to geographically mark soft and kinetic violence.

Addendum

On December 16th, 2019, a woman wearing a hijab verbally assaulted a man wearing a kippah (or yarmulke) and physically attacked a female named Lihi Aharon at a New York City subway station in Manhattan. According to Aharon, who identifies herself as Jewish and Israeli, the female attacker told the man that last week's shooting attack at Jersey City's JC Kosher Supermarket was "great" (Rudy Rochman, 2019, 3:45). She then added that the shooters should have killed more Jews, according to Aharon's account of the man's comments (Rudy Rochman, 2019, 3:56). This event could be a symptom of the proliferation of the BHI movement's doctrinal messaging. Their allegedly anti-semetic rhetoric has arguably activated an echo-chamber which further demonstrates the reticulate nature of the movement, consistent with the VTSM model (Kellshal, 2018).

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