



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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## Hearing Statement of Intelligence & Counterterrorism Subcommittee Chairwoman Elissa Slotkin (D-MI)

*State and Local Responses to Domestic Terrorism: The Attack on the U.S. Capitol and Beyond*

March 24, 2021

It's an honor to be opening my first public hearing as Chair of the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism. Our Subcommittee is meeting today to examine state and local responses to the growing threat of domestic terrorism and violent extremism.

Before we begin, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the horrific violence we've seen in Atlanta and Boulder over the past week. I know we're all grieving for the 18 Americans going about their daily lives, at a spa or the supermarket, who have been senselessly torn from their families. Now, this Subcommittee is charged with combatting domestic terrorism and violent extremism — united by the conviction that we simply cannot allow violence to be normalized as a part of our politics. But we have to acknowledge that we've allowed these monstrous acts of mass violence to become normalized as a part of our society.

While the investigations of these heinous attacks are ongoing, we cannot ignore the anguish that our Asian-American communities are feeling right now. Nor can we deny the Intelligence Community's warning, just last week, that lone wolf actors — driven by hate for swathes of our fellow citizens — pose a growing threat of “mass casualty attacks,” like the ones we've just seen, against innocent Americans here at home. There is nothing political about protecting Americans from violence in our communities — and I am determined to work together with each and every member of this Subcommittee, regardless of party, to do just that.

For the better part of the last two decades, since that fateful morning on September 11, 2001, our country's framing of our national security interests have revolved largely around the threats posed by terrorist organizations halfway around the world -- in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Northern Africa. But for those of us with a background in national security, like myself and others on this panel, we've seen a troubling trend in recent years.

Here at home, extremist rhetoric online, rising political tensions and the proliferation of disinformation have brought us to a boiling point. We've seen flashes of it over the last few years -- moments that have given us a window into the threat posed by violent domestic groups -- in Charlottesville (2017); in Lansing (2020); and tragically, on January 6, in the nation's capital.

The attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, and the warnings we have received from law enforcement and intelligence leaders in the months leading up to and in the weeks since, have made clear that while external threats remain, the single greatest threat to our country right now is domestic terrorism. Taking on this threat is our top priority: that is why our first hearing as a full committee (less than a month after the insurrection) focused on domestic terrorism, and why today's hearing — the first subcommittee hearing for the Homeland Security Committee this Congress — will continue that critical discussion.

I want to take a moment to make sure we're all on the same page, in terms of the scope and scale of these threats, and the words we use to describe them. First, the threat we face. A week ago today, Secretary of Homeland Security Ali Mayorkas testified to me and our full Committee that "domestic violent extremism" represents the "greatest threat in the homeland right now." This threat is not going away: A few weeks ago, FBI Director Wray testified that domestic terrorism investigations have grown from around 1,000 in September, to about 1,400 at the end of 2020, to around 2,000 after the attack on the U.S. Capitol this past January.

Last week, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) in collaboration with the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security released an assessment warning that domestic violent extremists (DVEs) pose an elevated risk to the homeland this year. The assessment cautions that extremists will continue to be radicalized and will mobilize around narratives of election fraud, pandemic restrictions, conspiracy theories, and the January 6th attack on the Capitol. That assessment also lays out the terminology that our intelligence and law enforcement communities use to describe these threats.

The Intelligence Community's foremost concern is racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) and militia violent extremists (MVEs), as our intelligence agencies have assessed that these groups present the most lethal domestic threat. Racially motivated extremists are the most likely to conduct mass-casualty attacks against civilians. And militias are likely to target law enforcement and government personnel and facilities. The agencies' assessment notes that the threat is compounded by tech platforms that make the radicalization, recruitment and mobilization of extremists easier.

As we sit here today, we are facing a new reality: the post 9/11 era of security has come to an end. The new reality we have to come to terms with is that it's extremists here at home seeking to exploit internal divisions within our own country that pose the greatest threat. While the insurrection and attack against our nation's Capitol on January 6th has brought the threat of domestic terrorism and domestic violent extremism to the forefront, these threats are ones we have been dealing with for a long time in our states and local communities — which is why we are focusing today on the challenges they face. This issue isn't theoretical for me — it's deeply personal.

In my own district last year, federal and state authorities managed to disrupt a plot by at least 14 men to kidnap our Governor, Gretchen Whitmer. The group spied on Gov. Whitmer's vacation home, conducted firearms and combat training, and practiced building explosives. They planned to detonate a bomb under a highway bridge to distract local authorities as they kidnapped the governor, and relocate her to Wisconsin to conduct a "trial." These plotters weren't affiliated with al Qaeda or ISIS; they didn't hail from a war-torn region halfway around the world -- they were Americans. They were white. And they were radicalized right here at home. These men were affiliated with a group who call themselves the Wolverine Watchmen, a violent extremist group threatening the start of a civil war.

Even just on Monday of this week, a 22-year old man from my district affiliated with this group was charged with two felony counts related to modifying a semiautomatic weapon. This is exactly what the FBI and DHS have been sounding the alarm over. In this moment, groups like this are what pose the greatest threat to our safety and way of life. I am grateful for the work of law enforcement at both the state and federal level that disrupted this horrifying plot. Three of six of those indicted on federal charges were my constituents, and one of the key raids occurred just 10 minutes from my home.

Michigan Attorney General Nessel, a dedicated public servant who is here before us today, has led the majority of the charges against these defendants. AG Nessel has charged eight of the extremists with "providing material support for terrorist acts," and two of the eight were additionally charged by her

office with the “threat of terrorism.” Now, AG Nessel’s work lays out some of the distinctions between the authorities that state/local and federal law enforcement can bring to bear. The specific terrorism charges she was able to bring were only possible because Michigan has a state-level domestic terrorism statute, and the Michigan Constitution forbids private military units from operating outside state authority.

As we all know here, although domestic terrorism is defined in Federal law, there is no specific Federal domestic terrorism charge. And while some of these investigations may result in serious charges, such as hate crimes and gun charges—and in the case of January 6, we’ve seen perpetrators be charged with conspiracy and now possibly sedition—many of these domestic terrorism-related investigations will not progress as terrorism-related charges.

The federal government has vast resources but they are not unlimited. States have tried to devise their own systems for countering domestic terrorism and hate-fueled violence. But those approaches differ, and in states like Michigan and Texas, for example, those differences can be significant. Today’s hearing will allow us to hear from law enforcement leaders in three states about how they are working to counter the threat and prevent future attacks from occurring, and the legal tools they have at their disposal to prosecute individuals engaged in acts of domestic terrorism.

Today, the Subcommittee will also examine how states coordinate with the federal government to combat the threat and how the federal government can better complement state and local communities’ efforts. Our state and local law enforcement -- our Attorneys General -- are on the front lines of the fight against domestic terrorism and violent extremism as it threatens our communities. As federal lawmakers, we have a responsibility to make sure they have the resources and support they need to tackle this threat -- whether in the form of intelligence sharing or through material support.

On January 6, we saw firsthand the consequences of failing to meet this challenge. As many of you know, I served three tours in Iraq alongside our military during my time as a CIA analyst. Never in my life did I think that the training I went through in war zones would be necessary here at home, let alone in the U.S. Capitol where I come to work every day. But at the beginning of this year, I felt like I had been transported back to that place. No American should feel threatened in that way on U.S. soil ever again, and I know all of us here are committed to making sure the events that took place on that day never repeat themselves.

I look forward to introducing legislation soon to ensure that DHS has the tools it needs from an intelligence analysis perspective to better understand the threats. And I hope that this is an area where my Republican colleagues can work with me to improve the Department’s capabilities. I also want to thank the Attorneys General from the District of Columbia and Oregon, the Manhattan District Attorney, and the National District Attorneys Association for their work on this topic and the statements they submitted for the record.

I am eager to hear from our witnesses today about where improvements can be made to guarantee the safety of every American, and I’m eager to work with all of you on this Subcommittee, on a bipartisan basis, to achieve that important goal.

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