



**Opening Statement for the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism
House Homeland Security Committee**

Coronavirus and Homeland Security Part 9:
A Conversation on Extremism During the Pandemic

By Mr. Ali H. Soufan, Founder of The Soufan Center

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About The Soufan Center

The Soufan Center (TSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. TSC fills a niche-role by producing independent, quality research and hosting proactive conversations in order to effectively equip thought leaders, policy makers, governments, bi- and multilateral institutions, media, and those in the non-profit and academic communities to engage in strategic security-related practices. Our work focuses on a broad range of complex security issues— from international and domestic terrorism, to humanitarian crisis analysis, to refugee and immigrant issues, and more.

The Soufan Center is a 501c3 non-profit organization.

About Ali Soufan

Ali Soufan is the Founder of The Soufan Center. Mr. Soufan is a former FBI Supervisory Special Agent who investigated and supervised highly sensitive and complex international terrorism cases, including the East Africa Embassy Bombings, the attack on the USS Cole, and the events surrounding 9/11. He is the Chief Executive Officer of The Soufan Group and Founder of The Soufan Center.



The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Global Terrorism Landscape

Opening Statement of Mr. Ali Soufan,
Founder of The Soufan Center

Before the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism
House Committee on Homeland Security
United States House of Representatives

Wednesday, May 20, 2020

Thank you, Chairman Rose. Representative Cleaver, Mr. Greenblatt: It is an honor to be joining you today to discuss this topic of outmost concern.

When I last joined you, Chairman Rose, for a congressional event in September of last year, my testimony expressed worries about the rising threat of this form of violent extremism, the transnational nature of this threat, and its uncanny resemblances to the Salafi-jihadist movement in the years leading up to the 9/11 attacks. We spoke about options to counter this threat including to designate white supremacist organizations abroad as foreign terrorist organization. In this way our law enforcement and intelligence agencies can use the same tools as we use against organizations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your leadership and efforts to push for designating these groups. The State Department's designation of the Russian Imperial Movement is a great first step in protecting the homeland from this rising threat. Following the designation immediate action was taken by social media companies that hampered the group's ability to spread its hateful rhetoric and recruit online.

However, we do not have time to pause and celebrate this victory. We still a long way a head of us- and unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has not aided us in the fight against terrorism both here and abroad.

This deadly global pandemic, combined with evident government failure to respond to it, diminishing faith in democratic institutions and international organizations, declining trust in our government and in each other, and a looming economic uncertainty, state and non-state actors will continue to argue that liberal democracy is no longer good nor stable enough to underpin the world order. This argument will affect our ability to address major global challenges, including terrorism.



In my years of tracking terrorist organizations, I draw two main conclusions about how the global terrorism landscape have changed in light of the pandemic and the threat it poses to the U.S. homeland.

First, Salafi-jihadist groups are seizing the opportunity to gain local legitimacy in their areas of operations. They ramp up terrorist activities as we have seen the Islamic State do in Iraq and Syria. The uptick in ISIS's activities pre-date COVID-19. However, let me be clear, the virus will make it harder to fight ISIS. Already, U.S. direct interaction with Iraqi security forces has slackened because of COVID.

Second, and my primary concern, the pandemic has created a disinformation-terrorism nexus with its focal point centering upon the white supremacist threat. State and non-state actors alike are spreading disinformation campaigns like wildfire surrounding the virus and extremists are quick to make use of conspiracies and polarizing narratives to radicalize, recruit, and call for acts of violence—posing a direct threat to the safety of the American people.

Specifically, white supremacists blame Jews, immigrants, foreigners, and other minorities, like Asian-Americans, for the pandemic. Anti-government extremists use the stay-at-home order and other policies perceived as infringing on individual freedoms as an excuse to stockpile weapons. Anti-5G conspiracist have encouraged and carried out attacks on critical infrastructure, like cell towers, in the UK, Europe, and Canada. Sadly, we have also seen white supremacists plan attacks against hospitals and assisted living facilities. Here I want to praise the FBI and other law enforcement agencies for stopping the dangerous plots targeting a hospital in Missouri and a Jewish assisted-living facility in Boston.

With most of the world at home and online due to the pandemic, extremists have unique opportunities to disseminate their messages, radicalize, and recruit—including targeting our children. This past April, in Estonia, a 13 year-old boy who was a member of the Feuerkrieg Division was using various gaming platforms to communicate with a white supremacist in Las Vegas who recently plead guilty for planning an attack against a Jewish synagogue.

Finally, I want to commend the FBI, DHS, and the State Department for taking the threat of white supremacy more seriously over the past year and for taking actions—from arrests; to thwarting attacks; to designating the Russian Imperial Movement—that illuminate the dark nature of the white supremacist threat.

In this fight, sunlight is truly the best disinfectant. Looking back at where we were only a year ago, we have made a clear headway in combatting the threat of white supremacy extremism. And we must continue to expose this menace, which stretches from Main Street USA to Donbass Ukraine.

Thank you again for inviting me to participate. I very much look forward to our discussion and, above else, I hope that we can put our heads together to find effective solutions on how to address this evolving threat to protect the U.S. Homeland.