



Contemporary Violent Extremism and the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement

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About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and nonviolent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or The George Washington University. This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-01.

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Executive Summary

This report evaluates violent extremism inspired by or connected to the Black Hebrew Israelite (BHI) movement. Black Hebrew Israelites ascribe to the idea that modern-day African Americans are the descendants of the Israelites in the Old Testament of the Bible. However, an extremist fringe within the movement takes this idea one step further, arguing that white Europeans are the descendants of Satan and that white Jews are impostors. Situating the role of extremist interpretations of BHI ideology within domestic violent extremist incidents during the past several years, this report finds:

- Like other domestic violent extremist movements in the contemporary American landscape, Black Hebrew Israelite violent extremism has undergone a transformation over the past twenty years. The predominant threat today is from individuals loosely affiliated with or inspired by the movement rather than by groups, organizations, or institutions.
- Today's violent extremists with a nexus to Black Hebrew Israelite extremism are usually not formal participants in any Black Hebrew Israelite organization, church, or group. They usually interpolate aspects of Black Hebrew Israelite ideology—particularly the idea that white Jews are impostors—into a personally-curated mix of viewpoints and ideologies that inspire violence.
- Despite ongoing controversy about how to classify domestic violent extremists who are motivated by racial ideologies but are not white supremacists, the “racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism” (RMVE) category used by federal law enforcement in the U.S. remains an apt descriptor for Black Hebrew Israelite violent extremists.
- Using the RMVE label for Black Hebrew Israelites yields important comparisons between this movement and other RMVE actors, particularly white supremacist violent extremists. Notably, Black Hebrew Israelite violent extremists and their white supremacist counterparts often share similar ideologies and core conspiracy theories, are examples of the role of religious ideas in domestic violent extremist movements, and often choose similar targets for attacks due to their mutual anti-Semitism.

Introduction

Over the past several years, the threat of domestic violent extremism (DVE) to the United States has undergone a simultaneous uptick and broadening in scope to include an immeasurably wide variety of actors with different motivations, ideologies, and grievances.¹ Within this litany of increasingly lethal DVE movements are extremists associated with and/or inspired by the Black Hebrew Israelite movement, who in the past five years were responsible for significant terrorist incidents in Jersey City, New Jersey, Monsey, New York, and elsewhere.² This movement, its role in domestic terrorism, and its linkages to other elements of today's American DVE ecosystem are regrettably understudied. This report traces the historical and ideological evolution of the BHI movement and its extremist fringe, evaluates violent extremist incidents with a nexus to BHI ideology during the past half-decade, and from these assessments, highlights how BHI violent extremism can be analyzed and classified as a part of the contemporary American DVE scene.

¹ "Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021." 2021. Office of the Director of National Intelligence. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/UnclassSummaryofDVEAssessment-17MAR21.pdf>.

² "Extremist Sects Within the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement." 2020. Anti-Defamation League. August 7, 2020. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/extremist-sects-within-black-hebrew-israelite-movement>.

Extremism and the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement: Origins and History

The Black Hebrew Israelite movement encompasses a range of religious sub-groups that subscribe to the belief that African Americans are the descendants of Biblical Israelites.³ The core ideologies that form the movement are mostly a product of the Antebellum South, as some enslaved Africans developed a symbolic identification with the plight of the Israelites in the Old Testament (and particularly in the Book of Exodus).⁴ However, the institutional roots of the movement trace back to individual preachers in the late 20th century who claimed to have received revelations that African Americans “were descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel.”⁵ After the establishment of the first BHI houses of worship in the late 1890s, hundreds of religious institutions espousing the belief of Black descent from the Israelites of the Old Testament were created throughout the 20th century.⁶ By the 1980s, some estimates claimed that there were up to 40,000 Black Hebrew Israelites in the U.S., with several thousand more in Israel.⁷

The BHI movement is not a monolith. Beyond its central tenets described above, the various historical and current offshoots of the movement have been influenced by a variety of other strains of religious, social, and political thought that result in a variety of disparate groups that, while they can all be placed under the aegis of the BHI movement, are dissimilar in their beliefs and activities. The main dividing line in the movement is between BHI groups that identify as Christian (including the earliest institutions associated with the movement, such as the Church of the Living God, the Pillar Ground of Truth for All Nations and the Church of God and Saints of Christ) and those that identify more closely with Judaism, adopting traditional Jewish practices such as celebrating Jewish holidays, observing Jewish dietary and ritual laws, and using the Hebrew language in liturgy.⁸

The diversity of ideological influences weighing on the BHI movement also characterizes the range of sociopolitical engagement methods in use by the movement’s followers. This is particularly true with the movement’s extremist fringe, which expands the idea of Black descent from the Biblical Israelites to argue, *inter alia*, that white people are the offspring of Satan and that today’s white Jews are usurpers or impostors.⁹ Arguably, the decisive line separating the vast majority of BHI adherents, who do not subscribe to these claims, and BHI extremists, are their views on Jews who are not in the BHI movement. Most BHIs view white Jews as legitimately Jewish; the BHI fringe believes that they are “Edomites” (the descendants of the Biblical figure Esau, thus placing them outside of the fold of the

³ Key, Andre E. 2014. “Toward a Typology of Black Hebrew Religious Thought and Practice.” *Journal of Africana Religions* 2 (1): 31–66. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jafireli.2.1.0031>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bleich, J. David. 1975. “Black Jews: A Halakhic Perspective.” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 15 (1/2): 48–79.

⁶ Sundquist, Eric J. 2005. *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Key, “Toward a Typology of Black Hebrew Religious Thought.”

⁹ ADL, “Extremist Sects Within the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement.”

Biblical Israelites, who are the descendants of Esau's brother Jacob) and/or "the synagogue of Satan" (referencing Revelation 3:9)¹⁰

Sadly, the most publicly visible aspects of the BHI movement today are arguably representative of this fringe. Residents of major American cities, particularly on the East Coast, are perhaps most familiar with extremist BHI groups due to their employment of caustic street preaching, in which groups of members of BHI extremist factions like the One West Camp, the Israelite School of Universal Practical Knowledge, and others verbally accost passers-by around busy intersections and major public transportation hubs in New York City, Washington, DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other cities.¹¹

BHI extremist public demonstrations, referred to by adherents as "camps," are highly confrontational, frequently imbued with the extremist BHI fringe's most vitriolic beliefs (including anti-Semitism, Holocaust denialism, misogynist and homophobic beliefs, and calls for white people to be sold into slavery), and in the 21st century, are increasingly broadcast online.¹² While they are corrosive, they rarely spill over into violence. That notwithstanding, the rhetoric and viewpoints expressed during these rallies, alongside the involvement of specific BHI groups in the criminal underworld, have led to several notable instances of BHI adherents planning and executing violent attacks.¹³ Because of this, federal law enforcement has constantly assessed that "extreme elements of the BHI movement are prone to engage in violent activity."¹⁴

The involvement of BHI groups in violent extremism and other criminal activities became relatively prominent during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1974, Alberta Williams King—the mother of Martin Luther King, Jr.—was assassinated by Marcus Wayne Chenault, a member of a BHI group in Ohio.¹⁵ Chenault, who claimed to have been inspired by BHI ideology to kill prominent Black Christian ministers, also planned to assassinate several other civil rights figures including the Reverend Jesse Jackson.¹⁶ In the early 1980s, the FBI conducted a nationwide probe of another BHI sub-group, the Chicago-based African Hebrew Israelites, after they engaged in a large-scale travel fraud scheme to help their members travel between the U.S. and the group's settlements in the African country of Liberia and Dimona, Israel.¹⁷ 35 BHI adherents, including the African Hebrew Israelites' highest-ranking leader, were arrested in 1985 and charged with conspiracy, wire fraud, and interstate theft and transfer of stolen property.¹⁸

¹⁰ Another interpretation claims that European or Ashkenazi Jews are the descendants of the Khazars, a medieval Turkic group who reportedly converted to Judaism. The "Khazar myth," which was popularized by proponents of British Israelism in the 19th century, is now widespread in a variety of anti-Semitic ideologies. Ibid.

¹¹ "Racist Black Hebrew Israelites Becoming More Militant." 2008. Southern Poverty Law Center. August 29, 2008. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2008/racist-black-hebrew-israelites-becoming-more-militant>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Project Megiddo." 1999. Federal Bureau of Investigation. <https://irp.fas.org/eprint/megiddo.pdf>

¹⁵ Delaney, Paul. 1974. "Slaying of Mrs. Martin Luther King Sr.: Nagging Question of Motive." *The Decatur Daily Review*, July 12, 1974.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Worthington, Rogers. 1985. "Agents Swoop Down on Black Hebrews." *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1985. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1985-07-17-8502160474-story.html>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

In 1979, a former member of the Nation of Islam (NOI) and ex-Christian faith healer named Hulon Mitchell, Jr. established a BHI sect in Miami, Florida known as the Nation of Yahweh (NOY), adopting the name “Yahweh ben Yahweh” (God, the son of God) for himself.¹⁹ At its peak, the NOY had several thousand followers, who viewed Mitchell as the Messiah.²⁰ Encouraging its members to sell NOY-branded goods, pool their money together, and purchase approximately \$9 million worth of real estate holdings, the NOY claimed its mission was urban renewal in Miami, social justice, and charity outreach—leading Miami Mayor Xavier Suarez to declare October 7, 1990 as “Yahweh ben Yahweh Day.”²¹ Meanwhile, Mitchell preached to his followers that white people and Jews were the offspring of Satan, and enlisted a cadre of his closest followers into his personal praetorian guard. The inner circle, referred to as “the Brotherhood,” and Mitchell’s bodyguards, known as the “Death Angels,” were encouraged by their leader to “kill a white person and bring proof of the kill to Yahweh in the form of a head, an ear, or some other body part.”²² The NOY’s Death Angels were responsible for more than a dozen murderers in the Miami area, mainly in random acts of violence towards white people and targeted assassinations of the group’s former followers.²³ In November 1990, one month after Miami’s official “Yahweh ben Yahweh Day,” Mitchell and several of his closest followers were arrested and charged in a federal conspiracy to commit extortion, racketeering, arson, and murder.²⁴ The NOY survived their spiritual leader’s 18-year incarceration and his death in 2007, but claims that it now rejects racism and violence.²⁵

The cases involving the NOY and a series of prophecies associated with the BHI movement formed the backbone of the FBI’s 1999 assessment that the movement was one of several DVE strands preparing for violence at the turn of the millennium.²⁶ These prophecies claimed that the year 2000 would herald the coming of the Messiah, who would rectify the subjugation of Black people by violently subduing white people, sparking an apocalyptic race war.²⁷ The unclassified intelligence report Project Megiddo, considering the possibility that these prophecies might augur increased violence by BHI violent extremists around the new millennium, assessed that

“extreme elements of the BHI movement are prone to engage in violent activity. As seen in previous convictions of BHI followers, adherents of this philosophy have a proven history of violence, and several indications point toward a continuation of this trend... While the overwhelming majority of BHI followers are unlikely to engage in violence, there are elements of this movement with both the motivation and the capability to engage in millennial violence. Some

¹⁹ Martin, Douglas. 2007. “Yahweh Ben Yahweh, Leader of Separatist Sect, Dies at 71.” The New York Times, May 9, 2007, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/09/us/09yahweh.html>.

²⁰ “Appeal.” 1996. United States of America v. Robert Louis Beasley, Jr., A/k/a “dan Israel,” Rufus Pace, Sr., A/k/a “ahaz Israel,” Ernest Lee James, A/k/a “ahinadad israel,” Richard Ingraham, A/k/a “job Israel,” Linda Gaines, a/k/a “judith Israel,” Walter Lightburn, A/k/a “amri israel,” Yahweh Ben Yahweh F/k/a “hulon Mitchell, Jr.,” a/k/a “hulon Shah,” & “moses Israel.” U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. January 5, 1996. 72 F.3d 1518

²¹ Solomon, Michelle F. 2019. “Yahweh Ben Yahweh: Miami Cult Leader or Caught up in a Conspiracy?” WPLG. August 28, 2019. <https://www.local10.com/florida-files/2019/08/28/yahweh-ben-yahweh-miami-cult-leader-or-caught-up-in-a-conspiracy-2/>.

²² USA v. Beasley et al, “Appeal.”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Martin, “Yahweh Ben Yahweh, Leader of Separatist Sect, Dies at 71.”

²⁶ FBI, “Project Megiddo.”

²⁷ Ibid.

radical BHI adherents are clearly motivated by the conviction that the approach of the year 2000 brings society ever closer to a violent confrontation between blacks and whites.”²⁸

Predictions of large-scale violence by BHI groups around the year 2000 did not come to fruition; neither did the Messianic prophecies offered by some groups within the movement. As a result of the latter factor and increased pressure from law enforcement (including the arrest and imprisonment of senior NOY leaders), many of the BHI fringe groups with a nationwide presence fractured, leaving an array of small, locally organized cells in major cities throughout the U.S. in their midst.²⁹ The smaller “camps” continued their signature street demonstrations, while a handful of individuals associated with the movement were involved in violent attacks in the 2000s.³⁰ For instance, in 2006, several gay men who were assaulted in a club in Atlanta claimed that they had been attacked by self-identified BHI adherents.³¹

Overall, the post-2000 environment deinstitutionalized the threat of violent extremism from fringe BHI adherents. As the most recent period of terrorist attacks perpetrated by individuals inspired by the movement demonstrates, large-scale violent BHI extremist formations have largely given way to lone-actor terrorism as the dominant lethal risk. This is a similar phenomenon to violence emanating from other American DVE movements over the past two decades.³² Yet, as these attacks and their perpetrators also show, BHI violent extremism now also plays a niche but interesting role in the broader American DVE landscape. Notably, the core ideologies of the group and certain snippets of its teachings have been rebroadcast by other extremists across the DVE spectrum, inspiring extremists beyond its immediate orbit. Meanwhile, when the BHI extremist fringe’s racially motivated violent ideas are analyzed alongside their counterparts in other DVE arenas, the results bear important insight into how terrorist and violent extremist groups are classified today.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ SPLC, “Racist Black Hebrew Israelites Becoming More Militant.”

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² ODNI, “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021.”; Bjelopera, Jerome. 2017. “Domestic Terrorism: An Overview.” Congressional Research Service. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R44921.pdf>; Jones, Seth, Catrina Doxsee, Grace Hwang, James Suber, and Nicholas Harrington. 2020. “The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States.” Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states>.

Black Hebrew Israelites and Contemporary Violent Extremism

While BHI violent extremism has been a persistent concern for law enforcement during the past several decades, the last seven years have heralded an unprecedented frequency and lethality of terrorist attacks involving individuals who participated in or were otherwise inspired by the BHI movement or its ideas. The precise cause of this increase is unclear. It bears mentioning that the rise in violence associated with the BHI extremist fringe, who typically targeted Jewish individuals and spaces, correlates with a simultaneous rise in anti-Semitic violent attacks in the U.S. perpetrated by a range of DVE groups since 2015.³³

The two hallmark incidents involving BHI violent extremists both occurred in the New York City metropolitan area at the end of 2019, 18 days apart from one another. At the beginning of December 2019, David Nathaniel Anderson and Francine Graham began a crime spree that culminated in a mass-casualty shooting at the JC Kosher Supermarket in Jersey City, New Jersey on December 10, 2019.³⁴ In the weeks prior to the attack on the supermarket, which resulted in five deaths (including Anderson and Graham) and three injuries, the Elizabeth, New Jersey couple planned to conduct several attacks in northern New Jersey, many of them targeting local Jewish communities or individuals.³⁵ They conducted reconnaissance on the JC Kosher Supermarket and several other potential targets, including a Jewish community center in Bayonne, New Jersey, and traveled to Ohio to train with firearms that they had purchased for the attack.³⁶

In advance of the supermarket attack, Anderson and Graham were implicated in several other murders and attempted murders in New Jersey, all targeting individuals who they believed were either Jews or police officers. On December 3, 2019, an individual opened fire from a moving vehicle on another vehicle being operated by a Hasidic Jew on a highway outside of Newark, NJ. The suspects were not immediately identified, but investigators later found that the ballistics matched a firearm belonging to Anderson.³⁷ Five days later, Anderson and Graham were passengers in an Uber driven by Michael Rumberger, who was later found in the trunk of his own car with a gunshot wound to the head in Bayonne, NJ.³⁸ Because the perpetrators conducted Google searches for the origins of Rumberger's last name, investigators claimed that the pair may have falsely believed that Rumberger was Jewish.³⁹

³³ Sanborn, Jill. 2020. "Confronting the Rise in Anti-Semitic Domestic Terrorism." Testimony. Federal Bureau of Investigation. February 26, 2020. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/confronting-the-rise-in-anti-semitic-domestic-terrorism>.

³⁴ Barron, James, Michael Gold, and Ali Watkins. 2019. "Jersey City Shooting: Suspect in Attack Wrote Anti-Semitic Posts." *The New York Times*, December 12, 2019, sec. New York. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/nyregion/david-anderson-francine-graham-jersey-city.html>.

³⁵ "Kosher Grocery Store Shooters 'Planned Greater Acts of Mayhem,' Feds Say." 2019. CBS News. January 30, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jersey-city-shooting-kosher-grocery-attack-suspects-planned-greater-acts-of-mayhem-feds-say/>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Napoliello, Alex, and Joe Atmonavage. 2019. "A Chance Encounter with Jersey City Shooters Left a Hardworking Cab Driver Dead, Friends Say." *NJ.Com*. December 13, 2019. <https://www.nj.com/hudson/2019/12/a-chance-encounter-with-jersey-city-shooters-left-a-hardworking-cap-driver-dead-friends-say.html>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

On the morning of December 10, 2019, Jersey City Police Department Detective Joseph Seals was meeting with a confidential source at the Bayview Cemetery in Jersey City when he recognized a stolen rental van from an all-points bulletin related to the murder of Michael Rumberger.⁴⁰ Identifying Anderson and Graham by happenstance, Detective Seals attempted to accost them, but the pair opened fire, killing the detective.⁴¹ Anderson and Graham fled, driving the rental van to the JC Kosher Supermarket. As soon as they arrived on the scene at approximately 12:30PM, they opened fire on the market, wielding a shotgun, an assault rifle, several handguns, and tactical gear.⁴² During the opening salvo, Anderson and Graham killed the store's owner, a store employee, and a customer of the store; other customers were able to escape out of a back door.⁴³ Police arrived on the scene shortly thereafter, but Graham and Anderson engaged in a standoff with police, periodically exchanging gunfire during a three-hour period.⁴⁴ At approximately 3:45PM, the siege concluded as both Graham and Anderson were shot and killed by police.⁴⁵ Investigators found an undetonated but live pipe bomb in the stolen rental van they used, alongside more bombmaking materials and a handgun.⁴⁶

The ensuing investigation quickly identified the JC Kosher Supermarket shooting as a hate crime targeting the Jewish community.⁴⁷ Police found a note from Anderson inside of the rental van, in which he claimed that "I do this because my creator makes me do this and I hate who he hates."⁴⁸ Law enforcement, after scouring Anderson and Graham's social media, found that they were adherents of an extreme interpretation of BHI ideology. Anderson, under the moniker "Dawad Macabee," constantly railed against white Jews on his Facebook account, referring to them interchangeably as "Edomites" and "the synagogue of Satan," and alleging the conspiracy theory that Jews control police departments and direct them to kill Black people.⁴⁹ Referencing his own military service record in the U.S. Army Reserve, he wrote on July 15, 2015 that he was waiting for God to give him the order to "dash little edomites against the stones...[using] all of my edomite military antiterrorist training against Our enemies."⁵⁰

Two weeks later, as orthodox Jews gathered in the house of Rabbi Chaim Rottenberg in Monsey, New York to celebrate Hannukah, another violent attack involving an individual inspired by BHI extremism took place. On the night of December 28, 2019, a masked man wielding a large knife entered the house, closed and locked the door behind him, and told the partygoers that "no one is leaving."⁵¹ The attacker stabbed five men at the party before the attendees fought him off, forcing him to flee.⁵² One attacked

⁴⁰ "Information on Jersey City Shootings." 2019. Office of the Attorney General of the State of New Jersey. December 11, 2019. <https://www.nj.gov/oag/newsreleases19/pr20191211b.html>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Gold, Michael. 2019. "Jersey City Shooting Was 'Domestic Terrorism,' Officials Say." The New York Times, December 12, 2019, sec. New York. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/12/nyregion/jersey-city-shooting-domestic-terrorism.html>.

⁴⁸ Barron, Gold and Watkins, "Jersey City Shooting: Suspect in Attack Wrote Anti-Semitic Posts."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "Complaint." 2019. United States of America v. Grafton E. Thomas. United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. December 30, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1230906/download>

⁵² Ibid.

partygoer, 72-year-old Josef Neumann, suffered a skull fracture as a result of the attack that left him in a coma for two months before he eventually succumbed to his injuries.⁵³

After the attacker was forced out of the house, he then attempted but failed to break into the synagogue next door. He fled in his car, which was later identified in New York City using information provided by partygoers.⁵⁴ Police arrested 37-year-old Grafton Thomas, a resident of Monsey, on the same night as the attack.⁵⁵ The next day, he was charged in Rockland County court with five counts of attempted murder (one of which was upgraded to second-degree murder after Neumann's death and one count of first-degree burglary.⁵⁶ A separate federal indictment charged Thomas with five federal hate crimes charges.⁵⁷ On April 20, 2020, a federal judge ruled that Thomas, who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, was unfit to stand trial.⁵⁸ He was held in a federal mental health facility until January 2022, when a Rockland County judge also found him unfit to stand trial on state charges.⁵⁹ He is currently being held in a New York state mental health facility.⁶⁰

Thomas' motivations for conducting the attack on the Hannukah party are slightly more difficult to ascertain due to his mental health diagnosis. At the very least, however, there is some evidence that suggests that BHI ideology was a contributor not only to his overall worldview but also in his choice of target. During the investigation of the stabbing, law enforcement uncovered Thomas' journals, in which he espoused tenets of BHI extremism alongside a hodgepodge of other anti-Semitic canards.⁶¹ Notably, Thomas wrote about how "Hebrew Israelites took from the powerful ppl (ebinoid Israelites), which the FBI claimed "appears to be a reference to the 'Black Hebrew Israelite movement,' in which groups of African-Americans assert that they are the descendants of the ancient Israelites."⁶² Like Anderson and Graham, investigators also initially believed that Thomas may have been linked to other anti-Semitic attacks in the area. He was also a suspect in a murder investigation related to the stabbing of a Hasidic Jewish man in Monsey who was walking to morning prayers in the early morning hours of November 20, 2019, although Thomas was never charged in relation to the incident.⁶³

After the back-to-back incidents in 2019, most perpetrators of violence with a nexus to BHI extremist ideology have more resembled Grafton Thomas rather than David Anderson or Francine Graham. Three traits characterize subsequent attackers: 1) they are usually, unlike Graham or Anderson, formal or long-term participants in any extremist BHI group or self-proclaimed BHI members, 2) aspects of BHI ideologies (especially the "Jewish impostor" conspiracy theory described above) are present alongside several other ideological influences drawn from a variety of extremist groups in their

⁵³ "Man Wounded in Monsey Hanukkah Stabbings Dies from Injuries." 2019. CBS News. March 30, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/josef-neumann-monsey-hanukkah-stabbings-victim-dies-from-injuries/>.

⁵⁴ USA v. Thomas, "Complaint."

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Lieberman, Steve. 2022. "Grafton Thomas Found Unfit to Stand Trial in Ramapo Machete Attack on Jews." The Journal News. January 27, 2022. <https://www.lohud.com/story/news/local/rockland/ramapo/2022/01/26/ramapo-machete-attack-grafton-thomas-found-unfit-stand-trial/9228142002/>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ USA v. Thomas, "Complaint."

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

worldview, and 3) violent extremist beliefs are compounded by mental health concerns. These traits are consistent with a broader trend in American violent extremism over the past several years, in which individual violent extremists concoct a blend of ideologies from various ideological sources to motivate or justify their violent worldview.⁶⁴

For instance, on November 21, 2021, Darrell Brooks piloted a Ford Escape SUV into a crowd of revelers at an annual Christmas parade in Waukesha, Wisconsin, killing six and injuring over 60 others.⁶⁵ The debate is still ongoing about the attacker's motive—Brooks had a lengthy violent criminal record, a history of mental health concerns, and the police are not investigating the attack as a terrorist incident.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, among the variety of conspiracy theories reportedly espoused by Brooks on his social media accounts included a 2015 post displaying a fake quote from Adolf Hitler that went viral on social media.⁶⁷ The fake quote claims that Hitler distinguished between “real Jews” and “fake Jews,” and argued that “the negroes are the real children of Israel.”⁶⁸ This false quote, due to its affirmation of a core BHI extremist tenet, was distributed widely by BHI extremist circles across social media.⁶⁹

In February 2022, a Louisville, Kentucky-area activist named Quintez Brown allegedly entered the campaign headquarters of Louisville mayoral candidate Craig Greenberg and opened fire, attempting to kill Greenberg.⁷⁰ Greenberg, who is Jewish, was unharmed; Brown was apprehended and federally charged with interfering with Greenberg's federally-protected rights and attempting to kill a candidate for political office.⁷¹ Brown, who rose to prominence in activist circles in Louisville for his participation in the anti-police brutality protests in the summer of 2020 and previously ran for a seat on Louisville Metro Council, met with and endorsed The Lion of Judah Armed Forces (TLOJAF) in the weeks prior to the attack.⁷² TLOJAF is a militia group with divisions throughout the country whose goal is to “help free the Chosen Nation from Mental, Physical, and Spiritual Bondage, while Uniting the Chosen Nation after being taught self hate, and Division for over 400+ years throughout the four corners of the earth.”⁷³

⁶⁴ Alcock, Matthew. 2019. “The Evolving and Persistent Terrorism Threat to the Homeland.” The Washington Institute. November 19, 2019. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/evolving-and-persistent-terrorism-threat-homeland>; Hughes, Seamus, and Devorah Margolin. 2019. “The Fractured Terrorism Threat to America.” Lawfare. November 10, 2019. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/fractured-terrorism-threat-america>.

⁶⁵ “Police Identify Waukesha Christmas Parade Suspect. Here's What We Know.” NPR, November 22, 2021, sec. National. <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/22/1057894472/what-we-know-about-the-waukesha-christmas-parade-incident>. [ps://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/02/nyregion/monsey-hanukkah-stabbing-grafton-thomas.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/02/nyregion/monsey-hanukkah-stabbing-grafton-thomas.html).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Alleged Waukesha Attacker Shared Conspiratorial, Antisemitic Content in 2015.” 2021. Anti-Defamation League. December 1, 2021. <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/alleged-waukesha-attacker-shared-conspiratorial-antisemitic-content-2015>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ “Kentucky Man Indicted for Shooting at and Attempting to Kill a Political Candidate.” 2022. Department of Justice Press Release. April 7, 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/kentucky-man-indicted-shooting-and-attempting-kill-political-candidate>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Menendez, Pilar, and William Bredderman. 2022. “Quintez Brown of Louisville, Alleged Craig Greenberg Wannabe Assassin, Started as Promising Activist.” The Daily Beast. February 15, 2022. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/quintez-brown-of-louisville-alleged-craig-greenberg-wannabe-assassin-started-as-promising-activist>.

⁷³ “Lion Of Judah Armed Forces National Headquarters.” <https://www.facebook.com/TLOJAF>

While the group does not self-identify as a BHI movement, its name, mission, and social media presence all are consistent with BHI ideology.⁷⁴

These incidents and others show that elements of BHI violent extremist ideas are disseminated beyond the movement and its members itself, playing a role in inspiring individuals who are only tangentially associated with its infrastructure into conducting acts of violence. In an age where would-be violent extremists are broadening their sources of ideological influence to justify their attacks, the conspiracy theories and core views of the BHI extremist fringe are in high demand throughout a particular subsection of American violent extremist movements. Thus, although most of the attackers in recent years who were inspired by BHI extremist ideology had no formal membership or participation in any realm of the movement, the ideas professed by extremist BHI groups played a role in shaping their radicalization and mobilization to violence.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Classifying and Assessing the Threat from Black Hebrew Israelite Violent Extremism

Recent incidents of violence involving BHI extremist ideologies are not just a continuing reminder of the pertinence of these ideas in the modern American DVE landscape. They also serve as an important test case for how federal law enforcement classifies—and as a result, assesses and allocates resources to—DVE groups today. Today, the FBI classifies BHI-related violent extremism under the broader category of “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism” (RMVE), defined by the United States Intelligence Community as “DVEs with ideological agendas derived from bias, often related to race or ethnicity, held by the actor against others, including a given population group.”⁷⁵

From a purely definitional standpoint it is easy to see why violent extremists motivated by fringe BHI ideologies are included under this category, though this was not always the case. Until 2019, BHI extremists were placed alongside Black separatists, Black nationalists, violent anti-police activists, and other groups under the controversial header of “Black identity extremism.”⁷⁶ Civil rights leaders and many counterterrorism experts decried this label, which they argued was politically motivated, grouped unlike actors together, described an extremist grouping that does not exist in real life, downplayed the threat from other types of extremism, and had racist undertones.⁷⁷

The FBI abandoned the term “Black identity extremism” in 2019 and began labeling the movements formerly associated with this term under its classification of RMVE, together with white supremacists, neo-Nazis, anti-Muslim and anti-Latino violent extremists, and other DVEs who were motivated by racial or ethnic bias.⁷⁸ This did not assuage many who had criticized the FBI’s use of the “Black identity extremist” label, who argued that putting Black nationalists, separatists, and BHI extremist groups under the same header as white supremacists created a false equivalency between the threat posed by the two movements.⁷⁹ Indeed, according to the FBI’s own data, between 2015 and 2019 RMVEs were responsible for 42 significant domestic terrorism incidents, of which 40 were committed by white supremacists.⁸⁰ Critics also argued that lumping together all racially motivated extremism was

⁷⁵ ODNI, “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021.”

⁷⁶ Tau, Byron. 2019. “FBI Abandons Use of Term ‘Black Identity Extremism.’” *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2019, sec. Politics. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/fbi-abandons-use-of-terms-black-identity-extremism-11563921355>.

⁷⁷ See for instance: Speri, Alice. 2019. “The Strange Tale of the FBI’s Fictional ‘Black Identity Extremism’ Movement.” *The Intercept*. March 23, 2019. <https://theintercept.com/2019/03/23/black-identity-extremist-fbi-domestic-terrorism/>; German, Michael. 2020. “The FBI Targets a New Generation of Black Activists.” *Brennan Center for Justice*. June 26, 2020. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/fbi-targets-new-generation-black-activists>; Clulow, Hudson. 2020. “The FBI’s Legacy of Smearing Movements as Terrorism to Justify Suppression.” *Center for Constitutional Rights*. August 4, 2020. <https://ccrjustice.org/node/8760>.

⁷⁸ Tau, “FBI Abandons Use of Term ‘Black Identity Extremism.’”

⁷⁹ German, “The FBI Targets a New Generation of Black Activists.”

⁸⁰ “Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism.” 2021. Federal Bureau of Investigation. May 2021. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-strategic-report.pdf/view>

analytically ineffective, as Black and white supremacists are diametrically opposed to one another's goals and generally lack features in common.⁸¹

In future assessments, the use of the RMVE label for extremist groups with a predominantly Black follower base will undoubtedly continue to garner controversy, and the debate about how to label these groups is unlikely to be resolved. However, studying BHI violent extremism can lend some important insight to these arguments about classification. Arguably, DVEs inspired by the BHI movement are, within the scope of groups previously labeled as “Black identity extremists,” most befitting of the RMVE label. Other movements—such as Black nationalist and Black separatist groups—lack significant points of comparison with other RMVE groups, particularly with white supremacist extremists; violent activity conducted on behalf of these groups rarely focus on similar targets and the ideologies espoused by either side of the dividing line bear little resemblance to one another.⁸² In contrast, BHI violent extremism shares ideological tenets, preferred targets, and a similar role within broader extremist milieus as some forms of white supremacist violent extremism.

The similarities between BHI violent extremists and white supremacists led Tom Metzger, a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and founder of the neo-Nazi skinhead group White Aryan Resistance to remark that BHI extremists “[are] the Black counterpart of us.”⁸³ Notably, the core tenet of extremist BHI thought—that African Americans are the descendants of the Biblical Israelites and today's Jews are usurpers—mirrors the core tenet of the white supremacist Christian Identity movement. Christian Identity, which emerged in the United States around the same time as the outset of the BHI movement, proclaims that white Europeans were the descendants of the Biblical Israelites.⁸⁴ In addition, Christian Identity adherents preach that today's Jews are the offspring of a union between Eve and Satan (known as the serpent seed doctrine), and that non-white people are nonhuman.⁸⁵ Aside from a difference in genealogical interpretation, with BHI extremists largely claiming Jewish descent from Esau and CI extremists claiming Jewish descent from Satan through Cain, both movements hold at their core that their in-group are the true descendants of the Biblical Israelites and that modern Jews are impostors, committed to a Satanic conspiracy to undermine the real “chosen people.”⁸⁶

The two groups are also similar in that their religiously imbued anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have permeated broadly beyond their core organizations and institutions, affecting the narratives, ideologies, and worldviews of a broader array of DVE actors. The spread of Christian Identity doctrine throughout modern American white supremacist movements was facilitated from the Church of Jesus Christ-Christian, a white supremacist church founded by former Pentecostal minister and Klansman Wesley

⁸¹ Lennard, Natasha. 2019. “Trump Administration Is Making It Harder to Find Out Whether It's Fighting White Supremacist Terror.” *The Intercept*. June 8, 2019. <https://theintercept.com/2019/06/08/white-supremacist-domestic-terrorism-fbi-justice/>.

⁸² Jones et. al., “The War Comes Home”; Bjelopera, “Domestic Terrorism.”

⁸³ “Miami-Based Nation of Yahweh Leader Appeals Parole.” 2007. Southern Poverty Law Center. January 16, 2007. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2007/miami-based-nation-yahweh-leader-appeals-parole>.

⁸⁴ FBI, “Project Meggido”; ADL, “Extremist Sects Within the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement”; Hoffman, Bruce. 1993. “Holy Terror: The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative.” Washington: RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2007/P7834.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Barkun, Michael. 1997. *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement*. UNC Press Books.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Swift.⁸⁷ Swift, widely acknowledged as the progenitor of Christian Identity as a white supremacist ideology, died in 1970 but his followers continued his work by establishing religious outfits that preached his ideas.⁸⁸ Two of his prominent acolytes were Richard Butler and William Potter Gale, who in their own work would each diffuse CI ideas into various aspects of modern white supremacist extremism.⁸⁹ Butler founded the Aryan Nations church organization, operating a large compound in northern Idaho that served as a gathering place for American white supremacist leaders and organizations throughout the 1970s and 1980s.⁹⁰ Gale, a former Army colonel, founded the Posse Comitatus movement and became a significant figurehead in the emerging white supremacist militia scene.⁹¹

In the 1990s, law enforcement crackdowns and the deaths of key leaders led to the institutional decline of the CI movement, but like the BHI extremist fringe, CI ideas still play an outsized role in the contours of modern DVE movements.⁹² Even among white supremacist groups, organizations, and individuals that are not card-carrying members of a CI church or adherents of the CI religion, “phrases, terms, and images that are associated with the CI movement” are prevalent.⁹³ Concepts initially developed by CI leaders such as the “Zionist Occupation Government” (ZOG)—referring to the conspiracy theory that Jews secretly control the U.S. federal government—and “Racial Holy War” (RaHoWa) have now become part of the white supremacist vernacular.⁹⁴ Combinations of white supremacist, neo-Nazi, and Christian religious symbols in imagery are frequent. The biblical exegesis of the CI movement, especially religious references to the idea that Jews are the “spawn of Satan,” is also widespread among individual white supremacist violent extremists.⁹⁵ For instance, the header of the social media profile associated with Robert Bowers, allegedly responsible for the 2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA, read “jews are the children of satan (john 8:44).”⁹⁶

Thus, like their CI counterparts, BHI religious narratives have similarly been engrained in a wide variety of violent extremists, even among those who otherwise would not ascribe to their religious beliefs. The allure of the CI and BHI religiously-infused conspiracy theories to violent extremists are understandable, as they provide a markedly theological justification. BHI ideas, such as the theory of Black Biblical Israelite descent, references to Jews as “Edomites” or the “synagogue of Satan,” or other genealogical theories about the origin of white Europeans, can be found throughout a spectrum of Black supremacist or Black nationalist actors in a similar way that CI ideas can be found throughout the spectrum of white

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Simi, Pete, and Robert Futrell. 2010. *American Swastika: Inside the White Power Movement's Hidden Spaces of Hate*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

⁹¹ Pitcavage, Mark. 2001. “Camouflage and Conspiracy: The Militia Movement From Ruby Ridge to Y2K.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 44 (6): 957–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027640121956610>.

⁹² “Christian Identity’s New Role On The Extreme Right.” 2021. Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. August 6, 2021.

<https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/christian-identitys-new-role-extreme-right>.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Silverstein, Jason. 2018. “Robert Bowers, Pittsburgh Shooting Suspect, Was Avid Poster of Anti-Semitic Content on Gab.” CBS News. October 27, 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/robert-bowers-gab-pittsburgh-shooting-suspect-today-live-updates-2018-10-27/>.

supremacist or white nationalist actors. This central role of these groups' religious conspiracy theories in their respective broader movements is essential to comparative analyses.

The ideological tenets of these groups drive their action, and perhaps the most important basis for comparison between BHI violent extremists and other RMVE actors is their preference for similar targets. The BHI-inspired violence of the past several years has most frequently targeted Jewish communities, individual Jews, or has been tinged by anti-Semitic discourses emanating from the perpetrators.⁹⁷ In a similar manner, the most frequent target of RMVE terrorist attack plots between 2014 and 2019 was Jewish synagogues.⁹⁸ While white supremacist violent extremists generally consider a wider range of potential targets than BHI violent extremists, the overlap in anti-Semitic animus, expressed through these two movements' targets of attack, is ample basis for apt comparisons.

In total, applying the term "racially and ethnically motivated violent extremist" to a particular group, organization, movement or individual should be considered carefully, and the broader category can only be considered analytically useful insofar as it covers those actors who share traits in common. From this analysis, however, three points about the BHI violent extremist movement are important to this judgment. First, BHI violent extremists clearly fit under the definition of an RMVE; they are violent extremists with an ideological agenda derived from racial bias against given population groups. But more importantly, unlike many of their counterparts who were previously judged to be "Black identity extremists" and now fall under the RMVE label, the BHI violent extremist movement has a significant number of traits in common with other RMVE actors, especially with white supremacists and with religiously inspired white supremacists in particular. Ideological overlaps, a similar role in the broader DVE infrastructure, and likewise targets provide areas in which those studying terrorism can adequately compare BHI violent extremists with the religious worldviews like Christian Identity.

Finally, the fact that a non-white supremacist group can both fit neatly into the RMVE category and be compared and contrasted, with notable areas in common, to white supremacist groups, yields important insights about the utility of the RMVE label as a whole. If the federal government were, in response to criticism, only to include white supremacists under the RMVE header, the resulting classification scheme would be insufficient to cover the scope of racially motivated violent extremist trends and ideologies that pose a threat of violence in the U.S. today. While this should not equivocate the lethality or frequency of white supremacists to non-white supremacist RMVEs, or necessarily draw linkages in activity between the two movements, it does require that federal law enforcement is able to classify, assess, and provide resources to movements with similar core tenets and tactics.

⁹⁷ ADL, "Extremist Sects Within the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement."

⁹⁸ Clifford, Bennett. 2021. "Racially/Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist (RMVE) Attack Planning and United States Federal Response, 2014-2019." Washington: George Washington University Program on Extremism. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/RMVE%20Attack%20Planning%20and%20United%20States%20Federal%20Response.pdf>.

Conclusion

The rise in BHI violent extremism during the past several years has been accompanied by a broader rise in violent activity by groups across the fractured domestic violent extremist spectrum. Indeed, incidents of domestic terrorism committed by other movements—particularly white supremacists and anti-government/anti-authority violent extremist groups—have eclipsed the frequency and lethality of BHI-related violence in recent years. Nonetheless, violent extremism with ideological linkages to the BHI movement is worthy of further examination not only because of its ongoing escalation, but because the movement is also an interesting test case for how federal law enforcement and the terrorism research community examine contemporary domestic extremism.

This study focused predominantly on ideology, with a particular interest in elucidating areas of comparison between BHI extremist ideology and the ideologies of religiously inspired white supremacist groups. Future research could broaden this field of inquiry, by examining how religion and religious ideology shape a wider spectrum of today's American DVE movements. Scholars and academics tend to separate “religious extremism” or “religious terrorism” into their own categories of analysis; this can manifest in an inability to study terrorist and violent extremist groups who seemingly operate towards a sociopolitical goal through a religious lens.⁹⁹ As the BHI movement shows, religious justifications for violence have the potential to proliferate throughout loosely connected extremist milieus, even if those milieus are not themselves categorized by their relationship to a religious faith or organization.

Moreover, this study added another perspective into the ongoing debate about the “racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism” classification used by the U.S. federal law enforcement and intelligence communities to classify domestic terrorism and violent extremism threats. As the debate about how to categorize DVE groups based on these labels (and debates over whether the labels are useful in the first place) continue, case studies of groups and movements that are on the cusp of specific categories can improve the clarity and effectiveness of categorization.

⁹⁹ Dawson, Lorne L. 2018. “Challenging the Curious Erasure of Religion from the Study of Religious Terrorism.” *Numen* 65 (2–3): 141–64. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341492>; Dawson, Lorne. 2021. “Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflection on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Religious Terrorism (Part II).” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15 (2): 2–22.

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