

Homeland
Security

HOMELAND INTELLIGENCE ARTICLE

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(U) Counterterrorism Mission Center

(U//FOUO) 5G, COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories Inciting Attacks Against Communications Infrastructure

(U//FOUO) **Scope.** This *Homeland Intelligence Article* provides an overview of threats linking 5G communications infrastructure to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is intended to inform federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial government counterterrorism and law enforcement officials as well as private sector partners of the potential threats to communications infrastructure. This information is current as of May 2020.

(U//FOUO) Prepared by the DHS Intelligence Enterprise (DHS IE) Counterterrorism Mission Center (CTMC), DHS IE Field Operations Division (FOD), and NCTC. Coordinated with CISA, CWMD, CYMC, CETC, and USCG.

(U//FOUO) We assess conspiracy theories linking the spread of COVID-19 to the expansion of the 5G cellular network are inciting attacks against the communications infrastructure globally, and that these threats probably will increase as the disease continues to spread, including calls for violence against telecommunications workers. Violent extremists have drawn from misinformation campaigns online that claim wireless infrastructure is deleterious to human health and helps spread COVID-19, resulting in a global effort by like-minded individuals to share operational guidance and justification for conducting attacks against 5G infrastructure, some of which have already prompted arson and physical attacks against cell towers in several US states.¹

- » (U//FOUO) Violent extremists have encouraged attacks targeting 5G infrastructure in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, claiming that 5G technology weakens human immune systems, resulting in the accelerated spread of the virus, according to DHS open source reporting.^{2,3,4} Calls for attacks have included tactical guidance for disabling radio towers near pandemic-stricken cities and come from a variety of violent actors, including racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) and at least one individual who posted a foreign terrorist organization-inspired image.
- » (U//FOUO) Since December 2019, unidentified actors conducted at least five arson incidents targeting cell towers in Memphis, Tennessee that resulted in more than \$100,000 in damages, according to DHS field intelligence reporting.⁵ Additionally, 14 cell towers in western Tennessee between February and April were purposely turned off by way of disabling their electrical breakers, according to separate DHS field intelligence reporting.⁶ In April, arsonists set fire to a major cell tower in Portland, Oregon, damaging electrical components at the base of the structure, according to Oregon state fusion center analysis.⁷
- » (U//FOUO) Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have all reported individuals attacking communications infrastructure due to COVID-19 fears, totaling at least 100 cell tower attacks globally since late April, according to a body of open source reporting.^{8,9} Additionally, a spokesman for the Communication Workers Union in the United Kingdom reported that telecommunications workers have been threatened with physical violence in light of conspiracy theories linking 5G networks to the spread of COVID-19.^{10,11,12}

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~~(U//FOUO)~~ 5G Overview and Critical Infrastructure Interdependencies

~~(U//FOUO)~~ In telecommunication, 5G is the fifth-generation technology standard for cellular networks, which cellular phone companies began deploying worldwide in 2019. Like its predecessors, 5G networks are cellular networks, in which service area is divided into small geographical areas called cells. All 5G wireless devices in a cell are connected to the Internet and telephone network by radio waves through a local antenna in the cell, creating greater bandwidth and faster download speeds.¹³

~~(U//FOUO)~~ 5G is a component of the communications sector—one of 16 identified US critical infrastructure sectors and an integral component of the US economy—underlying the operations of all businesses, public safety organizations, and government.^a 5G relies on services provided by other critical infrastructure, particularly the energy sector, which provides power to run cell towers and the delivery of electricity to critical communications facilities.¹⁴

~~(U//FOUO)~~ We assess that violent extremists probably will target a range of telecommunications infrastructure based on 5G's reliance on existing architecture and its easily accessible cellular base stations. Isolated attacks against telecommunications infrastructure typically lack the sophistication required to cause widespread service disruptions, but we judge that more coordinated attacks by multiple individuals in adjacent areas could amplify these incidents and complicate emergency response and repair efforts.

- » ~~(U//FOUO)~~ Industry experts estimate that half of the United States will have access to 5G by the end of 2020, according to media reporting.¹⁵ The initial phase of the 5G rollout relies heavily on 4G infrastructure that has been modified to share workloads with 5G networks,^{16,17} and some attackers could take a wholesale approach to targeting both networks.
- » ~~(U//FOUO)~~ Telecommunications base stations, including 4G and 5G towers, typically are lightly guarded with simple physical barriers, such as fences and gates. In some major cities no barriers are present as 5G systems are to blend in with the surrounding environment, disguised as lamp posts or trees, according to media reporting.^{18,19} Attacks on more rural platforms can be harder to investigate due to the lack of witnesses and a longer police response time, judging from media reporting.^{20,21}
- » ~~(U//FOUO)~~ The recent attacks against telecommunications infrastructure in Oregon and Tennessee caused damage to equipment and wiring at several base stations but did not compromise the structural integrity of the tower itself, according to DHS reporting.²² Although none of the arson attacks disrupted telecommunications service, one of the sites in Tennessee was offline for five days while it was being repaired.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ Violent extremists have consistently targeted communications infrastructure in the United States and threats are likely to persist beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Anti-technology grievances historically have transcended a broad range of violent extremist ideologies and inspired attacks against critical infrastructure perceived as being harmful to public safety, including communications, energy, and information technology infrastructure.

- » ~~(U)~~ In June 2019 an unidentified individual targeted an electrical substation in Klamath County, Oregon, with a high-powered rifle that resulted in damage estimated to be more than \$400,000, according to an FBI press release.²³ In 2007, a small group of environmental extremists were convicted of plotting attacks to bomb government and commercial facilities that were viewed by the group as being harmful to the environment, including cell towers, according to court documents and media reporting.^{24,25}
- » ~~(U//FOUO)~~ In August 2019, a social media user expressing views consistent with RMVEs shared tactics that could be used to sabotage the electrical grid, according to DHS open source reporting.^{26,a}

^a ~~(U)~~ Please see Definitions box.

- » ~~(U//FOUO)~~ The manifesto published by Theodore Kaczynski—commonly referred to as the Unabomber who was responsible for a string of anti-technology bombings from the late 70’s until the early 90’s—is widely circulated online and has been noted as a source of inspiration among RMVEs and domestic violent extremists (DVEs) throughout the past decade.^{27,28,a} Kaczynski has also served as a source of inspiration for an international environmental rights extremist movement known as Individualidades Tendiendo a lo Salvaje—Individuals Tending to Savagery—that is responsible for a string of indiscriminate anti-technology attacks since 2011 in Europe, Central, and South America.^{29,30,31,32,a}

~~(U)~~ Definitions

~~(U)~~ **Critical infrastructure** refers to sectors whose assets, systems, and networks, whether physical or virtual, are considered so vital to the United States that their incapacitation or destruction would have a debilitating effect on security, national economic security, national public health or safety, or any combination thereof.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ DHS defines a **domestic violent extremist (DVE)** as an individual based and operating primarily within the United States or its territories without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power who seeks to further political or social goals wholly or in part through unlawful acts of force or violence. The mere advocacy of political or social positions, political activism, use of strong rhetoric, or generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics may not constitute extremism, and may be constitutionally protected.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ DHS and NCTC define **racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism (RMVE)** as threats involving the potentially unlawful use or threat of force or violence, in furtherance of political and/or social agendas, which are deemed to derive from bias—often related to race or ethnicity—held by the actor against others, including a given population group.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ DHS defines an **environmental extremist** as individual who seeks, wholly or in part, through unlawful acts of force or violence to further their opposition to people, businesses, or government entities perceived to be damaging, destroying, or exploiting the natural environment. The mere advocacy of political or social positions, political activism, use of strong rhetoric, or generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics may not constitute extremism, and may be constitutionally protected.

~~(U)~~ Report Suspicious Activity

~~(U)~~ To report suspicious activity, law enforcement, Fire-EMS, private security personnel, and emergency managers should follow established protocols; all other personnel should call 911 or contact local law enforcement. Suspicious activity reports (SARs) will be forwarded to the appropriate fusion center and FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force for further action. For more information on the Nationwide SAR Initiative, visit <http://nsi.ncirc.gov/resources.aspx>.

~~(U)~~ Tracked by: HSEC-8.1, HSEC-8.2, HSEC-8.6, HSEC-8.8

(U) Source Summary Statement

~~(U//FOUO)~~ This *Homeland Intelligence Article* draws on DHS field operations intelligence reporting (FIR), open source intelligence reporting (OSIR), and reported media articles. We have **high confidence** in our FIR reporting since these reports come directly from official reports and shared information from our local law enforcement partners investigating the cell tower incidents directly. Similarly, we have **high confidence** that our OSIRs accurately capture statements and content that we have included in this assessment. We have **medium confidence** with reported open source media due to our inability to confirm all the information that was used and vetted in the reporting, especially from foreign-based reporting concerning incidents abroad.

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- 2 ~~(U//FOUO)~~ DHS; OSIR-04001-0605-20; "An encrypted instant messaging user published an image inciting others to destroy your local 5G towers and attack the infidels"; DOI: 02 APR 2020; Date Accessed: 8 May 2020; Source An encrypted instant messaging user; Extracted information is: ~~U//FOUO~~; Overall source classification is ~~U//FOUO~~.
- 3 ~~(U//FOUO)~~ DHS; OSIR-04001-0605-20; "A white national extremist channel on an encrypted messaging app shares a list of locations of high risk quarantined areas that would be most effected by a loss of electricity, then shares a video on destroying radio towers in response to COVID-19 quarantines"; DOI: 18 March 2020; Date Accessed: 8 May 2020; Extracted information is: ~~U//FOUO~~; Overall source classification is ~~U//LES~~.
- 4 ~~(U)~~ Vice; "Watch: People are burning down 5g phone towers over coronavirus conspiracy theories"; DOI: 14 April 2020; https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/m7qyy3/watch-people-are-burning-down-5g-cell-phone-towers-over-coronavirus-conspiracy-theories; Date Accessed: 8 May 2020; Source: US News Media; Extracted information is UNCLASSIFIED; Overall source information is UNCLASSIFIED.
- 5 ~~(U//FOUO)~~ DHS; FIR-0061-20; "Multiple Cell Phone Towers in Tennessee Damaged by Arson Attacks"; DOI: 4 December 2019 - 17 February 2020; Date Accessed: 8 May 2020; Source: An instant messaging user; Extracted information is: ~~U//FOUO~~; Overall source classification is ~~U//LES~~. (Downgraded information approved: DHS-RFI-01654-20).
- 6 ~~(U//FOUO)~~ DHS; FIR-0073-20; "Power Turned Off at Numerous Cell Phone Towers in western Tennessee"; DOI: 17 February 2020 - 14 April 2020; Date Accessed 8 May 2020; Extracted information is: ~~U//FOUO~~; Overall source classification is ~~U//LES~~.
- 7 ~~(U//FOUO)~~ Oregon TITAN Fusion Center Intelligence Bulletin; "Arson Damage at Oregon Cell Tower"; DOI 9 April 2020; Date Accessed: 8 May 2020; Extracted information is: ~~U//FOUO~~; Overall source classification is ~~U//LES~~.
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- 10 ~~(U)~~ BBC; "Coronavirus: 'Murder threats' to telecoms engineers over 5G"; DOI: 23 April 2020; <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-52395771>; Date Accessed: 8 May 2020; Source: US News Media; 0 Extracted information is UNCLASSIFIED; Overall source information is UNCLASSIFIED.
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- 12 ~~(U)~~ Al Jazeera; "Fighting fake news: The new front in the coronavirus battle"; DOI: 13 April 2020; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/fighting-fake-news-front-coronavirus-battle-200413164832300.html>; Date Accessed: 8 May 2020; Source: US News Media; Extracted information is UNCLASSIFIED; Overall source information is UNCLASSIFIED.
- 13 ~~(U//FOUO)~~ Oregon TITAN Fusion Center Intelligence Bulletin; "Arson Damage at Oregon Cell Tower"; DOI 9 April 2020; Date Accessed: 8 May 2020; Extracted information is: ~~U//FOUO~~; Overall source classification is ~~U//LES~~.
- 14 ~~(U)~~ CISA; "Communications Sector"; DOI: 4 December 2018; <https://www.cisa.gov/communications-sector> Date Accessed: 1 May 2020; Source: CISA Public Website; Extracted information is UNCLASSIFIED; Overall source information is UNCLASSIFIED.
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- 16 ~~(U)~~ World Wide Technology; "Utilize LTE Core Networks to Deliver 5G Speeds and Forge a Path to True 5G"; DOI: 3 April 2020; <https://www.wwt.com/article/utilize-lte-core-networks-to-deliver-5g-speeds-and-forge-a-path-to-true-5g>; Date Accessed: 8 May 2020; Extracted information is UNCLASSIFIED; Overall source information is UNCLASSIFIED.

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