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Coordinated with: CIA, DHS, DIA, FBI, NGA, NSA, State/INR

## **(U//FOUO) Envisioning the Emergence of Shia HVE Plotters in the US**

### **(U) Key Findings**

(U//FOUO) We assess that a Shia homegrown violent extremist (HVE) attack in the US is highly unlikely absent a catalyzing event that could galvanize some US-based Shia to engage independently in violence. Given sustained bilateral US-Iran tensions, the occurrence of such a catalyst could prompt Shia HVE activity relatively quickly, underscoring the benefits of early engagement with Shia communities about indicators of HVE radicalization. Potential triggering events for such Shia HVE violence include US military action against Iran and Lebanese Hizballah, Shia leadership or senior clerics sanctioning violence in the US, prominent Sunni government attacks on Shia, or high-profile anti-Shia activity in the US, judging from the results of a structured NCTC brainstorming exercise.

- (U//FOUO) There are no confirmed cases of Shia HVEs who plotted attacks in the US, probably because support for fundamentalist ideology is less prevalent among US Shia than US Sunnis, the hierarchical nature of Shiism, and the absence of a violent triggering event against Shia overseas or in the US. Even if Shia HVE plotting were to emerge, the pool of Shia HVEs would be smaller than that of Sunni HVEs, limiting the scale of the potential threat.

- (U//FOUO) We identified three key enablers that would probably increase the likelihood of Shia HVEs mobilizing to violence in the wake of a catalyzing event: the emergence of charismatic US-based Shia extremist voices, a persistent online Shia extremist cohort advocating violence in the US, and anti-US rhetoric from Shia media calling for violence in the US.

(U//FOUO) Increased community outreach to Shia community groups, mosques, and student organizations in the US about the signposts of extremist behavior could lead to the identification of future plotters and improve efforts to steer those individuals away from violence.

- (U//FOUO) Many existing law enforcement tools available to help thwart HVE plotting would be applicable to efforts to help identify and mitigate potential plotters, many of whose preoperational behaviors would probably resemble those of other HVE plotters, judging from the results of the NCTC exercise.
- (U//FOUO) Shia HVEs would be more likely than other HVEs to favor targets symbolic of Jewish interests or the Israeli or Saudi Arabian Governments, judging from the results of the NCTC exercise.

## (U) Scope Note

(U//FOUO) This Special Analysis Report explores the main global drivers that could lead to the emergence of US Shia HVEs and influence them to independently plot attacks in the Homeland. NCTC subject-matter experts on US HVEs, Iran, Hizballah, terrorist propaganda, and terrorist cyber actors conducted a structured analytic brainstorming session to explore the potential for Shia HVE plotters to emerge in the US.

- (U//FOUO) We assess that US-based HVEs are frequently motivated to engage in violence by a range of factors, including personal issues, which are often difficult to predict or identify before they conduct an attack. Therefore, we cannot discount the possibility that a single Shia HVE plotter could arise at any time, motivated by a unique set of circumstances and individualized grievances.

(U//FOUO) NCTC defines an HVE as a person of any citizenship who has lived and/or operated primarily in the US and advocates, is engaged in, or is preparing to engage in ideologically motivated terrorist activities in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization but is acting independently of direction. For the purposes of this assessment, we further define Shia HVEs as individuals who are inspired or influenced by state actors such as Iran, foreign terrorist organizations such as Hizballah, or Shia militant groups but who do not belong to these groups and are not directed by them.

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(U//FOUO) We assess that there is a minimal threat of Shia HVE plotting in the US in the current geopolitical environment and that the emergence of such threats would be an unprecedented event. There are no confirmed cases of US Shia HVEs who have plotted attacks in the Homeland, although at least one US-based individual with historical connections to Lebanese Hizballah independently tried to travel to fight with the group in Syria, according to court documents.

### (U//FOUO) Several Factors Inhibiting Emergence of US-Based Shia HVEs

(U//FOUO) We assess that there have been no Shia HVE plotters in the US primarily because levels of fundamentalism are lower among Shia than Sunnis in the US and because Shiism is hierarchical, limiting the potential that individual Shia will see violence as justified absent guidance from Shia leaders.

- (U) As of 2017, only 8 percent of US Shia believed that there was only one way to interpret Islam as opposed to 36 percent of US Sunnis, according to a Pew Research Poll conducted in 2017. In addition, Shia make up only 16 percent of the 3.5 million Muslims in the US, according to the same poll.
- (U//FOUO) Shiism is hierarchical, reducing the likelihood that members of Shia communities in the US would take violent action on behalf of the Iranian Government, Hizballah, or Shia militant groups without explicit direction from authority figures, such as the Iranian Supreme Leader or Hizballah's Secretary General. The absence of messaging by these and other important Shia figures

advocating violence in the US makes justifying violence on the basis of Shiism harder for an individual, in contrast with the prevalence of Sunni extremist groups that glorify violence against the US.

- (U//FOUO) Shia doctrine allows living among non-Muslims and encourages a contextualized interpretation of the Koran, in contrast with the traditional Sunni interpretations that favor a more originalist approach, judging from an academic source and polling of US Muslims. There also has not been an explicitly anti-Shia attack in the US—for example by Sunni HVEs or a prominent hate crime in the US by white supremacist extremists or other groups—causing the US Shia population to perceive the environment as hostile.

### (U//FOUO) Catalyzing Events Could Lead to Shia HVE Plotting ...

(U//FOUO) We have identified four catalyzing events that would probably inspire some Shia to engage in violence here without any explicit direction from the Iranian Government, Hizballah, or Shia militant groups. Although some of these events have occurred in the past without the emergence of Shia HVEs in the US, we assess that repeat occurrences of such incidents could contribute to or spark radicalization, judging from the results of the NCTC exercise.

- (U//FOUO) **US Military Actions Abroad Against Iran, Hizballah, or Shia Militants:** Direct US military action in Iran, sustained US operations against Hizballah in Lebanon or Syria, or the assassination of a senior

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Iranian or Hizballah leader perceived to have US involvement would be significant events that might push some US Shia to radicalize and consider retaliatory violence.

- (U//FOUO) **Shia Leaders and Clerics Call for Violence in the US:** If Iran's Supreme Leader removed the prohibition on conducting attacks in the US, the Supreme Leader or Hizballah's Secretary General called for attacks against the US, or senior Shia clerics issued fatwas urging attacks in the US, some US Shia might feel justified in conducting an attack here. Iranian Supreme Leader Khomeini issued a fatwa in 1989 calling for UK author Salman Rushdie's death, and Iran state-run media issued a \$600,000 dollar bounty on Rushdie in 2016, but there have been no confirmed attempts on his life.
- (U//FOUO) **Israeli Government or Sunni Killing of Shia Individuals:** If the Israeli or Saudi Government, or another Sunni government perceived as anti-Shia, conducted a large-scale lethal operation against Iran, Hizballah, or other Shia, Shia worldwide could respond with outrage that might serve as a triggering event for US-based Shia.
- (U//FOUO) **Anti-Shia Activity in the US:** A prominent or deadly attack in the US against Shia populations or symbols could spur retaliatory attacks against the perpetrators or a target perceived as complicit or accepting of the anti-Shia activity. Events such as disparaging depictions of Shia religious leaders that Shia Muslims perceive to be inflammatory and denigrating to their beliefs in the US could motivate some US Shia to become receptive to calls for violence.

### (U//FOUO) ... Particularly in Conjunction With Radicalization Enablers

(U//FOUO) We have identified several key external enablers that could emerge in the wake of one or more of the catalyzing events and would probably increase the number of Shia HVEs or accelerate their mobilization to violence by amplifying anti-US and pro-Shia rhetoric among Shia audiences in the US. Of the main potential sources of such amplifying rhetoric, only online Shia extremist ideology is apparent—primarily among Shia militant groups and their supporters—and most of this content is focused on issues in the Middle East and does not call for attacks in the Homeland.

- (U//FOUO) **US-Based Shia Extremist Voices:** Charismatic, English-speaking, US-based Shia radicalizers who have fought alongside Hizballah or Shia militant groups overseas or who have clerical bona fides, similar to deceased AQAP propagandist Anwar al-Aulaqi, could emerge to promote Shia grievances in the US and advocate attacks here.
- (U//FOUO) **Shia Cyber Actors:** Hackers and social media users associated with Iran, Hizballah, or Shia militant groups and independent Shia websites that promote Shia grievances in the US could conduct influence operations intended to sow discord in the US and influence sympathetic US persons to mobilize. The "Electronic Resistance," an Australia-based pro-Hizballah Twitter account with more than 16,000 followers, is not directly connected to Hizballah but has independently spread Shia extremist content on social media in English, according to an Australian press report.

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- (U) **Shia Media:** The emergence of Shia English-language media that sanctions retaliatory violence in the US, harshly critiques US military actions overseas, and highlights Shia grievances in the US could promote a more extremist Shia mind-set here. Iran, Hizballah, and Shia militant groups dominate existing Shia media and use their networks to publish pro-Shia content in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish for Western audiences, mostly online. Most of this content is focused on shifting popular opinion against US actions in the Middle East and in favor of Iran and its allies, judging from leadership statements, suggesting that media could easily be used to try to spur Shia resentment in the US.

### (U//FOUO) Characteristics of Shia HVE Plotting Would Probably Mirror Sunni HVEs

(U//FOUO) We assess that a Shia HVE plotter's preparations for a Homeland attack would resemble the preoperational activities of a Sunni-aligned HVE plotter, including weapons acquisition, the employment of operational security practices, and target surveillance, suggesting that traditional law enforcement tools and tripwires to spot individuals plotting violence would be applicable to Shia HVE attackers. Nevertheless, the Shia HVE threat would be far smaller than the threat from Sunni HVEs because Shia make up only 16 percent of the 3.5 million Muslims in the US, according to a Pew Research Poll conducted in 2017, and because would-be Shia HVEs would have access

to a far smaller body of radicalizing propaganda to motivate them to violence.

- (U//FOUO) Sunni HVE preparation for conducting attacks is typically an individualized process based on the plotter's resources and preferences rather than in response to ideological motivations, judging from our review of HVE cases since 2014. We expect that Shia HVEs would engage in similar activities to prepare for and mask their plots.

(U//FOUO) Shia HVEs may, however, diverge to some extent in target selection because they would be motivated to attack by a different set of grievances and actors than Sunni HVEs.

- (U//FOUO) Shia HVEs—depending on what caused their radicalization—would probably consider targets symbolic or representative of Jewish interests or the Israeli, Saudi Arabian, or US Governments in retaliation for actions overseas, because they generally perceive these governments as complicit or involved in anti-Shia actions, seeking to mirror targets that Iran and Hizballah have focused on. Prominent Iranian dissidents, including members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq or other Iranian opposition groups, probably would also be attractive targets for some Shia HVEs.
- (U//FOUO) If Shia-Sunni sectarian strife or conflicts abroad provoke Shia HVE radicalization in the US, Sunni mosques, community organizations, and notable clerics could also become the targets of Shia HVE plotting.

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### (U//FOUO) Opportunities To Detect and Prevent Shia HVE Plotting

(U//FOUO) Increased outreach to Shia community groups, mosques, and student organizations in the US about the signposts of extremist behavior could help prepare for the potential emergence of Shia HVE plotters and improve efforts to steer those individuals away from violence. Direct engagement with local law enforcement to build their understanding of Shia terrorism issues could help to detect and prevent future attacks.

- (U//FOUO) US Government agencies—in concert with local partners—could tailor outreach presentations for Shia communities similar to NCTC's Community Awareness Briefing, highlighting common signposts of radicalization and mobilization to violence. Such initiatives could spur more reporting on concerning behaviors and build rapport between local authorities and Shia communities.

- (U//FOUO) Given the robust presence of Shia student communities at several prominent US universities, there are opportunities to directly engage with Shia youths likely to be most vulnerable to radicalization. DHS and NCTC could adapt existing engagements on campus that focus on security issues and radicalization indicators to be delivered to Shia university groups.
- (U//FOUO) US Government agencies could educate local law enforcement on the primary grievances influencing Shia HVE radicalization and on any Shia propaganda and messaging contributing to their radicalization, similar to the longstanding efforts to make law enforcement agencies aware of key drivers of Sunni HVE radicalization and of prominent al-Qa'ida and ISIS messaging.

## (U//FOUO) Key Indicators Could Signal Shia HVE Plotting in the US

(U//FOUO) We have identified indicators that we assess could provide warning that Shia homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) are plotting in the US in the aftermath of a catalyzing event that might spur Shia HVE violence. The indicators are presented in order of how likely each indicator's occurrence is to uniquely reflect that US Shia HVEs are plotting—its diagnosticity.

**DIAGNOSTICITY KEY:** ● HIGH ● MEDIUM ● LOW

INDICATOR	DIAGNOSTICITY
(U//FOUO) Increase in US Shia religious leaders contacting FBI or local law enforcement with concerns that community members are exhibiting signs of radicalization	●
(U//FOUO) Online Shia extremists contacting US-based Shia social media users to encourage retaliatory violence in the Homeland	●
(U//FOUO) Increased anti-US messages on social media platforms by US Shia persons, such as discussion of Shia grievances against the US and calls for violent action	●
(U//FOUO) US-based Shia cultural centers or Shia student associations inviting extremist voices to speak and espouse violence in the US	●
(U//FOUO) Violent rhetoric calling for attacks in the US at rallies by local Shia communities, such as during celebrations of Iran-sponsored political holidays, including Qods Day	●
(U//FOUO) New websites run by US Shia—independent of Iranian or Hizballah direction—promoting Shia grievances in the US and advocating retaliation against the US Government for actions abroad or at home	●
(U//FOUO) Meetings between US Shia and foreign Shia who have foreign-fighter experience and advocate violence	●
(U//FOUO) US Shia viewing of online content of English-speaking Shia advocating violence in the US or meeting with other Shia with foreign-fighter experience	●