



## **BLACK HEBREW ISRAELITES: FROM SOFT VIOLENCE TO KINETIC ACTION**

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### **PURPOSE STATEMENT**

The purpose of this briefing note is to examine the escalation to violence of Violent Transnational Social Movements (VTSM), specifically the Black Hebrew Israelites (BHI). The BHI is a more than 100-year-old group that has arguably been in the political background for the past two decades and appears to have escalated from using soft violence tactics to kinetic violence after the Jersey City Deli Shooting. This briefing note primarily focuses on the BHI and their role as a VTSM that uses soft violence and symbolic power as a means to deliver their message. For further information on VTSMs, please visit *the Canadian Centre for Identity-Based Conflict*.

### **SECURITY PROBLEM**

The BHI movement, despite being over 100 years old, has infrequently been publicly studied or reported on for the past twenty years. However, they have now moved into the forefront of the conversation on VTSMs. This is because the BHI arguably uses soft violence and symbolic power to spread their messages. On January 18, 2019, tensions were inflamed between three groups with distinct identities. The BHI appeared to have used racial slurs based on identity and social hierarchy against the Covington Catholic School boys that were wearing “Make America Great Again” hats (Chappell, 2019). On December 10, 2019, a shooting in Jersey City resulting in four deaths was allegedly linked to the BHI through police investigation. The BHI’s escalation to kinetic violence has arguably been overlooked previously due to the contemporary focus on Islamic Extremism. In this case, this focus can result in a limited analysis of right-wing extremism and other VTSMs’ potential for kinetic violence.

## KEY FACTS

On December 10, 2019, three civilians and a police officer were killed by two suspects – possibly a third suspect which has yet to be confirmed at the time of this note – allegedly linked to the BHI in a mass shooting in Jersey City that erupted as police were investigating a rental van that was believed to be linked to an unrelated murder. After shooting the officer, the three suspects escaped in the rental van and deliberately barricaded themselves in the nearby C Kasher Supermarket. Subsequently, three civilians – two of which were members of the Hasidic community – and the two suspects were found dead inside the supermarket. Following the shootout, a pipe bomb and manifesto were found inside the rental van. According to the *New York Times*, one of the suspects appears to have published anti-Semitic and anti-police posts online (Gold & Watkins, 2019).

According to the *Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry* (CARM), the Black Jewish Identity movement represented by the BHI have the following traits (i.e., polycentric, reticulate, and segmentary) which are consistent with the VTSM model (Kelshall, 2018; Turner & Slick, 2019). According to CARM, the BHI currently do not appear to have a primary leader or a central headquarters. The estimation of members ranges between 40,000 to 200,000, and when analyzed, appear to be from diverse backgrounds and utilize various sect names which function in fragmentary ways (e.g., Commandment Keepers, The Law Keepers, House of Judah, and African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem).

According to Turner and Slick (2019), the BHI movement, which appears to have no official writings, is arguably guided by various religious writings when deemed appropriate for their doctrine; these religious writings include the following: King James' version of the Bible, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Book of Enoch & Book of Jasher, with some BHI using the Talmud. Moreover, Turner and Slick (2019) also note the BHI seem to claim Hispanics, Native Americans, and Negroes as the real Israelites. The BHI posit that white people are seen as conspirators who attempt to persecute black people and hide their true identity as Israelites. Many BHI members see white people as almost subhuman, consequently dividing groups and leaving the potential to clash with other groups who may believe that their race is superior to others (Turner & Slick, 2019, para. 9–11).

The last known publicly accessible report on the BHI was in 1999, which was authored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under Director Louis

Freeh (FBI, 1999). The BHI have no known extremist affiliations, but they have allegedly participated in violent acts in the 1990s (FBI, 1999, p. 43). They were also the subjects of allegations of racial supremacy by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) (SPLC, 2008).

Analysis conducted by CASIS and CCIBC researchers focused on the BHI Facebook page, *The Black Hebrew Israelites United*, assessed the BHI's online presence. The BHI Facebook group has garnered around 39,971 likes and has received a lot of attention for allegedly espousing racist commentary and posts. Many people are shaming the page administrators for going after children and promoting racism. Since the incident with the Covington Catholic School boys in January 2019, the BHI Facebook page has increased by 6000 likes as of December 11, 2019. Before January 18, 2019, the date of the incident, every one of the 14 viewable reviews had been positive. Since then, reviews of the Facebook page have been negative. As of December 11, 2019, the overall recommendation of the BHI Facebook page is 1.7 out of 5, based on the ratings of 313 users.

## BACKGROUND

The BHI were established between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries, claiming to be descendants of Hebrews in the Bible (Kestenbaum, 2019). Eligon (2019) notes that the BHI spread their message by preaching at street corners and that the BHI allege that there are twelve chosen tribes among God's people and they are all black (Eligon, 2019, para. 12). In 1999, the FBI authored a report called *Project MEGIDDO*, which gauged the likelihood of religious movements, who had significant attachments to the year 2000, committing violence against the general population (FBI, 1999). In the report, the FBI mentioned that "certain segments of the BHI movement were preparing for a race war to close the millennium" (FBI, 1999, p. 43). In 2008, the BHI were declared black supremacists by the SPLC (SPLC, 2018). In their Winter 2008 issue, the SPLC noted that the BHI movement had extremist offshoots who were prone to violence and professed racial idealism. The SPLC indicated that there is a "rising extremist sector within the Hebrew Israelite movement whose adherents believe that Jews are devilish impostors" (SPLC, 2008, para. 5).

In January 2019, BHI activists gathered on the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. They allegedly shouted racist slurs to Indigenous American protesters at the Indigenous Peoples March, as well as students from a Catholic Boys School participating in the March for Life (Mervosh & Rueb, 2019; O'Connor, 2019).

In response, the students were seen chanting school songs and dancing (Bekiempis, 2019). A Vietnam War veteran and Indigenous activist, Nathan Phillips, allegedly attempted to diffuse the standoff between the Covington Catholic School boys and the BHI activists (Bekiempis, 2019; Mervosh & Rueb, 2019; O'Connor, 2019). In coverage of the incident and subsequent video analysis, Bekiempis (2019) observes the incident appeared to involve several Elders, with Phillips among them, that sang songs while beating ceremonial drums surrounded by Covington students who appeared to be shouting at the Native American Elders. It is unclear what the boys were shouting, but some allegedly chanted "build the wall," alluding to American President Donald Trump's campaign promise to build a wall along the Mexican border (Bekiempis, 2019, para. 8-11). A number of students in the video could be seen wearing "Make America Great Again" hats (Chappell, 2019). This incident, combined with the New Jersey shootings, conceivably shows an escalation to violence. It appears that a small percentage of the BHI commit violent acts, while the larger group may not advocate for violence (SPLC, 2008).

### **KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

CASIS and CCIBC analysts conducted a structured analysis of the BHI incident. The key considerations and implications now presented are based on that analysis. CASIS & CCIBC developed the PINEHURST model to examine how far along a VTSM is from soft violence (hate rhetoric) to violent actions (kinetic violence) (Kelshall & Neal, 2019). Based on this model, the BHI is escalating from soft to kinetic violence. Their current tactics for social engagement are becoming confrontational, they have a more coherent focus on openly degrading others and are aggressively spreading their message to an ever-increasing geographic range; specifically, there has been evidence of the BHI being active in the United States and Canada.

Looking at the events that unfolded at the Lincoln Memorial on January 18, 2019, it is clear that tensions between three groups with very different political agendas were inflamed by competing conceptions of what it means to be American (NY Times, 2019). While there was no kinetic violence, the implication of three groups in conflict suggests the presence of group vs. group conflict outlined in the definition of 5th Generation (5G) Warfare (Kelshall, 2018). Kelshall (2018) notes that identity-based groups do not tend to fight the state (like previous generations of warfare) but rather, fight other identity-based groups for the purpose of preserving or promoting their identity. These groups, for one reason or another, feel that they have suffered a loss of identity, equality, and culture,

and therefore, they fight each other with any means (Kelshall, 2018). Therefore, contemporary violence is arguably shaped by VTSMs addressing cause-based issues founded on identity dominance, preservation, or maintenance.

Within the context of 5G Warfare and BHI, Hauck (2019) notes that “the two suspects in a deadly shooting at a cemetery and kosher supermarket in Jersey City held anti-Semitic views and had expressed interest in the Black Hebrew Israelite group” (para. 1). Moreover, the BHI group includes factions that have been designated as "hate groups" by watchdogs including the Southern Poverty Law Center and the AntiDefamation League. Anti-Semitic Black Hebrew Israelites believe that white people are agents of Satan, that white Jews are "impostors" and that blacks are God's true “chosen people” (Hauck, 2019, para. 13). Based on these observations, the BHI could be considered an identity-based group, as found in 5G Warfare, whose allegiance is with self and not state.

The BHI’s actions appear to be consistent with the Brixton UK’s BHI rhetoric expressed during an interview; the leader of the group, Ashan Ban-Yahawadah, is noted as saying that “we want the police to get involved because we’re the real policemen... we’re the real lawgivers... we’re reading out of the book of the law” (Weich, 2019, para. 11). This could suggest that the BHI is functioning as a transnational social movement, sharing a common message. This is consistent with CASIS and CCIBC analytical findings noted above, with the BHI showing no specific leadership and morphing into different segmented groups when they are scrutinized.

### **ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES TO BE CONSIDERED**

While there appears to be overwhelming evidence of BHI’s influence on the two shooters, the need for immediate decision making with an active shooter requires incident commanders consider possible alternative perspectives. These perspectives, presented below, are based on experienced criminologists, national security experts, and public safety personnel who have worked as first responders. Based on this collective knowledge and experience, the following alternatives are proposed:

- Could the Jersey City shooting have been a drug deal gone bad? This perspective is supported by the seemingly random encounter of a police officer on patrol finding people parked and requiring a curb side inspection.

- Is this a suicide by cop scenario? Although the suspects did barricade themselves in the supermarket in the moment of the assessment, the suspects could have made the decision to “go down with a fight” and not be taken alive.

The remaining two alternative perspectives are found in historical reflection most notably:

- Is there a serial killer? During the summer of 2019, a taxi driver had been murdered in New York City with similar wound patterns. It is possible that the taxi (livery driver) murder was the start of or continuation of a serial killing spree targeting taxi operators who are from the Middle East (Roy, 2019).
- Could the Jersey City shooting be a test run for a future terrorist attack? The New York City World Trade Centre attack (1993) and Oklahoma City bombing at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building (1995) had similar rental vehicles carrying explosives.
- Are the perpetrators of the violence affiliated with another group that we are unaware of thus far? This could have been an organized crime or gang-related incident that quickly escalated.

### **WHAT IS NOT KNOWN**

It is not known whether the 1999 FBI report and its findings are still relevant in 2019. Despite the BHI being a 100-year-old organization, not much is publicly known about them. Therefore, it is currently unknown whether the BHI will act on their rhetoric/doomsday messages. Furthermore, despite a publicly available report on the extremist tendencies of the BHI, there appears to be no follow-up reports or actions against the BHI thus far. It is also unclear as to whether the BHI have a larger following that is motivated to respond to accusations of racial supremacy or identity-based violence. A question of interest is whether the ‘extremist fringe’ sects of the BHI have a strong following transnationally. There appear to be cohorts of BHI in Israel and in the US, but their affiliations and levels of cooperation are so far undiagnosed.

### **NEXT STEPS**

- There appears to be little publicly accessible information from law enforcement agencies on the BHI movement and are not obviously the

subject of extensive research. It might be prudent for law enforcement to expedite a public report on current BHI behaviours and motivations.

- The BHI seem to have been largely ignored as a fringe religious group. However, as indicated by the SPLC and the FBI, the movement has had extremist elements in the past; such elements should therefore be monitored for possible extremist or violent activities if they are not already.
- With the escalation to kinetic violence seen in the 2019 Jersey City shooting, an environmental scan could be conducted to determine the potential for violence from other VTSMs in retaliation. Although hate crime in the United States must be proven to have prejudice before being classified as a crime, incidents with unknown perpetrators – including online incidents – should arguably be documented in a national centre to geographically mark soft and kinetic violence.

### **Addendum**

On December 16, 2019, an allegedly Muslim woman verbally assaulted a man wearing a kippah (or yarmulke) and physically attacked a female named Lihi Aharon at a New York City subway station in Manhattan. According to Aharon (2019), who identifies herself as Jewish and Israeli, the female attacker told the man that last week's shooting attack at Jersey City's JC Kosher Supermarket was "great." She then added that the shooters should have killed more Jews, according to Aharon's account of the man's comments (Aharon, 2019). This event could be a symptom of the proliferation of the BHI movement's doctrinal messaging. Their allegedly anti-Semitic rhetoric has arguably activated an echo-chamber which further demonstrates the reticulate nature of the movement, consistent with the VTSM model (Kelshall, 2018).



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