

# A Climate of Terror?

Climate Change as a Potential Ideological Driver of Terrorism

Marcus A. Boyd, Ph.D.  
*University of Maryland*

# SUMMARY

## Research Foci

- ▶ Adoption of climate change rhetoric in support of the primary ideology of a group/movement.
- ▶ The embrace of lethal terrorist tactics by environmental extremists against industrialized nations and corporations in response to the increasing human suffering and death tolls due to climate events.
- ▶ Climate change crystallizing previously disparate and highly localized grievances around a unifying narrative, thus increasing mobilization and transnationality.
- ▶ As more and more governments (and IGOs) take action to counter climate change, the possibility for climate change denial to become an ideological driver of violence.

## Key Insights and Findings

- ▶ During the 1990s and early 2000s the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) conducted a series of attacks that resulted in millions of dollars of property damage and serve as the foundation for understanding climate change as a potential ideological driver of terrorism.
- ▶ Presently, there is very little support for significant acts of violence (against persons or property) within the mainstream and leftist environmentalist movement.
- ▶ Significant support exists for continued non-violent civil resistance methods to convince governments and industry to change policies. Support for tactics generally includes blockades, occupations, and selective property damage. Furthermore, while there is substantial support for non-violent civil disobedience, support for property destruction remains low.
- ▶ “Petro-masculinity” coupled with climate denialism and a variety of conspiracy theories have led to specific instances of targeted violence, terroristic tactics, and violence against climate activists, indigenous groups, and elected officials.
- ▶ Neo-Luddites, the Anti-Technology Movement, and “eco-fascists” currently present the most significant concern due to their support for violence against humans and desire to destroy technology assets.
- ▶ The Covid-19 pandemic has caused an amount of disillusionment within the mainstream environmentalist movement, and this may shape future ideological and tactical considerations.



# CONTENTS

<u>BACKGROUND</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>EVIDENCE REVIEW</u>	<u>2</u>
Relevant Extreme Ideologies	2
Leftist Ideologies	2
Right Ideologies	3
The Anti-Technology Movement	4
<u>BOTTOM LINE SUMMARY</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>RECOMMENDATIONS</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>SUGGESTED DATA SOURCES</u>	<u>6</u>

## Background

Answering the question of whether climate change will be an ideological driver of political violence and terrorism is, in some respects, simple to answer. The Earth Liberation Front (ELF) has already demonstrated that factions of the environmentalist movement can become violent and cause large-scale destruction. In October 1998, ELF members caused 12 million dollars in damage to the Two Elk Lodge and various other buildings and chairlifts at the Vail Ski Resort in Vail, Colorado. If a similar attack were to

*“In October 1998, ELF members caused 12 million dollars in damage to the Two Elks Lodge.... If a similar attack were to happen today, the costs would total over \$20.5 million with inflation”.*

happen today, the costs would total over \$20.5 million in damage with inflation. Throughout the late 1990s, ELF property destruction regularly amassed over \$1 million in damages. In the early 2000s, their levels of property destruction continued. An attack on a University of Washington research center cost over \$7 million in property damage. They set fire to 30 SUVs at a car dealership totaling another million dollars in damages and burned down a mansion in Colorado that caused \$2.5 million in damage. In 2006 and 2008 they destroyed more luxury housing comprising an additional \$10 million in damages across multiple home sites.

A significant Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) response brought about the arrests of multiple key members of the movement and these property damage events have significantly declined. Ted Kaczynski, popularly known as the Unabomber, presents another set of extreme environmental beliefs – in his case primitivism, hatred of modern technology, and industrialization – serving

as a motive for terroristic violence. Unlike ELF, who intentionally avoided killing people, Kaczynski methodically targeted individuals for assassination. In total, he killed three and injured 23 others in a series of bombings that lasted from 1978 through 1995.

Despite these above facts, terrorist incidents where climate change or environmentalism serve as the primary ideological force remain rare. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) Project identified over 10,000 climate-related events between March 2019 and March 2022. Of those, 231 involved some level of violence. Eight climate-related events are classified as armed clashes (5) or explosions (3).

There are individuals and groups who espouse violent climate-related rhetoric, but we do not currently judge them to pose a major threat to individuals or infrastructure. However, continued inaction will likely increase climate-related radicalization (see rapid review #3). Perceived and real existential threats are a vital component of violent radicalization. As more individuals suffer the consequences of climate change, we should expect increased radicalization and potential violence.

***Perceived and real existential threats are a vital component of violent radicalization. As more individuals suffer the consequences of climate change, we should expect increased radicalization and violence.***

Presently, there are still opportunities to mitigate threats to infrastructure and/or harden infrastructure to minimize peril. This could be achieved by blending mainstream environmentalist policy solutions (e.g. increased use of renewable materials/resources and divestment from polluting industries) coupled with practical capital investments. Some effects of climate change will be unavoidable, and we should expect climate-related terrorism, but we assess that there remains an opportunity to mitigate the overall reach and saliency of violent rhetoric and direct action.

# Evidence Review

## Relevant Extreme Ideologies

The urge to commit violence to achieve political or societal goals exists on the fringes of all ideologies. Many individuals openly espouse or quietly retain radical beliefs. In open, democratic societies it is generally not a crime to express radical beliefs. However, a sliver of radicals will go on to act violently to bring about their vision/goals.

There are three broadly defined groups of concern: **violent far-left environmentalists, far-right climate denialists, and the anti-technology movement**. Facets within each of these subdivisions have argued explicitly for violent actions in one form or another.

## Leftist Ideologies

Climate change is an inherently political issue and has been a consistently controversial topic, particularly in industrialized and post-industrial nations. Center-left and left political parties have been, and continue to be, the main champions of proactive climate change policy. This is also true for the environmental activist community. Two surveys of environmentalists conducted in Sweden and France showed that participants overwhelmingly identify as center-left or left.<sup>1</sup> These same surveys show that within the mainstream activist community there is very little support for violent behavior (property destruction) and support for violence against humans is virtually non-existent. Three-quarters of Swedish respondents do believe that radical changes to society are necessary to prevent irrevocable harm.<sup>2</sup> But the intellectual leaders of the climate movement are not arguing for direct action or a repeat of the mass destruction committed by ELF. Instead, they are focusing on using nonviolent civil resistance to pressure governments to use their authority to coerce private firms.<sup>3</sup> Further, now that the environmentalist movement has transitioned to a climate justice paradigm, violent direct action, including sabotage (ecotage), is antithetical to their overall goals.<sup>4</sup>

*“... within the mainstream activist community there is very little support for violent behavior (property destruction) and support for violence against humans is virtually non-existent”.*

The effects of the pandemic on the mainstream (and fringe) environmentalist movement remain to be seen. Prior to the pandemic, Extinction Rebellion and Greta Thunberg’s Fridays for Future were finding real popular support in the streets, but the pandemic may have depleted activists of their energy.<sup>5</sup> And yet, ACLED data shows that over 3,000 climate and environmental movement protests occurred in 2020 during the height of the pandemic. The same data shows that over 5,000 protests occurred in 2021 across the globe. This suggests that the movement remains strong. ACLED data also shows an increase in the number of climate/environment-related riots from 38 in 2020 to 58 in 2021. Because of the pandemic, it is impossible to know if these increases in protests and riots were the result of increased frustration or if 2020 levels were artificially decreased. Regardless, the pandemic has diverted attention from climate change. As grievances against the government and polluting industries continue to grow, some on the fringes will likely feel an existential threat and feel compelled to direct action.

<sup>1</sup> Pederby, T. (2021). Fifty Shades of Green: Ideological divides in the environmental movement; Gaborit, M. (2020). Disobeying in Time of Disaster: Radicalism in the French Climate Mobilizations. *Youth and Globalization*, 2(2), 232-250.

<sup>2</sup> Pederby (2021)

<sup>3</sup> Hallam, Roger. 2019. *Common Sense for the 21st Century: Only Nonviolent Rebellion Can Now Stop Climate Breakdown and Social Collapse*. London: Chelsea Green.

<sup>4</sup> Hornborg, A. (2021). A pandemic can do what a movement cannot. *Social Anthropology*, 29(1), 210.

<sup>5</sup> Hornborg (2021); Bond, P. “Defense of climate justice in the Glasgow Agreement,” *Memo: Política, Economía y Poder*, 31 October 2021.

## Right Ideologies

Mainstream conservative political parties in many countries have downplayed the importance of climate change.<sup>6</sup> This sentiment has been expressed in numerous ways. Mainstream conservative think tanks and politicians have consistently called environmental science “junk science”<sup>7</sup> and argue for “human exemptionalism,” that is, that a combination of the free market, scientific advancement, and technology will resolve whatever climate-related issues we face.<sup>8</sup>

This climate skeptic and denial rhetoric have fostered pro-fossil fuel, anti-environmentalist sentiment in some nations. These movements have been called “pipeline populism”<sup>9</sup> and “petro-masculinity.”<sup>10</sup> In short, by tying polluting extractive industries and existing “car culture” to masculinity, climate change legislation and calls for renewable energy and resources become a threat to masculinity. In Canada, these fears have merged with certain conspiracy theories and been linked to incidents of violence against First Nations (water and land protectors) and death threats against elected officials.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, there is scant evidence to tie mainstream conservative discourse to acts of violence or terrorism, but as divestment from fossil fuels continues there is a possibility of retributive violence against governments and firms. While not in scope for this rapid review, it is possible that the very real threat of losing employment will present a real or perceived existential threat to some individuals. Conversely, building off the nascent stochastic terrorism it is possible for “sociopolitical commentary,” in the form of continued climate denial, to foster increased levels of violence.<sup>12</sup>

Far-right movements, namely ecofascism do present a clear and significant concern given the recent increased interest within far-right social media communities and the existing evidence of violent intent. The terrorists who committed the Christchurch terrorist attacks and the El Paso attack, both in 2019, made direct and indirect references to ecofascist ideologies in their manifestos.<sup>13</sup> The Christchurch attacker claimed the ecofascist title in his manifesto and the El Paso attacker discussed issues related to population pressures and “great replacement” ideologies. Campion defines ecofascism as “a reactionary and revolutionary ideology that champions the regeneration of an imagined community through a return to a romanticised, ethnopluralist vision of the natural order.”<sup>14</sup> Ecofascists generally link a version of ethnonationalism with ecological goals. This will include claims that immigration harms “native soil” and “native blood.”<sup>15</sup> But unlike the fascist race-based ideologies that developed out of Nazism, ecofascism argues a radical right ecology whereby cultures, ethnicities, and races must maintain barriers to protect “natural diversity” and that the “correct” path forward is not multicultural.<sup>16</sup> By this reasoning, immigrants can be seen as the root cause of ecological disasters.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>6</sup> McCright, A. M., & Dunlap, R. E. (2011). Cool dudes: The denial of climate change among conservative white males in the United States. *Global environmental change*, 21(4), 1163-1172; Krange, O., Kaltenborn, B. P., & Hultman, M. (2019). Cool dudes in Norway: climate change denial among conservative Norwegian men. *Environmental Sociology*, 5(1), 1-11; Dunlap, R. E., & Jacques, P. J. (2013). Climate change denial books and conservative think tanks: Exploring the connection. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(6), 699-731; Jylhä, K. M., Cantal, C., Akrami, N., & Milfont, T. L. (2016). Denial of anthropogenic climate change: Social dominance orientation helps explain the conservative male effect in Brazil and Sweden. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 98, 184-187.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques, P. J., Dunlap, R. E., & Freeman, M. (2008). The organisation of denial: Conservative think tanks and environmental scepticism. *Environmental politics*, 17(3), 349-385; Herrick, C. N. (2001). Junk science and environmental policy: obscuring public debate with misleading discourse. *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly*, 21(2/3), 11-16.

<sup>8</sup> Cairns Jr, J. (1999). Exemptionalism vs environmentalism: the crucial debate on the value of ecosystem health. *Aquatic Ecosystem Health & Management*, 2(3), 331-338.

<sup>9</sup> Trew, S. “Pipeline populism,” *Monitor*, July/August 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Daggett, C. (2018). Petro-masculinity: Fossil fuels and authoritarian desire. *Millennium*, 47(1), 25-44.

<sup>11</sup> Greaves, W. (2021). Climate change and security in Canada. *International Journal*, 76(2), 183-203.

<sup>12</sup> Amman, M., & Meloy, J. R. (2021). Stochastic Terrorism. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 15(5), 2-13.

<sup>13</sup> Campion, K. (2021): Defining Ecofascism: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Interpretations in the Extreme Right, Terrorism and Political Violence, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2021.1987895

<sup>14</sup> Campion (2021), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Zimmerman, M.E. (1995). “The Threat of Eco-Fascism,” *Social Theory and Practice* 21, no. 2, 211.

<sup>16</sup> Campion (2020).

<sup>17</sup> Lawton, G. (2019). “The Rise of Real Eco-Fascism,” *New Scientist* 243, no. 3243.

Ecofascism fosters significant interest from the far-right and alt-right because they can launder their ideologies through the lens of ecology and environmentalism. The added pseudo-scientific rationalization of racist, ethnocentric beliefs has aided the far-right and alt-right in mainstreaming their beliefs. Ecofascist ideas are extensive and expand into the below-mentioned Anti-Technology Movement.<sup>18</sup>

## The Anti-Technology Movement

There also exists a difficult-to-classify using traditional political typologies (liberal, moderate, conservative, etc.) set of actors who are, at present, the most concerning. Aspects of the Anti-Technology Movement (ATM) are explicitly violent, neo-Luddites. Ted Kaczynski is an exemplar of this movement. Aspects of ATM ideas and interests overlap with mainstream left-wing environmentalists and far-right ecofascists. ATM desires the wholesale destruction of technologies.<sup>19</sup> The Radical Environmentalist Milieu is the subset of the ATM that explicitly merge environmentalism and violence. Historic groups including Animal Liberation Front, the Revolutionary Cells-Animal Liberation Brigades, EarthFirst!, and the Earth Liberation Front are typically classified within this grouping.<sup>20</sup> These former groups advocated for direct action and violence, but explicitly avoided violence against humans. This was obviously not the case for Kaczynski and the currently active Individualistas Tendiendo a lo Salvaje (Individualist Tending Towards the Wild; ITS) who, since the early 2010s, have committed numerous indiscriminate acts of violence in Mexico. ITS describes itself as being “an anti-industrial, anti-technological, and anti-civilization group formed by radical environmentalists.”<sup>21</sup>

ITS activities are largely overshadowed by the extreme violence of Mexican narco-trafficking cartels and, as such, have managed to operate without significant resistance or government response. ITS is unique amongst currently operating groups because of its explicit nihilist viewpoint and desire to commit unequivocally violent, terroristic acts. Within the last decade, ITS has bombed universities, including the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education (Tec de Monterrey), and murdered a researcher at the Biotechnology Institute at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.<sup>22</sup>

The emerging linkages between technophobia and environmentalism are concerning. A recent academic article suggests that by 2040, this will represent the next “wave” of terrorism.<sup>23</sup> This builds off the “waves of terrorism” thesis that suggests forms of terrorism come in waves. Rapoport, who developed the theory traces an initial anarchist wave in the 1880s followed by anti-colonial terrorism, then New Left terrorism, and finally a wave of religious terrorism.<sup>24</sup> Other research suggests that Animal Rights Extremists who were active as of 2017 and Deep Green Resistance are a potential bioterrorism threat.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Loadenthal, M. (2022). Feral fascists and deep green guerrillas: infrastructural attack and accelerationist terror. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1-40.

<sup>19</sup> Lubrano, M. (2021). Stop the Machines: How Emerging Technologies are Fomenting the War on Civilization. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1-17.

<sup>20</sup> Lubrano (2021); Hirsch-Hoefler, S., & Mudde, C. (2014). “Ecoterrorism”: Terrorist threat or political ploy?. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37(7), 586-603.

<sup>21</sup> Lubrano (2021); Loadenthal, M. (2022). Feral fascists and deep green guerrillas: infrastructural attack and accelerationist terror. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1-40.

<sup>22</sup> Lubrano (2021); Spadaro, P. A. (2020). Climate change, environmental terrorism, eco-terrorism and emerging threats. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 13(4), 58-80.

<sup>23</sup> Torres-Soriano, M. R., & Toboso-Buezo, M. (2019). Five terrorist dystopias. *The International Journal of Intelligence, Security, and Public Affairs*, 21(1), 49-65.

<sup>24</sup> Rapoport, D. C., Cronin, A. K., & Ludes, J. (2004). The four waves of modern terrorism. *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press 2004) p, 54, 3-11.

<sup>25</sup> Spadaro (2020); Kallenborn, Z., & Bleek, P. C. (2020). Avatars of the Earth: Radical Environmentalism and Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Weapons. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(5), 351-381.



## Bottom Line Summary

We are ahead of the curve, but only just. In 2021, five countries experienced temperatures above 50° Celsius.<sup>26</sup> Recently, the United Nations Climate Change Executive Secretary, Patricia Espinosa, stated that by 2100, half of the population in the Middle East and North Africa will face “super extreme” weather events with temperatures up to 60° C.<sup>27</sup> The emerging heatwaves alone will cause significant loss of life before out-migration and temperature rise makes these regions completely unlivable. Consider a future where Muslims are unable to visit Mecca, Jews are unable to visit the Western Wall, and Christians are unable to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Economically, how does global trade continue without access to the Suez Canal and the Middle East’s oil and natural gas deposits?<sup>28</sup>

On April 22, 2022, Wynn Bruce, an apparent Buddhist practitioner and climate activist self-immolated in front of the U.S. Supreme Court ostensibly because of his distress over climate inaction.<sup>29</sup> Previously, in 2018, a lawyer and climate activist, David Buckel, self-immolated in a public park in Brooklyn, New York. According to news reporting, both Bruce and Buckel were influenced by the similar actions of Vietnamese monks during the Vietnam War.<sup>30</sup> Bruce’s friend, a Zen Buddhist priest based in Denver called his suicide “a deeply fearless act of compassion to bring attention to climate crisis.”<sup>31</sup> The priest was subsequently quoted in *The New York Times* that “people are being driven to extreme amounts of climate grief and despair.” Acts of self-immolation are shocking acts that, as acts of protest, sit between non-violent civil resistance and violence.<sup>32</sup> In this context, they are inherently political acts – the images of Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation are indelibly linked to Vietnam and Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation is credited with sparking Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution.<sup>33</sup>

The oncoming environmental and humanitarian disasters will likely radicalize individuals to violence. There is empirical evidence that famines and other externalities of climate change likely increase conflict and “social disturbances.”<sup>34</sup> We cannot know what the extent of climate-related terrorism will be, that will require further study with different methods. But we do know that the drivers of radicalization and extremism are present on the extremes of the left and the right. Presently, this appears most commonly on the left in the form of despair and self-destruction while on the right it appears as nihilism, broadly defined. Climate and/or environmental motivated terrorism is an area of near-future concern.

## Recommendations

There is a clear opportunity to decrease the likelihood of climate change becoming a leading ideological driver behind terrorism. What follows are a series of near- and long-term recommendations.

- **Futures Workshop:** Use causal layered analysis to plan for multiple potential futures, develop narratives, strategies, and policy options

<sup>26</sup> ≥122° F; Cappucci, M. “Record heat bakes Middle East as temperatures top 125 degrees,” *Washington Post*, 7 June 2021.

<sup>27</sup> ≥140° F; Kennedy, R. “‘Grave threat to life’: UN climate chief issues warning for MENA,” *Al Jazeera*, 26 March 2022.

<sup>28</sup> It is possible to counter with the opening of Arctic waterways as Arctic ice melts and oil and natural gas deposits in the Arctic.

<sup>29</sup> Bradbury, S. “Boulder climate activist dies after apparent act of protest outside U.S. Supreme Court on Earth Day,” *The Denver Post*, 24 April 2022;

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Uzzell, J. (2012). Biopolitics of the Self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. *e-international relations*, 7; Kallio, K. P., & Häkli, J. (2017). Geosocial lives in topological polis: Mohamed Bouazizi as a political agent. *Geopolitics*, 22(1), 91-109; Hope, M. (1967). The reluctant way: self-immolation in Vietnam. *The Antioch Review*, 27(2), 149-163; Lauesen, C. M. (2019). *Contemplation in Fire: Immolation, Photography, and Vietnam 1963*. Stanford University.

<sup>34</sup> Damette, O., & Goutte, S. (2020). Beyond climate and conflict relationships: new evidence from copulas analysis.



- ▶ **Threatcasting Targets:** This method brings together a transdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners to develop plausible future scenarios with a specific focus on climate terrorist target selection.
- ▶ Promulgate further research into malign narratives and emerging threats.

## Suggested Data Sources

- ▶ LaFree, G., & Dugan, L. (2007). Introducing the global terrorism database. *Terrorism and political violence*, 19(2), 181-204.
- ▶ Raleigh, C., Linke, A., Hegre, H., & Karlsen, J. (2010). Introducing ACLED: an armed conflict location and event dataset: special data feature. *Journal of peace research*, 47(5), 651-660.
- ▶ Leah Temper, Daniela del Bene and Joan Martinez-Alier. 2015. Mapping the frontiers and front lines of global environmental justice: the EJAtlas.



## ABOUT THIS RAPID REVIEW

The author of this rapid review is Dr. Marcus A. Boyd, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. Questions about this report should be directed to Dr. Boyd] at [boydma@umd.edu](mailto:boydma@umd.edu).

This research was supported by Pool Re Solutions. 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 Pool Re Solutions] or START.

## ABOUT START

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is a university-based research, education and training center comprised of an international network of scholars committed to the scientific study of terrorism, responses to terrorism and related phenomena. Led by the University of Maryland, START is a Department of Homeland Security Emeritus Center of Excellence that is supported by multiple federal agencies and departments. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and effects of terrorism; the effectiveness and impacts of counterterrorism and CVE; and other matters of global and national security. For more information, visit [www.start.umd.edu](http://www.start.umd.edu) or contact START at [infostart@umd.edu](mailto:infostart@umd.edu).

## CITATION

To cite this rapid review, please use this format:

Boyd, Marcus. "A Climate of Terror? Climate Change as a Potential Ideological Driver of Terrorism," College Park, MD: START, 2022.