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Strategic priority of foresight



Gendarmerie et territoires

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“SOVEREIGN CITIZENS”: FROM OPPOSITION TO THE STATE TO VIOLENCE

On April 1, 2024, a roadside check carried out by National Gendarmerie officers in the Nord department was shared on social media after being recorded by the vehicle's passenger. For about ten minutes, the driver and the passenger refused to comply with the check, arguing that they were “sovereign citizens” who did not submit to the authority of the French state. The gendarmes' intervention ended with the driver's window being broken as he attempted to drive away, before he was subdued and taken into custody. The intervention, which went viral with several hundred thousand views and a reprise of the slogan “*I don't contract*,” gives the “sovereign citizen” movement particular visibility, which requires an explanation of the movement's origins. Appearing in the 1970s in the United States, and stemming from the *Posse Comitatus* movement¹, characterized first by a rejection of state authority, considered illegitimate by nature, followed by opposition to it, sometimes through violence. The American agricultural crisis of the 1980s led to a significant acceleration of the movement, before its international expansion, particularly in Canada in the early 2000s under the name of the “*free man of the land*” movement.” Other Commonwealth countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, then saw the movement develop in their respective countries, before it reached Western Europe. While studies on the subject are limited, it appears that the movement proliferates during times of social and economic crisis². Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic and the health crisis have enabled the movement in France to expand and grow stronger³, in the Netherlands⁴ and in the United Kingdom⁵, amongst others. This rapid evolution demonstrates its great ideological adaptability, translating and modifying its language according to the country and local culture where it develops. If French “sovereign citizens” reject the authority of the “*French Republic Presidency*,” whose SIREN number they quote⁶, in Germany, the “*Reichsbürger*” recognize only the 1919 Constitution of the

1 American anti-government group.

2 ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE. « The Lawless Ones: The Resurgence of the Sovereign Citizen Movement ». *Special Report*, 2nd edition, 2012.

3 BENECH, Émilie. « *Je ne contracte pas* » : une formule de la mouvance complotiste des Citoyens souverains [online media]. *Ouest France*, 6th April 2024. Available on: <https://www.ouest-france.fr/societe/video-je-ne-contracte-pas-une-formule-de-la-mouvance-complotiste-des-citoyens-souverains-b2feb829-fb37-4b0f-bf96-c9eb67457ed5>

4 ALGEMENE INLICHTINGEN- EN VEILIGHEIDSDIENST (AIVD) (in English: General Intelligence and Security Service). « Anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands: A serious threat to the democratic legal order? », May 2023, 23 p.

5 COLEMAN, Alistair, SARDAZIRADEH, Shayan. « Anti-vax protests: ‘Sovereign citizens’ fight UK Covid vaccine rollout » [online]. *BBC*, 18th January 2022. Available via: <https://www.bbc.com/news/59870550>

6 A.D. Non, la France n'est pas une entreprise privée malgré son numéro SIREN, comme l'affirment les « citoyens souverains » [online]. *20 minutes*, 8th April 2024. Available via: <https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/4085432-20240408-non-france-entreprise-privee-malgre-numero-siren-comme-affirment-citoyens-souverains>

Weimar Republic⁷, while the “[Společenství legitimních věřitelů České republiky](#)” (“*Legitimate Creditors of the Czech Republic*”) denounce the legitimacy of the partition of Czechoslovakia⁸. In addition, the movement sometimes joins forces with “allied” movements of convenience, such as certain members of the far right and black identity movements in the United States or Germany, or the QAnon movement in France. The multiplicity of fallacious language and its evolving nature make it difficult to promote an effective counter-narrative. Nevertheless, studying the movement's methods, from “legalistic” protest (I) to violent action (II), provides a better understanding of the risks they pose.

I) Pseudo-law, false documents, and “paper terrorism”

The “sovereign citizen” movement and most of its members do not call for violence, despite their constant opposition to state authority. As a result, it has long prioritized a range of different tactics to fight its designated adversaries. Its claims are always based on a “pseudo-law” that mixes legal vocabulary from several different jurisdictions (“*common law*”), conspiracy theories (“*Washington DC cult*”) and misleading statements (“*County roads are private roads.*”)⁹ Among the most targeted public officials are local elected officials and state representatives, law enforcement agencies, and tax authorities. The numerous methods employed by “sovereign citizens” have been described by a Canadian judge as ranging “*from the bizarre to the criminal.*”¹⁰ As in the example of the Nord department (see above), refusals to submit to checks, combined with a lack of legal documents, remain common but are a regular problem for law enforcement agencies.¹¹ During these checks, it is common to discover falsified documents, such as identity documents¹², credentials (law enforcement officers, diplomats, magistrates) or license plates. Tax evasion and false tax returns are also common; they cite, for example, the Magna Carta in the United Kingdom¹³ or contact the Dutch Supreme Court¹⁴ to justify a tax “*exemption.*” In addition, there is a trend toward “legal harassment,” sometimes described as “*paper terrorism,*”¹⁵ members of the movement are multiplying legal proceedings, valid or otherwise, against their opponents. Challenges to criminal proceedings can be extensive, as in Australia, where a magistrate reported regularly receiving “*300 pages of documentation,*” citing “*American law and quotations from the Bible,*” following a parking fine, which multiplies by “*three or four*”¹⁶ the time spent on each procedure. These maneuvers are sometimes accompanied by undue legal proceedings against magistrates and law enforcement officers, with claims amounting to tens of millions of euros.¹⁷ In the United States, some “sovereign citizens” have attempted to obtain and register in their own names the deeds to the private homes of police officers who had stopped them¹⁸ or register a mortgage on the property¹⁹ of Canadian judges. There are numerous examples

7 DODMAN, Benjamin. Allemagne: qui sont les Reichsbürger, ces nostalgiques du Reich ? [online]. *France 24*, 29th August 2017. Available via: <https://www.france24.com/fr/20170829-allemande-reichsburger-proces-meurtre-police-wolfgang-reich-crime>

8 GOSLING, Tim. « Czechia's Rabble-Rousing Pensioners Take Inspiration From US 'Sovereign Citizens' » [online]. *Balkan Insight*, 28th June 2023. Available via: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/28/czechias-rabble-rousing-pensioners-take-inspiration-from-us-sovereign-citizens/>

9 In the United States, a number of religious justifications are also regularly mentioned.

10 MARCH-SAFBOM, TERRI A. « *Weapons of Mass Distractions: Strategies for Countering The Paper Terrorism of Sovereign Citizens* ». Monterey, California : Naval Post Graduate Academy, mars 2018, 161 p.

11 HARDY, Keiran. « Sovereign Citizens: Eccentrics or Extremists? » [online]. *Griffith University*, 5th April 2023. Available via: <https://enlighten.griffith.edu.au/sovereign-citizens-eccentrics-or-extremists/>

12 *op. cit.* note 1.

13 « "Three or four" people a year in Central Bedfordshire try to use the Magna Carta to get out of paying council tax » [online]. *Bedford Today*, 19th February 2024. Available via: <https://www.bedfordtoday.co.uk/news/politics/council/three-or-four-people-a-year-in-central-bedfordshire-try-to-use-the-magna-carta-to-get-out-of-paying-council-tax-4523627>

14 « Supreme court raises the alarm over “sovereign citizens”: Trouw » [online]. *Dutch News*, 23th May 2024. Available via: <https://www.dutchnews.nl/2023/12/supreme-court-raises-the-alarm-over-sovereign-citizens-trouw/>

15 The author clarifies that the term, although frequent, is not appropriate, as the multiplication of legal proceedings is in no way terrorism.

16 KESTEVEN, Sophie, CARRICK, Damien. « Magistrates witness a 'sharp rise' in sovereign citizen cases brought before the local courts » [online]. *ABC RN*, 7 mai 2023. Available via: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-08/nsw-magistrates-report-sharp-rise-in-sovereign-citizen-cases/102285772>

17 *Ibidem.*

18 *Op. cit.* note 2.

19 LAROUCHE, Vincent. Des radicaux opposés à l'État ciblent des juges et des policiers du Québec [online]. *La Presse*, 11th January 2013. Available via: <https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/justice-et-faits-divers/affaires-criminelles/201301/10/01-4610290-des->

of squatting by “sovereign citizens,” such as recently in the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence region²⁰, where the *One Nation* movement attempted to take advantage of an inheritance to settle on private property. A number of them are also involved in scams: they promise their “clients” the opportunity to wipe out their debts, evade taxation, or issue “*bills of exchange*.”²¹ In addition to the abuses of the judicial system mentioned above, some “sovereign citizens” also declare their own jurisdiction, as was the case in 2010, when a group describing itself as the “*Wyoming Grand Jury*” announced that it was convicting four judges and local elected officials for “*breaking their oath*.” One of them told the press: “*Right now, we don't have the arm of the law behind us, but that day will come*,”²² thus illustrating the dangerous nature of the movement.

II) Violence, kidnappings, and links to terrorist groups

“Sovereign citizens” consider the authority of the state to be illegitimate and therefore refuse to submit to it. This opposition can take various forms of violent action against their declared adversaries. Violence against law enforcement officers during home visits following unpaid bills is common, particularly in the United States.²³ In December 2022, an ambush that claimed the lives of two police officers in Wieambilla, Australia, was carried out by three Christian extremists linked to the “sovereign citizen” movement.²⁴ Some large-scale interventions have also been recorded, such as in Lakota (North Dakota) in 2011, where a ranch was besieged for several months²⁵, or in Toquop Wash (Nevada), where dozens of “sovereign citizens” and armed militiamen forced federal agents from the *Bureau of Land Management* to abandon their operation in 2014.²⁶ Convinced that law enforcement officers are “*mercenaries*” acting without legitimate authority, some have also attempted to carry out “*citizen arrests*” of magistrates and judges, handing down death sentences in some cases. In an excellent article on the subject, Christine Sarteschi²⁷ lists 75 incidents in which US law enforcement was targeted by “sovereign citizens,” resulting in the deaths of 27 police officers, primarily killed during traffic stops and ambushes. Several cases of child abductions were also committed by members of the movement. The abduction of 8-year-old Mia Montemaggi in April 2021 in France was orchestrated by her mother, a supporter of the One Nation movement, which combines and blends several conspiracy theories, notably those linked to the QAnon movement and “sovereign citizens.” Convinced that her daughter, whose custody had been revoked, was being targeted by a “*pedophile elite*,” she asked several men she had met online and who were connected to the Rémi Daillet network to help her.²⁸ They kidnapped her from her grandmother's home in the Vosges mountains. Using forged documents bearing the Ministry of Justice logo and claiming to be representatives of child protection services, the kidnappers were able to retrieve their victim and take her to a parking lot where her mother was waiting. The girl and her mother were found in Switzerland five days later.²⁹ This type of abduction by a parent,

radicaux-opposes-a-letat-ciblent-des-juges-et-des-policiers-du-quebec.php

20 P.L. Qui sont les One Nation, ce mouvement complotiste qui fuit les « élites pédophiles » [online]. *Charente Libre*, 17th November 2021. Available via: <https://www.charentelibre.fr/france/qui-sont-les-one-nation-ce-mouvement-complotiste-qui-fuit-les-elites-pedophiles-6961299.php?csnt=18fa4c22390>

21 « KC Man Convicted Of Attempted \$100 Million Fraud Scheme. Guilty Of Creating False Obligations, Mail Fraud » [online]. Website of the U.S. Department of Justice, 16th September 2011. Available via: <https://www.justice.gov/archive/usao/mow/news2011/hardin.conv.html>

22 MORTON, Tom. « Sovereigns promote common law courts » [online]. *Billings Gazette*, 9th April 2011. Available via: https://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/wyoming/sovereigns-promote-common-law-courts/article_c55d18ca-d65c-5d0c-835a-894e346d4c32.html

23 *Op. cit.* note 2.

24 CALLINAN, Rory, ANDRE, Julia, STONE, Lucy. « Nathaniel, Gareth and Stacey Train carried out a deadly police shooting. Their twisted backstory is revealed » [online]. *ABC Net*. Available via: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-15/qld-police-shooting-offenders-nathaniel-gareth-stacey-train/101766720>

25 « Lakota farm family in custody, ending strange standoff » [online]. *Savannah Morning News*, 2011. Available via: <https://eu.savannahnow.com/story/news/crime/2011/11/07/lakota-farm-family-in-custody/64048992007/>

26 Up in Arms : How the Bundy Family Hijacked Public Lands, Outfoxed the Federal Government and Ignited America's Patriot Militia Movement – John Temple, 2019.

27 Sovereign Citizens: A Narrative Review With Implications of Violence Towards Law Enforcement – Christine Sarteschi, Aggression and Violent Behavior, 2020.

28 The Rémi Daillet network is a far-right group with conspiracy theories and strong opposition to the French state. In October 2021, R. Daillet announced “*Operation Azur*” with the aim of overthrowing the French government. He has since been arrested.

29 NGUYEN DANG, Julien, SAN, Louis. Enlèvement de Mia : Lola Montemaggi, une mère enfermée dans une spirale complotiste [online]. *Franceinfo*, 24th April 2021. Available via: <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/faits-divers/enlevements/enlevement-de-mia/enquete->

justified by the movement to "protect" the child, has also been observed in the United States.³⁰ The links between the movement and certain terrorist groups are also a cause for concern in several Western countries. In 2021, the US government described militias and "sovereign citizens" as one of the "most lethal" terrorist threats³¹ in the United States. An FBI report from the same year indicated that "sovereign citizens" were involved in 15% of the 84 domestic terrorism investigations conducted between 2015 and 2019.³² In December 2022, three thousand German police officers were deployed to arrest 27 individuals from the *Reichsbürger* movement, who were planning a coup. The plotters had amassed nearly 700 pistols, rifles, crossbows, knives, and machetes, as well as bulletproof vests, helmets, handcuffs, and night-vision devices.³³ Sabotaging the power grid, invading the Bundestag, and using an Olaf Scholz lookalike were considered.³⁴

The threat posed by "sovereign citizens" in France remains minor compared to that of the jihadist movement, which remains the most significant terrorist risk on national soil. Nevertheless, while their opposition to traffic stops and their rhetoric may seem incongruous, they are fundamentally opposed to the state and convinced they are facing an illegitimate system, run by a corrupt elite, which can lead to violent behavior on their part. In the short term, an isolated incident of violence remains conceivable; military personnel and police officers could be targeted. The multifaceted nature of the "sovereign citizens" beliefs could also make them opportunistic allies of other violent movements, such as the far right and the far left. In the long term, the movement's capacity to undermine public trust in state institutions remains worrying, as highlighted in a report by the Dutch intelligence services.³⁵ While criticism of institutions is inherent to democracy, its intensification, unchecked by effective counter-narratives, is particularly dangerous. In the current climate of social and political polarization in France, the rise of anti-establishment rhetoric requires vigilance.

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franceinfo-enlevement-de-mia-lola-montemaggi-une-mere-enfermee-dans-une-spirale-complotiste_4382325.html

- 30 « Self-proclaimed sovereign citizen sentenced to 14 years in prison for kidnapping » [online]. *Maryland Coordination and Analysis Center*, 14th December 2023. Available via: <https://mcac.maryland.gov/2023/12/self-proclaimed-sovereign-citizen-sentenced-to-14-years-in-prison-for-kidnapping/>
- 31 « FACT SHEET: National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism » [online]. Website of *The White House*, 15th June 2021. Available via: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/15/fact-sheet-national-strategy-for-countering-domestic-terrorism/>
- 32 FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY. « *Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism* », May 2021, 40 p.
- 33 BAER, Sébastien. Le groupuscule des "Citoyens du Reich" devant la justice pour avoir minutieusement préparé un coup d'État en Allemagne [online]. *Franceinfo*, 29th April 2024. Available via: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/europe/allemande/le-groupuscule-des-citoyens-du-reich-devant-la-justice-pour-avoir-minutieusement-prepare-un-coup-d-etat-en-allemande_6515015.html
- 34 Narrative. Le prince qui voulait renverser l'État allemand et l'opération policière qui l'en a empêché [online]. *Courrier international*, source: *Die Tageszeitung*, 10th December 2022. Available via: <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/recit-le-prince-qui-voulait-renverser-l-etat-allemand-et-l-operation-policiere-qui-l-en-a-empêche>
- 35 « Sovereign citizen movement undermines democratic rule of law » [online]. Website of *Government of the Netherlands*, 9th April 2024. Available via: <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2024/04/09/sovereign-citizen-movement-undermines-democratic-rule-of-law>