

US leader of global neo-Nazi terrorist group signals retribution for arrests

Rinaldo Nazzaro says detention of suspected Base members
in Spain justifies 'resistance ... by any means necessary'

Ben Makuch

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After Spanish police and Europol's counter-terrorism section arrested three suspected members of the Base – a globally proscribed neo-Nazi terrorist group – in the eastern province of Castellón, its American leader living in Russia was defiant and signaled further actions.

In a text message to the Guardian, Rinaldo Nazzaro called the arrests another “example of political persecution” by world governments that are “further justifying our resistance to its hegemonic rule by any means necessary”.

The group's presence on the Iberian peninsula underlines how its American brand of extremism, glorifying hyper-violence and modeling itself on an armed insurgency against the state, continues to popularize and be exported abroad. Nazzaro and the Base are also suspected of harboring links to Kremlin spy agencies and aiding their broader sabotage efforts.

Experts were shocked at the level of organization and the arsenal of weaponry the cell was able to achieve inside of Europe.

“This cell was particularly serious,” said Joshua Fisher-Birch, a terrorism researcher at the Counter Extremism Project who keeps tabs on the digital accounts of the Base. “It should be noted that the group's cell in Spain had its own public Telegram channel, which is unusual, where they repeatedly called on others to join the group, shared photos of weapons training and urged militant action.”

In recent months, the Base has made headlines, claiming the July assassination of a Ukrainian officer in Kyiv and other acts of terrorism inside Ukraine. Then, last week, a Luxembourg court imprisoned a Swedish member of the Base for plotting a mass casualty event at a past Eurovision singing competition.

Fisher-Birch says the Spanish cell was openly endorsing the operations of the group in Ukraine as a sort of example and applauding its efforts to start a white ethnostate in the Zakarpattia region of the war-torn country. Similarly, the Spanish cell advocated online for “calculated ruthlessness” against its perceived enemies and to “acquire mountain land to form protected, self-sufficient and self-managed white communities”.

A data dump of the Base's Spanish Telegram activities reviewed by the Guardian contains propaganda videos, photos, and other posts with what appear to be automatic rifles and other firearms. Ted Kaczynski, the legal name of the Unabomber who sent letter bombs and other explosives to American business executives from his Montana shack during the 70s and into the 90s, also appears to be idolized by the cell.

“Your liberties aren't dying,” one message reposted by the Spanish cell reads, “they're being killed by people with names and addresses.”

Several other photos typical of the Base's internal propaganda of the past show masked men holding its black flag in the Spanish countryside and stylized images of armed members in forests, along with posts espousing the benefits of drone warfare and survivalism.

“It's very simple,” one of its April posts reads, “we live for combat, we sacrifice ourselves for victory.”

The Europol press release on the arrests showcases a confiscated weapons cache – items of which were clearly used in the same propaganda put out by the Base – containing what appears to be multiple firearms, a machine pistol, neo-Nazi paraphernalia, envelopes of cash, ammunition, combat knives, and shirts with Kaczynski’s and Adolf Hitler’s faces. The European law enforcement agency made it clear the cell’s leader was in direct contact with Nazzaro.

“The potential ties to Russian sabotage operations in Europe, whether or not the cell members were aware of it, are also incredibly concerning,” said Fisher-Birch. “The fact that the leader of the Spanish cell was allegedly in contact with Rinaldo Nazzaro also underscores his continued role and raises the possibility that he is directing certain aspects of activity in Europe.”

Currently believed to be living in St Petersburg with his Russian wife and children, Nazzaro has long been accused of being a Russian intelligence asset – an allegation that took on more seriousness when his group started offering money for assassinating Ukrainian military and political figures over the summer in what many saw as direct collaboration with the Kremlin’s objectives.

The personal history of the New Jersey native, who formerly worked for the Department of Homeland Security and with American special forces as an analyst targeting jihadist terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan, has consistently brought with it questions. Nazzaro has denied any associations with Russian intelligence, going so far as to tell a Kremlin-controlled television channel that he had “never had any contact with any Russian security services”.

But the Base’s growing presence on the continent comes as Kremlin operatives are being tapped for sabotage missions all over Europe, targeting allied countries that are supporting Ukraine as it continues to resist invasion. Russian spies are increasingly paying either unknowing individuals in pre-established criminal networks or far-right activists to carry out those attacks.

Both the Spanish police and Europol declined to comment on questions about the cell’s potential links to Russian intelligence operations in Europe.

But stateside, the Base hasn’t lost its footprint, either. While Nazzaro and the organization have leaned on global expansion, the group is still believed to be most active inside of its founding country, even in the face of historical police scrutiny. The Base was the subject of a relentless FBI counter-terrorism investigation that led to more than a dozen arrests of its members, including three who planned a 2020 mass shooting and bombing in Virginia.

“What stands out about the Spanish case is how closely it mirrors the patterns we have observed elsewhere,” said Steven Rai, an analyst at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) who has closely studied the Base’s global growth in recent years, “including in the United States, where Base members are pairing their ideological beliefs with offline action, including paramilitary-style training, tactical drills and shooting exercises.”

In favor of investigations targeting the Trump administration's political enemies and anti-fascist activists, and contributing resources to nationwide ICE raids, the FBI has moved away from concerning itself with groups like the Base. Multiple sources have said that the bureau, at the behest of the White House and under its director, Kash Patel, has pulled resources from pursuing cases against rightwing extremists of all stripes.

"These behaviors echo the group's earlier era between 2019 and 2020, when various members planned serious acts of violence before being arrested," warned Rai.

"It is important that law enforcement agencies, platforms, and other stakeholders remain vigilant about the broader threat posed by the Base's underlying ideology and the online ecosystem which has crystallized around it."

The Ted K Archive

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