

Facebook boots Utah Citizens' Alarm, a group that has opposed Black Lives Matter protests

SLT

<https://www.sltrib.com/news/2020/08/20/utah-citizens-alarm/>

By Paighen Harkins

August 21, 2020

Salt Lake Tribune



A Facebook page where thousands of Utahns coordinated armed responses to anti-police protests was removed from the social media platform on Wednesday.

Utah Citizens' Alarm founder Casey Robertson said in a video statement that the group was taken offline, and said, chuckling, that Wednesday was "a day that will live in infamy."

The group, which quickly amassed thousands of members, started after protesters fired at a motorist who drove through a crowd in the streets during a July 29 demonstration against police violence in Provo.

Facebook announced Wednesday that they took down pages and groups associated with "offline anarchist groups that support violent acts amidst protests, U.S.-based militia organizations and QAnon."

In a statement, Facebook said that while it already removes content and bans individuals advocating violence, these groups are different yet still dangerous, and it had updated its policies accordingly.

"[W]e have seen growing movements that, while not directly organizing violence, have celebrated violent acts, shown that they have weapons and suggest they will use them, or have individual followers with patterns of violent behavior," the statement read.

Facebook said it removed over 980 groups and 520 pages from the platform that were "[f]or militia organizations and those encouraging riots, including some who may identify as Antifa."

Another 790 groups and 100 pages tied to the QAnon far-right conspiracy theory were also removed.

Facebook confirmed Thursday afternoon that the UCA page was taken down to adhere with the new policy.

Utah Citizens' Alarm members have shown up, armed and in tactical gear, at protests in Provo, Salt Lake City, Cottonwood Heights and Taylorsville.

Robertson told supporters in the video that the group's removal was a setback, but one the group would overcome.

"This isn't going to stop up. Not even close," he said.

They've since setup a website at utahcitizensalarm.com to host updates, a store — selling T-shirts that say "Don't talk s---. Do s---" and hats in black, white and, of course, police blue — and firearm training videos.

Lex Scott, the leader of Black Lives Matter Utah, has decried the group at her protests, saying they are trying to intimidate protesters and has cautioned supporters not to engage with the organization or its supporters.

She wrote on her group's Facebook page, "Utah County Citizens Alarm page is down because they are terrorists. They incite violence. They threaten us daily."

She added, "And God loves Black people. Thanks."

The ACLU of Utah has also spoken out against law enforcement's relationship with this group and similar organizations, like the far-right Proud Boys, who have shown up at these protests.

"At several protests in different Utah cities, we observed law enforcement stand calmly next to predominantly white and heavily armed counterprotesters," the ACLU said, "many of whom wore emblems that identified themselves as members of groups that have openly embraced extremist and racist ideologies calling for violence against BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) communities."

Two Tribune journalists have heard people standing with Utah Citizens' Alarm direct racial slurs at protesters.

Robertson rejects the idea that they are counterprotesters, white supremacists or a militia. He says group members attend anti-police protests to deter protesters from destroying or damaging property.

"We just don't want violence. We don't want our cities being destroyed, and that's really all it is for us. It's as simple as that," Robertson told The Salt Lake Tribune on Aug. 7. "You know, a lot of you people in the media want to make it about race, or say that we're some kind of white militia ... it has nothing to do with that. This is about violence and keeping our community safe. That's it."

On Thursday, Robertson and multiple Utah Citizens' Alert members who identify as racial minorities spoke with FOX 13 about the group's removal from Facebook and why they decided to join.

Member Irene Rogerson, who is Mexican and Italian, told FOX 13 that she doesn't see the group as racist and that she wouldn't be part of an organization that was. She said she wants to prevent violence.

"If I'm at a protest and see anyone, even a member of BLM, anyone assaulted or attacked violently. I would stand up for them with everything I had," she told FOX 13. "It's not just a matter of standing up for our own group, our own race. It's standing up against violence."

Cottonwood Heights police said Thursday they are still investigating after a citizen journalist was maced at one of Scott's protests on Aug. 7. Demonstrators have accused a Utah Citizens' Alarm member.

John Mejia, legal director for the Utah ACLU, said that there is a long history of armed groups, comprised of mostly white men, who "took it upon themselves" to threaten and kill Black people and others exercising constitutional rights.

"Claiming your goal is to protect your community while using guns and threats to intimidate others isn't a new approach at all," he said.

Editor's note: FOX 13 and The Salt Lake Tribune are content-sharing partners.