



# Homeland Security

Statement of  
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## Preventing Domestic Terrorism: The DHS Approach and the New U.S. Strategy

In March of 2014, I sat down with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy to conduct a Policy Forum examining the Department of Homeland Security's countering violent extremism (CVE) programs, just one year after the horrific bombing of the Boston marathon the previous April. Those observations I made over seven years ago serve as a helpful datapoint for my remarks today. After all, many of the core challenges have stayed the same, but so much more of the landscape has since changed. Now, almost six months have passed since the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> and we are just three months short of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>, so this is the perfect point to take stock of what we got right, what we got wrong, and where we are heading so we can ensure that these types of events come to an end in our country. Therefore, I welcome the opportunity to join you today to build upon those remarks I made over seven years ago and share with you the direction that our expanded CVE efforts are heading now and in the future.

Last week, the Biden-Harris Administration released its *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*. Reflecting a detailed review of past and current aspects of the holistic response to domestic terrorism in the United States, the Strategy notes that although domestic terrorism is not a new danger to citizens in the United States it is a threat that Americans have endured far too often in recent years. This comprehensive strategy provides a nationwide framework for the U.S. Government and its partners to understand and share domestic terrorism related information; prevent domestic terrorism recruitment and mobilization to violence; disrupt and deter domestic terrorism activity; and confront long-term contributors to domestic terrorism.

The Department of Homeland Security sits at the fulcrum of the main pillars of this new Strategy. Rather than give you a rundown of the Department's approach to implementing the strategy, I found that looking back on my remarks from 2014 offers me a way to focus a little more on what I think are the three key aspects of the strategy.



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## Back to the Future

Back in 2014, I spoke to you about the threat of terrorism. I noted that while terrorism continued to be a concern for the United States, the nature and types of terrorism were changing and, therefore, the methods and responses to terrorism also needed to adapt to the changing times and new threat landscape. At that moment, foreign threats such as Al-Qaeda in Syria and other parts of North Africa continued to be major points of concern. I also noted that, on top of foreign threats, the US must deal with domestic threats. Here, much of the focus was on the issue of foreign fighters and the rising efforts of Al Qaeda to inspire attacks in the United States, much as we had just seen in the Boston marathon attack. Through counterterrorism and information sharing efforts, we had come a long way in terms of detecting and mitigating those threats abroad. However, we needed a new toolkit to do the same domestically—especially when considering the crucial importance of also upholding civil rights and civil liberties considerations.

The solution, as I saw it then, was evident. DHS and its interagency partners had crafted an approach called Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Focusing on local communities, CVE sought to empower efforts to prevent violent attacks using multidisciplinary approaches aligned with all stakeholders within a community, including local law enforcement, religious organizations, schools, health professionals, etc. Much of this effort would hinge upon building stronger ties between law enforcement and local communities. I spoke about some successful examples of this approach that worked with American Muslim and Arab communities.

I also spoke about the evolving role of the Internet and social media platforms and how they must be taken into consideration as an ever-increasing number of individuals were connecting to radicalization through this avenue. At that time, the online environment was largely one where we saw recruiters either inspiring attacks or encouraging travel to fight abroad. We had yet to see the rise of social media and how it would drastically change the threat of radicalization, and of course the important issue of spreading mis-, dis- and mal-information (MDM) was still many years away.

Looking back, I would say that the themes we identified about the threat, the need for prevention, and the importance of the online space were relevant then and have remained so. Yet, hindsight allows us to see that what we saw in 2014 is now far more complex and dynamic. First, while our focus in 2014 was on foreign and predominantly Islamic violent extremist and terrorist activities, the current primary threat is an ever-evolving domestic terrorism threat landscape that often sees perpetrators motivated through multiple grievances. Second, while in 2014 CVE efforts appeared successful, we only later learned that many stakeholders felt maligned or unfairly targeted by the CVE approach. So, while prevention remains the goal, we have now shifted to a more informed public health infused, whole-of-society approach that seeks to address concerns from all forms of targeted violence and terrorism that can originate from seemingly anywhere. Last, online activity has become arguably the most powerful and frequent path to radicalization to violent extremism, becoming even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this new reality, engagements between DHS and tech companies have become more frequent and more



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varied, and social media companies are taking a more active role in addressing radicalization to violent extremism alongside both the government and civil society.

## The Threat Landscape

While many forms of violent extremism have waxed and waned over the past century and more, the recent expansion of the current threat is tied to a growing list of motivations based upon a diverse set of catalysts. Today, acts of domestic terrorism pose the most lethal and persistent terrorism-related threat to the homeland. This threat encompasses a range of domestic terrorist actors, including racially and ethnically motivated extremists and anti-government extremists, and is fueled by false narratives, conspiracy theories, and extremist rhetoric spread through social media and other online platforms. A range of issues motivates these individuals, including anger over COVID-19 restrictions, the results of the 2020 presidential election, and police use of force, as well as a broad range of extreme racial, political, anti-government, anti-law enforcement, societal, and even personal ideological beliefs. The events of January 6<sup>th</sup> have only served to embolden domestic violent extremists (DVEs) who harbor a volatile mix of grievances and who are continuing to seek further opportunities to incite or commit violence.

Addressing DVE is a top priority for DHS, and we are taking immediate steps to ensure all available resources are devoted to combatting this violence. This undertaking requires nothing less than a Department-wide effort, which the Secretary has already initiated. Within the first 30 days of the Secretary's tenure, he designated me as the senior official to organize, plan, and oversee the Department's operational coordination and response to all terrorism-related threats, including those from DVEs. He also released a National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin in late January highlighting the domestic terrorism threat. This was the first Bulletin that had been issued in the past year.

In the coming months, the Department intends to continue enhancing and expanding its efforts to address the DVE threat and the factors driving its growth. Together with the FBI and other members of the Intelligence Community, the Department seeks to better understand the growing operational collaboration between domestic terrorists in the United States with those operating in Europe and other parts of the globe. Additionally, DHS is enhancing public awareness and resiliency to disinformation and other false narratives that are continuing to inspire domestic extremist violence. We are doing this by both updating our "If You See Something, Say Something®" public awareness campaign, and by refreshing the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative to build our partners' abilities to identify, assess, and report tips linked to potential acts of targeted violence and terrorism, regardless of ideology.

## From CVE to CP3

Previous countering violent extremism "CVE" efforts proved ineffective and at times harmful by engendering community mistrust exacerbated by unfairly targeting Muslim, South Asian, and Arab American communities. In response to these and additional concerns from civil



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rights organizations and others, DHS made significant changes to its approach to targeted violence and terrorism prevention.

DHS stands committed to enhancing our collective ability to prevent all forms of terrorism and targeted violence.<sup>1</sup> We need to make it harder to carry out an attack and reduce the potential loss of life by preventing individuals from radicalizing to violence at the earliest possible moment.<sup>2</sup> Achieving this objective is beyond the Federal government's capability and role alone. Thus, DHS has adopted a whole-of-society approach that builds trusted partnerships across all levels of government and among a multidisciplinary set of local actors, including houses of worship, civic organizations, health practitioners, government agencies, law enforcement, and others.

This DHS prevention mission is grounded in the public health approach for violence prevention that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and numerous academic experts and practitioners have supported through empirical evidence and program evaluations. Recent special issues of the *American Psychologist* (2017) and *Criminology and Public Policy* (2020) represent but a portion of the growing body of scholarly literature supporting the core concepts upon which targeted violence and terrorism prevention rests—specifically, the importance of locally-based prevention efforts that provide help to individuals before they commit a crime or resort to violence.

Last month, the Secretary created the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3). With the formation of CP3, DHS can continue to utilize and build upon the diverse set of programmatic resources establishing and expanding local prevention frameworks, while also enhancing the impact of our outreach and engagement activities with the public concerning these prevention efforts. An effective local prevention framework succeeds by connecting all segments of a community through stakeholder engagement, public awareness, threat assessment and management, and support services. Through the provision of technical assistance services, the Center provides subject matter assistance to establish and expand local prevention frameworks. Through grants and other financial assistance, CP3 invests in local prevention efforts that generate promising new practices that can also serve as models or templates for replication in other localities. Finally, through education and awareness training, CP3 ensures that all stakeholders possess the knowledge needed to recognize and take steps to prevent targeted violence and terrorism.

The public-health approach to DHS targeted violence and terrorism prevention proactively places civil rights, civil liberties, and privacy concerns at the forefront as a core component of its programs. The DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL), the DHS Privacy

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<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the Department added 'targeted violence' to its prevention mission, to expand beyond terrorism. The goals of any targeted violence attack may lack a discernable political or ideological motive but inflict the same type of trauma on communities. Consequently, OTVTP works with communities to prevent these types of attacks which include attacks on schools, workplaces, public gatherings, and other settings.

<sup>2</sup> Radicalizing to violence can be defined as the process wherein an individual comes to believe that the threat or use of unlawful violence is necessary or justified to accomplish a goal. It is limited to the process by which individuals come to engage in terrorism or targeted violence.



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Office, and the Office of the General Counsel are involved in every aspect of the DHS prevention mission. CP3 has recently enhanced its work with CRCL to increase the level of visibility and involvement of the Department's civil rights and civil liberties experts in all aspects of the Center's work, including by embedding CRCL experts within CP3 internal deliberations as part of the content-creation process. To ensure this progress is made permanent, CRCL will continue to have a senior advisor embedded within CP3 to ensure all targeted violence and terrorism prevention programs and initiatives maintain a clear focus on the protection of civil rights and civil liberties. Additionally, CP3 has initiated a strategic engagement process focusing on proactively working with civil rights and civil liberties advocacy organizations. This process will result in a multi-tiered community engagement strategy with the goal of ensuring that civil rights and civil liberties organizations are factored in as a key component in the development and implementation of local targeted violence and terrorism prevention frameworks around the country.

The other crucial element that sets CP3 apart from prior efforts is the enhancement of its programmatic activities by speaking directly to the broadest segments of the American public about prevention efforts. Through CP3, the Department is seeking to ensure that all Americans know about prevention efforts addressing targeted violence and terrorism. Later this year, DHS will launch a national outreach and engagement campaign aimed at elevating prevention missions and addressing many of the concerns associated with previous initiatives. In addition, DHS plans to launch an information clearinghouse for prevention that will allow any locality to obtain much needed guidance about how to establish and operate local prevention frameworks. Last, CP3 continues to work alongside the Department of Justice (DOJ) to ensure its prevention efforts complement broader community-based violence intervention efforts as well as the DOJ's Diversion and Early Engagement Program (DEEP).

## Online Landscape

While the Department's focus remains on increasing local prevention capabilities nationwide, DHS also recognizes that a core component of this effort is empowering our partners to identify and counter the false narratives and extremist rhetoric that incite violence and that are often spread through social media and other online platforms. While protecting civil rights and civil liberties, the Department will continue building upon its existing efforts and collaboration with industry and non-governmental partners to identify online narratives that incite violence, and initiate efforts to prevent and impede their spread.

The Department works with industry partners, particularly technology companies, to develop voluntary, innovative approaches to identify and mitigate violent extremist content as defined by their own terms of service and community standards. This includes building greater public awareness and resilience to MDM by developing and sharing digital media literacy and online critical thinking resources. All such efforts operate with appropriate oversight to ensure the protection of civil rights and civil liberties. CP3, representing DHS, along with the National Security Council (NSC) and other departments and agencies, engages with technology companies on counterterrorism and terrorism prevention efforts, most notably by working through the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT).



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The GIFCT is a nongovernmental organization bringing together the technology industry, government, civil society, and academia to foster collaboration and information sharing to address online terrorist and violent extremist activity.

Another key mechanism for this work is through our Digital Forums on Prevention. These CP3 led forums provide participants with greater awareness of online activity that radicalizes people to violence, increase digital literacy, and offer a platform for local and sector-specific leaders to engage with tech companies, practitioners, and experts to discuss innovative responses in the digital space. In March of this year, CP3 hosted a Digital Forum focused on the online gaming and eSports industries which included nearly 300 attendees from non-governmental and non-profit organizations, state and local governments, academia, and the tech sector. Participants discussed the manipulation of gaming platforms by malicious actors, and also highlighted the positive ways that gaming helps provide a sense of community and fosters important protective factors against radicalization to violence, particularly in times of social isolation. In June, CP3 led another Digital Forum focusing on the public health approach to prevention through the evidence-based, technology, and threat assessment and management teams. Among the over 500 participants were public health prevention research experts, social service providers, mental and behavioral health practitioners, nonprofit organizations, state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) agencies, and other practitioners in attendance to discuss and share knowledge on the public health approach to prevention. And in September, we anticipate hosting another Digital Forum focused on providing resources to civil rights and civil liberties, religious, and cultural advocacy organizations to further support these essential stakeholder communities online."

Yet here again DHS needs to do more to ensure it shares information and insights about the online space with nongovernmental partners and the public. The Secretary recently created an Open Source Information Working Group to facilitate operational coordination and recommend common standards and processes necessary to mitigate critical gaps in the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) ability to gather, evaluate, assess, and share relevant open source information for identifying threats and mitigating the risk of violence, consistent with legal requirements and the protection of privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties. The DHS Open Source Working Group will build upon lessons learned from previous efforts and will include a line of effort to advance DHS's ability to identify emerging threats, including narratives introduced by foreign and domestic violent extremist actors. The working group will use open source and other publicly available information to evaluate trends and the potential for violence, and assess the risk associated with widespread/multi-platform amplification of such narratives and other threats. The working group will develop recommendations to enhance the collection, analysis, and sharing of open source threat information within the Department and with external partners, and will also identify existing impediments that limit the ability to achieve these objectives.

## Conclusion

One thing that has remained constant in my thinking from 2014 to today is that prevention is unequivocally a critical requirement to solving much of what I have outlined here. As the online and threat environments continue to evolve, often in a symbiotic relationship to one



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another, what is clear to me is that the Department of Homeland Security and its partners need an agile, nimble and transparent response to address the concerns of targeted violence and terrorism. The prevention programs and partnerships that CP3 are bringing to scale hold within them the promise to address these issues well before harm is inflicted upon our communities. I look forward to continuing to work with the Department to ensure that this mission reaches the level of impact that our other counterterrorism missions have achieved.