

Navigating the Dynamic Homeland Threat Landscape

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Counterterrorism Lecture Series \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series)

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A senior U.S. official discusses the current threat landscape, the role of counterterrorism in the broader national security space, and the Department of Homeland Security's efforts to prevent violent extremism.

On May 17, *The Washington Institute* held a virtual *Policy Forum* with Nicholas Rasmussen, the counterterrorism coordinator at the Department of Homeland Security. The following is a *rapporteur's* summary of his remarks.

[Download a PDF transcript of the full event. \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/6484\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/6484)

The current threat landscape—both globally and here in the homeland—is more complex, fractured, and dynamic than at any other point in recent history. In the past two decades, the United States has had success in suppressing the ability of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), such

as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, to carry out devastating attacks abroad. This effect was achieved through the massive application of resources and personnel to target and disable these groups' capabilities. The terrorist threat, however, remains persistent and enduring. Although the United States has limited terrorists' capacity to conduct external operations, the number of individuals subscribing to jihadist ideology around the world has not diminished. As a result, it is vital to continue robust counterterrorism efforts to maintain this suppression of FTO transnational activity. Part of this process includes repatriating U.S. citizens from detention camps like al-Hawl in Syria because, from a risk management perspective, it is more threatening to U.S. national security to maintain the status quo than to repatriate. It is also important to consider the illicit activities of state sponsors of terrorism, specifically Iran, and their willingness to conduct operations in the United States. One notable case involved the [indictment \(https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/member-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-irgc-charged-plot-murder-former-national\)](https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/member-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-irgc-charged-plot-murder-former-national) of an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps official charged with plotting to murder former national security advisor John Bolton.

Yet the most significant terrorist threat here in the United States comes from domestic violent extremism (DVE), which has grown in size, lethality, and complexity in the last few years. The diversity of extremist ideologies is at an all-time high, which makes this threat incredibly challenging to counter. Extremists are using violence to advance their agendas and grievances online and offline. In addition, the DVE threat is not attached to major urban or suburban areas, as opposed to the post-9/11 period, when attacks were generally centralized in large cities. On the contrary, all environments can be targets and are at risk for extremism. Online extremism provides another mode for the threat. Technology companies are effective in countering designated FTO content online, but it is harder to moderate content when extremists are not designated. The Department of Homeland Security engages with various agencies and tech companies to develop the most effective tools to counter online extremism.

The Role of Counterterrorism in the Broader National Security Landscape

At a time of competing national security priorities and shrinking U.S. government budgets, counterterrorism officials have limited resources, tools, and personnel to pursue their objectives. As a result of diminished forward-deployed resources and government attention, the counterterrorism strategy focuses more on risk management and risk mitigation. This puts tremendous pressure on the intelligence community to identify indicators and warning signs of emerging terrorist threats. The United States needs to collaborate with international partners and engage in capacity-building efforts to effectively respond to the current threat environment, even as it receives lower priority domestically.

The shift away from counterterrorism places greater emphasis on border security as a last line of defense for denying entry to individuals who may pose a security risk. The Homeland Security Department maintains a robust watch list enterprise to prevent terrorists' travel into the United States and ensure U.S. borders are secure. This kind of defensive counterterrorism strategy has much less margin for error.

Preventing Violent Extremism

Prevention work is one of the most important tools the Homeland Security Department offers in terms of preventing radicalization and violent extremism, particularly when facing rising domestic extremism threats. Informed by more than twenty years of experience, the department's role is to engage with vulnerable communities and provide resources to develop protective factors and prevent violent extremism. This reflects a more public health-informed approach and helps eliminate communication barriers. It is important for the government to avoid securitizing these conversations, because that creates an "us versus them" dynamic and impedes progress. Ultimately, the goal is to harness the capacity and resources of the federal government to enable communities themselves to be the leading edge of prevention work.

As part of the recent [National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf), the Homeland Security Department plays a vital role in prevention, investing in safety and security measures for community facilities, and providing training and grant programs to allow communities to better provide for their own security and reduce the potential impact of terrorist attacks. The hardest part of these prevention efforts is scalability. The United States is vast and diverse, so terrorism prevention efforts will be different in every city. To provide the best resources and information to on-the-ground practitioners across the country, the department recently launched the [Prevention Resource Finder \(https://www.dhs.gov/prevention\)](https://www.dhs.gov/prevention) website, a comprehensive online repository of federal government resources to prevent acts of terrorism and targeted violence. The department is also now developing a mobile app that will deliver real-time intelligence from the federal government to local law enforcement. The aim of this tool is to provide a constant stream of information, maintain a relationship with local law enforcement, and transform classified information into actionable intelligence. Finally, to ensure the Department of Homeland Security's efforts are effective and data-driven, the government needs to invest in evidence-based research and focus on metrics and evaluation. Combating targeted violence and domestic terrorism is a whole-of-society problem that requires a whole-of-society approach.

This summary was prepared by Lauren von Thaden. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖

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