

Revisiting U.S. CVE Efforts One Year After the Boston Bombing

[John Cohen](#)

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The Department of Homeland Security's chief counterterrorism coordinator discussed the government's evolving approach to countering violent extremism.

On March 26, 2014, The Washington Institute held a Policy Forum with John Cohen, the acting undersecretary for intelligence and analysis/counterterrorism coordinator for the Department of Homeland Security. The following is a rapporteurs' summary of his remarks.

Today, the nature of the threat the United States faces from violent extremism is changing. The primary concern immediately after 9/11 was preventing attacks from centralized terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda. These attacks originated from abroad and were ideologically motivated. While preventing attacks by al-Qaeda core and its affiliates remains a priority, we have learned over the years that mass-casualty attacks can also be carried out in the United States by domestic actors whose grievances may be against their workplace or other individuals, though they often use the same tactics. It is fitting to be talking about this subject one year after the Boston Marathon bombing, an event that replicates today's threat environment in many respects while illustrating how the methods for countering violent extremism (CVE) must continuously evolve. Terrorists and would-be terrorists are also continuously adapting, however, reviewing what the United States does and how it responds.

CONCERNS TODAY

Threats from beyond U.S. shores continue to be of concern. Al-Qaeda, whether in the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, or elsewhere, still aims to strike aviation infrastructure and U.S. targets abroad, and its membership remains focused on attacking the homeland. Syria has also become a great concern and will remain a top priority. Due to its ongoing conflict, the country has evolved into a meeting point for violent extremists all over the world, giving them an opportunity to establish informal social networks with like-minded individuals. Foreign fighters can be indoctrinated, receive training, and improve their tradecraft in Syria, then return to their hometowns in the United States, Europe, and Canada. Those who come from visa-waiver countries are especially of concern, though any violent extremist able to return to the United States and remain in contact with his network of experienced operatives poses a unique and challenging problem for counterterrorism authorities.

Accordingly, cooperation with local communities is of the utmost importance, since traditional tools like intelligence platforms, military power, and international law enforcement relationships are not always best able to identify foreign fighters who are threats or to prevent attacks prior to them leaving the United States or once they have returned home. The Department of Homeland Security will continue to work with its partners across the board, including international, federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial authorities as well as the private sector and faith-based organizations, to address the issue of violent extremists who travel to Syria and who represent a threat to the homeland.

DOMESTIC PERSPECTIVE

The U.S. government must also rely on different capabilities to detect and mitigate threats originating in the homeland, some of which may not have a direct operational relationship with foreign terrorists. These could include people who have lived in the United States for a long time or were born here. The government has made great progress in detecting and mitigating threats abroad, but at home it must leverage a different set of tools, operate under a different set of laws, and ensure that threat mitigation efforts are carried out in a manner that safeguards privacy rights and civil liberties.

Today, our efforts are focused on local communities, which must be empowered to prevent violent attacks by recognizing the warning signs of a threat, assessing the risk posed, and using existing multidisciplinary local tools to mitigate the threat. Clearly one such tool is an FBI or local law enforcement investigation, but depending on the threat, it can also be intervention by mental health professionals, religious figures, parents, friends, or siblings. When communities come together and have the capacity and awareness to identify a potential threat and use multidisciplinary approaches to address it, they are better able to prevent violent incidents such as school shootings, gang violence, and attacks motivated by extremist ideologies.

This type of local law enforcement cooperation with community members has been successful. Examples include CVE efforts in Montgomery County Maryland, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis/St. Paul -- in the latter case, community engagement has been used to address both gang violence and the recruitment of individuals seeking to join al-Shabab in Somalia. In such cases, local law enforcement has established a committed partnership with the community and created a platform for dealing with violence prevention.

For their part, American Muslim and Arab communities as well as other faith-based and community groups have said to authorities, "Don't come to us and say you only want to work with us on the violent extremism problem; that makes it sound like we're part of the problem." We recognize that these communities are part of the solution -- working as partners to make our communities safer means working toward a mutual goal. This makes sense operationally and sends a very strong message. When such partnerships are based on collective responsibility, they become strong enough to deal with a whole host of community problems. In essence, then, the U.S. approach to CVE is to empower local communities to better understand the threats facing them, and to work together in applying their existing resources to prevent acts of violence regardless of ideology.

WHAT DHS IS DOING

In partnership with the FBI, the National Counterterrorism Center, and other organizations, the Department of Homeland Security has conducted extensive analysis on past instances of violent extremist attacks, examining the path individuals have taken when deciding to violently redress a grievance, whether ideological or not. DHS looks at behavior and indicators that were observed by family members, community members, or others. It also studies tradecraft -- how these individuals prepared for attacks, how their plots were disrupted, or what was missed that allowed them to proceed. The department is then better able to help communities become aware of indicators they should be looking for as they seek to prevent violence.

DHS has also done research on community and environmental factors that may facilitate someone going down the path toward ideologically motivated violence. Thus far, this research has shown that a subset of America's population may be predisposed to violent behavior for a variety of reasons, and that a smaller subset of such individuals go through an evolutionary process where they are actually willing to commit violence to redress their grievances. Irrespective of their specific motivation, DHS has found that an increasing number of violent individuals take similar paths and adopt a similar tactical approach in preparing for and carrying out acts of violence. For instance, Norwegian gunman Anders Breivik and Colorado gunman James Holmes took similar evolutionary paths, had similar psychological backgrounds, and lived in similar environments. Their grievances were very different, but their plots involved very similar tradecraft.

The evolving role of the Internet and social media has increased the number of individuals going down this path. Previously, violent extremists had to collaborate in a nonvirtual way, but the Internet allows them to facilitate their own journey of radicalization to violence, connect more easily with others who have shared ideologies, recruit potential members for a violent extremist organization, obtain knowledge and materials to conduct attacks, and, most important, prepare for attacks without ever leaving their homes.

From a prevention perspective, this changes the paradigm significantly. Behaviors that could have been observed and possibly reported in the real world may be unnoticed in the virtual world. The question facing DHS is how best to incorporate Internet behavior into prevention efforts.

SUPPORTING LOCAL EFFORTS

DHS has also sought relationships with national religious organizations, helping to create a multi-faith-based advisory committee. Initially intended as a conduit for information sharing, this committee has since evolved into a group that helps mitigate incidents that could lead to tensions in communities, and in turn to potentially violent situations.

DHS also carries out engagement with local authorities throughout the country. It trains local law enforcement to recognize the behaviors and indicators associated with specific threats of violent extremism, terrorism, and

criminal activity, as well as behaviors that are part of a constitutionally protected religious or cultural activity. This helps frontline officers distinguish between criminal behaviors and constitutionally protected behaviors. All in all, significant progress has been made in the past few years, and today the links between the federal government and local communities are stronger.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Jonathan Prohov and Kelsey Segawa. The forum was part of the Institute's [series of lectures by top counterterrorism officials](#).