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“Countering Domestic Terrorism: Examining the Evolving Threat” – 25 September 2019

Today, both international terrorists and domestic terrorists congregate, coordinate, and conspire online, often without having any direct connection or physical interactions with a terrorist organization or fellow adherents. Both types of terrorist perpetrate violence in pursuit of political or social change on behalf of their respective ideologies. In both international and domestic terrorism, successful attacks inspire further attacks by like-minded supporters. Modern domestic terrorist networks like international terrorist networks stretch beyond international borders and across hundreds of U.S. jurisdictions.¹

Domestic terrorists differ from international terrorists in two critical ways that vex law enforcement efforts to preempt violence. First, domestic terrorists, for the most part, don't operate as physical, named groups in the way that al Qaeda and the Islamic State have in an international terrorism context. America's law enforcement presence and the operational opportunities of virtual networking result in sub-surface, distributed networks of domestic terrorists motivated by common violent ideology, but they generally lack a defined organizational structure or physical base for their operations.

Second, law enforcement pursues domestic terrorists via different rules and structures separate from international terrorists. Investigators must pass higher thresholds to initiate investigations and have fewer tools and resources at their disposal. In sum, domestic counterterrorism remains a reactive affair, in which investigators respond to violent massacres and then pursue criminal cases.

There's more to discuss than I can capture during these brief opening remarks, but I'll focus on what I believe to be critical gaps in America's posture and approach for countering domestic terrorists.

- *If we can't define the threat, then we can't stop the threat – Importance of threat designation & measurement*

Countering al Qaeda and the Islamic State is no easy task, but the process for conducting international counterterrorism is far easier because the U.S. State Department can

¹ An extended discussion of the similarities between international and domestic terror attacks and groups can be found at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI). Clint Watts, “America Has A White Nationalist Terrorism Problem. What Should We Do?,” FPRI, May 1, 2019. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/america-has-a-white-nationalist-terrorism-problem-what-should-we-do/>.

designate such groups as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).² FTO designations allow federal law enforcement to a) pursue investigations according to the Attorney General Guidelines, b) organize their agencies and allocate resources based on these designations, c) centrally manage cases around the country helping connect associated perpetrators and plots, and d) measure investigative performance and return on investment.

Today's domestic terrorism lacks designation by group or violent ideology and the pursuit of investigations is limited to U.S. Criminal Codes. Lacking designations for initiating a nationwide case for pursuing connected violence, federal law enforcement largely pursues cases reactively after an attack. Individual cases are pursued across dozens or even hundreds of jurisdictions even though subjects congregate, communicate, and collaborate with each other in online environments. Domestic terrorism's lack of designation also results in no effective measure for understanding the size, shape, and scale of each violent extremist threat.

If the U.S. seeks to preempt domestic terrorist attacks, then it must provide a mechanism for designating domestic terrorism threats. A domestic terrorism statute or designation process would resolve this challenge but may be impossible to effectively create or implement. Alternatively, we could develop a process allowing the FBI Director to open nation-wide cases when violent ideologies inspire mass casualty attacks and are connected to multiple cases, incidents, and reports across the country. With congressional oversight, reasonable thresholds could be established for placing federal, state, and local law enforcement into a preemptive posture similar to our approach with al Qaeda- and Islamic State-inspired terrorism over the past decade.

- *If we don't understand the threat, then we can't defeat the threat – Need for research & training*

After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, agencies dramatically increased their staffing of intelligence analysts and committed research funds for understanding terrorist ideologies helping to identify key influencers, ideological justifications for violence, and radicalization pathways for those enticed to join terrorist groups.³ By understanding terrorist networks, we could assess the scale and breadth of the jihadist threat, establish intelligence requirements that needed further analysis, and inform investigators and community partners about where to look and what to look for in mitigating terrorist violence.

² For additional background on the Foreign Terrorist Organization process and current list, see, "Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)" *Congressional Research Service*, January 15, 2019. Available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/IF10613.pdf>.

³ For example, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point created the *Militant Ideology Atlas* helping determine key influencers, influences, and indicators for understanding mobilization to violence. There is no parallel for domestic terrorism despite there being sufficient data for exploration. See, here, at the Combating Terrorism Center website: <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2012/04/Atlas-ResearchCompendium1.pdf>.

With domestic terrorism, threat knowledge comes anecdotally from the experience of the most seasoned investigators. Few, if any, personnel and resources are dedicated to establishing a collective picture of which violent ideologies perpetrate violence, why they do it, and how they overlap. Indicators of mobilization to violence are largely unknown or undefined, yet we have extensive data about past perpetrators that we could analyze and new technology tools for understanding terrorist sentiment, associations, and mobilization. The best sources for understanding these domestic terrorist threats reside outside the U.S. government, have little or no contact with investigators, and lack sufficient funding. Since they lack research and training, we cannot expect investigators to preempt the current spate of domestic terrorist attacks.

- *If we can't see the threat, then we can't preempt the threat – Identifying violent extremists both online and on-the-ground to disrupt their attacks*

To reduce the frequency and scale of international terrorism in the U.S., we sought to connect the dots between extremists through all-source analysis and targeted outreach with community partners and online interventions. With domestic terrorism, federal investigators have less ability to observe online threats than I have from my home. Federal agencies may have extensive relationships for conducting outreach to at-risk individuals and communities in the international terrorism context, but they have only a few, if any, in the domestic terrorism context.

In the online space, federal agencies might look to rapidly increase their partnerships with groups like Moonshot CVE,⁴ which employs innovative approaches for spotting and engaging vulnerable individuals via social media in both international and domestic terrorism contexts. Similarly, terrorism task force officers should extend their “See Something, Say Something”⁵ strategies to domestic terrorism threats and create community partner engagement strategies with non-governmental groups.

- *If we don't resource the defenders, then we'll keep losing to the offenders – Allocating resources and synchronizing operations across the federal, state, and local levels*

International terrorist threats brought about a whole-of-government approach by which federal resources created terrorism task forces synchronizing information sharing and actions across the country to defeat distributed terrorist networks. We have intelligence fusion centers stretched across the country designed to detect international terrorism now seek out more missions to sustain their utility and existence. The federal government could lead the way to not only help state and local law enforcement do more than simply respond to domestic terror attacks, but also help them to employ effectively their manpower and resources for preempting domestic terror attacks.

⁴ For background on Moonshot CVE and its approach for preempting violent extremism, see, here: <http://moonshotcve.com>.

⁵ For background on the “See Something, Say Something” strategy employed over the last decade, see, this Department of Homeland Security website: <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/if-you-see-something-say-something™-campaign-overview>.

- *If we only look at what's happening in the U.S., then we'll miss the dangerous global connections – Local violence is increasingly connected to a global network*

Our homegrown terrorists, at times, appear to be lonely, but they are not alone in their motivations, and their connections extend far beyond U.S. borders. Over the last decade, we worried about the global networking, state sponsorship, and facilitation of jihadist terrorism. Today, we should worry equally about foreign connections and influences on domestic terrorist threats. The social media posts and manifestos of recent domestic attackers point to the international inspiration and global connections of violent ideologies. These connections extend beyond the internet leading to physical movement across international boundaries to attend training or execute attacks. In Sweden, two of three bombers from the Nordic Resistance Movement received military training in Russia before returning home to attack.⁶ The Christchurch mosque attacker was not from New Zealand, but Australia.⁷

The patterns of today's domestic terrorism formation mirror what we've seen with international jihadists. The federal government must use lessons learned from countering global jihadists to help defend against foreign influences inspiring or facilitating violence in America that on the surface may appear as strictly homegrown. Creating a common operational picture for understanding violent ideologies with international reach is essential for developing individual de-escalation strategies online and on-the-ground in local communities.

In conclusion, with these remarks, I've only addressed gaps that I believe, if closed, would reduce the frequency of domestic terrorist attacks. These remarks do not address how we could reduce the impact—the number of dead and wounded—arising from each domestic or international terrorist attack.

⁶ “Two men charged over refugee home blast ‘received military training in Russia’.” *The Local (Sweden)*, June 9, 2017. Available at: <https://www.thelocal.se/20170609/gothenburg-sweden-two-men-charged-over-refugee-home-bomb-attack-received-military-training-in-russia>.

⁷ Sarah Keoghan and Laura Chung, “From local gym trainer to mosque shooting: Alleged Christchurch shooter’s upbringing in Grafton,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 15, 2019. Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/alleged-christchurch-gunman-identified-as-former-grafton-local-20190315-p514nm.html>.