# Navigating the Dynamic Homeland Threat Landscape

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**Matthew Levitt:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. I'm Matt Levitt. I direct the Reinhart Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and am the Fromer-Wexler Fellow here. And I'm thrilled to have with me, if I can admit it, a longtime friend, Nick Rasmussen, who is the Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, where he is responsible for overseeing intelligence, operational planning, policy matters across the department's agencies. Nick is a long, long time national security professional with over 20-something, 27, 28 years of experience, in the National Security Council, the National Counterterrorism Center, and the U.S. intelligence community. You've kind of been there and done that, and so I'm glad now that you are here and are doing this.

Nick is going to open with some opening remarks, then he and I will have a little bit of a fireside chat, and then we will open up to Q&A from our participants. Some of you are participating on a Zoom link and will be able to submit questions to the Q&A function on the bottom of your screen. The rest of you who are watching via the live stream on YouTube are also welcome to submit questions, and you can do that by sending an email to policyforum@washingtoninstitute.org, that's policyforum, one word, @washingtoninstitute, one word, .org. So with no further ado, Nick, tell us about navigating the dynamic homeland threat landscape.

**Nicholas Rasmussen:** Great. First, Matt. Thank you for having me join you at the Institute today. The Institute has long been a place where I and other people who fall into the practitioner category have looked to for cutting edge research, analysis, and insight from colleagues and experts such as yourself. So thank you for doing this and thank you for continuing to do what you do here at the Institute.

What I thought I would do is say a few broad things, or a few things about three broad topics, as a way to enter into a conversation, and happy to follow up on any particular aspects of these three broad things. One, I thought I would start as the title of the discussion today indicates, with a bit of, some

observations about the threat landscape, and it's a bit of a thing for counterterrorism professionals to say the threat landscape is ever evolving, ever more difficult, ever more whatever. But it's usually true. And I'll try to explain a little bit why that is so, and why we feel that it is such a dynamic, shifting threat landscape. Stepping back after that, I thought I would say a few things about where the issue and challenge of counterterrorism sits, or resides, within our broader national security landscape right now, because I think it's stating the obvious to say that we're not where we were five or ten years ago with respect to the level of effort—the place that counterterrorism sits in terms of our national set of priorities. And then maybe thirdly, and lastly, I'll talk a little bit about the challenges of prevention work and what we're trying to do at the Department of Homeland Security to evolve our approach to prevention, prevention of targeted violence, prevention work aimed at getting to individuals before they travel too far down the path towards extremism and ultimately violence. I'll say a few words about our evolving approach in that space. So those three broad topics, I figured, was where I would start, and as I said, looking forward to diving into any of the details of the threat landscape.

Again, as I kind of previewed a second go, the adjectives I tend to draw on when talking about our threat landscape, and now I tend to think of it more from a particularly homeland lens because of my current set of responsibilities, I think of our threat landscape as being more diverse, dynamic, and more complicated than at any point in our recent history. And that's because of the kind of unique emergence of the domestic terrorism set of threats, which we can talk about a little bit more in a minute. But first, I'll start overseas because that's a more familiar counterterrorism environment in the way we've thought about the post-9/11 period.

It's, of course, true that we've had a fair degree of success in the 20 plus years since 9/11 at achieving what I would call suppressive effect. We have successfully, in many instances, suppressed the ability of FTOs, Foreign Terrorist Organizations, and specifically the FTOs who are our principal adversaries—ISIS, al-Qaeda, to be specific—suppressed their capacity to carry out the most devastating sorts of attacks that they would aspire to carry out, including those aimed at the homeland.

That suppressive effect, of course, has been achieved through the massive application of resource, primarily in the overseas environment, the work done abroad by our community of military intelligence, law enforcement, diplomatic, and other professionals who have targeted and worked hard to suppress the capacity of those groups to carry out attacks against us. That has not come without cost. We can talk about that at another point.

That's good news. And I would not ever shy away from calling it good news. What is less good news on the overseas threat landscape front is the fact that the threat remains a persistent and enduring one. I think if you were to look at gross assessments or gross evaluations of the global number of individuals who subscribe to the jihadist ideology, we're probably not on a downward trend. We are not in a place where that pool of individuals who are drawn to the ideology put forth by our most significant terrorist adversaries, that group has not grown smaller or shrunken. We have limited their capacity to carry out, what we would call external operations directed at the United States homeland, but we have not successfully shrunk the pool globally, and I think most of the academic work would back up that assertion.

I also worry that the suppressive effect that I've just spoken about only remains so, if effort remains at a significant level. So if you let off on some of the efforts and some of the work you are engaged in to achieve that suppressive effect, there is, of course, always concern about resurgence of terrorist capability, particularly with groups that have enduring intent to carry out attacks against the United States.

Here at home, obviously, I don't need to tell most individuals watching this broadcast that the domestic violent extremist problem is the most significant of our homeland threat challenges at present. That domestic violent extremist threat has grown in size, lethality, diversity, complexity, in just the last few years, and all you need to do is track the kind of testimony of individuals like our FBI Director Chris Wray, or our Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, others who are speaking on behalf of our law enforcement intelligence community, to know that that set of challenges has kind of leapt, jumped to the top of our set of homeland concerns, whether that is tied to individuals that we would describe in the intelligence community as REMVE, racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, or whether it's tied to some other form of grievance or anti-establishment ideology. The violence, the violent intent, the grievance narrative, the idea that the agenda of such individuals can be advanced by carrying out attacks here inside the United States obviously shapes up as our most significant homeland challenge right now. We can talk at greater length in the Q&A part about why that's a particularly difficult challenge in terms of the toolkit that we have available to us, but I would just say the diversity of this threat literally strikes me every day.

Just in the last two weeks I've been on the West Coast engaging with some of our partner communities on the West Coast in the Los Angeles area, and in the course of one afternoon, my DHS colleagues and I met with the Muslim American Community Representative in the Los Angeles area, we met with the Jewish American Community Representative in the Los Angeles area, and we met with the Asian-American Pacific Islander Community Representative in the greater Los Angeles area. Each of those communities, for very good reason, feels at risk, targeted, and vulnerable to the very kind of the exact kind of violence I've been talking about a minute ago. And obviously some communities will have longer experience in dealing with that, certainly, the Jewish community and the Muslim-American community has been dealing with that threat for most of the post-9/11 period. But it was striking to see, for example, our contacts in the Asian-American Pacific Islander community speak to us about how they were feeling marginalized and vulnerable by this threat environment. So that to me, was a striking indicia of the threat environment we're facing right now.

And I think the other thing I would point to in terms of that threat environment domestically is I don't think of it now as being attached to major urban or suburban areas. If you think back to most of the post-9/11 periods, the plots we would have disrupted, where our law enforcement would have disrupted, tended to be in large American cities where particular communities might be gathered who engaged in the kind of extremist interchange that led to the plotting and terrorism-related activity. Now, as you can see just by reading the news, all 50 states, rural, suburban, urban, there is no environment that you can point to across the United States where we aren't at risk of some form of extremism of one or another narrative flavor. So that feels different than in past years. So that's, broadly speaking, how I look at the threat environment and actually before pivot away from that limit, I should have said one other thing: When thinking about the set of overseas terrorist actors who may be interested in carrying out terrorist activity against the United States, we cannot leave out the activities tied to state sponsors of terrorism, specifically Iran.

And again, I'll refer you again to the words of our FBI director, our director of national intelligence, who go on the record every year in the February-March period and speak declaratively about how we think about the threat. But I would just point you to some obvious indicators that that there is activity in this regard. If you think back to last August, our Department of Justice unsealed an indictment against an IRGC-linked individual who was engaged in plotting activity aimed at targeting our former national security advisor, John Bolton. And that's all laid out now in court documents. It is the kind of sequence of events that the individual was involved with as he sought to build a capability to carry out an attack against Mr. Bolton. I won't go into the classified world in this setting, obviously. But when you see something like that in the unclassified world, I think you're on safe ground to assume

that there is more to the iceberg below the surface of the waterline. And so I think that's worth keeping in mind as we deal with the global set of issues around Iranian proliferation activity and our tense relationship with Iran.

So stepping back from that threat landscape, where does counterterrorism fit into the broader national security landscape at this particular moment? Again, somewhat speaking the obvious, we are in the midst of a shift, I would argue, towards a place where terrorism sits alongside other significant, highly significant, national security issues at the top of our priority list. It no longer sits there as the preeminent issue, or the most urgent issue. It now sits there alongside others, and those other issues to include those tied to great power competition, concerns we have over climate change, our efforts to deal with cyber risk—you could go on and on. There's just a whole set of national security issues that go well beyond the counterterrorism space. And so now if you're thinking and talking about counterterrorism, you're doing so in an environment where you may not have first claim on resource, you may not have the ability to resource your way out of particular problems, and it's requiring our counterterrorism enterprise and community to make harder choices about where resources can be devoted. We also find ourselves in a place where we are less reliant on a strategy where we will be using aggressive direct action in the overseas environment to deal with counterterrorism threats. That's an obvious outgrowth of our winding down of overseas presence in theaters like Afghanistan, the Middle East, and even in Africa as well.

So that puts us in a place where we are adopting, what I would describe more as a risk management model, rather than an aggressive direct action model for engaging in threat mitigation. Risk management and mitigation is, of course, a more complicated exercise. It requires you to make choices. It puts a tremendous amount of pressure on our intelligence community to be looking over the horizon to be identifying the particular indicators and warning signs that they would expect to see if a threat that has been suppressed is at risk of reemerging. Again, we are relying even more than ever on our intelligence community to be anticipatory and even predictive in that space. The other thing, such a strategy, puts more pressure on, to be honest, my department, the Department of Homeland Security, because the Department of Homeland Security ends up being, in a sense, the last line of defense in terms of actors trying to enter the country who may wish us harm.

So it's a little bit weedy and in the in the weeds, but if you had Director Abizaid here in this setting, I know she would be talking to you about maintaining the health of the watch listing enterprise, trying to make sure that as we do less to mitigate threat overseas, it's even more important that we have a robust watch listing enterprise that gathers identity intelligence on individuals tied to terrorism overseas so that we can prevent their travel to the United States. So it's that kind of more defensive oriented counterterrorism work that has not lessened in importance in this new landscape. It's, I would argue, even more important and it leaves us in a position, that I would argue, puts us in a place where we have less margin for error than we perhaps might have at earlier phases. We're managing, in summary, a complicated threat environment in a landscape that leaves us with fewer tools, less margin for error, and I think any counterterrorism professional that you've ever worked with, Matt, including yourself, thinks of this as a zero fail business, and so, we find ourselves in that environment where we put even more pressure on the people who are focused on these issues.

So, maybe I'll just wrap up with a few words on prevention, because I think prevention work is perhaps one of the most important tools in our toolkit, particularly when dealing with the set of domestic violent extremism threats that I spoke about a minute ago.

I wouldn't say that we are embarked on some grand new strategy with prevention work, or that we are on the verge of rolling out some brand new approach, but I would say is that we are in the midst

of an evolution in thinking and an approach to prevention work, and that evolution is informed by 20 plus years of experience. Some of that experience, hard won, some of that experience, including negative feedback from communities with whom we've engaged across—we the government, and I'm not speaking as me personally, I'm speaking as we the government as an enterprise. Over the last 20 years, we've learned a lot about how communities respond and react when the government speaks to them about matters tied to extremism and terrorism.

And so, I think that the emerging thinking out of our department, the Department of Homeland Security, is that we want to position ourselves where we're talking about prevention work as a public health-informed kind of activity—that the knowledge and perspective that our public health community has gained over the past 30, 40, 50 years in dealing with other significant challenges that have a security dimension, whether that's gang violence, suicide prevention, other harms where there is a community element or community role to be played in identifying individuals who may be at risk and then seeking to direct resources to help them.

I think there's a lot to be learned in our work in talking about how to engage with individuals who are at risk of being radicalized to extremism. There's a lot to be learned from that public health-informed approach that will give us, I think, a stronger basis on which to engage communities, because what we have learned over the last 20 years with our prevention work is that we do not find great success when communities perceive that we are securitizing conversations with them about extremism. If they view the government's engagement as a law enforcement leading edge into a conversation, that conversation is not as comfortable and does not go as well. It tells the community, "We're worried about you," "We think you are the problem," when what we actually want to say is the opposite: "We want to help you as a community strengthen your protective factors so that you can prevent this phenomenon from taking root in your community."

And to do that, I think you have to change the way you talk about it. I think we're in the midst of doing exactly that. The last thing I'll say on the prevention side of things is that the hardest part of this work, from my perspective, is scalability. The United States is a vast, diverse place. Prevention work will not look the same and feel the same in Northern California as it will feel in South Florida or in New York or in Chicago or in Boston or in Houston, not to mention the rural areas around the country where I've mentioned that extremist influences may take hold.

How do we harness the capacity and resources of the federal government in a way that enables communities themselves to be the leading edge of prevention work? That's our challenge because I don't think we're ever going to be in a position where the Department of Homeland Security delivers programing that touches every community in a direct way and actually helps them manage individual cases of concern. That's a challenge that I don't think we can ever meet. But what we can do is shape the environment with cutting edge research, identification of best practice, fostering a community of practitioners across the country who do this work, who understand this work. I know you've contributed with your own work to that community of practitioners with the CVE roundtable that you have run for many years. It is a small community and we need it to do big things on a big scale.

And so I think that is the biggest challenge as I see it from the Department of Homeland Security is, how do we scale up this work to meet the challenge that we have in front of us? And I guess the last thing I'd say before we start, Matt, is I was in a major American city last week with one of my DHS senior colleagues, Ken Wainstein, our undersecretary for intelligence, and we happened to have a conversation with the FBI special agent in charge for that community. And of course, we talked about everything I've just talked about now, the overseas terrorism threat, the crime problem, the domestic

violent extremism challenge that this SAC special agent in charge and his team were having to manage. And I thought it was interesting that one of the things we kind of landed upon or alighted upon was that we in the counterterrorism world, unfortunately never successfully or rarely successfully cross things off of our list.

The new problems that I've been talking about in many ways this morning are all additive. In fact, the individual I was talking to, the FBI special agent in charge, we chuckled that there was actually still an active case underway that I had been familiar with eight, ten years ago, tied to a major South Asian extremist organization. And that still sucks up time, energy, and resources for the Federal Bureau of Investigation in this major American city, all the while, they're dealing with everything else that I've described that has emerged on the threat landscape. So that is something that I think is worth appreciating. When you think about managing the threat landscape. Things rarely go away, but new things often arise. And so the challenge for our counterterrorism professionals is how to make that queen size blanket cover that king size bed—at least that's how I think about it metaphorically. Why don't I stop there?

**Levitt:** I think what you're trying to say is you don't get enough sleep, and I'm here for you. Thank you for that opening statement that really covered the waterfront. So, we'll engage in a little bit of a fireside chat now. And I encourage people watching to submit questions. If you're on the Zoom, you can use the Q&A function in the bottom middle of your screen. I see some of you already have. And if you're participating via the livestream, feel free to send an email to the email address policyforum@washingtoninstitute.org.

So, we're about to hit the two-year anniversary of the publication launch of the Domestic Terrorism strategy, and that involves a lot of different agencies, of course, it's not just yours. It's had a lot of things that have been public and people looking in from the outside can notice that there was a big White House conference. Obviously, there was a publication of a big strategy document. There was the launch of an online platform providing resources to people. What else is there? And specifically for DHS, what is DHS's role in implementing the strategy?

**Rasmussen:** DHS's role in implementing the strategy focuses on the things that DHS has resources to do and has experience doing. Some of that is the prevention work I spoke to a minute ago. And as I said, that's a space where our work is evolving and trying to become more fit-to-purpose with the threat landscape that I described.

I mentioned to you when we were getting ready for this conversation, we've just brought on a new senior leader to head up our primary prevention organization, CP3, which drives the work in the department on this topic. I think that provides us a new opportunity, or a fresh opportunity, to come at the problem of prevention with clear eyes, fresh eyes, and an aggressive vision for how to make prevention work effective across the country.

But beyond the prevention work, DHS has a role to play in helping communities prepare themselves for terrorist attacks. Our department supports, with its grant programs, investments in safety and security measures for places of worship or for community facilities such as schools, recreation centers, etc. Basically allowing communities to participate in their own security by giving them the tools that they need to, I don't want to say harden their defenses because that's a horrific and horrible way to think about living here in the United States, but it's a reality that if we can help individual communities with training and grant programs that allow them to become better providers of their own security, then we reduce the potential impact that attacks or incidents will have.

And I would say that's probably where DHS brings the most experience, expertise, and resources to the table—doing that work. And then I would argue we also have a critical role to play in the community engagement piece of this, which I described when I talked about my recent visit to Los Angeles. It's important that citizens across the country feel like their government understands where they are in this space and how they feel vulnerable and at risk and targeted, and so our department spends quite a bit of time engaged in community outreach with communities of all sorts to try to understand what more we can do to meet the needs that they have and to help them feel more secure in pursuing their daily lives. So as we come up on the two-year anniversary of the strategy, I know the White House is certainly looking to kind of take stock of where we've made major headway and where more resources, more application of effort needs to happen. That's a process we're engaged in with our White House colleagues right now. But from my perspective, from the DHS perspective, we just need to do more of what we're doing and reach more communities across the country.

**Levitt:** So that it tees into my next question, which is, you know, when I was in government working counterterrorism, which was mostly jihadi in nature, there was complete consensus not only within government and agencies, but among the public about the nature of the threat agreement that this was a threat and that something had to be done about it. Now we're in a situation where just about everybody in academia and government acknowledges that the most prominent threats we're facing, while the others have not gone away, as you've explained, come from a domestic violent extremist milieu, but there doesn't seem to be the same public consensus on this. And I wonder how that both affects what DHS is trying to do and what DHS is doing to try and help shape that circumstance?

**Rasmussen:** First of all, I would agree with your characterization. We don't have the same clarity of perspective around the domestic violent extremist threat that we would have, or we do have and have had, tied to the threat posed by overseas terrorist adversaries. From our perspective, or from my perspective at DHS, the fix to that is not to try to persuade everybody to see things the way you see them, but instead to try to demonstrate in word and deed that we are approaching this problem in a way as threat or ideology agnostic. We're interested because we want to understand what happened in the particular case, or why an individual traversed down a path to end up in a certain place. But in the end, if the individual is motivated by a white supremacist ideology, an Islamist jihadist ideology, an incel-fueled ideology, or some complex mixture of multiple ideologies, regardless of which of those it is, the tool kit we would be using to try to address that problem is probably pretty similar.

And so, we don't have to necessarily agree on what are the proportionate sizes of the pie where the problem resides. We don't have to reach full consensus as a society because of how we understand the problem, from my perspective, in order to reach consensus about what we need to do about it. And as I said, the what we need to do about it centers on, in my judgment, prevention work, enabling communities to be the ones closest to the problem, who have the ability and the tools to identify actors who are at risk, apply preventive factors, and that might reduce that risk or mitigate that risk and thereby avert ultimate, you know, pathways to radicalization.

As you know from your own CVE-related work, that's inexact science. But I think if there's a glimmer of hope here, and this is a conversation I have had with our new CP3director, Bill Braniff recently, it's that we can approach this in a threat agnostic way because the way we want to do prevention work is not contingent on which form of extremist ideology an individual may have been animated by.

**Levitt:** The only complicating factor here is if we're trying to get communities to get involved in addressing forms of extremism that lead to violence, and there's not an agreement within some of those communities that this is extremism or that it's an unacceptable form of violence. They're not. That's a problem. And to be fair, for example, I can think of several DHS funded programs within the DHS

grant program that are aimed to address just this type of thing.

**Rasmussen:** Well, you often hear FBI Director Wray say he and his FBI colleagues don't focus on the ideology, they focus on the violence. I don't know that I can look at it quite that starkly, because if you're trying to work upstream in the prevention space, you obviously don't want to wait until violence occurs in order to engage in appropriate responses.

But I think the FBI director is on to something in that what should be our cueing mechanism is the idea that violence may emerge from this ideological path, regardless of which ideological path it is. And maybe that's what a community can galvanize around. No community, even if they define right wing, left wing, far right, far left differently, no community wants to see violence inflicted on itself or on their neighbors. So maybe I'm choosing optimism here.

**Levitt:** I think we have to. How does DHS think about the early edge of the spectrum of radicalization? So, we're pre-crime. This is not yet a place for law enforcement to be, you know, using its tools. But, there is so much academic research right now on looking at misogyny, looking at hate, looking at, for example, these are just facts that the largest number of hate crimes in this country right now are targeting Jews. The amount of Islamophobia is such that there was just an IPC on the matter within the government. You have churches and synagogues and mosques. You have the Asian-American Pacific Islander community. I mean, how do we go about even just having conversations with people about this "pre-crime space" so we can try and get ahead of the curve and maybe begin to deal with this phenomenon that otherwise new problems come up but the old ones don't go away.

**Rasmussen:** I think I'm at risk of leaping beyond my actual subject matter expertise by getting to deep into prevention research, but I think it is widely viewed as consensus that attitudes shaped in children, particularly in their pre-teen years, end up being pretty determinative when it comes to pathways to extremism, pathways to extremist-fueled violence. So that gets exactly the point you're making with the question, Matt, which is how do we contribute to the building of an infrastructure that invests in protective factors, that I don't want to say inoculates young people against that kind of extremism, but that at least, and again, this is the term that that our prevention colleagues use again and again, instead of looking at this through a risk factor lens, let's look at this through a through a preventive factors lens. How can we strengthen the elements of community in a place, in a community, such that individuals who engage in exactly the kind of thinking or talk that you just described are viewed as outliers and then in need of engagement, or the lack of a better word, treatment? Rather than those attitudes landing in an environment where they are encouraged, nurtured and fostered by the adults around them.

What I just described is a really, really ambitious project. Again, there's even a question to be asked, do you want your federal government to be driving that kind of programing at state and local levels? I suspect not. Again, because of the questions of size and scale that I mentioned earlier. Where DHS can contribute in this space is with its grant programs that try to identify bespoke programing, programs, and organizations that can deliver this kind of outcome that I just described. A contribution to the preventive safety factors in a particular community. And when that works, let's identify that, do more of it and scale it out.

But what I just described, and again some of my prevention colleagues say to me quite often, is a multi-decade journey. And again, the public health informed approach or model that I described very briefly earlier, it took the public health community decades to reach the point at which we've got that kind of infrastructure in place across the country to support public health.

**Levitt:** So, the Allen, Texas shooter was, if I counted it right at the time, the 22nd mass shooting this year. And we've had more since then. So, does America have a gun problem? Is this part of the larger problem set that you find yourself having to deal with?

**Rasmussen:** I've always thought about the gun issue and the extremism terrorism issue in a pretty simple and linear way. And maybe that's because I'm simple and linear. To me it is a truism to say that when you have a problem with extremism and violent extremism, you don't want those individuals who are holders of extremist or violent extremist thought to have access to resources, to include weapons, that would allow them to be even more lethal than they would otherwise be.

So, the fact that an individual like the Allen, Texas individual or any of the individuals, the Buffalo attacker. We just passed the one-year anniversary of the now horrific attack in Buffalo that targeted the African-American community. To me, it is not controversial. It is not up for debate to say that if the individuals engaged in those kinds of attacks were not armed with high-powered weaponry, it doesn't mean we would not have an extremism problem. Those perpetrators may very well have carried out attacks against individuals, but those attacks might have been less lethal and we might have more ability to prevent the kind of mass casualty tragedies we've been witness to far too often.

**Levitt:** I'm going to ask just two more questions and we'll go straight to the questions from our Q&A. We have the sentencing of Saypullo Saipov for the 2017 New York City vehicular attack, in an ISIS inspired lone offender plot, an HVE plot. You said earlier that, you know, things don't go away. We just have new things. But you know, people ask me all the time, do we really have that type of thing still? Like we don't hear about that as much all the time. Is it because there aren't as many? Is it because DHS and FBI and everybody else are so effective at what they do? But is that still something that is a constant.

**Rasmussen:** Yes, it is. And again, I would not underplay the degree of success and hard work driven effectiveness that our law enforcement community has had in suppressing that kind of threat. But again, if you measure by kind of gross metrics, like caseload or other ways in which the Bureau kind of quantifies its work, I suspect that you would find, and I think it's been borne out in testimony, that the volume of work in this space, that space you just described, has not significantly decreased.

Then just purely anecdotally, I joined DHS in the early part of November at the end of last year, within the first week or two of my arrival, I was part of a NSC-led White House-led interagency meeting to deal with the very the very question of how to manage a set of threat concerns tied to an affiliate of the Islamic State, I guess is what I would say. And so it felt both very new and very familiar at the same time as I was reentering government. I had kind of a moment of I guess this hasn't gone away.

**Levitt:** Yeah.

**Rasmussen:** Now the suppressive effect that I've described earlier is real. I don't want to underplay the success that we've had. But, because the narrative that underpins the ideological narrative, that underpins so much of that plot activity continues to hold appeal for a significant number of individuals, including our fellow citizens or fellow residents in the United States. So long as that is true, we have a problem.

**Levitt:** And the last question before I go to the questions from our audience. To date, the U.S. has formally repatriated 39 individuals from northeast Syria. Some individuals probably returned prior to the formal repatriation process. How does DHS look at the potential security concerns stemming from the foreign terrorist fighters, repatriation, and returnee phenomenon?

**Rasmussen:** I think we look at it through the lens that I described, our kind of overall counterterrorism enterprise that I described that we adopted earlier in this conversation, and that is risk management and risk mitigation. You take the information that you have available to you, you make judgments about whether repatriation of an individual would pose a particularly heightened risk, and then it's a particular form of risk. And if it does, then you apply the appropriate measures, whether they're law enforcement or other, to try to manage or mitigate that risk. As you are well aware, the United States has been vocal and we're working with our partners across the globe to encourage them to engage in greater levels of repatriation. Not because anybody is excited or thrilled by prospect of trying to reintegrate into their societies, individuals who may pose some degree of risk, not for that reason, but for the reason that the status quo as it exists in northern Syria right now, leaves all of us less secure over the over the coming decades.

And so, if we have to marginally accept some degree of risk with repatriation, in service of an objective to shrink the size of that pool residing in camps in northern Syria, then I think we have to think hard about how to do that well. And that's the message that we've certainly tried to carry to so many of our partners around the globe.

**Levitt:** Excellent. For those interested in this issue-set, watch this space in a couple of weeks. We're going to have an event with my colleague, Dr. Devorah Margolin and some others to talk about this, and you'll get all the answers you need.

So, I'd like to go to the Q&A now. Again, feel free to send questions to the Q&A function on the Zoom or to policyforum@washingtoninstitute.org. First question comes from Mike Downing. Who or what entity is responsible to drive the national intelligence collection enterprise? And is DHS an equal in this effort? Are Fusion Centers still relevant and have they succeeded in coordinating efforts of local, state and tribal law enforcement?

**Rasmussen:** Good questions, all Thanks. I assume that's Chief Downing and my good friend in California. Chief, obviously, the overall intelligence enterprise for the federal government is driven by the Director of National Intelligence. But I would say DHS, through its intelligence organization, INA (Intelligence and Analysis) under Undersecretary Ken Wainstein, feels a particular responsibility to address the intelligence needs of our state and local partners across the country.

Again, I was just in Southern California a few weeks ago, and I got a chance to spend time with Fusion Center colleagues in Orange County, California. What I learned there was something that I'm heartened by, and that is the federal government has as much to gain as it does to give in that environment. I came away from that conversation in Orange County, understanding a tremendous amount more about the extremism challenges, particularly anti-Semitism related threat challenges that were existing in Orange County that I knew beforehand.

So, while it was important that the federal enterprise support state and local partners with our intelligence analysis, it was equally important that we harness and harvest what our partners at the local level are learning. And if that were true in the era when our primary threat was tied to the Jihadist set of ideologies, it's even one hundred times more true in this environment. Because I believe we, the federal government, have way less to offer in terms of classified clandestinely acquired hard intel on our DVE set of threats than we had to offer on our set of threats tied to overseas actors.

So, in many cases, the best and most useful information on our domestic violent extremist threats

will come from sources outside the federal government. Whether it's the research community, identifying individuals who are propagating material that proves inspiring to others. Whether it's state and local law enforcement, who are encountering individuals of concern and reporting that. I feel like it's a much more two-way conversation with threat than it might have been ten years ago now.

**Levitt:** I understand there are, specifically in the two years since the strategy came out, there are things that the DHS is doing to really try and improve this conversation, things like the creation of a mobile app and a very, very sharp rise in the number of classified reporting at a variety of levels of classification, but especially go to state, local and tribal partners to push out that which the federal level does have to our local partners.

**Rasmussen:** Right, and this is the always the challenge in this space is putting the highly classified information in a form that it can be disseminated as widely as possible and therefore be as much useful as possible. In some cases, it is not all that useful that a highly classified product be shared with a law enforcement organization that may only have one or two cleared individuals who have to go down the hall to a special room to read and then really can't do anything with that information.

So, the mobile app that you described that our DHS intelligence colleagues are working to push out will aim to make available all the way down to the street-top level the kind of information that you're talking about now at a classified level. And again, constantly looking for feedback from our state and local partners to see if we're hitting the mark in this space. Because I think after 20 years, we know that there's never there's never a good enough when it comes to the sharing of intelligence with partners across. It's just how do we get better?

**Levitt:** The next question asks: can you speak to the relationship between big tech and the rapidly growing threat levels from domestic extremists? What might the department be doing about regulating or monitoring or working together with big tech to uncover threats posed to our communities?

**Rasmussen:** It's a very good question, and it kind of attaches a little bit to the job I held just before coming back into government, where I was working with an organization called GIFCT, the Global Internet Forum to Counterterrorism, which brings tech companies together for the purpose of addressing activity on their platforms by terrorists and violent extremists. In a sense, the easy part of this problem, if there ever was an easy part of this problem, and I wouldn't argue that there was easy, but the less complicated part of this problem attaches to the activity of individuals who are branded with ideology or imagery or self-identification as FTO-linked. So if Matt Levitt wishes to jump on his Facebook/Meta account or his Twitter account and say a bunch of good things about the Islamic State and wave his black banner, I suspect Twitter will act with dispatch against Matt's account and remove that material.

That may not have been so five years ago, ten years ago. But I would argue now, and I'm not singling out Twitter or Facebook, but the mainstream US companies have done a good job of investing in the resources necessary for them to identify material tied to designated FTOs and to remove it. It is a far more complicated project for them to moderate that content when it's not tied to a FTO and when they have to make judgments around whether material or content crosses a line.

That line will look differently to different people and to different companies. When I was at GIFCT, we were embarked on a journey to try to expand the circle of consensus about how to think about categorization of content tied to non-FTO but still quite noxious ideologies. There is still plenty of work to be done in that space.

Now, often the material that you will get will show online is violative of companies' terms of service for reasons other than tied to being tied to terrorism. If it encourages violence, for example, that should result with many companies in removal of or addressing of that content. Just on the face of it. Now, that doesn't always happen and certainly doesn't happen with the speed that we all want it to. But my point is that the companies have tools at their disposal, including their terms of service, that they can apply and it falls on them to make use of those tools.

You asked about DHS's role in this. Along with my White House, State Department and other government colleagues, we DHS, we engage with GIFCT directly to support the work of GIFCT as it helps tech companies in the space. But we also maintain our own independent dialog with technology companies, sharing our own concerns as a department, and as part of a CT community led by the White House, and that happens routinely and regularly.

**Levitt:** Tom Warrick asks the next question, so I warn you, this is from a former DHS person so it's kind of an inside question: keeping on Nick's comment about scaling up prevention programs, do you have an end goal as to the size of the community resources required? DHS is spending overall around $360 million on community programs of all kinds, but communities still find it hard to find resources to run programs commensurate with the threat. How big do community programs need to go before they are effective in communities that range from Buffalo to Uvalde?

**Rasmussen:** This is a familiar question from Tom. I know it well and he's put his finger on something I think that I would agree with wholeheartedly. We are not scaled at this point. We need to be scaled out to deal with the threat picture that I've articulated today. But within the context of the current budget that we have and the budget process that we have underway, I think all I would be comfortable saying is that we need to get bigger, overtime, by orders of magnitude.

That is, of course, not something that the department can do on its own. It has to do so as part of a unified administration approach to the president's budget and then to seek the Congress's approval as well. And what will support our efforts overtime is if we get positive feedback from communities and if we can tie our work, as I know our prevention colleagues are determined to do, to evidence-based research that says this is effective, this is not effective, this is likely to be more effective. The more we can show that we are engaged in an evidence driven effort, the more we can legitimately make a claim for that kind of order of magnitude increase in resources.

**Levitt:** Yeah, metrics and evaluation is the only way to get this going. But in the meantime, I recommend not trying to have this conversation until at least after June one. Do you feel hampered in your, meaning the government's, efforts by the slow and relatively ineffective judicial process in pursuing domestic extremists?

**Rasmussen:** Interesting question. I hadn't really thought about it until just this second. Whereas Tom's question I've thought about a lot because he's raised it with me in a number of settings and it's a good one. I don't know that I would agree with that. I would say we feel hampered because I would argue in my mind, in some cases, even one of the things you gain when you have a successful prosecution effort of someone engaged in what we might call domestic terrorism, we do not only deliver consequences to a perpetrator, and that's ideally delivering some form of justice to the affected community. But hopefully you're also creating a bit of a deterrent effect. You are demonstrating to other individuals who may be inclined to engage in that kind of violent activity and saying, nope, you can be put away for a long time for doing that kind of activity. And I don't know that you need to have to work your way all the way to be realized. And so just the fact that individuals now are being indicted, prosecuted and ultimately imprisoned for offenses that are characterized as domestic terrorism, I

hope will prove to be a powerful deterrent.

**Levitt:** Do you think that there's utility in pursuing, as a matter of policy, hate crime charges to be able to get at some of the activity that's earlier in the kind of radicalization to violence continuum? We do have laws on the books for this. A lot of what we're talking about, not all of it, but a lot of it would constitute hate crimes. Would there be utility in having or having more kind of "hate crimes task forces" to try and address some of these things earlier in the process?

**Rasmussen:** Again, I'm channeling and even going to quote my new colleague, Bill Braniff, who talks about hate crimes all the time. We talk about dozens of terrorism-related incidents a year inside the United States and how unacceptable that is. If you broaden your aperture more widely to include hate crimes, including real crimes that involve police reports and arrests, prosecutions, but then go beyond that to include aggressions, microaggressions and unreported crimes, you're probably talking about not only thousands but tens of thousands of incidents or crimes a year. So by framing my answer that way, I would say, of course Matt, anything we can conceive of that might help us manage the hate phenomenon at a lower level of violence before it has progressed to its worst manifestations, such as a mass casualty event in a mall, that would be a better outcome.

But again, this is again another place where our patchwork of jurisdictional and obviously federalism. Federalism is a challenge in this space. I think that we find ourselves with data challenges. I know the FBI has spoken to data challenges they have in gathering hate crime data. I don't think any of us are satisfied that we have the picture of hate crime that we need to in order to develop more effective policy responses.

**Levitt:** So far, we've talked about foreign terrorist organization threats and domestic violent extremist threats in two distinct baskets. But in what ways do you ever find them kind of overlapping? I remember, for example, after the ISIS-K attack, as we were withdrawing from Afghanistan and the withdrawal overall, you saw all kinds of domestic white supremacist, anti-government extremists lauding the Taliban. At a certain level there, there is some kinship just in terms of, you know, "sticking it to the big man." But are they entirely still separate baskets or at any level in the analysis, is there a bleeding between these groups of ideologies?

**Rasmussen:** I think there are certainly extremist narratives that may have some kind of magnetic attraction that tend to attract. And so, I think to the point you just made, you find these seemingly strange instances in which someone can have aspects of a Jihadist ideology at the same time as they are expressing other forms of ideology that make them appear to have a far-right or a white supremacist ideology.

I'm not probably the best placed person to unpack the psychology behind that. I think from my perspective, though, where we draw distinctions in terms of how we respond to the problem is important. When are talking about individuals who are acting largely on their own or in small, self-selected groups of like-minded individuals? And when are we confronting, as we did for most of the post-9-11 period, a true global network with hierarchy, structure, bureaucracy and all of the associated capability behind that?

To me, that's the bigger distinction rather than the ideology. Which kind of terrorism problem are you confronting? The atomized terrorism problem, whatever the ideology of the individual who is largely on his own or at worst or most, connecting to a small number of like-minded individuals, maybe even never in person? Or are you instead dealing with the post-9-11 Al Qaeda challenge that we had where we were worried about external operations driven by a centralized planning process,

highly bureaucratized, structured, resourced, from a center? That was a long time ago, we've seen lots of that and I'm covering a lot of history in a quick sweep. I think of that distinction as being more important than the ideological distinction.

**Levitt:** So that begs my final question, which is how transnational, really, is the white supremacist, anti-government, various ideologies that ultimately coalesced into what we describe as the domestic violent extremism? Is it just shared ideology or is there something more tangible to maybe use the foreign terrorist organization tool against them, or sort of that, other tools that enable us to leverage our more traditional transnational toolkit?

**Rasmussen:** I think that's an evolving, moving target for questions. I don't know that the answer today will be the same as it might be six months or a year from now, but what I can say…

**Levitt:** So, we'll bring you back.

**Rasmussen:** Right. So, what I can say, with confidence, is that this is a problem we're dealing with, but it's also a problem that dozens of our partner country friends around the world are dealing with in some form or fashion, too. So, it is transnational in that respect. You will find people in northern and Western Europe in the Far East, in Asia, Australia, New Zealand, all of whom fit into the same category. There certainly have been ideological and communications links between individuals in country A and in country. B I don't know that I could point to the kind of plotting that we traditionally saw for so much of the post-9-11 period. But there's a transnational aspect to this, and it behooves us to keep carefully monitoring and digging to make sure that we're not missing something. And if nothing else, there's an opportunity for shared learning as our other partner countries deal with their form, their particular variant, of this threat as well. Just this week at DHS, we are hosting meetings with two of our European partners and this figures on the agenda in ways it would not have figured five or ten years ago.

**Levitt:** Nick, thank you so much for joining us today and taking the time. I want to thank your colleagues for making it possible. Thank you all for participating with us and submitting your questions. Be safe, be healthy. Enjoy the rest of your day. Nick, thank you very much.

**Rasmussen:** Thanks, Matt. Really enjoyed it.

**Levitt:** Appreciate it.