

Protection Considerations for Violent Extremist Threats to Public Officials

Violent extremists continue to encourage attacks against public officials, to incite violence, chaos, and create political instability.^a Violent extremists justify their actions through grievances, such as perceived government and law enforcement overreach; the anticipation of opposing legislative changes; and the proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories, all of which might intensify enduring grievances and encourage violent extremists to threaten violence or attack public officials.^b While most threats and attacks against public officials have been criminal and not associated with terrorism, the increase in threats targeting federal, state and local public officials—particularly in public gatherings—highlights unique protection, security, and public safety challenges.

SCOPE: This product provides awareness and best practices to first responders—especially for smaller departments and those located in more rural regions—on handling terrorist threats and providing protection to public officials.

BACKGROUND: Over the last five years, there has been an uptick in threats to public officials—to include those at the state and local level to a degree unseen in the past—showcasing the need for first responder awareness, particularly during community-focused special or political events. While larger urban agencies may have more experience and greater resources (personnel, equipment, budget), smaller agencies may benefit from some key best practices.

- On 11 November 2021, a DHS National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) Bulletin warned that the new COVID-19 variant and additional public health restrictions may cause antigovernment violent extremists to "use the new restrictions as a rationale to target government, public health officials, or facilities."

Fatal Attack on Senior UK Official Increases Concerns Over Protecting Politicians

In October 2021, an identified UK male fatally stabbed a senior UK official by in a suspected terrorist attack, during a routine town hall-style meeting with his constituents.

There was at least one other foiled terrorist plot targeting another senior UK official in 2016, and British lawmakers have talked about a rising tide of threat.

The UK has launched a review and is considering enhanced security measures to include police protection while lawmakers meet with constituents at town hall events.

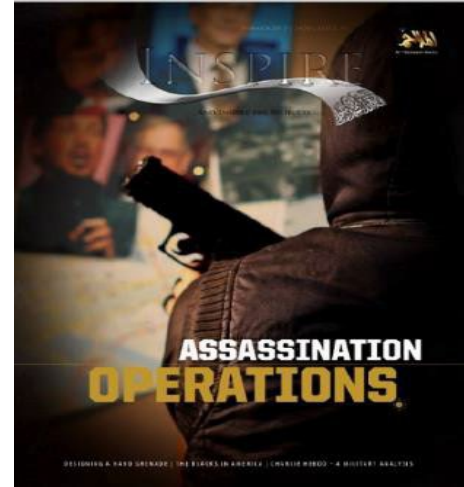
^aUS persons liking, citing, quoting, or voicing, the same themes, narratives, or opinions raised by violent extremists are presumed to be independently engaging in First Amendment-protected activity, unless there are reasonable, articulable facts otherwise. Furthermore, variants of the topics covered in this product, even those that include divisive terms, should not be assumed to reflect violent extremist activity absent information specifically attributing the content to violent extremists. Violent extremists frequently amplify themes already present in lawful domestic debate, and this use by violent extremists has no bearing on the constitutional protections afforded other speakers on the same topic. This information should be considered in the context of all applicable laws and policies while protecting privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties.

^b**Public officials**—includes federal, state, local, and tribal government representatives. They may be political office holders—both elected and appointed, including former officials and candidates seeking future office—and non-elected government officials such as civil servants.

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- In 2021 a former Atomwaffen Division leader and his coconspirators were sentenced to three and a half years in federal prison for their role in a “swatting”^c scheme whose targets included journalists, a sitting cabinet secretary, and a church whose parishioners are predominantly black.
- The 2021 issue of *Inspire* encouraged actions that “deepened the division among the American people, among right and left,” and increased anxiety and panic among Americans, which would include targeting of public officials.
- In December 2020, a federal grand jury charged six men with reported ties to antigovernment violent extremists for orchestrating a domestic terrorist plot to kidnap the Michigan governor.
- The fourteenth issue of *Inspire* magazine by al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) focused entirely on encouraging assassination operations, to include targeting economic and political leaders. Although that issue was released in 2015, historically, *Inspire* articles justify violence, and are accessible online.



CONSIDERATIONS

Best practices for responding to potential threats against public officials include:

Information Sharing and Situational Awareness

- Monitor international, national, state, and local threat intelligence.
- Track international, national, state, or local issues that may serve as a pretext for violence during lawful demonstrations.
- Review open-source information before public engagements, paying particular attention to potential threats.
- Communicate any expectation of violence with interagency stakeholders, as well as the closest state or major urban area fusion center and Joint Terrorism Task Force.
- Encourage reporting of suspicious activity and threatening communications to law enforcement.

Swatting—A type of attack that involves calling law enforcement authorities to report a hostage situation or other critical incident at the victim's residence, when there is no emergency situation.

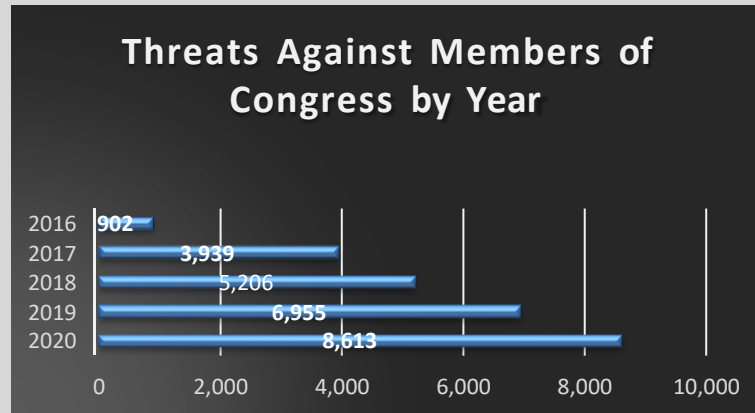
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Heightened Threats to Public Officials

In the last two years, threats to Congress have increased nearly 855 percent from a variety of actors. Violent attempts towards public officials, regardless of motivation, may encourage further threats.

- Between January and March 2021, the US Capitol Police recorded 4,135 threats against members of Congress. If that pace continues, total threats for 2021 may be double those of 2020.



- Threats have included not just those elected to positions of high visibility and authority like Congress, but also lower visibility jobs in suddenly contentious fields—including health officials, local judges, election administrators, and school officials.
- In August 2021, Los Angeles Sheriff's Department began monitoring reported death threats to a local judge overseeing a high-profile conservatorship case.
- In July 2021, authorities arrested a Maryland citizen for e-mailing threats to senior medical directors and their families.

Planning, Coordination, and Training

- Before a public engagement, conduct background research to become familiar with the public officials and their particular responsibilities in your area of responsibility.
- Identify medical care facilities to facilitate the safe and prompt transportation of public officials or their staff, should a medical issue present itself.
- Conduct routine training and practical exercises with public officials, public safety personnel, and other security partners to test security measures.
- Use the ***US Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators Booklet (2021 Edition)*** as an aid for what to look for to determine appropriate and timely action.
- Conduct site surveys of public engagement locations, paying attention to ingress and egress points for both pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

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Digital and Personal Security

Violent extremists may attempt to monitor (in person and virtually) public officials, as well as their families, to establish patterns. With this in mind, public officials and their families should assess their online presence and any exposure to reduce the risk of a targeted attack.

- Educate public officials and their staff^d on personal security measures, such as changing routines and using caution when entering or leaving particular areas, especially when alone.
- Encourage public officials to maintain close communication with law enforcement and security officials, and establish a point of contact for protection needs.
- Inform public officials how to report suspicious activity and threatening communications.
- Encourage public officials, as well as their family and friends, to use safe practices online to mitigate the risk of doxing^e or swatting. For example, limiting the disclosure of details (location and time) of public engagements.
- Educate officials, family, and friends about safe habits and the importance of discretion when posting information online.

RESOURCES

NCTC

The ***US Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators Booklet (2021 Edition)*** is an NCTC, DHS, and FBI triseal product that provides a list of observable behaviors that may help to determine whether individuals are preparing to engage in violence. For inquiries or more information, contact mib@nctc.gov or visit <https://go.usa.gov/xEKgd>.

First Responder Toolboxes

- **Physical Security of First Responders in the Digital Age**
https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/111s_-_First_Responders_Toolbox_-_Personal_Security_of_First_Responders_in_the_Digital_Age_survey.pdf
- **Violent Extremists Exploit Civil Unrest and Public Assemblies in the US**
https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/89s_-_Violent_Extremists_Exploit_Civil_Unrest_and_Public_Assemblies_in_the_US.pdf

^dIt is often best to include the public officials' staff in many of these recommendations, as they typically receive the threats first and may have a fuller picture.

^e**Doxing**—The act of compiling and posting an individual's personal information without permission is known as doxing. The information is then posted on information-sharing websites with details suggesting why the individual should be targeted. The personal information gathered from social media and other websites may include home addresses, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, passwords and any other information used to target an individual during a cyber attack.

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[Violent Extremists and Terrorists Exploit Civil Unrest and Public Assemblies in the United States-survey.pdf](#)

FBI

- **Public Service Announcement “Hackivists Threaten To Target Law Enforcement Personnel and Public Officials,”** <https://www.ic3.gov/Media/PDF/Y2015/PSA150421.pdf>
- **Threat and Intimidation Response Guide** [fbi_threat_int_guide.pdf](#) (harborcomputerservices.net)

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION

- **Tips on Protecting Personal Information** <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/what-know-about-identity-theft>

DHS

- **STOP. THINK. CONNECT.™** <https://www.cisa.gov/stothinkconnect>
- **CISA Cyber Threat Tips** <https://us-cert.cisa.gov/ncas/tips>
- **How To Prevent Online Harassment From “Doxing”** <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/How%20to%20Prevent%20Online%20Harassment%20From%20Doxing.pdf>

NATIONAL EXPLOSIVES TASK FORCE SUSPICIOUS PACKAGE INDICATORS AND RECOMMENDED RESPONSE PROCEDURES <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/suspicious-package-indicators.pdf>

NEW JERSEY REGIONAL OPERATIONS & INTELLIGENCE CENTER, THREAT ANALYSIS UNIT; Protective Intelligence Bimonthly Report | Executive Threat Watch. To get on e-mail distribution, please reach out to ROICProtectiveintel@njsp.org

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PRODUCT FEEDBACK FORM

(U) JCAT MISSION: To improve information sharing and enhance public safety. In coordination with the FBI and DHS, collaborate with other members of the IC to research, produce, and disseminate counterterrorism (CT) intelligence products for federal, state, local, tribal and territorial government agencies and the private sector. Advocate for the CT intelligence requirements and needs of these partners throughout the IC.

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WHAT TOPICS DO YOU RECOMMEND?
