International Center for Enterprise Preparedness (InterCEP)

FBI Report: Lone Wolf Terrorism and Militant Extremists

Web Forum

On September 14, 2016, Gregory Ehrie, Special Agent in Charge of the Intelligence Division at FBI New York Office (NYO), led a discussion about lone wolf terrorism and militant extremists. As summarized below, the discussion addressed the ways in which these threats are evolving and the efforts of the intelligence and law enforcement communities to mitigate them.

The Current and Future Threat

Lone wolf terrorism is a current threat. However, there is a misperception that this is a new, unprecedented threat and that we are at a loss in terms of what we can do. This is not true. Threats related to terrorism and crime have been around for a long time. In 1919 the U.S. had the anarchist bombings. In the 1970s the Black Panther Party conducted a number of attacks. In the 1990s the World Trade Center site was attacked. The threat is not new but it has certainly evolved. The intelligence and law enforcement communities have also evolved to address these threats.

The areas where international terrorist organizations such as ISIS train and their safe havens have grown in the last few years. That expansion has also led to an increase in homegrown terrorism since these international organizations are now better able to share ideas, methods and best practices. Sharing information is now easier than ever before. ISIS had been expanding in Syria but the areas under their control may now be shrinking again.

It is unlikely that any of the current terrorist organizations will take over a country and form a government that would be sustained over time. Many disenfranchised or disenchanted individuals around the world are attracted to the idea of the Caliphate but after experiencing it have realized that it is not what it was advertised to be. Many of those that join these groups soon realize that they are not necessarily what they expected.

ISIS represents a different style of terrorism. Al-Qaida and their affiliates are still there. The threat from these groups has been mitigated but it is still there. Those groups plan their attacks very carefully and they plan big attacks that attract attention. The intelligence community understands how they operate. ISIS is different. It is more like an autonomous collective where members are loosely affiliated and they are more interested in throwing all sorts of punches, no matter how small. It's very difficult to mitigate that threat.

Lone Wolf or Militant Extremists

There has been a very rapid evolution in the area of lone wolf terrorism. When the intelligence community thinks about how to counter that threat they think about similar threats from groups such as white supremacist extremists. In these cases there is a fine line between constitutional rights for the free expression of opinions and what can be tolerated. In the past, with white supremacy groups the intelligence community reached out to them and warned them that in the event of a violent attack their group would be declared a terrorist group and would be destroyed. In these cases, the FBI asked known groups to identify members who had maybe left their organization or been expelled for radical behavior or ideas, or who they thought might conduct an act of violence. This has been done to identify potential lone wolf extremists.

In today's environment, Individuals are self-radicalizing and not talking to anyone. This is happening in their homes where they can self-radicalize very quickly sometimes, across a spectrum of ideologies. How do you find someone who is not in your radar? The time frame for when these individuals decide they want to commit an act of violence and when they carry it out can be an hour or two. This is a very short time frame. The idea may be festering for a long time. For law enforcement this is the worst case scenario. There isn't a very good mechanism for preventing that. These individuals are not meeting with or communicating with a fiery person that promotes hate that the intelligence community may be familiar with. These folks are going to legal places on the Internet and looking at videos and news and self-radicalizing. The age category does not provide a clue and lone wolf extremists can be in their 20s or their 70s. The intelligence community has also recorded both poor and wealthy individuals engage in lone wolf extremism.

How Can This Threat Be Addressed?

The FBI gets asked what people can do to help mitigate this threat very often. Communities should keep their eyes open. If you see something say something. For example, if someone becomes aware of an individual who watches videos that show violence for extended periods of time and who talks about such acts often, that would be a reason for concern. It's always the case that those in contact with someone who has self-radicalized notice a change in behavior before the individual commits an act of violence. It's similar to suicide prevention. It can be someone who was very gregarious suddenly being very quiet, or someone giving their belongings away or buying extravagant gifts. Oftentimes it is teachers and other community leaders that may notice these behavioral changes.

The intelligence and law enforcement agencies are overwhelmed with work and it is critical for them to establish relationships with communities. Nobody wants the stigma of a member of their community going out and committing an act of violence and that means collaboration is beneficial for everybody.

Responding to Active Shooter Incidents

In the Tri-State area the intelligence and law enforcement agencies have gotten much better about going out and talking to various partners about how to respond to active shooter incidents and exercises are carried out with various agencies that need to respond during such incidents. These exercises should be as realistic as possible in order to obtain good results. The most successful response efforts are those that include agencies that know their partners and those they are working with. An active shooter incident is not the time to start relationships with partnering agencies.

Working with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

The FBI works with many NGOs and several organizations have very good intelligence to share. The agency has opened investigations based on information from NGOs. Since law enforcement can't prioritize one organization over another the goal is to talk to all relevant NGOs. In addition, the FBI may bring organizations together and contact them about grant opportunities and other ways for them to collaborate.

International Extremism and Copycats

There are acts of violence that can be described as copycats doing something they have seen done elsewhere. With today's media exposure it is very easy for disenfranchised individuals to see what happens everywhere else. These individuals may not intend to survive but seeing an act of violent extremism abroad may give them an idea of doing something they feel they will be remembered for or doing something that means something to them. It's not necessarily driven by ideology, sometimes it's just about notoriety. It can be copycatting the weapon or method, and that's why they do it.

How real is the cyber-terrorism threat?

Cyberterrorism is a new threat. Everybody lives and breathes on the web or on their phone these days and this medium allows someone abroad who wants to harm the U.S. to do so without leaving their country. In a worst case scenario an individual with sophisticated training or expertise in this area has the potential to shut down the electrical grid or turn off the electricity at a hospital. There is a lot of potential for damage and every time a way to stop a hacker is found, something new comes up. This threat is common to every country so there is a lot of unity on that front. Governments cannot afford to slow down because the threat is evolving very rapidly.

Additional Resources

- Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – New York Office: https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/newyork
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security – Preventing Terrorism: https://www.dhs.gov/preventing-terrorism
- New York Police Department (NYPD) SHIELD – Counterterrorism Strategies: https://www.nypdshield.org/public/initiatives.aspx
- Center on National Security – Fordham Law School: http://www.centeronnationalsecurity.org/
- USC Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE): http://create.usc.edu/