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Defeating the many faces of terrorism requires enterprise thinking

By Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, USAF (ret.), Michael Chertoff, and Steven C. McCraw - Special to the American-Statesman

Within the span of one month, 14 Americans — nine parishioners at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church and five servicemen in Chattanooga, Tennessee — died at the hands of murderers who seemed to have followed the modus operandi of modern-day terrorists, an M.O. increasingly characterized by self-inspiration and often fueled by social media.

These two attacks illustrate in lurid detail that the terrorist threat confronting our nation is dynamic and is not an aberration of just one entity or ideology. Terrorism has many faces; searching in dark alleys for a single face has tragic consequences.

The exact motivation of Mohammad Abdulazeed, the shooter in Chattanooga, remains under investigation, as do exact ties to terrorist organizations. And yet, the target of his attack, as well as its timing, which occurred at the end of Ramadan, suggest a terrorist intent. The self-styled Islamic State promised “calamity for the infidels” during the holy month and implored its followers via Twitter to “kill somebody where you are; kill somebody in uniform.”

In fact, it may be Abdulazeed’s lack of a clear motivation that is indicative of a troubling new face to terrorism. Michael Leiter, the former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, stated that what is “most concerning” is that there were “very few red flags,” and that it was the “speed” with which Abdulazeed seems to have radicalized that highlights “how hard this challenge is.”

The events in Charleston, South Carolina, meanwhile highlighted another face of the terrorist threat; no one ideology has a monopoly on extremism or hate. Indeed, the New American Foundation recently released a study that found nearly twice as many Americans since 9/11 have died in attacks by far right or racist groups rather than Islamic extremists: 48 to 26.

The increased coverage of the many faces of terrorism should bring an increased focus on today’s threat and greater collaboration between federal, state, and local authorities to address them. The two most recent attacks, compounded with the New American Foundation study and others with similar findings, highlight the need for a domestic security apparatus that is more comprehensive and agile — in short, an enterprise

approach to domestic counterterrorism.

In January, Business Executives for National Security outlined 10 specific actions that would help create an enterprise-wide domestic counterterrorism posture. The impetus being that today’s threats are not the same as experienced in 2001 — and our counterterrorism agencies need the capability to adapt their processes and structures accordingly. Specifically, federal, state, and local officials need the tools to acquire, process, share and act on threat information more rapidly and with assurance.

Recent events indicate that terrorists today are increasingly lone actors carrying out attacks without direct instruction or collusion with the organizations promoting and sharing their ideology. Dylann Roof, the suspect in the shooting in Charleston, was not officially affiliated with any particular white supremacist group; initial details on Abdulazeed have shown inconclusive ties to Islamic extremist groups.

Second, social media and the Web are playing a larger role in influencing and motivating these lone actors. In Roof’s case, a website was registered to Roof offering diatribes on white supremacy and pictures of him seemingly glorifying a segregationist past. And as mentioned, while it is still unclear if Abdulazeed was acting directly in response to Islamic State’s tweet, he nonetheless carried out their call-to-action and used the Web to research martyrdom beforehand.

These characteristics portray an increased complexity and breadth of combating today’s threat. The threat is a hydra that

is not subordinated to a single organization or figurehead that we can target and destroy. Rather, to defend against this hydra, we need an increasingly effective flow of threat information.

Creating a domestic security enterprise that keeps pace with the evolving threat requires additional tools, improved skills and superb awareness.

Terrorism has many faces. And we need a domestic counterterrorism enterprise that can see and address them all effectively.

*Schwartz is the former chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force and president and CEO of Business Executives for National Security. Chertoff is former Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. McCraw is the director of the Texas Department of Public Safety.**

*corrected from original publication.

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