

One Year On: Marking Progress on Biden's Counter-Domestic Terrorism Strategy

by [Ryan B. Greer](#)

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Early in the Biden administration, the president tasked the intelligence community with evaluating the domestic terrorist threat – intelligence officials [concluded](#) that it's severe. On June 15, 2021, the Biden administration released the [National Strategy to Counter Domestic Terrorism](#). Now that it has been a full year since the launch, there is an opportunity to review the administration's progress made toward countering the threat of domestic violent extremism. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), where I work, and the McCain Institute at Arizona State University held a Domestic Violent Extremism Policy Summit just before the strategy's anniversary, at which [senior administration officials spoke](#), the substance of their remarks was illustrative in explaining how the administration sees its progress.

[As I wrote previously](#) in this space, the strategy had its limitations from the outset, but largely was an ambitious attempt to meet the need to address domestic terrorism through a comprehensive plan. The administration has been hampered by the inability of Congress to advance comprehensive authorities and scaled resources. Overall, the administration has accomplished a significant amount – given the political realities – and yet, there is much more that can be done.

Pillar One: Understanding the Threat

The strategy consists of four pillars, the first of which is to commit the federal government to improve its understanding of the threat and share more information. While it is difficult to tell exactly how intelligence and information flow are carried out within the government, it seems safe to say that the administration has succeeded in increasing information sharing. The Department of Homeland Security reconstituted the team specializing in domestic terrorist threats in its Intelligence and Analysis unit – which had been disbanded in the previous administration – and DHS has shared considerably more information with state, local, and non-government stakeholders on the urgency of the domestic terrorist threat, largely through National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) Bulletins, the [most recent of which warned](#), “In the coming months, we expect the threat environment to become more dynamic as several high-profile events could be exploited to justify acts of violence against a range of possible targets.” (Some of these and other administration efforts discussed in this article predate the public announcement of the strategy but were developed in concert with it and are therefore considered as integral to an assessment of the administration's counter-domestic terrorism agenda.)

According [to a recent statement](#) by Biden's Homeland Security Advisor, the FBI, National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), and DHS shared three times as many intelligence products related to domestic terrorism this year compared to last year. And they have

streamlined the sharing of information by launching an app – ACT Knowledge – which aims to provide real-time information to state and local law enforcement, as well as the public, easily accessible on smartphones. In February 2021, DHS released \$77 million in grants to state governments to better understand the domestic violent extremist threat, and DHS plans to increase that amount this year to approximately \$128.5 million. Congress is also requiring the National Institute of Justice to perform a “feasibility study” into the potential to create an independent clearinghouse of online extremist content that would fund independent sleuths who could provide tips when they observe potentially criminal behavior. The clearinghouse – originally recommended as part of the Anti-Defamation League’s [PROTECT Plan](#) – is far from operational, but to have Congress mandate a feasibility study is an excellent first step.

It is difficult to assess the success of these efforts. The NTAS bulletins are relatively vague, and it is difficult to know how they are used. The intelligence shared between agencies is classified, as typically is the use of that intelligence. And the administration has not released details as to how states have spent the funding nor how it may have aided state-level efforts.

However, for the federal government to have mobilized that level of effort is incredibly impressive. It is not easy to mobilize federal efforts at all, let alone on the scale of \$128.5 million – particularly without Congress’ help – or to triple the rate of information sharing on one topic. While we must maintain skepticism until the results are clearer, it seems fair to say that the administration succeeded in increasing the amount of information sharing.

This pillar also mentions the need to assess whether overseas white supremacist terrorist groups should be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), unleashing significant law enforcement authorities to counter them. One white supremacist organization was designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) in 2020, the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM). The SDGT type of designation uses narrower authorities, but certainly has some impact in sanctioning terrorist groups. While no white supremacist groups have been designated as FTOs and no *new organizations* have been designated as SDGTs, on the anniversary of the administration’s strategy, the Departments of Treasury and State announced the SDGT [designations](#) of three individuals associated with RIM. As such, the number of groups impacted has not been expanded, but the reach of sanctions against RIM has.

Additionally, [according to](#) the President’s Homeland Security Advisor, the State Department has begun organizing foreign partners with concerns about violent white supremacy to collaborate on shared law enforcement approaches. Congress required the State Department to develop a plan to counter global white supremacy, which should have been completed, but it has not yet been released. Sharing that strategy would go a long way toward public understanding of the foreign policy of countering domestic terrorism, as would more transparency on the FTO process. Absent that transparency, it is difficult to know if there are more actions being taken abroad, or whether there is good cause for no further designations.

Pillar Two: Prevention

The second pillar concerns prevention of recruitment and mobilization to violence. The government's authorities for countering domestic terrorism – as opposed to taking action against FTOs – are, rightfully, far more narrow, to preserve Americans' civil liberties. As such, prevention is significantly more important as a strategic line of effort to counter domestic threats. The strategy states that the administration would increase prevention resources and share information with the technology sector to inform platforms on radicalization methods.

Some progress has been made. In May 2021, DHS [launched](#) the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, the grant program that funds public health-style approaches to off-ramping at-risk individuals. For example, a [recent grant](#) to Boise State University supports the school to “develop a pilot program that builds an alternate reality game (ARG) that engages users in the democratic values underlying a number of historical markers and public exhibits in the State of Idaho.” With the high prevalence of video game usage and [its vulnerability to](#) exploitation by extremists, [finding ways to reach gamers](#) is a prevention area for strategic investment. Further, NCTC releases “mobilization indicators” so that local non-experts can recognize the warning signs that someone might be going down a violent path; last year's version included domestic terrorism indicators for the first time.

The administration also [joined the Christchurch Call](#) in May 2021, an informal agreement among countries and tech companies that followed the massacre of Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, and focuses on mitigating online extremism. Administration officials [also state that](#) they work with the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), the industry organization working across platform companies to address online extremism, such as identifying the livestreaming of an attack so platforms can remove it in real-time.

While the administration's efforts are considerably more significant than their predecessors', prevention efforts are far weaker than needed. While it is admirable that DHS launched the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, the administration also did not request any new funding for it, strapping the grant program to the Trump-era small level of \$20 million per year – hardly enough, when spread nationwide, to disrupt trends in extremist motivations. ADL has called for the grant program to be increased [to at least \\$150 million](#), and [other organizations have called](#) for even more.

Further, as participation in the Christchurch Call is voluntary, it is also unclear if this agreement has any real capacity to create change. And while GIFCT is an important mechanism for addressing violent content, it is difficult to see how platform companies will take voluntary action to police themselves, particularly from a preventive perspective. This is especially true when it comes to measures aimed at countering right-wing extremists on the GIFCT's participating social media companies' platforms. For now, participating companies are only engaged in the removal of livestreamed attacks, agnostic of ideology. Certainly, extremist content is still rampant on the internet, and only a

comprehensive approach addressing all violent extremists, especially right-wing extremists which are [consistently ranked as the most](#) significant threat to the homeland, will begin to make any incremental difference.

In all, prevention is incredibly important to address domestic violent extremism, and efforts must be scaled significantly to have even a small impact.

Pillar Three: Disrupting Threats

The third pillar of the strategy is focused on disrupting domestic terrorist plots, assessing whether new legislation is needed to counter the threat, and looking at insider threats within the government. The results of this pillar so far are mixed.

Early in the administration, Attorney General Merrick Garland issued guidance to prosecutors to increase the prioritization of domestic terrorism and to share more information on domestic terrorism cases across the Department. When Biden took office, there were approximately 850 domestic terrorism cases referred to DOJ for prosecution. Now, there are at least [2,700](#) (as announced in September 2021). However, a significant portion of those cases may be against protestors in Portland, Oregon, in 2020, which may suggest [civil liberties](#) concerns – even if those cases are merited, federal resources should be focused on lethal, violent offenders, not [protestors who](#) “failed to obey a lawful order” or are charged with similar non-violent crimes. At minimum, it is not where the focus should be, which is on violent white supremacist and anti-government terrorism, such as what we saw on Jan. 6, 2021.

In January of this year, the Department of Justice [announced a new office](#) to specialize on domestic terrorism. However, it did not request new resources, which suggests a reshuffling of efforts, as opposed to net-additional efforts. More recently, DOJ announced a new position of Anti-Hate Crimes Resources Coordinator, which may help streamline hate crimes cases that may also be considered domestic terrorism. The administration also [supported](#) the Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act (DTPA), which would have created federal offices to address the threat, streamlined hate crimes and domestic terrorism investigation collaboration, and added critical transparency mechanisms. It passed the House with bipartisan support but failed in the Senate. While the DTPA bipartisan support in the House, it is simply too difficult to galvanize broad support in the Senate, absent a major political push like what we are currently seeing in gun reform.

The administration and Congress have both worked to increase resources to protect non-government institutions under attack. The rabbi of the synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, that was recently attacked by an armed terrorist noted that he used federal Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP) resources to help increase the security of the building, which he credited with lowering the threshold for his congregation to keep themselves safe. The administration was slow to support a scaled increase of the NSGP program, but it has recently announced such support, and Congress seems on track to double the grants provided to faith-based institutions and other non-profits.

To address extremism within the ranks of law enforcement and military personnel, both DHS and the Department of Defense performed reviews of insider extremist threats. To have conducted these reviews at all is laudable. However, DHS admitted that it did not have a definition of extremism or a mechanism to perform regular reviews. And the DOD review used a high threshold of a definition of extremism and [made more promises for future](#) efforts than it did reveal prior or ongoing efforts.

In all, the administration's progress on the third pillar is somewhat TBD. We would need far more transparency on the details of the increase in domestic terrorism cases to evaluate whether such prosecutions are an appropriate use of resources. Further, the administration could have been more vocal in supporting the DTPA or a scaled NSGP, and more detailed in its prescriptions for DHS and DOD insider threat reviews (not to mention reviews of other agencies). However, it would be fair to put some of that blame on Congress, which failed to advance even non-controversial legislation (or what *should be* non-controversial) like the DTPA, or to establish an office at DOD to coordinate extremism reviews on an ongoing basis, among other support.

Pillar Four: Long-Term Contributors

The fourth pillar of the strategy aims to address systemic racism, bias in law enforcement, online conspiracies, and gun violence. In short, it is the pillar with long-term aims. It is both the pillar with the least obvious progress, but also the one where progress is perhaps the most elusive. Solving systemic racism, for example, is no small goal.

Biden has [called out white supremacy directly](#) – a much-needed change in condemnation that was certainly not his predecessor's approach. He directly spoke against the racist and antisemitic "[Great Replacement](#)" Theory after the Buffalo supermarket shooting by an avowed white supremacist. It was helpful to hear him directly articulate that threat, but it was followed with little obvious action.

Assessing the administration's work on systemic racism merits an analysis unto itself, by an author expert in that area, but the administration did release plans to [advance racial equity](#), and it is fair to say that the administration [has done quite a bit](#) to advance this priority, overall. It would also be fair to say that there is much, much more that can be done, and that trust in government – an metric articulated by the strategy – [is still low](#), including among communities with a history of being over-policed. The strategy pledges that the administration is "prioritizing efforts to ensure that every component of the government has a role to play in rooting out racism and advancing equity for under-served communities that have far too often been the targets of discrimination and violence." That is a high bar, and one that would be difficult to achieve for any administration.

On gun control, the Senate seems to claim most of the recent progress. However, the administration did take [measures to address ghost guns](#), including regulating the production of guns to reduce the number of untraceable firearms in circulation. The administration also [announced "regional strike forces"](#) to address firearms trafficking and released draft model legislation for Extreme Risk Protection Orders, also known as "red

flag laws,” to support states in blocking dangerous individuals such as extremists from obtaining a gun.

It would be fair to critique efforts to advance the fourth pillar as either too ambitious on the front-end, or too little in implementation. Those concepts are likely connected, as it may have been difficult for the administration to wrap its head around how to address such significant ambitions.

Conclusions

The administration has made a significant amount of progress to counter domestic terrorism. In fact, by most measures on most issues, the Biden administration has done more on countering domestic terrorism than most administrations do on any typical policy issues. Moreover, Congress deserves much of the blame for not rising to the challenge and working with the administration to significantly scale efforts.

However, the domestic terrorist threat is not a typical policy issue – it is an existential one; a threat to our very democracy and ability of communities to live without fear. On January 6th of this year, [FBI Director Christopher Wray rightly observed that](#) “the problem of domestic terrorism has been metastasizing across the country.” And yet, the administration has not created a new center – like the Bush administration worked with Congress to do with NCTC after 9/11 – nor created a Special Presidential Envoy – as President Obama did to advance the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS. Perhaps a new center or envoy are not the right mechanisms, but certainly, they are the right *scale* to address domestic terrorism, which by any measure is a significant national security threat, and one that is only getting more severe. While the administration’s progress is laudable, the bar for progress is, rightfully, incredibly high, and not yet met.

IMAGE: US President Joe Biden arrives to speak at the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, DC on June 21, 2022. (Photo by Nicholas Kamm / AFP) (Photo by NICHOLAS KAMM/AFP via Getty Images)

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