



Reference Aid: ISIS and al-Qa'ida-Inspired Homegrown Violent Extremists

This reference aid is about homegrown violent extremists (HVE) in the United States. These individuals are most frequently supporters of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS), al-Qa'ida, or [designated foreign terrorist organizations \(FTO\)](#) allied with these two groups.^{a,b} It also discusses HVEs' connections to FTOs, participation in multiple types of terrorism activities, historical attack data and recent examples of lethal attacks, targeting and tactical trends, locations, demographics, and common behavioral indicators during their radicalization to violence.^c

Key Points

- **Ties to FTOs:** HVEs who mobilize to engage in violence are often inspired to act without receiving direct operational support from a FTO.¹ Alternatively, their mobilization to violence can be enabled and often sped up by contact, typically via the internet or social media, with terrorist groups who provide operational guidance but leave overall control of the operation to the HVE.^{2,3}
- **Terrorism Activities:** HVEs have engaged in a variety of illegal terrorism-related activities including seeking to engage in lethal attacks in the United States; pursuing travel overseas to join an FTO; and engaging in US-based fundraising, logistical, or other facilitation activities on behalf of a FTO.
- **Attack Numbers:** Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, there have been at least 21 attacks in the United States by HVEs, which have resulted in at least 92 deaths and 442 injured persons.⁴
- **Targets and Tactics:** While HVEs have traditionally preferred attacking targets associated with the US Government, law enforcement, and military, many have pursued plotting against softer civilian targets since mid-2015. Additionally, easily obtainable and simple to use weapons such as firearms, bladed instruments, and vehicles have increasingly become their weapons of choice.⁵
- **Geographic Dispersal:** There have recently been federal terrorism investigations in all 50 states.⁶ Despite the geographic dispersal of HVEs throughout the United States, many HVEs are in contact with other violent extremists during their initial radicalization or if they subsequently mobilize to violence.⁷
- **Demographics:** A review of HVEs who have been arrested or killed due to their involvement in terrorism activities indicates that a significant majority are males between the ages of 18-35, but more females and minors have engaged in such activities recently.^{8,9}

Examples of Lethal Attacks

- **Orlando, FL:** Omar Mateen, a supporter of ISIS, in June 2016 shot and killed 49 patrons at an Orlando night club and injured 53 others before he was killed by law enforcement.¹⁰
- **San Bernardino, CA:** ISIS supporters Syed Farook and his wife Tashfeen Malik entered Farook's December 2015 work holiday party and shot dead 14 individuals and injured 22 others.¹¹ The couple were killed hours after the attack in a shootout with police.
- **Chattanooga, TN:** In July 2015, Mohammad Abdulazeez—who viewed materials from deceased al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula radicalizer Anwar al-Aulaqi—used firearms to kill five and wound three individuals at a military

^a An **HVE** is defined as a person of any citizenship who has lived and/or operated primarily in the United States or its territories who advocates, is engaged in, or is preparing to engage in ideologically-motivated terrorist activities (including providing support to terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization, but is acting independently of direction by a foreign terrorist organization. HVEs are distinct from traditional domestic terrorists who engage in unlawful acts of violence to intimidate civilian populations or attempt to influence domestic policy without direction from or influence from a foreign actor.

^b ISIS is also commonly referred to by others as ISIL, which stands for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Daesh, which is the acronym for the derogatory Arabic-language name al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa ash-Sham. Ash-Sham is a historical term often previously used to describe the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River, and Anatolia (in present day Turkey) and Egypt. The group calls itself the Islamic State or IS.

^c **Radicalization** is defined as the process through which an individual changes from a non-violent belief system to a belief system that includes the willingness to actively advocate, facilitate, or use violence as a method to effect societal or political change. Some radicalized individuals elect to mobilize by inciting, supporting, or preparing to engage in violence.

recruiting center and Naval reserve center less than 10 miles away. Abdulazeez was shot and killed by police during the attack.¹²

- **Garland, TX:** ISIS supporters Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi in May 2015 used small arms to attack a contest to draw the Prophet Mohammed.¹³ They injured one person before they were both shot dead by an off-duty law enforcement officer working security at the event.
- **Boston, MA:** Brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev^{USPER} in April 2013 detonated multiple improvised explosive devices at the Boston Marathon and days later shot and killed a police officer, resulting in a total of 4 killed and 264 injured persons.¹⁴ Tamerlan was killed in a subsequent shootout with police, and Dzhokhar was arrested, convicted on terrorism charges, and then sentenced to death.¹⁵

Behavioral Indicators of Possible Radicalization to Violence

A US Government review of recently mobilized HVEs produced the below list of common, observable activities many of the individuals engaged in during their radicalization to violence. Some of the observed activities include constitutionally protected activity, which by itself may not be indicative of criminal activity associated with terrorism.

Posting on the internet or social media sites public comments or links that promote FTOs or stating one's desire to pursue acts of violence in the United States on behalf of FTOs or travel to join such groups;
Communicating with known or suspected US or overseas-based violent extremists in person or on social media sites;
Attempting to recruit or radicalize others to pursue acts of violence in the United States on behalf of FTOs or travel overseas to join such groups;
Seeking religious or political justification for engaging in or supporting violence in the United States or other countries;
Performing internet research for target selection and/or acquisition of technical capabilities, without a reasonable explanation, could be indicative of planning for attacks in the United States;
Newly engaging in firearms or physical training while expressing a desire to pursue plotting in the United States on behalf of FTOs or travel to join such groups;
Conducting suspicious financial transactions to obtain the funds to acquire weapons, explosives, or precursors to build improvised explosive devices;
Destroying electronic media and deactivating social media accounts that individuals previously used to post their support for FTOs or their causes;
Using cover stories to mask nefarious activities, such as plans to engage in or support violence; and
Giving away or selling possessions such as cars and electronics, maxing out credit cards, taking out money from student loan accounts, or borrowing money from friends and relatives, in conjunction with an expressed desire to pursue acts of violence in the United States on behalf of FTOs or travel to join such groups.

Additional CVE Resources

For additional information on CVE-related research and analysis, strategies and frameworks, toolkits, organized networks, and grants, please visit the [interagency CVE Task Force's website](#).

- ¹ US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs; Hearing Entitled “15 Years After 9/11: Threats to the Homeland;” “Statement of Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Charles Johnson;” 27 SEP 2016; pg 1.
- ² US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs; Hearing Entitled “15 Years After 9/11: Threats to the Homeland;” “Statement of Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Charles Johnson;” 27 SEP 2016; pg 1.
- ³ US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs; Hearing Entitled “15 Years After 9/11: Threats to the Homeland;” Statement of NCTC Director Nicholas J. Rasmussen; 27 SEP 2016; pg. 2.
- ⁴ DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis; Database of HVE terrorism attacks in the United States between 12 September 2002 and 31 August 2017.
- ⁵ US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs; Hearing Entitled “15 Years After 9/11: Threats to the Homeland;” Statement of NCTC Director Nicholas J. Rasmussen; 27 SEP 2016; pg. 2.
- ⁶ CNN; “DHS Chief: Terror Risk as High as on 9/11;” Zachary Cohen; 18 APR 2017; <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/18/politics/john-kelly-dhs-terrorism-isis-threat/index.html>.
- ⁷ House Committee on Homeland Security; “#TERROR GONE VIRAL: Overview of the 75 ISIS-Linked Plots Against the West, 2014-2016;” MAR 2016; pgs. 5-7.
- ⁸ House Committee on Homeland Security; “#TERROR GONE VIRAL: Overview of the 75 ISIS-Linked Plots Against the West, 2014-2016;” MAR 2016; pg 7.
- ⁹ George Washington University Program on Extremism; “Cruel Intentions: Female Jihadists in America;” Audrey Alexander; NOV 2016; pg 1.
- ¹⁰ CNN; “Orlando shooting: 49 killed, shooter pledged ISIS allegiance;” Ralph Ellis, Ashley Fantz, Faith Karimi, and Elliott C. McLaughlin; 13 JUN 2016; <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/index.html>.
- ¹¹ LA Times; “Everything we know about the San Bernardino terror attack investigation so far;” 14 DEC 2015; <http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-san-bernardino-shooting-terror-investigation-htmlstory.html>.
- ¹² CNN; “Chattanooga shooting: 4 Marines killed, a dead suspect and questions of motive;” Catherine Shoichet and Gary Tuchman; 17 JUL 2015; <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/16/us/tennessee-naval-reserve-shooting/index.html>.
- ¹³ CNN; “Chattanooga shooting: 4 Marines killed, a dead suspect and questions of motive;” Catherine Shoichet and Gary Tuchman; 17 JUL 2015; <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/16/us/tennessee-naval-reserve-shooting/index.html>.
- ¹⁴ CNN; “Boston Marathon Terror Attack Fast Facts;” 29 MAR 2017; <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/03/us/boston-marathon-terror-attack-fast-facts/index.html>.
- ¹⁵ Newsweek; “JUDGE FORMALLY SENTENCES BOSTON MARATHON BOMBER TSARNAEV TO DEATH;” Michele Gorman; 24 JUN 2015; <http://www.newsweek.com/boston-marathon-bomber-tsarnaev-formally-sentenced-346211>.