

## Law Enforcement Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Past Cases

### OVERVIEW

The White House's *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* places significant responsibility upon local law enforcement to be a key actor in countering violent extremism and preventing potential terrorist acts in the United States in the future. While counterterrorism has rarely been the primary responsibility of law enforcement, the United States has long engaged law enforcement in counterterrorism efforts, particularly against domestic threats. Analyses of two past cases—efforts to counter eco-terrorists and violent Puerto Rican nationalists—demonstrate that law enforcement can have success in this role when agencies and individuals involved are willing and able to fully collaborate with colleagues, have access to an ongoing stream of intelligence and data, and apply innovative techniques for analyzing those data. These historical cases can provide important insights for today's efforts to address persistent and emerging threats.

### PROJECT BACKGROUND

The purpose of this research was to examine different mechanisms that the United States and other countries have used to counter terrorism beyond high-profile military efforts and to examine the effects and effectiveness of such interventions. Specifically, this project aimed to identify conditions and practices that may foster success in preventing future extremist violence using law enforcement as the primary countermeasure.

### FINDINGS

This project has generated findings from efforts focused on two cases in which law enforcement in the United States played the lead role in trying to counter movements known to present a threat of terrorist violence to the U.S. public. The first case dates back to the 1970s and 1980s and involves Local, State, and Federal law enforcement efforts to minimize the threat posed by the **Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional (FALN)**, a violent Puerto Rican nationalist group responsible for at least 98 terrorist attacks on the U.S. mainland between 1974 and 1982. The second case focuses on the threat posed by **The Family**, a subgroup of the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front involved in 20 attacks from 1995 to 2001 against targets that the perpetrators believed to be hostile to the environment. FALN's terrorist activity was primarily located in the major urban areas of New York City and Chicago, while The Family concentrated its efforts in the Pacific Northwest, especially in Oregon.

**Interagency collaboration was essential in both cases for maximizing resources, pooling intelligence from different sources, and putting these terrorist groups in an appropriate threat context.**

While these cases occurred during different times in U.S. history and addressed groups motivated by very different ideologies and beliefs, similarities between the law enforcement efforts to counter them appeared as the cases were examined more closely: In both cases, law enforcement agencies were successful in arresting and convicting key leaders and members of the groups, and the arrests were associated with a significant reduction (or elimination) of activity by the groups. A key element contributing to this outcome in both cases was the purposeful and effective collaboration among different law enforcement agencies at the Local, State, and Federal levels. This interagency approach was not the norm for the agencies involved in either case, but key individuals recognized that collaboration

was essential for maximizing resources, pooling intelligence from different sources, and putting these groups in an appropriate threat context.

While sustained interagency collaboration was an essential innovation in both of these cases, success was also fostered by more traditional police methods: Specifically, in the FALN investigation and in Operation Backfire (the effort to break apart The Family), the recruitment of a key informant represented a pivotal moment that provided engaged law enforcement officials with essential information about the operations, practices, and membership of each of the groups. Such information allowed officials to more effectively target their investigations and led to crucial breakthroughs in both cases.

Efforts to eliminate the FALN threat also relied on extensive surveillance of known and suspected members, particularly at safe houses in Chicago. Operation Backfire relied on such tactics, but also illustrated the potential value of newer techniques for analyzing data collected from such efforts. Investigators on Operation Backfire employed link analysis tools to organize information from different sources. While valuable to their efforts, this tool—typically used in narcotics cases at the time—had limitations that might have been overcome by employing social network analysis methods that are better equipped to demonstrate the nature of ties among individuals connected in some network. Investigators adopted social network analysis methods late in Operation Backfire, but observers argue that the operation might have been more efficient had it been adopted earlier.

**Both old and new policing techniques were essential in these counterterrorism efforts.**

While it is important to understand the practices used by law enforcement in these past efforts, this research also demonstrated the challenge of singling out factors that make a countermeasure effective or ineffective. Violent extremist groups emerge in distinct contexts, with different strengths and vulnerabilities that make them either immune to or susceptible to specific measures. As such, we guard against drawing general conclusions about “what works” from looking at just these two cases. It is important to note, though, that these cases demonstrate the potential contributions of law enforcement in the campaign to counter violent extremism.

## METHOD

Research teams undertook individual qualitative case studies of law enforcement efforts against FALN and The Family, generating in-depth reports on both efforts. Both research teams reviewed primary and secondary sources related to these efforts, and both conducted original interviews with members of the investigation teams who were involved in these cases. Full reports on each, listed below, are available via START:

- Belli, Roberta. “Effects and effectiveness of law enforcement intelligence measures to counter homegrown terrorism: A case study on the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN),” Final Report to Human Factors/Behavioral Sciences Division, Science and Technology Directorate, U.S. Department of Homeland Security. College Park, MD: START, 2012.
- Deshpande, Nick, and Howard Ernst. “Countering Eco-Terrorism in the United States: The Case of ‘Operation Backfire’.” Final Report to Human Factors/Behavioral Sciences Division, Science and Technology Directorate, U.S. Department of Homeland Security. College Park, MD: START, 2012.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

These case studies were part of a larger effort to understand the landscape and effects of countermeasures against specific terrorist threats that have been faced by the United States. To complement the case studies, START researchers have spent 2.5 years compiling a systematic, structured data set on Countermeasures against Extremism and Terrorism (CoMET) to better understand the effect and effectiveness of a wide range of measures against targeted terrorist groups.

## RESEARCHERS AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Project Lead: Brooke Fisher Liu, Kathleen Smarick  
Other Project Researchers: Roberta Belli, Nick Deshpande, Howard Ernst

To provide feedback, or for any correspondence relating to this research, or for a copy of the full reports on this topic, contact:

### Dr. Brooke Fisher Liu

Department of Communication, University of Maryland | Affiliated Faculty Member, START  
2110 Skinner Building, College Park, MD 20742 | 301-405-6524 (phone) | [bfliu@umd.edu](mailto:bfliu@umd.edu)



The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is supported in part by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through a Center of Excellence program based at the University of Maryland. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. For more information, contact START at [infostart@start.umd.edu](mailto:infostart@start.umd.edu) or visit [www.start.umd.edu](http://www.start.umd.edu).

This research was supported by the Human Factors / Behavioral Sciences Division of the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through an award made to the START Consortium. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or START.