

Calling All Eyes: Spotting Potential Terrorist Activity

A young man buys a ton of ammonium nitrate fertilizer from a farm supply store. Later, a young man goes to a raceway and purchases large quantities of racing fuel. Still later, a young man buys a used car and leaves it parked for several days not far from a nondescript federal building.

None of these activities is illegal and each went unreported. Turns out it was the same young man in each instance. His name was Timothy McVeigh—the domestic terrorist responsible for the April 1995 attack in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people and wounded hundreds more.

Connect the Dots

The Justice Department recently launched the Nationwide SAR (Suspicious Activity Reporting) Initiative—NSI—a program that sets up “fusion centers” where reports of suspicious activities made by citizens and local police are collected and analyzed. NSI establishes a uniform process for gathering and sharing information among federal, state, local and tribal agencies with the aim of detecting underlying patterns of “precursor conduct”—activities that may signal a potential terrorist attack.



The public plays a large part in the NSI program. Authorities are depending upon ordinary citizens to provide the dots to connect. As Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano put it, “Homeland security begins with hometown security.” But what exactly should the public be looking for?

See Something, Say Something

Certain kinds of activities can indicate terrorist plans are in the works, especially when they occur at or near high-profile sites or places where large numbers of people gather. The FBI urges citizens to keep an eye out for such precursor conduct—like that listed below—and to report it immediately.

Surveillance: Are you aware of anyone recording or monitoring activities, taking notes, using cameras, maps, binoculars or other observation equipment near a key facility?

Deploying Assets: Have you observed abandoned vehicles, stockpiling of suspicious materials, or persons being deployed near a key facility?

Suspicious Persons: Are you aware of anyone who does not appear to belong in the workplace, neighborhood, business establishment, or near a key facility?

Suspicious Questioning: Are you aware of anyone attempting to gain information in person, by phone, mail, email or other communication method regarding a key facility or its personnel?

Acquiring Supplies: Are you aware of anyone attempting to improperly acquire explosives, weapons, ammunitions, dangerous chemicals, uniforms, badges, flight manuals, access cards or identification for a key facility, or to legally obtain items under suspicious circumstances that could be used in a terrorist act?

Dry Runs: Have you observed any behavior that appears to be preparation for terrorist activity,

such as mapping out routes, playing out scenarios with other people, monitoring key facilities, timing traffic lights or traffic flow, or other suspicious activities?

Tests of Security: Are you aware of any attempts to penetrate or test physical security or procedures at a key facility or event?

Recognizing and reporting precursor intelligence-gathering activities can interrupt potential terrorist events, crimes and other threats before they occur. While on the job, security officers should follow post orders for reporting suspicious activity. Otherwise, the FBI encourages citizens to contact local police, the FBI or the nearest Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) to report suspicious activity or behavior. If there is an emergency or immediate threat, call 911.

For more information on the NSI program go to <http://nsi.ncirc.gov/>. For additional resources on detecting and reporting indicators of terrorist attacks, and for guidelines on preparedness and response to terrorism threats, visit www.fbi.gov, www.dhs.gov and www.fema.gov/pdf/areyouready/terrorism.pdf

Terrorism Targets

Terrorism is the use of force or violence against persons or property in violation of the criminal laws of the United States for purposes of intimidation, coercion, or ransom. Terrorists often use threats to:

- Create fear among the public
- Try to convince citizens that their government is powerless to prevent terrorism
- Get immediate publicity for their causes

Acts of terrorism include threats of terrorism; assassinations; hijackings; bomb scares and

bombings; cyber attacks (computer-based); and the use of chemical, biological, nuclear and radiological weapons.

High-risk targets for acts of terrorism include military and civilian government facilities, international airports, large cities, and high-profile landmarks. Terrorists might also target large public gatherings, water and food supplies, chemical plants, utilities, and corporate centers. Further, terrorists are capable of spreading fear by sending explosives or chemical and biological agents through the mail.

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