

Threats Against Religious Facilities and Adherents Highlight Importance of Religious Community Outreach

Houses of worship and other faith-based facilities will likely continue to be potential targets for terrorists and homegrown violent extremists (HVEs).^a Enhanced communication, coordination, and training among federal entities, state, local, tribal, and territorial first responder agencies, religious community groups, and private sector partners can improve security protocols, increase awareness of suspicious activity indicators, and ultimately improve the ability to detect, deter, and disrupt potential plots.

SCOPE: This product raises awareness of potential threats to religiously affiliated facilities and groups regardless of type, sect, or denomination; provides examples of tactics used in attacks; and promotes best practices for engaging with religious communities.

Historically, terrorists have targeted and encouraged the targeting of religiously affiliated facilities, structures, events, people, and groups, and there have been a number of high-profile attacks and plots against religious facilities, both domestically and abroad. Terrorists may consider faith-based institutions as potential targets for a variety of reasons, including their symbolism, perceived lack of security, direct encouragement from terrorists overseas, and violent extremist messaging glorifying recent attacks.

- In April 2019, suicide bombers attacked several targets in Sri Lanka, including three churches—St. Anthony’s Shrine in Colombo, St. Sebastian’s Church in Negumbo, and Zion Church in Batticaloa—killing at least 250 and injuring 450 others. ISIS identified several men pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a video as being the attackers.
- In March 2019, a 28-year-old Australian male equipped with firearms and explosive devices attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 and injuring approximately 48 others. The alleged shooter published a manifesto online and—using a head-mounted camera—livestreamed the attack on social media. A New Zealand court has charged the attacker with 51 counts of murder, 40 counts of attempted murder, and one count of carrying out a terrorist act.
- In January 2019, rebels with Abu Sayyaf attacked the Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church on the Island of Jolo, Mindanao, Philippines, with a series of homemade explosive devices. Authorities confirmed that 20 were killed and 81 were injured, including 16 police and military officers. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack through social media.

^aA person of any citizenship who has lived or operated primarily in the US or its territories that advocates, is engaged in, or is preparing to engage in ideologically motivated terrorist activities (including providing support for terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) but is acting independently of the direction of an FTO. 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 or influence from a foreign actor.



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Individual or small-group violent extremists using simple strategies, such as opportunistic attacks, have largely threatened or conducted attacks against temples, shrines, home congregations, and other religious sites in the Homeland. The following examples highlight tactics and threats against religious facilities and adherents in the United States.

- In December 2018, a 21-year-old Ohio man allegedly planned to use multiple firearms to target Toledo, Ohio, area synagogues. According to court documents, he posted pro-terrorist photographs and messages on social media. In January 2019, the Northern District of Ohio grand jury returned a three-count indictment of attempting to provide material support to ISIS, attempting to commit a violent hate crime, and possessing firearms in furtherance of a crime of violence against the attacker.
- In October 2018, a 46-year-old Pennsylvania man allegedly attacked a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, synagogue using multiple firearms killing 11 and injuring seven others, including five police officers. According to a January 2019 63-count indictment, prior to the assault, the attacker posted anti-Semitic language on social media. The US Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania charged the attacker with federal charges of obstructing free exercise of religious beliefs—a hate crime—and use of a firearm to commit murder. In addition, the State of Pennsylvania charged the male with criminal homicide, aggravated assault, and ethnic intimidation.
- In June 2018, a 45-year-old woman in Wisconsin hacked into private social media platforms and posted pro-terrorist messages to encourage individuals to conduct attacks using various methods on potential targets, such as churches, street festivals, and summer celebrations. In April 2019, she pled guilty in the US District Court, Eastern District of Wisconsin, to providing material support to ISIS.

Terrorists favor soft targets and continue to call openly for attacks in the West through violent extremist publications and social media in multiple languages. In April 2019, al-Muntasir—a pro-ISIS media group—issued two messages that called for attacks against specific religious facilities and their members:

- A video broadcast calling for its followers to attack Valencia and Malaga, Spain, in the name of “holy war.” The video showed scenes of Holy Week processions with vehicles running down pedestrians in the streets.
- A poster of the Notre Dame fire stating in French, “Its construction began in the year 1163 and ended in 1345. It’s time to say goodbye to your oratory polytheism,” accompanied by the hashtag “Bonne journee,” meaning “Good day.”

ENGAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS: Because religious-related events and structures—and those who attend or occupy them (clergy, staff members, and congregations)—are potentially at risk, first responders are encouraged to look for and develop engagement opportunities or expand existing programs and relationships with religious community leaders and congregations in their



jurisdiction. Engagement supports information exchange that can increase safety by ensuring reporting, vetting, and investigation of local threats or suspicious activities, and that all partners are aware of the current local threat picture.

- Religious facilities often publicize their meeting times and locations, including services and events such as festivals, picnics, concerts, special services, classes, or training, which is information that can be potentially useful to a terrorist.
- First responders who are already members of a religious community may serve as initial points of contact to create or strengthen community relationships.
- First responders and religious groups may not have the same level of understanding or a common lexicon regarding violent radicalization. First responders should consider training with religious groups and leaders to promote a common understanding of the indicators of radicalization or mobilization to violence.
- Be aware of ways in which international issues may affect the religious communities within jurisdictions, adjacent communities, or regions.
- When possible, engagement should take place within a wider social engagement context and address issues such as discrimination, criminal activity, access to social or economic support programs, and outreach related to general safety, such as security seminars, fire-prevention inspections, and security-system testing.
- Jurisdictions should support and promote outreach groups, such as interfaith councils, to build networks, provide education, and share accurate information on threats and attacks.
- Congregations may negatively perceive the physical presence of first responders and security personnel, especially in uniform. Consider developing alternative, nontraditional or low-visibility means to conduct engagements, such as teleconferences.
- Religious gatherings may occur in nontraditional houses of worship, such as movie theaters, office buildings, schools, and in homes, which may not have standardized or modernized security, including communications equipment.
- Special faith-based events may occur in nontraditional venues such as parks or on city streets.
- Services or ceremonies may involve separation practices based on gender, culture, age, or other factors. It is important to be aware of specific community sensitivities that may affect the ability to provide assistance during an incident.
- Some religious facilities or structures may be tourist destinations, with a limited security presence.
- Religious facilities may run or host activities at venues that provide a public service, such as schools, day and after-care centers, donation sites, and food banks.



- Know the schedules for religious services and events, including festivals, picnics, guest speakers, concerts, special services, classes, or trainings.
- Develop response and security protocols in conjunction with religious community security personnel to accommodate regular religious ceremonies and special events.
- Congregations may have internal security teams with a wide variety of training and equipment.

RESOURCES:

- Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative (NSI) Safety for Faith-Based Events and Houses of Worship (April 2017):
https://nsi.ncirc.gov/documents/Safety_for_Faith_Based_Events_and_Houses_of_Worship_NS_I_Awareness_Flyer.pdf
- NCTC's "Homegrown Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators for Public Safety Personnel":
<https://www.dni.gov/index.php/nctc-newsroom/nctc-resources/item/1945-homegrown-violent-extremist-mobilization-indicators-2019>
- DHS Hometown Security Initiative: <https://www.dhs.gov/hometown-security>
- DHS Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships: <https://www.dhs.gov/dhs-center-faith-based-neighborhood-partnerships>
- DHS Office for Bombing Prevention Training and Resources: <https://www.dhs.gov/bombing-prevention-training>





PRODUCT FEEDBACK FORM

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