

United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 27, 2020

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf  
Acting Secretary of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528

The Honorable Richard Grennell  
Acting Director of National Intelligence  
Washington, DC 20511

The Honorable Christopher Wray  
Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation  
35 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20535

Dear Acting Secretary Wolf, Acting Director Grennell, and Director Wray:

We write to express concern over continued terrorist threats and to request information about the United States government's counterterrorism capabilities amid our nation's struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a recent interview John Demers, the Assistant Attorney General for National Security at the Department of Justice (DOJ), said that the Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) are carefully monitoring how violent extremists are changing, or accelerating, their plans because of the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>1</sup> For example, on Tuesday, March 24, suspected violent white supremacist Timothy Wilson was shot and killed by FBI agents as he attempted to acquire a car bomb, which he planned to detonate at a Kansas City-area medical center.<sup>2</sup> According to the FBI, Wilson had been planning the attack for months, but accelerated his plans due to the pandemic.

Foreign Terrorist Organizations continue to be a threat. In a recent ISIS newsletter, the terrorist group declared that "COVID-19 is a solider of Allah."<sup>3</sup> Mr. Demers stated concerns that potential terrorists might weaponize the virus by trying to infect other people, and The George Washington University's Project on Extremism noted that extremists are circulating messages and memes online that encourage coughing on minorities and law enforcement to promote the spread of the virus to those demographics. Other experts have expressed worry that isolation resulting from social distancing measures could increase the risk of homegrown radicalization over the internet.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Betsy Woodruff Swan, How the coronavirus is reshaping terrorists' attack plans, Politico (Mar. 27, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>Mike Levine, FBI learned of coronavirus-inspired bomb plotter through radicalized US Army soldier, ABC News (Mar. 26, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>Extremism and the Global Health Crisis, George Washington University Project on Extremism (Mar. 30, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Betsy Woodruff Swan, How the coronavirus is reshaping terrorists' attack plans, Politico (Mar. 27, 2020).

The continuation of existing terrorism threats combined with the prospect of groups like ISIS attempting to exploit the COVID-19 crisis therefore puts a high priority on the federal government maintaining an uninterrupted counterterrorism posture during our response to the pandemic. However, due to social distancing measures, many federal employees have been assigned to telework or have been instructed to work in limited shifts. Additionally, key state and local law enforcement partners face their own reduced capacity thanks in part to their battle against COVID-19. For instance over 1,400 employees and officers of the New York Police Department have tested positive for COVID-19, and on one day in April, 17% of the force called out sick.<sup>5</sup>

Given this continued terrorist activity, the federal government's reduced operational capacity, and state and local first responders' attention consumed largely on the COVID-19, please provide answers to the following questions within 14 days:

- 1) How are your agencies providing regular information to the American public about terrorist radicalization and recruitment during the COVID-19 crisis? To what extent have you tailored this information to account for the COVID-19 crisis? To what extent have you tailored delivery mechanisms used to disseminate this information—or the frequency in which you deliver this information—to account for access restrictions during the crisis?
- 2) How are your agencies ensuring that communities at risk of a terrorist attack are receiving the information and protection they need in order to stay safe during this crisis?
- 3) How are your agencies tailoring support to state and local law enforcement partners in order to address terrorist manipulation and exploitation of the COVID-19 crisis?
- 4) What mechanism are you using to ensure that this information is delivered to state and local partners who may be deemed as essential as well as those deemed non-essential as their locality responds to COVID-19? In particular, how are your agencies ensuring that continued information is getting to state and local partners who, during the pandemic, are considered “non-essential” workers and must telework and/or isolate during this period?
- 5) As state and regional fusion centers across the country deal with COVID-19 response and recovery, and as states face reduced operating budgets amid an economic downturn and corresponding dwindling tax revenues, how are your agencies working to ensure that state and regional fusion centers will have consistent and sufficient funding to carry out both their counterterrorism and all-hazards missions?

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/01/more-than-1000-new-york-city-police-officers-are-infected-with-coronavirus.html>

- 6) What percentage of National Counterterrorism Center's, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's, and the Department of Homeland Security's counterterrorism professionals are currently teleworking as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 7) Do your agencies have a strategy for information sharing and coordination during times of a global or national crisis? If so, how has this strategy been employed during the COVID-19 crisis?
- 8) Has the 2018 National Strategy for Counterterrorism been updated or amended since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to address the limitations placed on counterterrorism professionals in the federal government during this period? If so, please provide our offices with a copy of the update or amendment.
- 9) What steps have the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the National Counterterrorism Center taken to ensure that agencies in charge of terrorism prevention and response are coordinating their activities during this period of reduced capacity?
- 10) What terrorism preventative measures are in place that are specifically tailored to the COVID-19 pandemic? How are your agencies working both to offramp and intervene in terrorist recruitment and attack planning during the pandemic?
- 11) For Acting Secretary Wolf: What part of the Department of Homeland Security's Terrorism Partnerships Prevention grants for Fiscal Year 2021 will specifically account for preventing terrorism in times of national or global crises?
- 12) For Director Wray, over the past six weeks, have the number of terrorism related Guardian, preliminary or full investigations initiated increased, decreased or remained the same?

Thank you for your prompt response to these questions. Should your office have any questions, please contact Harlan Geer ([Harlan\\_Geer@hsgac.senate.gov](mailto:Harlan_Geer@hsgac.senate.gov); 202-224-1497) with Sen. Hassan's office or Jesse Mahan ([Jesse\\_Mahan@lankford.senate.gov](mailto:Jesse_Mahan@lankford.senate.gov); 202-224-5754) with Sen. Lankford's office.

Sincerely,



Margaret Wood Hassan  
United States Senator



James Lankford  
United States Senator