

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3743 | SEPTEMBER 26, 2012

National Terrorism Threat Level: Color-Coded System Not Missed

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Last week, the FBI foiled the 52nd thwarted Islamist-inspired terrorist plot against the United States since 9/11. The thwarting of this plot came as the FBI and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued warnings to religious organizations and other groups within the U.S. of the potential for heightened violence in connection with recent unrest in Egypt and Libya. Yet while U.S. law enforcement, intelligence, and other communities increased their vigilance, the national threat level was not raised to red, orange, yellow, or even blue.

This was because in May 2011, DHS did away with the oft-criticized, color-coded Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS). In its place, the Department created the National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) in an effort to better communicate clear, timely, and specific

information about the nature of the terrorist threat to the American people.

Overall, this system, coupled with other sensible efforts at effective risk communication, has served to enhance national preparedness, but more should be done. DHS should work to build on these efforts by merging terrorist alerts into an “all hazards” alert system, enhancing information sharing, and building human capital and professional development among the next generation of homeland security professionals and leaders.

Ending the Color-Coded Chaos. Most Americans are familiar with the once-common announcements that the national threat level was orange. Once heard throughout U.S. airports, the color-coded threat level announcements have not been missed. While the system was designed to convey a wide range of threat levels, elevated and high (yellow and orange) threat warnings became the norm, desensitizing the public and causing HSAS to lose its credibility. Over the eight-year life of the old system, the threat level changed 17 times; however, it was never reduced to low or guarded (green or blue), and only once was the threat level ever raised to red.

Not only did the perpetually heightened threat level undermine the credibility of the system, creating apathy and complacency among the American public, but the alerts ignored the basic principles of effective risk communication by offering no actionable steps for citizens to follow. The system also failed to convey any meaningful difference between its non-specific alert levels. The differences between yellow and orange, for instance, had little to no difference in meaning for the public.

New System, Better Alerts. Abolishing HSAS in May 2011, DHS created the National Terrorism Advisory System in its place. Unlike its predecessor, NTAS offers only two alerts:

- **Imminent Threat Alert.** Warns of a credible, specific, and impending threat against the United States.
- **Elevated Threat Alert.** Warns of a credible threat against the United States.

With each alert, the streamlined system also offers a brief summary of the threat, steps for public preparedness, information on the affected areas, and expiration date of the

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3743>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies

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alert, as well as further details on the nature of the threat and actions being taken by authorities. Once activated, alerts are disseminated to state and local partners, as well as through the media, e-mail alerts, Facebook, and Twitter.

Not only a warning system for the public, NTAS also provides a tool for information sharing across the government and the private sector. This allows the federal government to communicate details about the nature and location of a terrorist threat to state, local, and private-sector leaders.

What may be most notable is that since the creation of NTAS more than a year ago, no alerts have been issued. Unlike HSAS, NTAS alerts are issued only when credible information is available about specific threats to the U.S. As one prominent example, vigilance was heightened across the nation immediately following the death of Osama bin Laden last May, yet no NTAS alert was issued indicating a credible or imminent terrorist threat to the U.S. Instead, both non-specific and specific threat and intelligence information may be communicated to law enforcement and public and private officials through such important and sensible tools as the FBI-DHS Joint Intelligence Bulletins.

Ensuring Effective Risk Communication and Preparedness. Building on the experience of the HSAS system and the principles of effective risk communication—ensuring that information is credible, specific, actionable, and understandable—the NTAS system has made extensive strides in enhancing the federal government’s threat communication. While NTAS offers a vast improvement over the now-defunct color-coded warning system, more should be done to improve risk

communication and national preparedness. Accordingly, Congress and the Administration should:

- **Merge terrorist alerts into an “all hazards” alert system.** The NTAS only provides alerts and information on potential terrorist threats. In further developing the NTAS system, DHS should look to expand current risk-communication frameworks for other homeland security-related threats and activities. By integrating existing terrorist alerts into an “all hazards” alert and warning system for both man-made and natural disasters, DHS could better disseminate varied threat information and foster national preparedness.
- **Improve homeland security information sharing.** All too often, information sharing does not make for truly crosscutting communication, but simply entails state and local law enforcement sending information up to the federal government. Detailed and specific threat information is critical to ensuring that state and local leaders are able to make informed decisions for preparedness and response. While the NTAS and the FBI-DHS Joint Intelligence Bulletins both seek to share intelligence and threat information with state and local leaders and law enforcement, more should be done to ensure that counterterrorism and threat information flows both ways.
- **Build human capital and professional development.** Effective risk communication is nothing without the people to lead the nation through a disaster. Today, however, too few individuals in

government have all the skills necessary to lead the national homeland security enterprise. In 1986, the Goldwater-Nichols Act mandated that U.S. officers have a mix of joint education, assignments, and accreditation by a board of professionals in order to be eligible for promotion to general officer rank. The lessons learned from Goldwater-Nichols should now be applied to the homeland security enterprise to develop professionals capable of leading in critical national security activities, including homeland security preparedness and response.

Great Strides Forward, but More Left to Do. Last year, DHS wisely replaced its colorful but ultimately unhelpful and oft-ignored Homeland Security Advisory System in favor of the more specific and useful National Terrorism Advisory System. The NTAS provides actionable and understandable warning when a credible terrorist threat against the United States exists.

While this system and other tools (such as the FBI-DHS Joint Intelligence Bulletins) provide actionable intelligence to U.S. law enforcement and the public, there is more work to be done. The U.S. should pursue an “all-hazards” alert system, as well as greater information sharing and professional development for homeland security officials, to further enhance risk communication and the nation’s overall preparedness.

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