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# Domestic Extremism Executive Summary

September 2021

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the U.S. Department of Energy  
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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

CBRNE	chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or explosive
DE	domestic extremism
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ORS	Office of Radiological Security
SME	subject matter experts
WINS	World Institute on Nuclear Security

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## 1.0 Background and Purpose

Domestic extremism (DE) has been a growing concern in the U.S. in recent months, as illustrated in multiple bulletins from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) warning law enforcement partners of the heightened threat. As concerns about these actors grows, it is important that facilities in the U.S. and internationally that protect critical assets, such as sensitive information, hazardous materials, or critical infrastructure, have effective methods in place to secure those assets. DE has challenged security systems through the danger of insider attack and violence, creating a new threat to be countered. In this effort, therefore, we used a literature review and focus group discussions with experts in critical asset security and extremism to understand the nature of the domestic extremist threat, to identify best practices in securing assets, recognize potential gaps in security measures to be corrected, and recommend actions for the Office of Radiological Security (ORS) to address DE with its partners.

Findings focus specifically on recommendations for the chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or explosive (CBRNE) community to better protect their critical assets against DE, both in the U.S. and internationally. Although security measures to protect critical assets are often robust, the threat of DE has nonetheless challenged these systems in new ways. First, organizations have struggled to define DE and the boundary between individual freedoms and the need for security. Second, the threat landscape has rapidly evolved, bringing new concerns in the form of online radicalization and a global pandemic. Finally, DE represents an especially high risk to facilities with chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or explosive (CBRNE) materials due to the increased risk for violence.

## 2.0 Methods

To accomplish project objectives, five focus group sessions were conducted with subject matter experts in critical asset security from either a research or a practical perspective. A literature review was also conducted.

### 2.1 Focus Groups

Focus group participants had a variety of job roles, including private consulting, insider threat professionals within the government, security personnel at universities or medical facilities, academic researchers, and practicing clinicians. Twenty-two individuals participated in the focus groups sessions (Table 1). To maintain anonymity, participants were asked to provide only a general description of their role and of the nature of their organization.

Table 1: Participant Organizational Affiliation

Organization Type	Number	Percent of SMEs
Federal Government	6	27.3
Consultant; Private Practice	5	22.7
Academia; Education	4	18.2
Government Contractor	2	9.1
Medical Facility; Hospital; Health Care	2	9.1
Industry	1	4.5
Local/State/Tribal Government	1	4.5
Local/State/Tribal Law Enforcement	1	4.5
Total	22	100

### 2.2 Literature Review

In addition, a literature review was completed to gather existing knowledge on DE. Approximately 45 articles on extremism, radicalization, deradicalization, and prevention and counter measures for DE were reviewed and summarized. A summary table of key points was created for incorporation with the focus group results.



## 3.0 Findings

### 3.1 Focus Group Findings

Overall, findings from the subject matter experts (SME) suggested that the threat of DE has grown in recent years. SMEs encouraged organizations to focus on developing a strong organizational culture of support, and to emphasize early intervention and wellness in their insider threat programs. Although these measures are not new, they become especially important in the face of the growing risk of an insider attack by radicalized individuals. Review of the focus group notes revealed seven primary themes related to the research objectives, presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Key Themes from Focus Groups

Theme	Description
Definitions	Definitions of extremism are lacking, ambiguous, or inconsistent.
Culture	The culture of an organization is a critical factor in creating or mitigating the risk of DE.
Privacy	Security must be balanced with the need to protect individual rights to privacy and free speech.
Sociopolitical Environment	The current sociopolitical environment is exacerbating extremism in new ways.
Dynamic Threat	The threat of DE is dynamic and growing, and ongoing threat assessment is needed for security measures to remain effective.
Human Security	Although physical security remains important, the human layer of security is the most critical tool in protecting against DE.
Collaboration	Countering extremism requires collaboration, including outreach to similar organizations, communication with other Federal experts, and community engagement.

The next sections describe these findings in context of the results of the literature review (not described herein) to address the project objectives of defining DE, identifying best practices, and finding potential gaps in security measures.

## 3.2 Research Synthesis

### 3.2.1 Defining the Threat

One primary objective of this effort was to understand the terms used to describe the threat of DE and the definitions of those terms. In addition to the conversations with SMEs, we conducted a review of the literature to understand how organizations can define DE and the threats it poses to critical assets. As part of this effort, Figure 1 presents a conceptual map of some key terms, beginning at the highest level (with extremism) down to specific types of extremism that have been outlined as a potential threat (FBI 2020). Again, because these may not involve

criminal behavior, they are thought of as threats posed by specific ideologies rather than something that can be legislated.

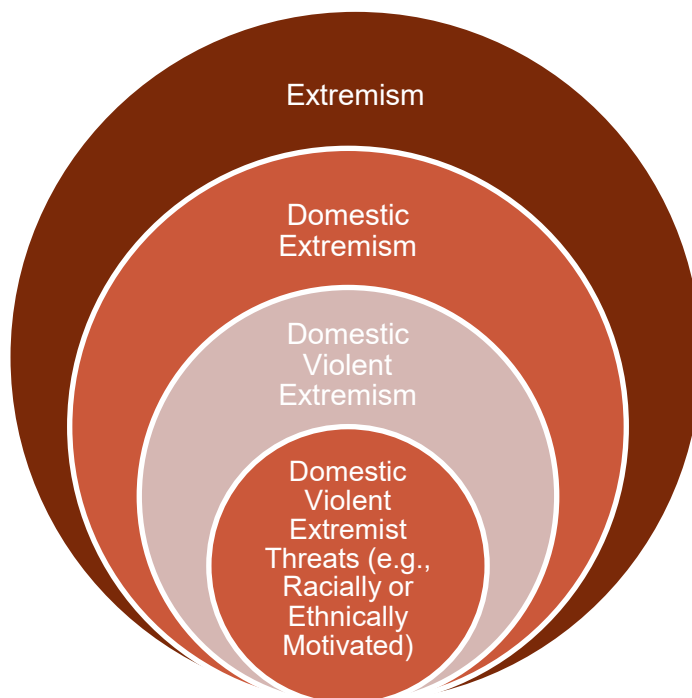


Figure 1: Conceptual Map of Extremist Terms

The FBI released publications describing potential threats posed by DE. However, these terms are not consistently used, and organizations will still need to develop their own standards of conduct and policy to outline permissible behaviors for their personnel.

### 3.3 Best Practices in Security

A second objective of this effort was to identify security measures that are most effective when addressing the threat of DE. Security measures to counter DE are divided into those for prevention and those for response. Prevention measures are designed to prevent a domestic extremist threat from occurring; response measures are implemented once a potential threat has been identified.

#### 3.3.1 Prevention

Results of the literature review and SME focus groups highlighted several useful practices in the prevention of domestic extremist threats, including organizational culture; diversity, equity, and inclusion programs; organizational codes of conduct; and behavior observation programs. Fostering a strong organizational culture to effectively prevent domestic extremist threats at organizations with critical assets. Along with this robust culture of engagement and security, review of the literature also emphasized the need to foster open communication and discussion around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Brown et al. 2021; Mulligan et al. 2021; Stephens et al. 2021). SMEs and the literature suggested that a code of conduct is important for organizations to develop and maintain, so that all employees understand what is and is not permissible behavior in their workplace (International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] 2020a;

WINS 2020). Finally, SME discussions emphasized the importance of human intelligence in preventing domestic extremist threats. In addition, best practices in the literature highlighted the need to train employees in behavior observation and help them to identify behaviors that might indicate a security concern (Mulligan et al. 2021; WINS 2020)

### 3.3.2 Response

When responding to threats of DE within their organizations, results of this effort suggested that organizations should leverage a multidisciplinary team, offer employee assistance programs, and respond to threats appropriately. The literature and SMEs emphasized that multidisciplinary teams are key to properly responding to potential domestic extremist threats (Ellis et al. 2020). Although not all articles discuss employee assistance programs per se, articles on deradicalization highlight the need to provide resources to individuals who are a domestic extremist threat—particularly concrete resources, such as counseling (WINS 2020; Ellis et al. 2020). In addition, throughout the focus groups, SMEs reiterated that organizations should not overreact when responding to a potential threat (e.g., terminate an employee unnecessarily). There is evidence that overreactions can lead to backlash, creating further damage (Clifford 2021).

Of course, organizations also need to be careful to act on the reports that they receive. It is important to avoid the “not in my organization” bias, where individuals do not believe that an incident could occur at their organization (Bunn and Sagan 2017; WINS 2020). Thus, the focus in SME discussions and in the literature was on ensuring that the response was appropriate—i.e., did not overly punish, but also did not ignore potential threats. Finally, organizations should also develop realistic DE threat scenarios to assess their insider threat mitigation programs.

## 3.4 Potential Gaps in Security Measures

Many of the best practices discussed represent well-established measures in insider threat mitigation. There were two areas of potential concern or gaps in security: social media monitoring and lack of resources. There is increasing evidence that social media plays an important role in radicalization processes (Jensen et al. 2016; Jensen et al. 2018), both by increasing the likelihood of radicalization and increasing its speed. However, social media is still not consistently incorporated into the background investigation process in the U.S. (WINS 2020). SMEs and the literature emphasized that, to effectively prevent domestic extremist threats from manifesting in action, organizations and the federal government need to prioritize the threat in policy and allocate resources accordingly (Mulligan et al. 2021).

## 3.5 Remaining Challenges

Finally, results of this effort identified two challenges that need to be addressed through additional research and development.

1. First, questions remain regarding the appropriate legislation of DE within the U.S. and internationally.
2. Second, and relatedly, there is a lack of consistent data collection and tracking of extremist incidents.

## 4.0 Next Steps

Many of the findings of this effort underscored the value of ORS's current activities in training partners on the importance of insider threat mitigation programs. Given the prominence of the extremist threat domestically and internationally, the findings here suggest that these efforts could be improved through further emphasis on the threat of extremism specifically. By incorporating prevention and response measures focused on extremism, ORS can support security measures that are robust against this potential threat. These training and awareness efforts should be informed by recent guidance from relevant organizations, such as the IAEA's cultural enhancement measures (2021a) and the recent best practices guide in countering violent extremism issued by WINS (2020). Whenever possible, implementation should leverage existing legal requirements which can help to support the investment of resources necessary by partners to create an effective program.

Finally, although this effort focused on the threat of DE, the threat of extremism is a global one and it will need to be addressed internationally to be effective. Some initial suggestions were provided here for leveraging existing relationships with international partners, but further venues for communication and collaboration will need to be identified. A coordinated global response will support sharing of information regarding potential threats and will accelerate the development of effective measures to prevent and respond to violent extremism and its threat to critical asset security.

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