

Why America Can't Spot Dirty Bombs

As Trump preps a new executive order to stop terrorists before they enter the country, a government report finds we aren't prepared for the threat from within.



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While President Trump doubles down on the hypothetical threats of incoming terrorists posing as refugees, he might be ignoring a very real concern here at home: **The U.S. is largely underprepared to detect or respond to the threat of a radiological terrorist attack on American soil.**

A so-called Red Team from the U.S. federal agency charged with evaluating domestic capabilities to defend against dirty bomb and weapons of mass destruction attacks found **gaping holes in domestic nuclear detection and defense capabilities and massive failures during covert testing.** That's according to the most recent annual report by the Department of Homeland Security's Domestic Nuclear Detection Office.

The Red Team found significant issues in detecting dangerous radioactive and nuclear materials, failing to do so in 30 percent of covert tests conducted over the course of the year. In far too many cases, the person operating the detection device had no idea how to use it. And when the operator did get a hit, he or she relayed sensitive information over unsecured open radio channels.

The Red Team report, dated July 2016 and reviewed by The Daily Beast, summarizes a year's worth of covert and overt testing of nuclear and radiological detection and response capabilities. These tests were performed by a broad range state, local, federal, and tribal agencies and across a range of venues: at border points of entry, in aviation

and maritime environments, during large public events like the Super Bowl or Inauguration, and at regular checkpoints around the country.

Dozens of FBI and DHS intelligence reports issued in the last six months and reviewed by The Daily Beast outline the current threat landscape, identifying the biggest concerns: Rising homegrown radicalization of U.S. citizens and renewed calls by terror groups to carry out dirty bomb and weapons of mass destruction attacks on targets throughout the United States. For example, in May, a pro-Islamic State outfit published a detailed document explaining the concept of making a radiological weapon. The instructions included photo instructions and promised “death by radiation poisoning.” The missive was distributed via Telegram, the secure messaging app, and on Twitter. A five-page translation produced by SITE Intel Group was circulated the same day to the FBI and other counterterrorism agencies and divisions. In November, DNDO distributed an article from the recent Military Review headlined “The Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Terrorism Threat from the Islamic State.” Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly acknowledges this threat and said in an interview with Fox News conducted right after his confirmation that nuclear and radiological detection capabilities would be included in the construction of Trump’s proposed border wall. But according to the July 2016 Red Team report, local and federal agencies had ongoing and serious problems fulfilling even the most basic aspects of that mission at the border and elsewhere.

In the most basic sense, the Red Team is in charge of assessing the abilities of a massive interconnected web of thousands of agencies and fusion centers and task forces that make up the nationwide network designed to detect and respond to domestic nuclear and radiological threats.

Every year the Red Team conducts covert and overt tests all over the country to determine two things: Can the U.S. effectively detect and identify these materials? And can it follow proper communication protocols to alert appropriate agencies whose job it

is to conduct secondary testing or minimize harm to the public during emergency events? (The answers: not really, and no.)

The Red Team report noted a continued and widespread failure to detect and identify the presence of neutron radiation, also highlighted in the report. This is a big deal because illegally trafficked nuclear and radiological materials are often smuggled inside stolen nuclear density gauges, a type of soil-measuring device used in construction and mining that is highly regulated by federal agencies and extremely dangerous if handled improperly. They contain dangerous levels of radiation and are reported missing or stolen from U.S. facilities about 25 times a year.

In 40 percent of all assessments, the Red Team found issues associated with equipment damages or malfunctions made far worse by ad hoc attempts to prevent overheating or fix devices by placing them in the freezer for no reason. This did not work, obviously.

During covert testing, important checkpoints outside high population cities repeatedly failed to detect the radiological and nuclear materials. One time, in the middle of the day a critical checkpoint was entirely abandoned and left unmanned while all the operators attended the same training. Not a single person was there to prevent the Red Team from walking right through with hazardous materials.

In 70 percent of its tests, the Red Team found that operators' ability to do their jobs was inhibited because they weren't trained in what the information on their device meant.

Certain colored lights, for example, indicate the presence of specific materials—and those operating the devices had no idea what those indicators or colors were or what any of the icons on the panel screen represented.

The final issue, found in 50 percent of assessments, involves issues involving “reachback”—the term used to describe the successful relaying of radiological and nuclear data through designated pathways to the appropriate state or federal or other agency for further analysis in a timely and effective manner. Relaying critical information during nuclear or radiological events was “the most challenging aspect” of the entire radiological and nuclear detection mission. The federal government does not

maintain an in-depth database of deployed nuclear and radiological detection capabilities, so the feds rely on this failed information sharing process for locating detection equipment and responding to emergency events like terrorist attacks. The country is running blind while everyone fumbles to relay the data down the line. Even more frustrating is just how simple and easily fixable this is. The biggest threat to the entire country's domestic nuclear detection architecture all comes down to failures attributed to out-of-date software, lost or forgotten passwords, bad or no cell or wireless coverage, and failure to bring the right cable to plug into the device.

The report concluded: "Agency leaders must continually emphasize the consequences of a nuclear or radiological attack on the homeland—frontline supervisors must ensure the frontline operators conduct these duties," and they should all show up for work when they're supposed to.

That frequently cited apathetic or complacent view toward nuclear and radiological threat detection and ongoing failures to keep critical detection checkpoints manned during regular business hours are embarrassingly simple problems that could have devastating consequences, counterterrorism officials told The Daily Beast.

The combined increases in homegrown radicalization of U.S. citizens and calls by ISIS to carry out nuclear and chemical attacks on American soil are among the most serious threats facing the country, according to dozens of FBI and DHS intelligence reports issued over the past six months and interviews with counterterrorism officials at those agencies. In his opening remarks at the Nuclear Security Summit just a few months before the Red Team report was issued, President Obama stated that "the danger of a terrorist group obtaining and using a nuclear weapon is one of the greatest threats to global security."

The Trump administration's hardline and vocal anti-immigration stance will make this pressure cooker of a situation even more volatile, as aspiring foreign fighters refocus their efforts on domestic attacks out of concern that if they leave the country, they won't be allowed to return.

“It doesn’t matter what happens in court,” explained one administration official, referring to the executive order banning travelers from seven Muslim-majority nations.

“It’s about the appearance of increased scrutiny at the border that will keep a lot of wannabe foreign fighters from going anywhere,” explained one administration counterterrorism official. “So you’ve got a bunch of idiots who’d probably be killed in Syria but now they’re like, ‘What if I can’t come home to mommy and daddy?’”

This view was echoed by officials and law enforcement military and congressional officials who nearly all enthusiastically support the refugee ban but spoke out of frustration that media attention might be the only way to quickly mobilize resources to harden domestic nuclear defense amid what they all said was a significant, urgent national security threat not getting enough attention from the president.

There is no law compelling DHS and other agencies to adopt the recommendations of the Red Team report—and if the references to similar problems the previous year in the report are any indication, these recommendations are not always or often followed.

The current gaping holes in U.S. nuclear and radiological detection capabilities are significant, but many can be quickly and immediately fixed, said law enforcement officials at TSA, Customs and Border Patrol, and U.S. Secret Service—all of whom carry the detection devices tested by the Red Team.

The biggest obstacle? Working better with each other. Each source laughed when asked if better interagency cooperation could also be fixed easily and quickly.

“Nobody talks to anybody and when we look at something and clear it, we will see somebody else wasting their time checking the same thing,” said one TSA official.

“We don’t know what they do or how, so we do what we do and they do what they do,” said a Secret Service official.

“I tend to think Red Team reports are bullshit, but I guess they have a point here.”

The Department of Homeland Security declined to comment on the specific Red Team report, citing policy not to discuss sensitive items. A spokesperson, however, assured The Daily Beast that much was being done to improve domestic detection capabilities.

“DNDO provides direct support for and guidance on how to develop, implement, enhance, and sustain radiological and nuclear detection programs and capabilities,” the DHS official said in an emailed statement. “This support includes instructor-led classroom training that is offered through DNDO at no cost to the receiving agencies, operations-based exercises that assist partners in improving their capabilities, and 24/7 access to alarm adjudication and technical reachback for operators in the field. Our assessments of detection capabilities are part of an ongoing effort to continually evaluate and improve the nation’s radiological and nuclear detection capabilities.”

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