

What's the next U.S. terror threat?

By Susan Page, Thomas Frank and Kevin Johnson, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The past decade was defined by terrorism, starting with the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001 that led to two wars and big changes in the way Americans travel and live. What could the next decade hold?

To find out, USA TODAY reporters sat down with some of the nation's top officials who deal with terrorism and intelligence issues day-to-day, including the White House national security adviser, the Homeland Security secretary and the [FBI's](#) top intelligence adviser. Others interviewed: the New York City police commissioner, the Senate Intelligence Committee chairwoman and the only person who has led both the top-secret [National Security Agency](#) and [Central Intelligence Agency](#). The interviews took place this month, in the aftermath of the foiled bombing of a Detroit-bound jetliner on Christmas Day that focused the nation's attention once again on the terror threat. The officials offer different perspectives: The "nightmare scenario" of terrorists gaining access to weapons of mass destruction. The rise of the "lone wolf" terrorist, acting alone and using a new breed of hard-to-detect explosives. The radicalization of some people in the Caribbean, close to U.S. shores. The Internet as a weapon. And the prospect that the battle against terror is being won.

Top officials see varied challenges in coming decade: (Questions and answers have been edited for length and clarity.)



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James Jones, White House national security adviser

A retired Marine Corps four-star general, is national security adviser for President Obama. Jones has served as commandant of the Marine Corps and NATO's supreme allied commander in Europe, and he was a special envoy to the Middles East for the George W. Bush administration.

"Of all the things that could be the nightmare scenario, what's the biggest nightmare scenario? Thirty years ago, one of my predecessors would have said nuclear war with Russia. Today, as I'm in this chair, I can tell you it's proliferation, the acquisition of a weapon of mass destruction by a terrorist organization. The difference between a nation-state doing so and a rogue group of a terrorist organization is that nation-states can be controlled. They know if they're going to use one what's going to happen. But terrorist groups will have no such limitation. That's one aspect of the next decade that we're going to have to focus on...

"It's very clear that radical terrorist organizations, the most prominent of which of course is al-Qaeda ... will continue to try to obtain weapons of mass destruction - which I think is their singular goal, which would be a huge game changer."

Q: Can it be prevented?

A: "As long as the family of nations, of civilized nations, (doesn't) get together and say this is in fact something that is completely unacceptable to all of us, then there's always that risk. But there are ways in which we can prevent

them from acquiring this capacity. One way is to keep them always on the run. Never never let them get a foothold. And it's going to take international diplomacy fairly rapidly to make sure that where they appear, that they're dealt with rapidly and efficiently and ruthlessly in order to make sure they never get that foothold where they could organize themselves in pursuit of their ultimate aspiration."

Q: What would qualify as a 'game changer?'

A: "The threat of a weapon of mass destruction, whether it's nuclear or chemical or biological, is a fundamentally different order of threat, magnitude of threat, to our societies. And probably the reaction to our knowing that's out there would foster changes in the way we live that are probably very hard to imagine."

Q: What should the U.S. focus on in the next decade?

A: "Countries are always accused after a war is over of preparing themselves for the war that is just over. You can make the same case that our fixation with airlines is only because airlines have been the primary means by which terrorists have tried to strike at us, and I don't think there's any question that we should also consider other means of mass transportation - trains, buses, seaports..."

"If you want to see a sharp contrast between the level of focus on security, go to an airport and go to a train station, for example. I think we should pay attention to the whole spectrum of vulnerabilities."

Interviewed by Susan Page



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Raymond Kelly, New York police commissioner

A New York City police commissioner, overseeing the nation's largest police department with 35,000 officers. he previously served as commissioner of the U.S. Customs Service and is a combat veteran of the Vietnam War.

"New York City is going to be a target in 2020. This is it. This is the big enchilada. It's the communications capital, the financial capital. It's seen as the capital of the world... I don't think an attack is inevitable here because we're doing an awful lot. It may mean they go to someplace else. But New York will still be at the top of the terrorist target list."

Q: Are there areas of the world that concern you?

A: "We've been looking at South Africa for a while now. You'll see pockets around Johannesburg with the Pakistani Diaspora and *madrassas* being developed there. There's also the Sahel desert area south of Algeria, Mali and Mauritania."

"We have to keep our eye on the Caribbean - Jamaica, Trinidad, locations like that. There's a lot of disaffection

there."

Q: Will terrorists shift their focus from aviation and landmarks to more open targets like subways?

A: "If you look at their purpose, it's not just to kill people, it's to terrorize, to really frighten people. One of the ways of doing that effectively is aviation. People feel particularly vulnerable in the air, and if terrorists do anything it's going to get them a lot of publicity.

"We've done an awful lot to make it more difficult. (Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, accused of trying to blow up a Detroit-bound airliner on Dec. 25) had to really go to great lengths to get this explosive in the air, and it still didn't work. It doesn't mean they aren't going to try it again. I think they're going to learn from it."

Q: What sort of anti-terrorism technology do you want in the New York City subway system?

A: "Clearly we need a comprehensive camera program and a sensor program (to detect biochemical agents). ... We're looking ideally for a self-contained system that does the analysis quickly, either in the system or some place where you can get the results back quickly. Right now, it's more of a manual system. We need an automated system."

Q: What's the biggest impediment to preventing an attack?

A: "You have to be concerned about a certain level of apathy down the road. You'll have the Detroit case, and it's on the front pages of the paper, and it sort of drops off. Now, does that extend to the government? I hope not.

"You have to guard against it as best you can, but the reality is, the longer we go without an attack, human focus shifts. I think apathy is something that affects us, whether we admit it or not. We have a short attention span in this country."

Interviewed Thomas Frank



Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., Senate Intelligence Committee chair

Chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee, which oversees U.S. intelligence agencies. She has served on the committee since January 2001. She is a former mayor of San Francisco.

"In this new decade, we must pay attention to (radical Islamic) *madrassas*, and *madrassas* exist by the thousands all over Pakistan, all over most Muslim countries. Youngsters are not taught any subject which enables them to earn a living in a legal way, but only the Quran - and in addition to that a perverted version which teaches them how to hate, encourages them toward jihad and gives them their first training as a *jihadi*, and then refers them to various training camps. These are extremely dangerous.

"The Muslim world is very young and therefore the education of these young people is all-important, and (it is) a place where we have neglected to concentrate and where most Muslim countries have been reluctant to interfere. So the madrassas have just been spreading..."

"We really need to concentrate resources on (it). See that normal schools are established. Part of the problem is, poverty is so widespread in these countries that these children have nothing and therefore they can go to school where they have room and board and clothes, their parents are delighted. But those schools don't teach them to function in the world as it is. They teach them to hate and kill."

Q: What will be the chief terrorist threat to the United States by 2020?

A: "What we're going to see is the emergence of the lone wolf rather than the planning of large numbers of people to carry out large attacks... Explosives are getting more sophisticated. And we've seen new areas which have become safe havens as well as operational theaters for these groups, namely Yemen, Somalia and as a matter of fact virtually the entire Maghreb (in northern Africa)."

Q: How much has this issue changed over the past decade?

A: "We've got this huge, dark world out there of non-state actors banding together in loose alliances and doing just terrible things, things that we never would have thought could possibly be done: Blowing up schools. Blowing up hospitals. Blowing up marketplaces. Who would ever think that anybody even remotely civilized would do that kind of thing? ...But it's become almost expected, and that was not the case in 2001."

Interviewed by Susan Page



Philip Mudd, FBI senior intelligence adviser

The senior intelligence adviser at the FBI. He previously served as deputy director of the Counter Terrorism Center, responsible for overseeing its operational, analytical, and support programs.

"I think that the idea of the ends justifying the means is losing value. By that I mean there appears to be less tolerance (among terror organizations and their supporters) for attacks that target large numbers of civilians.... The (extremist) websites are rife with this debate."

Q: Where is that leading?

A: "The Internet will play an important role. It will perhaps determine how long it will take for people to think about the evolution of jihad and the idea that the killing of innocents is unacceptable. As a result, you might see a change in targeting - taking out power plants, water systems and other structural targets. But it might take 10

years to get there."

Q: As terrorists' tactics change, how does the FBI change?

"We have to continue evolving as an organization that analyzes and responds to emerging threats as much as we investigate individual cases. Globalization impacts us. When the world changes in Somalia, Pakistan, Yemen, Russia... we have a responsibility to try to understand and counter threats that result.

"We don't simply collect intelligence, and we don't simply investigate federal crimes. We combine both to provide security, by trying to understand threats early through intelligence and analysis and then using law enforcement and other tools to prevent a threat from growing. And, as a result of our security responsibilities, we'll need to keep ...making sense of vast and growing amounts of data on emerging threats."

Interviewed by Kevin Johnson



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Janet Napolitano, secretary of Homeland Security

Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. She was the governor of Arizona from 2003 to 2009, Arizona's attorney general from 1999 to 2002, and the U.S. attorney in Arizona from 1993 to 1998.

"One area we are now seeing more of is the whole cyber issue. We saw that with China and Google (which said its computers were hacked in China). We're seeing increasing attempts to use the Internet not only to connect different people as a facilitator of terrorist groups but also as a possible means of attack..."

"It can be a denial of service attack, which really shuts down your access not only to the Internet, but in some circumstances, to services that are operated through the Internet, like communications. It can be fraud or misinformation. It can be the theft of valuable defense information or of intellectual property."

Q: Will terrorists still be focused on aviation in 2020?

A: "It's hard to predict that far out. But what we are assuming is that aviation could be (their focus), which is why we're continuing to work on the technology that is used at airports...We also are working across the international air environment because this is an international issue. We need to lift aviation standards around the world."

What are the challenges of doing that?

"It's a challenge of capacity. In some places, it's a challenge of political will. In some places, it's a challenge of

resources."

Q: By 2020, will we see a body scanner at every airport checkpoint?

A: "I don't know about at every checkpoint. But I think what we'll see is a rapid deployment of body scanners, and rapid improvement of technology. We'll also see improvements in explosive detection (that will increase) our ability to pick up traces on persons and on baggage and on cargo, but particularly on persons."

Q: Will the biggest aviation threat be to U.S.-bound international flights?

A: "It is international, but it's also the homegrown terrorist who can act on land, on sea and in the air. One of the things that's so important is, even in the face of this very determined adversary, to demonstrate that we are able to respond and we are resilient - that these attempts do not 'terrorize' us, and that terrorists can't obtain their objective because we're tougher than that."

Interviewed by Thomas Frank



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Michael Hayden, former CIA and NSA director

A retired Air Force four-star general, was head of the Central Intelligence Agency during the George W. Bush administration. He previously served as director of the National Security Agency. He is now a principal with the Chertoff Group, a security consulting firm.

"At what a military guy would call the deep battle, we are seeing signs of progress. Here, specifically what you have are authentic voices in the Muslim world who are seriously questioning both the vision and the tactics of al-Qaeda. And the key point there is, they've got to be authentic voices in the Islamic world. It's not something that we can do. It has to come from within Islam itself. That is, I think, one of the more heartening signs in terms of the long fight..."

"I don't know if we've crested yet (in terms of the terror threat) but I see trend lines that - and I choose my words carefully here, without being Pollyannaish - give me reason to hope... It could be that the tactical results - you know, how many young Islamic men are willing to accept these kind of beliefs - that may still have a bit of a bow wave to it. We may continue to see this. But what's beginning is this serious questioning within Islam. And over time, if the trend continues, we will see a reduction (in terrorism)."

Q: How is the terrorist threat changing?

A: "Self-radicalized individuals from within the United States begin to be a bit more of a problem. And certainly for the near- to midterm, the next several years at least, that's an issue on which we'll see increased focus by our counterterrorism folks."

"We are not immune to this threat, but we are blessed in the United States with the American immigrant experience, being different than the immigrant experience say, in Western Europe or even in Great Britain. ... We have a history of assimilation just by the nature of our country that our European friends have not had to the same degree or in the same manner.. .. And so it's not surprising that the homegrown threat comes later to us and maybe even less severe than, say, it is in Great Britain.. ..

"We have to become more and more aware of this.... This is probably going to be less severe than it is elsewhere, (but) the threat's not zero and we need to pay very careful attention to it."

Q: What emerging threat is not getting much notice?

A: "I'm going to use the word franchising. You've got al-Qaeda the base operating out of the region along the Afghanistan and Pakistan border.... Now you have an al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has suffered greatly. You have al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. You have al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. You've got al-Qaeda in the Horn of Africa. You've got these franchises popping up..."

"The last attack, the Christmas attack, came out of al-Qaeda in Yemen. It was an individual recently brought into al-Qaeda with fairly limited training, using a weapon that did not have a high probability of success. Now compare that to what happened on 9/11: 19 guys, four airplanes, massive loss, long preparation and so on..."

"So maybe the potential for the spectacular has been reduced in a real way, but then these lower threshold threats continue."

Interviewed by Susan Page