

DHS's 2019 *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*

From August to September 2019, the Valens Global team served as lead drafters for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) groundbreaking [*Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*](#).

The Client: In the wake of August 2019 mass shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio that killed 30 people over a 13-hour span — occurring just one week after another deadly shooting at a food festival in Gilroy, California — the country was reeling. A common thread connecting several recent attacks was that the shooters expressed white supremacist extremist beliefs when explaining their motivations. DHS's leadership recognized the need for a clearly articulated strategy addressing the evolving domestic threats. Enter Valens.

The Challenge: Though foreign terrorist organizations remain a core priority for the Department's counterterrorism efforts, the United States now faces a growing threat from domestic terrorism and targeted violence at home. One particularly important driver of the evolving threat is racially and ethnically motivated violence, particularly that associated with white supremacist extremism. By introducing a more comprehensive and current understanding of the threats posed by terrorism and targeted violence, the Department can better position itself to detect, prevent, protect against, and mitigate mass attacks against houses of worship, schools, workplaces, and other public spaces.

The Solution: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Valens's CEO, kicked off this project by meeting with Acting Secretary Kevin McAleenan to obtain the commander's intent for the new strategic framework. Valens staff then consulted the Department's 22 offices and components, conducting informational interviews to determine how the various parts of the Department could coordinate efforts and harmonize resources to address the terrorism and targeted violence challenge. The Valens team researched the Department's past successes and current programs, tools, and efforts; drafted a comprehensive discussion of the evolving nature of the threat; and designed objectives and priority actions that could guide the Department in addressing these challenges.

Described as “novel” by DHS's Assistant Secretary for Threat Prevention and Security Policy Elizabeth Neumann and Assistant Director for Infrastructure Security Brian Harrell in their written testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism, the *Strategic Framework* introduces four overarching goals:

- Goal 1: Understand the Evolving Terrorism and Targeted Violence Threat Environment, and Support Partners in the Homeland Security Enterprise Through This Specialized Knowledge.
- Goal 2: Prevent Terrorists and Other Hostile Actors from Entering the United States, and Deny Them the Opportunity to Exploit the Nation's Trade, Immigration, and Domestic and International Travel Systems.
- Goal 3: Prevent Terrorism and Targeted Violence.
- Goal 4: Enhance U.S. Infrastructure Protections and Community Preparedness.

The Brookings Institution hosted Acting Secretary McAleenan, as well as panelists James Carafano, Seamus Hughes, George Selim, and Chad Wolf on September 20, 2019, to discuss the groundbreaking framework. You can watch a recording of the panel [here](#).

The Results: Since its release in September 2019, the *Strategic Framework* has received widespread acclaim:

- [The New York Times](#) editorialized that the document “focuses unapologetically on right-wing terrorism, particularly white supremacist extremism,” which constitutes “a shift that is both urgently needed and long overdue.”
- Former White House senior counterterrorism officials Christopher Costa and Joshua Geltzer wrote in [Defense One](#): “By emphasizing this rising threat, situating it in the context of a growing transnational white supremacist movement, confronting the dangers posed by firearms in the hands of terrorists, and addressing ‘targeted violence’ as its own form of national security threat, DHS’s strategy reflects an important evolution in terrorism and other violence targeted against civilians.”
- Former DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff [wrote](#) that “the new DHS framework represents a welcome and candid recognition of the emerging dangers of domestic terrorism posed by white supremacists and other extreme ideological groups.” He explicitly praised the *Strategic Framework* for “properly not[ing] that because of the sensitivity of domestic intelligence gathering, the government must explicitly commit to operate within the boundaries of civil rights and civil liberties and with respect for free speech and privacy.”
- Thomas S. Warrick, the former DHS deputy assistant secretary for counterterrorism policy, [wrote for the Atlantic Council](#) that “the DHS CT strategic framework was written by professionals, for professionals.” He praised the framework for calling “out the need to protect American democracy from foreign disinformation that could result in violence here in the United States.”
- In testimony before the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, the Under Secretary for DHS’s Office of Intelligence and Analysis, David Glawe, described the *Strategic Framework* as being “designed to assess DHS’s past and provide a guidepost to its future.” He stated that the framework is therefore “intentionally forward-looking in its understanding of technology’s role as a factor that can exacerbate problems, but also one that can provide new solutions to combat the threats we confront.”

On September 11, 2020, DHS released a Public Action Plan detailing the action items necessary to successfully implement the strategic framework. “Nineteen years ago today, the American people came to understand the threat of terrorism in a new way. With the subsequent establishment of DHS, our nation vowed to prevent, disrupt, and deter terrorism of all sorts,” [wrote](#) Acting Secretary Chad F. Wolf. “Today, DHS continues to take unprecedented actions to address all forms of violent extremism. This new framework draws upon the Department’s intelligence, prevention, and preparedness capabilities and lays out discrete actions DHS will undertake to further safeguard our communities, schools, places of worship, cyberspace, and public gatherings.”