



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on March 16, 2022

DHS Doubling Down on Detecting Potential “Extremists” by Monitoring Personnel’s Social Media

A new report by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) lays out a plan for the agency to define “violent extremism acts” and establish regulations aimed at preventing its employees from participating in “concerning” behavior. According to DHS, examples of “extremism” include a belief that fraud occurred in the 2020 elections and criticism of pandemic-related policies. To root out potential “extremists,” the agency, among other measures, will be monitoring the social-media activity of its staff.



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Last April, DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas [proclaimed](#) that “Domestic violent extremism poses the most lethal and persistent terrorism-related threat to our country” and ordered an internal review to identify how to best detect, prevent, and respond to relevant threats within the department.

Almost one year later, a cross-departmental working group of senior officials produced a report on approaches to addressing the “domestic violent extremism threat.” For reference, the new bureaucratic organ within the DHS was established shortly after President Joe Biden took office and after the January 6, 2021, events at the U.S. Capitol.

While the investigation found “very few instances of the DHS workforce having been engaged in domestic violent extremism,” (four since 2019, to be precise), it stresses that there are “significant gaps that have impeded [DHS’s] ability to comprehensively prevent, detect, and respond to potential threats...within DHS.”

The report underlines that it is critically important for the department to identify and remove “extremist” employees. It states that the “more than 250,000 dedicated DHS personnel” are expected to show “dedication, honor, integrity, and often, enormous personal sacrifice.”

To ensure that potential extremists have not infiltrated the agency, it is recommended to work diligently to identify them by checking the contents of employees’ online posts.

The report reads,

Studies and pilots have suggested that certain online activity may represent behavior of potential concern to national security and could be useful in assessing an individual’s trustworthiness, judgment, or reliability. PAEI [Publicly Available Electronic Information],



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including social media checks, have proven to be of limited value as stand-alone sources of information. However, when coupled with and corroborated by other data and investigative follow-up, the use of PAEI can be a powerful tool in preventing and detecting domestic violent extremism-related threats.

Social-media posts pertaining to “extremist” content is seen by the DHS as a precursor of actual “violent extremist activity,” hence the urgency to “continue to examine the use of social media and other PAEI.”

What constitutes “extremist content?” The report laments that the department so far has failed to clearly define what it is, but the investigators cite a March 2021 unclassified threat assessment prepared by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), Department of Justice, and DHS that linked certain online posts to instances of actual violence.

Per the text of that report,

Newer sociopolitical developments—such as narratives of fraud in the recent general election, the emboldening impact of the violent breach of the US Capitol, conditions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and conspiracy theories promoting violence—will almost certainly spur some [domestic violent extremists] to try to engage in violence this year.

To monitor the social-media posts of its employees, the DHS working group is proposing establishing “a centralized, interoperable DHS-wide investigative case management system and information sharing procedures for these types of investigations and inquiries.”

To work out “best practices, frameworks, and adaptation of PAEI, including social media checks” to “identify and investigate violent extremist activity within the DHS workforce,” the task force suggests sharing findings with the Department of Defense (DOD), the intelligence community, the Department of Justice, academia, and “industry,” i.e., Big Tech and social-media platforms.

The report also points out that the same monitoring should be applied to the agency’s 170,000 contractors and an unnamed number of non-employee insiders, since many of them have “direct authorized access to DHS assets.”

Among other recommendations, the task force urges the department to come up with a formal definition of domestic violent extremism within the DHS, and develop training programs for personnel on how to identify and report it.

It is also recommended that HR departments go beyond traditional background checks of the new hires and check what they post online.

In response to the report, Mayorkas [said](#) that he was “troubled by the findings, because the findings disclosed significant gaps in this department’s ability to detect and respond to domestic violent extremism.”

At the same time, the secretary said that, thanks to the report, “we know precisely what we need to do to model good government, to ensure the honor and integrity of this department and to protect those who do not feel safe in the workplace.”

The task force’s recommendations follow a DHS Office of Inspector General [report](#) of March 4



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that described how employees within DHS’s Office of Intelligence and Analysis failed to produce any “actionable information” about the January 6 events because they weren’t sure what language was serious enough to be elevated.

Last month, the DHS issued a [bulletin](#) stating that the domestic terrorism threat remains heightened due in part to “proliferation of false or misleading narratives, which sow discord or undermine public trust in U.S. government institutions.” The bulletin specifically names “unsubstantiated widespread election fraud and COVID-19” as key narratives that feed domestic terrorism.



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