

Intelligence Led Policing

Melissa S. Gresham

Police agencies have an overall mission to protect and serve their communities. Generally, their duties involve reactive measures in response to criminal activity or misdemeanors. Specialized units within the agencies collect intelligence regarding drug movement, gang activity, and school security. Large municipalities can also have a special weapons and tactics (SWAT) team, intelligence unit, terrorism squad, and canine unit. The federal agencies are primarily charged with counter-terrorism efforts in a proactive manner. However, more detailed intelligence should emerge from local agencies that live and work in the communities. Police agencies need to have the authority and internal leadership to collect intelligence on possible terrorist threats to become a proactive force; rather than wait on a terrorist act to occur and investigate it afterwards.

Advanced surveillance has been used in the aftermath of 9/11 in addition to the passing of the USA Patriot Act, which gives the power to use surveillance on American citizens. In order to protect civil liberties, there is a limitation to the use of that power. Wiretapping, audio recording, and personnel tracking devices are controversial methods that are needed to prevent terrorism, but infringe on individual rights. Part of the USA Patriot Act limits the scope of intelligence collection to the belief that terrorist activity is taking place. Other tools available to prevent terrorism include searches without warrants, finance freezing, and border protection. But these policies only provide the power to collect certain pieces of information. Are police agencies and leaders equipped with the analytical skills to evaluate the information and develop actionable plans to prevent terrorism?

There are different studies that can be examined on stages to terrorism, the creation of a terrorist, or staircase to terrorism. All involve a process that terrorists go through on their way to jihad. Intelligence can start in these phases from studying the local indoctrination within the Muslim community to investigating the social network created within a certain socioeconomic class. Terrorist creation does not become illegal until an actual act has taken place. However, police agencies should be trained to act morally and with integrity as not to abuse any power to investigate individuals in the early stages. Data shows there is little criminal history of the terrorist. In fact, many terrorist come from middle class families, not poverty, and have been to college. Investigating a common criminal is easier than investigating a law abiding citizen with no prior arrests or criminal activity.

Gathering data on potential, or already created, terrorists at any stage requires leadership within the police agency. Connecting pieces of information that may appear irrelevant can be early warning signs of terrorist creation. Analyzing the trends will help determine if a group of individuals are violent youth or a terrorist cell preparing operations. An insignificant misdemeanor can be a missing piece to a larger puzzle and police leadership need to connect these dots. Using undercover agents becomes costly and limits the resources within the agency. Police leadership should tap into their capabilities and collaborate with existing agencies, community resources, and other organizations to reduce their operating costs and increase their decision making capability.

Intelligence led policing is twofold and has an equally shared level of responsibility between the intelligence and leadership pieces. Intelligence is there and federal policies have given the authority for police to use these tools. Leadership comes from technical knowledge, sound judgment, reasonable decision making, and respect. Police leaders must be able to take the intelligence, use their experience and knowledge to gain an understanding of it, turn it into action, and execute a plan to attack terrorism in a proactive manner. Terrorists exploit weaknesses in our systems like they did on 9/11 and an “old-school” mentality that does not mature with terrorist tactics will leave our police agencies fighting today’s battle with yesterday’s tools.