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Agencies collaborate for a common cause: security

The 9/11 terrorist attack was not the blow that introduced terrorism to the U.S.

The World Trade Center had been attacked in 1993, and two years later, the Murrah Federal Building was bombed in Oklahoma City.

But the Sept. 11 attack, which killed nearly 3,000 people, was the one that introduced the need to fight terrorism to the country. And security moved front and center in the nation's collective psyche.

The difference was not only the scale of the attacks, experts said, but that the perpetrators were not quickly apprehended, as they were after previous incidents.

"People looked at these and said, yes, it's a tragedy. But we investigated, we arrested, we resolved," said David Cid, executive director of the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism in Oklahoma City and a former FBI agent. "After 9/11, that didn't happen. After 9/11, we said 'There's something not working here.' "

What wasn't working, Cid said, was prevention. Authorities showed they could respond to attacks, but they failed to prevent them.

In the decade since 9/11, the increasing focus on prevention has helped make the country more secure, resulting in no successful international terror plots carried out on U.S. soil.

"I think we are safer than we were," said Thomas Locke, the FBI agent who organized the agency's initial investigation into the Sept. 11 attacks and who now runs his own global security firm. "We've always been pretty good in response. What we're better at is prevention. I think we've learned a lot about the level of chatter to look for overseas. I think we have better human intelligence on the ground."

The visible signs of security – the National Guard troops patrolling Grand Central Terminal, the preflight screening that even includes passengers removing their shoes for inspection – have helped make people more aware of the constant threat of terrorism and perhaps feel safer. But the unseen efforts to thwart plots before they develop into imminent threats has done more to enhance security, experts said.

"Of course we're safer," said Dr. James Carafano, a homeland security expert with the Heritage Foundation, a Washington think tank. "We've thwarted at least 40 terrorist plots aimed at the United States since 9/11. Three of them were stopped by luck, but most of them were stopped by finding the guys before they did anything. We're largely safer because of counter-terrorism efforts."

Coordination between the FBI and CIA has helped increase security more than concrete barriers and security screeners, Cid said. When he worked with the FBI in Washington, he said, agents "affectionately" referred to the CIA as "TBARS" – "which was an acronym for 'Those Bastards Across the River.' "

Security has also been enhanced by better sharing of information by federal authorities with their counterparts in state and local law enforcement, experts said.

Cid said the state and local departments have 800,000 officers nationwide on the front lines.

"If they're thinking in terms of terrorism prevention and terrorism precursors, that's a huge force multiplier," he said.

Cid said nonfederal law enforcement agencies also have taken on more of the load in security and intelligence efforts. As an example, he pointed to the New York City Police Department's development of its own sophisticated anti-terrorism and intelligence unit that travels overseas to develop information about terror threats.

"It would be irresponsible of the police commissioner of New York to do less," he said.

White Plains Public Safety Commissioner David Chong traveled to the city in August for a briefing from NYPD officials about anti-terrorism efforts.

"That would not have happened before 9/11," he said.

The FBI, he said, is much quicker now to involve local police agencies in anti-terror efforts.

"The FBI's direction has changed to where local law enforcement is granted much more immediate, up-to-date access to information that they have regarding threats and trends than we've ever been," he said.

Part of the willingness for all agencies to cooperate comes from an understanding of the void that existed before Sept. 11, said Rockland County Sheriff James Kralik, the chairman of National Sheriffs Association Counter-Terrorism Committee.

Weaknesses, however, still exist, he said. He's frustrated that a decade after the Sept. 11 attack, there's no national protocol for law enforcement agencies in the realm of counter-terrorism.

"I'm not comfortable that we don't have a national plan," he said. "We still need a specific 'best practices' to follow."

But unlike in the past, local and state police are not waiting for the FBI or some other federal agency to take the lead. The National Sheriffs Association is drafting a plan, Kralik said.

The lack of a successful attack in the last decade only increases the likelihood of an eventual attack – despite the killing of Osama bin Laden and the weakened state of his branch of al-Qaeda, experts said.

Part of that is because the security ceiling has been reached, Cid said.

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"We've reached our limit as a society, our tolerance for additional security measures. No one's going to give the FBI more intelligence authority," he said. "We're static, the adversary is not. The more time he has to work around our security measures, the greater the threat of attack is."

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