



Managing Joint Terrorism Task Force Resources

By JAMES CASEY, M.A.

In a post-September 11 world, successful management of a joint terrorism task force (JTTF) may represent one of the most important aspects of law enforcement's unified war on terrorism. The September 11 attacks placed a high profile on FBI-sponsored JTTFs across the nation and have presented unique management issues for the FBI and participating agencies of the task forces. Organizational and strategic analysis of the threats posed by international and domestic terrorism can help law enforcement executives at all levels develop management structures and protocols for successfully operating the nation's JTTFs, proving mutually beneficial to the FBI, participating law enforcement agencies, and the country's national security effort.



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History

Many of the FBI's task forces dealing with significant crime problems grew out of the agency's close working relationship with the New York City Police Department (NYPD). Both organizations have a history of innovative approaches to law enforcement and highly competent investigators willing to try new concepts. The first formal FBI task force, the Bank Robbery Task Force, primarily was staffed with FBI

special agents and NYPD detectives, followed closely by participation from a host of other federal, state, and local law enforcement partners. The task force concept flourished, and, by the mid-1980s, many other formalized FBI-sponsored task forces existed, dealing with such issues as fugitives, drugs, and, eventually, terrorism. The joint task force concept is not new nor did the FBI develop it. Many levels of law enforcement successfully have used the



concept for years to handle specific crime problems. All FBI-sponsored task forces, however, have two common elements that make them unique: 1) written memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between participating law enforcement agencies and 2) FBI funding to pay for participating state and local departments' expenses, such as officer overtime, vehicles, gas, cell phones, and related office costs.

Prior to September 11, the United States had 35 formal JTTFs. Shortly after the attacks, FBI Director Robert Mueller instructed all FBI field offices to immediately establish formal terrorism task forces. Today, the FBI has a JTTF in each of its 56 field offices, as well as 10 stand-alone, formalized JTTFs in its largest resident agencies.¹ Many other field offices sponsor JTTF annexes in small- to medium-sized resident agencies, but these entities formally are attached to the respective field office. Agents and officers may reside physically in a smaller resident agency but work for the field office's JTTF. Also, shortly after September 11, Attorney General John Ashcroft ordered the U.S. Attorneys' Offices (USAO) to establish antiterrorism task forces (ATTF). The mandate and mission of the ATTFs initially were unclear to many

individuals in the law enforcement community, as well as to some of the USAOs, who thought that a duplication of effort at the federal law enforcement level would occur and confuse JTTF and ATTF participants. In practice, the ATTFs have evolved into senior-level working groups with scheduled policy and intelligence briefings, while the JTTFs have remained the day-to-day operational and investigative components of the law enforcement community.



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Structure

Proper staffing of the task force is critical. A supervisory special agent (SSA) accomplished in counterterrorism investigations oversees the daily operations of the task force. A basic JTTF consists of a group of FBI special agents experienced in international and domestic terrorism investigations combined with other federal, state, and local law enforcement officers who bring a variety of skills to the task

force environment. A complex mix of available resources in each jurisdiction and the historic working relationships these agencies enjoyed prior to the establishment of the task force present subtle differences within each JTTF, particularly in major U.S. cities.

Task force coordinators constitute a critical component of the JTTF. Coordinators, generally, are special agents experienced in counterterrorism who can handle administrative functions effectively. JTTF coordinators obtain MOUs for all participating agencies and manage the overtime budgets for state and local officers, acquiring automobiles, cell phones, laptop computers, and, in some cases, off-site work space for the task force. Additionally, coordinators serve as the primary line investigator liaison to all other federal, state, and local officers on the JTTF. They frequently schedule emergency surveillance coverage of a subject or arrange court-authorized electronic surveillance, all of which counterterrorism investigations often use. To ensure success in the critical functions of directing operations, assigning cases, and managing liaison with other task force participants' home agencies, SSAs should delegate these administrative functions to task force coordinators.



Special agents in charge (SAC) of local FBI field offices must accommodate all law enforcement agencies in their territories that want to contribute to the counterterrorism mission. In the post-September 11 era of increased cooperation among all levels of law enforcement and, particularly, recognition that local law enforcement plays a critical role in protecting the homeland, the importance of a well-represented JTTF cannot be overstated. However, conflicts may arise when an agency contributes members to the task force on a part-time basis but, then, routinely assigns these employees to non-JTTF duties.

Possible Conflicts

State and local law enforcement agencies' investigative resources are limited, which becomes the primary motivation for assigning part-time task force members to the JTTF. However, a caste system can develop on a task force that includes both full-time and part-time participants. The full-time members generally are more flexible in assignments and better able to work odd hours, doing so with little or no notice. The rest of the task force may unintentionally slight part-time members ("out of sight, out of mind"), and the supervisor often may feel reluctant to give them time-sensitive assignments. The



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part-time members also more frequently tend to matriculate to other assignments at their home agencies, which can undermine the cohesiveness of the JTTF and breed inefficiency. Although part-time participation is possible, most task forces discourage it.

In an effective JTTF, all investigators, whether from the FBI, other federal agencies, or state and local departments, are equal partners. All investigators should be assigned substantive cases and work from the established FBI protocols for investigating terrorism, completing paperwork requirements, and using data systems. Further, to establish task force esprit de corps, supervisors should encourage JTTFs to create their own seals, patches, and jackets.

Although all law enforcement agencies interested in

JTTF participation should be encouraged to join, several agencies are critical to the success of the task force. First, the task force should include the local police department where the field division's JTTF is headquartered. Generally, this is a medium- to large-sized department with detectives who have access to their agency's intelligence base as related to criminal investigative matters. This intelligence base can include formal sources, such as criminal informants, or informal relationships with business leaders and other community representatives. When a large suburban county surrounds a field office, members from that county's police or sheriff's department are important members of the task force for the same reasons. Further, the state police or highway patrol is a critical JTTF partner because



of its statewide jurisdiction, databases, and access to other important state service agencies. Agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) are an important addition to the task force because of their unique skills and databases. The Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) recently transferred to the Department of Homeland Security and proves crucial to the JTTF because of the numerous immigration issues that surround many current international terrorism investigations. This list of essential participants is not exclusive but, rather, should form the basic building blocks for a successful JTTF. A wide variety of local, state, and federal agencies make significant contributions to counterterrorism task forces across the country.

Immediate access to the National Joint Terrorism Task Force (NJTTF) located at FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., benefits state and local law enforcement agencies participating in a local JTTF. Director Mueller set up the NJTTF as a national resource in early 2002, seeking to have representation from every federal law enforcement and intelligence agency in one location. In addition to the traditional partners, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and FBI, the NJTTF has

agents and officers from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, Transportation Security Agency, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Bureau of Prisons, and approximately 50 other significant contributors to the national counterterrorism mission. While any law enforcement officer in the United States can contact the NJTTF for specialized assistance, participation on the local JTTF provides a natural seam to the NJTTF.



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Security Clearances

Security clearances for team members and home agency managers often present a confusing issue surrounding the administration of a JTTF. Responsibility for the protection of national security information rests with the president of the United States through the director of Central Intelligence, who serves as the final authority surrounding the handling of information related to national

security. Because FBI offices are repositories of national security information, a presidential executive order requires all employees, including task force officers assigned to these offices, to have a top secret (TS) security clearance. While most task force officers rarely handle TS information, they nonetheless work in a TS facility and, therefore, are required to have a TS clearance.² Issuance may take 6 months to 1 year to complete because, unlike secret clearances, an investigator physically must verify all of the information concerning a candidate.³ According to a recent report by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) on terrorism, “There is a misperception that the FBI has control over the process and that local law enforcement sometimes believes that the process is an affront to their professionalism, when it is really just about following mandatory authorities.”⁴

In the aftermath of September 11, Director Mueller sought to have security clearances granted to many of the nation’s state and local law enforcement leaders to assuage their fears of not getting necessary terrorist information because they lacked the proper clearance. Many law enforcement officials incorrectly believed that a great deal of information that could or should have been passed to

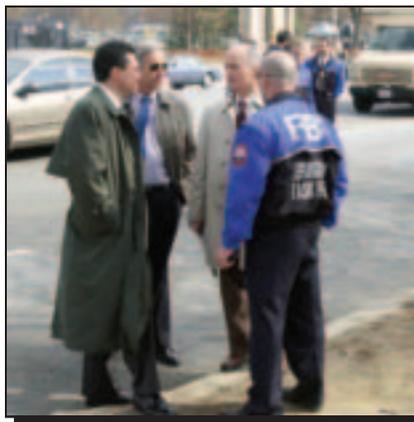




local law enforcement was classified. Numerous local officials also were discouraged by the length of time it took for the government to process their requests for clearances. Another issue concerned the perceptions associated with different clearance levels. Again, according to PERF, “The fact that an investigator assigned to a JTTF has a top secret clearance, while the chief has only a secret clearance should not concern the chief... unless you are the chief. Elected and appointed local government leaders and law enforcement personnel attach significance, even status, to the higher of the two clearance levels.”⁵

The management lessons regarding clearances are threefold. First, the issue of clearances never should cause FBI managers to be in a position of not sharing timely threat information with local law enforcement executives. Effective liaison skills, operational competence, and common sense dictates that immediate threat information needs to be passed to the appropriate law enforcement officials, working around the issue of security clearances. In other words, the threat usually can be discussed even if a sensitive source or method of how the threat was received cannot. Second, unless law enforcement executives have daily, unescorted access to FBI space or a continuing

need for sources and methods information, they should acquire a secret clearance as soon as possible, not waiting unnecessarily for a TS clearance. Third, JTTF-partner executives should strive to keep their officers assigned to the task force for at least 1 year due to the time it takes those officers to acquire their own clearances. If the officer needs to be rotated or promoted, home



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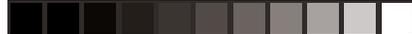
agencies should provide as much notice as possible to the JTTF to coordinate the inclusion of another officer from the same agency and begin the clearance process.

Updates and Reports

The very nature of the JTTF’s work makes it significantly different from other task forces. It is challenging for resource-strapped agencies to justify continued task force operations when performance measures are difficult to gauge.

Unlike fugitive or drug task forces, JTTFs do not have numerous arrests, search warrants, or seizures. Rather, the bulk of the work often relates to long-term surveillance, electronic court-ordered monitoring, source development, or interviews, none of which may garner significant statistics in the traditional law enforcement sense. Therefore, commanders of agencies who contribute personnel to JTTFs must be well briefed on task force operations. Successful administrators require their task force officers to provide them with weekly scheduled updates on the overall operations of the JTTF. This is particularly critical during lulls in major operations—executives must know the day-to-day duties of the JTTF, and, if a crisis occurs, they should have a firm understanding of the chain of command of other JTTF-participant agencies. The early stages of a potential terrorist incident are not the time for administrators to try to identify their counterparts among other JTTF partners.

Another information-sharing tactic is for the SAC of each FBI field office to send a personal letter to the command staff of all of the participating JTTF agencies. This monthly communication should discuss the general operations of the task force during the previous



month, as well as the specific contributions made by that department's task force members. Nothing replaces effective liaison between all of the JTTF law enforcement agencies where successful chief executives communicate in a variety of formal and informal forums concerning terrorism issues in the community.

Conclusion

Protecting the nation's homeland from future terrorist attacks is the responsibility of all law enforcement agencies. No single police or intelligence agency exists with the expertise, personnel, knowledge of the local environment, or money to unilaterally accomplish this mission.

Unfortunately, the very nature of terrorism demonstrates that all future attacks against the homeland cannot be prevented any more than all future crimes. But, law enforcement officials can ensure that local, state, and federal agencies do all within their power and work as hard as they can to thwart future acts—the American people deserve and expect that effort from their leaders in law enforcement. Today, an effective and efficient multiple law enforcement joint terrorism task force is the most important tool for combating the complex issue of terrorism. ♦

Endnotes

¹ The FBI's field offices are located in major cities throughout the United States and in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In addition, resident agencies are maintained in smaller cities and towns across the country. The locations were selected according to crime trends, the necessity for regional geographic centralization, and the need to efficiently manage resources. For more information, see <http://www.fbi.gov/contact/fo/fo.htm>.

² The primary difference between secret and top secret information is the method by which the information is collected. Top secret information or intelligence might come from highly sensitive sources, such as human sources or foreign intelligence agencies that do not wish to be identified. This often is referred to as "sources and methods information." Generally, absent the source of the information, the substance can be shared with an individual, such as a law enforcement official cleared at the secret level with a need to know.

³ Examples of the type of records that must be physically verified for a top secret clearance by an investigator include those associated with birth, education, residence, credit, employment, and military service. Additionally, personal interviews must be conducted of the candidate, employers, neighbors, associates, and references. Any discrepancies or derogatory information also must be resolved.

⁴ Gerald R. Murphy and Martha R. Plotkin, *Protecting Your Community from Terrorism: Strategies for Local Law Enforcement*, Police Executive Research Forum, (Washington, DC, 2003).

⁵ Ibid.

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