

A View from the CT Foxhole: Mitchell D. Silber, Executive Director, Community Security Initiative

By Paul Cruickshank

Since January 2020, Mitchell D. Silber has served as the executive director of the Community Security Initiative, a joint UJA Federation NY and JCRC-NY initiative to safeguard the Jewish community of the greater New York City area. Silber is also a visiting lecturer at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs ("SIPA") where he teaches about terrorism and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Silber served as Director of Intelligence Analysis at the New York City Police Department (2005-2012) where he was a principal advisor to the Deputy Commissioner of Intelligence on counterterrorism policy and analysis. He was responsible for developing and managing the Analytic and Cyber Units and supervised the research, collection, and analysis for the Intelligence Division's entire portfolio of ongoing terrorism related investigations.

Silber is the author of The Al Qaeda Factor: Plots Against the West, published in 2012 by the University of Pennsylvania Press, and more recently, co-authored "Iran and Hezbollah's Pre-Operational Modus Operandi in the West," Studies in Conflict in Terrorism 44:2 (2021).

CTC: Tell us about the Community Security Initiative and what your role is within it.

Silber: The Community Security Initiative is a startup security program, now in its fifth year, created by the leading organizations in the Jewish community in New York to protect the Jewish population and Jewish institutions in the Greater New York City metro area. And in some ways, it's an American version of the types of programs that Jewish communities in Europe have instituted, like the Community Security Trust in the U.K. or the SPCJ [Service de Protection de la Communauté Juive] in France and these are programs that provide an extra layer of security for the community and in a sense serve as connective tissue between law enforcement and government and the community and their institutions and organizations.

CTC: What is your geographic area of responsibility?

Silber: Our area is greater New York City metro. It now runs from the tip of Long Island in Montauk all the way up through Albany, and we estimate that that covers a Jewish population of about 1.7 million people, which is about 25 percent of the entire Jewish population in the U.S., and in excess of 2,600 institutions. An institution is a synagogue, a school, a community center, a museum, a camp, all of those things are in our area of responsibility between Montauk and Albany.

CTC: How and why was this organization created to protect the Jewish community in this area?

Silber: The 'why' is really a series of deadly events, terrorist attacks in the United States from October 2018 through December 2019, first and foremost being the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in October of 2018 that left 11 dead. Then there was a deadly attack at a synagogue in Southern California in Poway six months later.¹ And then in December of 2019, two deadly attacks in the New York area: one in Jersey City that left three [people in a grocery store] dead² and one in Monsey, New York, that left one dead.³ Over the course of 14 months, you had four deadly attacks, leaving 15 Jewish American fatalities for no other reason than they went to synagogue or a grocery store. With that in mind, the UJA, which is the umbrella organization in the New York area, and the JCRC, another community organization, wanted to create the security umbrella for the community. So that's the 'why' part. When we look at Tree of Life, it's kind of like the 9/11 event for Jewish communities in the United States. Nothing would ever be the same after Tree of Life. That sense of security, for the Jewish community in America, was shattered.

The 'how' was a little bit more than four years ago. I took the role of executive director, and we hired a team of five regional security directors. So, we took our initial territory; we divided into five zones, and each one of those security directors was given responsibility for every Jewish institution in that zone. And we recruited the best and brightest, elite former law enforcement—both from NYPD, counterterrorism, intelligence—from the Shin Bet, from regional intelligence centers—and now I've added to the team people from the New York State Police, Central Intelligence Agency, as well as from the NYPD's tactical unit, the Emergency Services Unit.

CTC: And this is a privately funded effort, correct?

Silber: Right. That's really innovative here. The federation, which you can make a rough comparison [to] the archdiocese for Catholicism, has a regional responsibility for the community, and they were approached by significant Jewish philanthropists who were very concerned about security in the New York area. Some of the names are in the public domain: Paul Singer, Marc Rowan, Daniel Loeb, we're talking billionaire Jewish philanthropists who said, 'We want to fund a program specifically to protect the community here; so our funds need to be earmarked for this designated role to start up this program from scratch,' in early 2020. So you've got this interplay between philanthropists from non-profit organizations like the Jewish Federation (UJA-NY) and New York's JCRC creating this program that now, four-plus years later, has 18 people, has a fully staffed intelligence desk, has an operational side, cyber security, and has been super busy since October 7th.

CTC: Can you talk about your career in counterterrorism, including as director of intelligence analysis at the NYPD? How did that help prepare you for your current role and the lessons that you learned along the way that are applicable to what you're doing now?

Silber: I'm unashamed in saying that I've stolen many of the playbooks from the NYPD counterterrorism and intelligence library to help create this program, taking some of the best practices from that program. One of them worth highlighting is the importance of intelligence, and this initiative didn't necessarily have an intelligence component out of the gate. The idea was 'Well, just harden all targets.' But if we look back at something like the Tree of Life attack and plenty of other terrorist attacks, having the intelligence ahead of time would have given the community, the institution a much better shot at protecting itself, if not thwarting the attack itself. So, we added this threat intelligence component where our team is knee-deep in the sewers of the dark web and the deep web looking for—on 4Chan and 8kun and Telegram and Gab, as well as the surface web—individuals who are talking about carrying out violent extremist acts against the community here in New York. So that's a program that we had at NYPD, and we've basically recreated it here at the Community Security Initiative.

And the other element is having people who were at NYPD, were in those units who are out in the field. Our sort of field commanders, the regional security directors, many of them have a counterterrorism background. So, when they're in the field visiting a synagogue or visiting a community center, they're looking at all the vulnerabilities. How strong is the door? Can the windows withstand a blast? Are there CCTV cameras there? Where are the guards? How are they positioned? Taking talented people and mixing this operational and the intelligence together where the intel piece is the hub and everything from the field comes into the intel desk to be vetted and then goes back out to the field, that dynamic—the interplay between the field and the intel desk—[is] another piece taken from my experience and NYPD and seeing what works.

One other thing I'd add to that from NYPD is that one of the great things about the department under Ray Kelly and David Cohen is that when an attack happened around the world, they wanted to learn a lesson. So one of the lessons from the 7/7 attacks is that London couldn't be protected unless you looked out 180 miles north to Beeston and Dewsbury and places like that. And so NYPD created this partnership with other law enforcement agencies in that 200-mile radius around it, thinking that New York City is the most likely target. We've done a similar thing. We have a relationship with the New Jersey security directors, with Boston, with the Anti-Defamation League, with the Community Security Service. We've created an East Coast Security Director partnership. We've created these concentric circles to try and protect New York City, ever-widening around us to make sure we have the best chance of detecting something as far out as possible.

CTC: On October 7, you were in Israel with a visiting delegation of American law enforcement officials. Can you describe what you were doing and how that day went? What were your takeaways and reaction to those horrific events?

Silber: We had been invited by Israel's Ministry of Diaspora and Antisemitism to bring two dozen senior law enforcement officials



Mitchell D. Silber

from the greater New York area—NYPD, Nassau County, Suffolk County, Westchester police chiefs, Rockland police chiefs—to Israel for a week of training about antisemitism and counterterrorism. We had arrived in Israel on the morning of October 6th, and we were put up in a hotel in Ashdod, which is in southern Israel about 10 miles from Gaza. And at 6:30 in the morning on the 7th, we were awakened by a high-pitched sound that we quickly figured out were sirens. Many of us scrambled out into the hallway of our hotel and saw people running towards the stairwells. In Israel, all hotels have to have safe rooms, but also the stairwells are reinforced. So [we] immediately ran to the stairwell, ran into some members of the delegation. There had already been a couple of sirens that had happened. You wait in the bomb shelter for a couple minutes. Somehow, the Israelis seem to know when it's safe to come out, so you follow them. We went back to the room and then another siren, back into the shelter. Go grab a cup of coffee. Another siren. So, over the course of three hours from 6:30 to 9:30 AM, we were in and out of shelters 20 different times.

We knew about Iron Dome as an anti-missile defense or some of us did, but talk about the fog of war. We really did not know what was going on. The best we could do is jump on Twitter and try and figure out what Israeli commentators, war correspondents were saying, but we didn't have any idea of the bigger picture. We had no idea of the ground invasion that Hamas had launched not more than 10 miles away from us. And to be honest, our hotel wasn't particularly well protected. We had one security guard at the door. Later in the day, Israeli government officials said they thought the program was still going to be on; by evening time and a couple more missile/rocket attack warnings, they said the program was over. And we had to find a way out. There was almost like an "Argo"

moment where we had to meet in the lobby and we bought tickets for the whole delegation to fly to Dubai, told everyone to pack up their stuff at 12:30 in the morning, and the next day, by midday we were on a flight to Dubai and to Dubai back to New York.

We saw Iron Dome in action over the hotel. There's an app called Red Alert—most Israelis have it on their phone—that shows you specifically where rockets are expected to land. You have 45 seconds to seek shelter. But, if it's not in the area where you are, you don't have to shelter. We were in Ashdod. It's so specific that when rockets were targeting Ashdod North or Ashdod South, we could be outside and watch the interceptions literally above our head.

You asked what the effect on the delegation was: I think two of the most telling moments [were] one, the night of October 7th, we had Israeli police, border police commandos staying at our hotel, doing patrol on the beach across the street for fear of naval incursion by Hamas speedboats. So that was a clarifying moment. And then, as we were on the bus heading to the airport on October 8th, seeing as far as the eye could see on Israeli highways, cars pulled over by the side of the road, none of us knew what that meant. Those were reservists already showing up for duty before they're even called up, and I think that resonated with the law enforcement team we were with, to see that idea of public service that when the call goes out, they show up, drop whatever they're doing, leave their families behind, and show up for their government, for their communities.

CTC: And the events of that day on October 7 really do underline the importance of what you do and the stakes involved. What are your reflections on the significance of October 7, in the bigger picture as someone who is so engaged in all these issues?

Silber: If we widen the lens a bit, we have to think of Hamas as a proxy organization, one of the proxy organizations for Iran. And it's hard to believe that there wasn't some type of coordination with Iran for the timing of this event because it really happened seemingly on the cusp of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which would have been a breakthrough event in Arab-Israeli relations. We know Indonesia was about to establish normalization with Israel.^a So this attack was meant to thwart all of those regional dynamics. That's the wider lens: Iran's larger war against Israel and their positioning for themselves for supremacy in the region.

If we drill down a little bit more, here we have a terrorist organization that totally surprised the Israeli intelligence community, Western intelligence agencies in terms of their capabilities and intentions. Not to get too deep in the weeds here, but the fact that they were able to gather so much intelligence on the Israeli border defenses, blind them using drones, know where their command bunkers were, understand where the troop positions were, so that if they were going to attack those small groupings of troops that are actually still on the border, they could do that early

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on in the assault, I think it really was a game changer in terms of how *anyone* thought about Hamas and their capabilities and their intentions.

CTC: Let's pivot to the New York situation. The greater New York area is home to the largest Jewish population outside Israel, and even before October 7, Jews were the victims in the majority of hate crimes in New York City.⁴ And at the Community Security Initiative, you were monitoring at least 100 potential security threats a day even before October 7.⁵ How has the threat to the Jewish community here in in the New York area evolved since October 7? What is the data telling you?

Silber: We came back from Israel and essentially [were] out of the fire and into the frying pan. Let's talk about the online world. This is kind of like a category five storm. Five times the amount of hateful postings that our intelligence desk had to vet through, and they're using artificial intelligence, web-scraping tools to comb through the sewers of the internet, but to try and identify what is noise and what is a potential threat. So you're totally overwhelmed, a tidal wave of extremism and hate on online.

We've also had more than 140 bomb threats against Jewish institutions in the New York area since 10/7. Every bomb threat potentially requires a response by the local police, an investigation and eventually clearing of the location that was threatened. That's been a huge toll on law enforcement, on the anxiety in the community as well as our team.

Also [there's] protest activity. There have been more than 300 anti-Israel protests, [and] some of them have actually turned violent. There's been vandalism, there have been assaults, there have been arrests. One of the missions of our organization is to detect when these sometimes spontaneous protests are going to happen and make sure that law enforcement has the information so that they have the resources to control the civil disorder that's happened on the streets of New York City.

Moreover, according to NYPD data, while in 2022 there were 262 antisemitic hate crimes against Jewish New Yorkers, in 2023 there were 325—a 24 percent increase—and more specifically, after 10/7, from October to December 2023, the number of hate crimes targeting Jews in New York City equaled that of the entire previous nine months.⁶ Lastly, since October 7, 2023, there have been at least 23 anti-Jewish assaults in New York City.

Our regional security directors have just been overwhelmed with requests for assistance: 'Can you come and relook at our security?' 'Can you make sure that the local police know we're having this event on Tuesday night?' 'Can you help us apply for a security grant? We really want to do that now.' Everyone has been moving at a much

a Editor's Note: On February 28, 2024, *Jewish Insider*, citing three sources involved in the negotiations, reported that "Israel and Indonesia had planned to announce the establishment of diplomatic relations in October 2023, a move that was delayed by the Hamas terror attack on Israel and subsequent war in Gaza." Lahav Harkov, "Israel, Indonesia were on track to normalize ties before Oct. 7: sources," *Jewish Insider*, February 28, 2024. A senior aide to Indonesia's president subsequently denied that this had been the case. See "Jokowi aide quashes report Indonesia was set to open ties with Israel," *Jakarta Post*, March 5, 2024.

higher operational tempo here, and we've had to add staff since 10/7.

CTC: At NYPD, you previously played an important role protecting New York City and have a lot of very strong relationships. Tell us about the importance of that coordination with law enforcement on a day-to-day basis.

Silber: We could not do what we're doing without those relationships, and it's a key reason why as we recruited this team, we recruited heavily from local law enforcement agencies like NYPD, like Westchester police departments, intel centers, because there's a limit to what we can do. We don't have any arrest authorities, any street authorities. So we have to work through the police and other law enforcement agencies. Within the last 24 hours, I've had to meet with both the Special Agent in Charge of the JTTF and the Deputy Commissioner of Counterterrorism and Intel at NYPD on sensitive security matters. They've opened their doors to this collaboration with us, whether it's talking about terrorist threats with JTTF— briefing them, them sharing concerns with us—or coordinating with NYPD intel and counterterrorism about events that are happening in the city, and frankly, passing intelligence to both these organizations. Things that we've passed on to the NYPD and FBI have resulted in more than a half dozen arrests of people who were in the process of turning to violent extremism. So, these relationships are invaluable, and we're so grateful for the partnership with the NYPD, FBI, and other local police agencies.

CTC: What are the challenges in tracking online threats given the sheer volume of threatening posts being made on social media? How do you figure out which threats warrant the most serious attention?

Silber: For all the technology that exists out there, at the end of the day, it requires really savvy intelligence analysts to be able to make a subjective judgment and discern whether we think someone is just threatening but not going to actually do anything, [just] 'talking,' or someone who we think is actually going to act. The last thing we want to do is send law enforcement leads that we think aren't going to pan out and then we're wasting their time. We want to make sure we send them things that we really think have a likelihood. But on the other hand, you don't want to not send something that ends up becoming a real threat. So, we use artificial intelligence tools to scrape the web, and I don't want to go too much into our techniques and tactics and procedures, but let's just say that helps us look at New York-related phenomena that we should be concerned about.

And then it's really the analytic team vetting these types of threats and trying to do some digging in terms of who is this person, what else have they posted, who else are they connected with online, are they part of a group? Maybe even finding out if they ever had a criminal record. [So it's] all that deep dive investigative work, and we're always experimenting with some new technologies. We're looking at some of the facial recognition tools because you might have someone's face online as part of their avatar but not have their real names. So we're experimenting.

CTC: And the stakes are really high here. One of the things that you've provided the Jewish community in the New York area is active shooter training. Can you talk through that a little bit?

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Silber: With the Tree of Life attack in Pittsburgh in mind—and so many other active shooter attacks in the United States, not only against the Jewish community—counter-active shooter training has really become something that's required and necessary for houses of worship, for schools, for community centers, for the workplace. So, every member of our operational team is trained and certified to provide this training, and over the course of an hour, hour and a half, they'll go to a location, talk through what active shooter means, what one should do in those type of incidents, and they'll cite past incidents.

One we've talked about in the past, the [January 2015] Hypercacher attack in Paris against a Jewish grocery store, there are aspects of that that after the fact one can analyze and say, 'Run, hide, fight: When was there an opportunity to run? How do people react during stress?' Because you can look at the CCTV footage of what happened inside that location. When people hide, where are places that one might not think to hide? And fight: What are things that you could use to fight in a place that [you] might not think would provide that? And I always think about the video of the Hypercacher, where there's a French man who picks up a bottle of red wine. He's going to use whatever he has to defend himself against this armed assailant. And that's the message that we're trying to convey to the community. If you think back that about two years [ago] to this hostage situation in Texas where the rabbi threw a chair at the hostage taker in order to free himself and the two other hostages, he was taking a page out of that playbook.⁷ Use whatever you have. If you can't run, if you can't hide, then fight with what you've got. He had a chair. He threw the chair and used that as the way to escape and get to safety. So those are the types of things that we're teaching in schools, in synagogues, in community centers, and offices.

CTC: You've created a real time emergency communication system that links the Jewish institutions in New York City and further afield in the greater New York area. Talk us through that.

Silber: Given the types of threats that that we're talking about—a

lone gunman, an active shooter, a bomb threat—we wanted to be able to communicate with all of the institutions within a certain area: maybe a certain borough, maybe two adjacent boroughs or counties or maybe the whole area simultaneously. So we've partnered with some private sector companies who have these capabilities, so that in a moment's notice, we can send out an email and text message to every synagogue, school, community center in Brooklyn; or in Brooklyn, plus Queens; or Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island; or our whole area. And we can provide them advice: There's an active shooter, shelter in place; there's a bomb threat, evacuate, whatever the particular instructions are. And over the last few years, from time to time, there have been incidents—fortunately, not necessarily ones that were deadly—active shooter incidents that we've been able to provide those alerts and prepare people so they could take the appropriate action.

CTC: Hezbollah has a track record of targeting the Jewish community around the world including in Europe⁸ and South America.⁹ And there are indications that Iranian-enabled terrorists are again looking to target the Jewish community in Europe.¹⁰ When it comes to the potential Hezbollah threat in the United States, as noted by Matthew Levitt in this publication “in June 2017, the FBI arrested two alleged Hezbollah operatives, Ali Kourani and Samer El Debek, for carrying out surveillance of U.S. targets in the United States ... Kourani reported Hezbollah operatives like him would be called upon to act in the event that the United States and Iran went to war, or if the United States were to take certain unnamed actions targeting Hezbollah, Nasrallah himself, or Iranian interests.”¹¹ Given the current high degree of tensions in the Middle East, including the possibility that the United States could get drawn into a war with Hezbollah and Iran, how do you see the threat from Hezbollah in the greater New York area? How can you prepare for this kind of threat?

Silber: At NYPD, we had open investigations into Hezbollah-affiliated individuals in the greater New York area. I've brought that concern to the Community Security Initiative. This past summer, we took a look at a scenario where we woke up one morning and Israel had struck the Iranian nuclear sites, and the question was what would the blowback be here in the United States? We were coming off some meetings, as you said, in Europe where there has been maybe more examples of Hezbollah/IRGC-type reconnaissance, surveillance on possible targets. And we plugged that into a New York/American model to think about which high-profile individuals, which high-profile organizations might be subject to targeting in that scenario. It hasn't been just a theoretical exercise because we did have a situation that's still somewhat classified, but someone from New York area who was targeted overseas by Hezbollah and Iran, and we've had individuals here in New York we're aware of who've also been targeted by Hezbollah and Iran. So that put a further impetus to this effort.

We're currently looking at what might happen if the United States or Israel goes up the escalation ladder. Obviously, there have been a number of kinetic strikes against Iranian proxy organizations in Iran and Syria, and the ongoing strikes in Yemen, is there a threshold with which an American strike would trigger retaliation by Iran or Iran proxies, i.e., Hezbollah, in the United States. That's the scenario that's on the table right now that we're talking to our

law enforcement partners about: What should we do if we think a strike of such magnitude has happened? What do we expect local law enforcement to do? What do we expect the FBI and JTTF to do and making sure we've got a plan that we can put into action if that comes to pass?

[Then there is] the targeting of Iranian dissidents, which we see as just being one iteration of targeting prominent people, prominent organizations, Jewish community. There was that plot to kidnap Masih Alinejad, the Iranian female dissident in Brooklyn.¹² Even more recently, the plot to use the Hell's Angels to target an Iranian dissident in Maryland.¹³ So, these are just two examples of Iran plotting against individuals here in the U.S. So, we have to assume that they don't have hesitation. And we know that Iran has continued to plot against U.S. government officials¹⁴ who they believe were responsible for the strike against Soleimani. So Iranian retaliation in the U.S. to us is not theoretical.

CTC: Pivoting to Hamas, in congressional testimony several weeks after the Hamas October 7 attack in Israel, FBI Director Christopher Wray stated: “We also cannot—and do not—discount the possibility that Hamas or another foreign terrorist organization may exploit the current conflict to conduct attacks here on our own soil. We've kept our sights on Hamas and have multiple ongoing investigations into individuals affiliated with that foreign terrorist organization.”¹⁵ How do you see the threat from Hamas in the greater New York area?

Silber: Up until a couple months ago, I looked at it the same way as I looked at it when I was at NYPD. We didn't really find Hamas operatives here in New York in the same way that we found Unit 901 Hezbollah^b operatives here. We found people who maybe had a brother or cousin who was in Hamas in the West Bank or in Gaza and they were here in New York. So as Director Wray talks about the heightened threat level from a terrorism perspective in the U.S., I have to say it was very notable that there were those recent arrests of Hamas operatives in Europe—Germany and Denmark¹⁶ where, for example, it looks like those arrested in Germany were commanded and controlled out of Lebanon, so really operatives sent to carry out action on behalf of the central organization, that's new to the Hamas model. And we're all still trying to digest that, but it means that here in the U.S., we can't assume that it'll just be loosely associated people. It is possible that there might be operatives here that are commanded and controlled from some type of Hamas central command in Lebanon or somewhere else.

CTC: Switching now to the far-right extremist side of the ledger, as you noted a pivotal event was the Tree of Life Synagogue attack that killed 11 congregants by a man prosecutors described as having “white supremacist, antisemitic and bigoted views.”¹⁷ What do you see as the evolving threat from the extreme far-right to the Jewish community in the United States?

Silber: Before October 7th, I really would say and our intelligence desk would say based on the volume of what they were looking at

b Editor's Note: Hezbollah unit 901 “coordinates the group's foreign operations.” “Lebanon's Hezbollah detains 'Israeli spy' in its ranks,” Al Arabiya, December 25, 2014.

social media, far-right extremism was the predominant threat. I would say upwards of 75 percent of the hateful postings that suggested violence before October 7th were coming from the white supremacist, neo-Nazi, accelerationist type perspective. Since 10/7, that has changed. Unfortunately, I don't think the white supremacist side of the ledger has gone away. It's really just a question of other different types of threat emanating from the Islamist or anti-Zionist side of the ledger. Those all jumped up, so it's kind of a perfect storm where you already had white supremacists at this level, and now the others have jumped up as well, which means that you're looking at this panorama of threats from different type of ideological origin points.

When we think about it here in the greater New York area, our concerns go to more rural communities further upstate, Pennsylvania, eastern Long Island, as being places where you have people who are more amenable to this ideology. There is probably less frequency of attack in New York, but a higher likelihood of deadliness.

There was this plot in November 2022 where two individuals were looking to attack a synagogue on the Upper West Side [of New York City], and when they were arrested at Penn Station, they had a Nazi swastika armband and they had been mobilized by white supremacist ideology.¹⁸ There was an attack not against the Jewish community, but against the Black community up in Buffalo by a white supremacist motivated by this ideology. In his manifesto, he talked about Jews as much as he talked about Black Americans.¹⁹ It's one of the things that I don't sleep well about.

CTC: And with regard to that November 2022 white supremacist plot against a synagogue in New York City, the Community Security Initiative detected early signs of that plot and alerted police, basically telling them that “We know you get a lot of incoming, but you should pay attention to this.”²⁰ Can you walk us through that case and the role that your team played in it?

Silber: It was a Friday morning in November, and our intelligence analysts, using their web scraping tools, had detected a series of tweets by an individual saying that he wanted to attack a synagogue. He was ready to die for the cause and suggested that it was going to be that day, that Friday. Our initial assessment was that the origin of the tweets [by] the individual who posted them was in Long Island, so we informed Nassau and Suffolk County police departments, FBI Long Island, and continued to investigate. As we gathered more information, our team made the decision to alert the NYPD because Long Island is only a short railroad or car drive to New York City, and we brought them into the equation.

Both NYPD and FBI then ran with this and approached Twitter and said that they needed to know via court order who was behind this particular avatar who had posted the tweets. The investigation was on that Friday afternoon. We had handed everything that we had over to law enforcement, and at that point it was a bit of a waiting game.

And then in kind of dramatic fashion, about 7:30 that Friday night, one of our regional security directors was told that NYPD has issued a BOLO—a ‘be on the lookout’— alert for all of New York City for this individual. When we looked at who they were putting [as] the picture of the individual, we said, ‘Wow, that’s our person we just flagged to law enforcement earlier in the day.’ This

alert went out to 25,000-plus NYPD, FBI, Port Authority, MTA police, and we confirmed with NYPD and FBI that yes, in fact, the manhunt was on in a city of eight million people for this individual on this Friday night.

Around midnight, plus or minus, we got a call from the FBI and they told us good news: They’d been arrested. To which we responded, ‘They? We thought there was only a single actor.’ And they said, ‘No, actually there was a co-conspirator.’ The MTA police had the picture of this individual on their phone, and they arrested them at Penn Station, and as we know, they had already procured a weapon, ammunition. They had an axe, a hunting knife, and a Nazi swastika armband. We think that we interrupted a potential Tree of Life-type attack in process. For us, we felt like, ‘OK, this system that we’ve built worked.’ The whole process from detection to notification to hand-off to law enforcement worked in a great way—12 hours from detection to arrest, roughly.

CTC: In 2019, you wrote an important article for *CTC Sentinel* examining terrorist attacks against Jewish targets in the West. You wrote that “Europe has become the focal point of the jihadi terror threat to Jews in the West and second, the United States has become a new, emerging focal point of the extreme right-wing terror threat to Jews in the West.”²¹ You’ve spoken a little bit about this already in terms of how things have changed since October 7. What’s your assessment of these trends today?

Silber: The assessment I made then was that in the U.S., the right-wing threat, white supremacist [threat] was predominant, but I think what 10/7 has put into sharp relief is that it can be multiple threats simultaneously.

As we’ve seen over the years, when organizations, whether it be al-Qa`ida or ISIS, are in decline overseas because of kinetic efforts by the U.S. military and coalition allies, those organizations are, in a sense, less popular to individuals in the West who might be radicalized to violence. I think there’s almost a bandwagon effect. But when those organizations are popular and are seen as being on the ascent, which I think is how Hamas was viewed in the wake of October 7th, then there’s this rush of interest of people who are intrigued and in a sense ‘jump on the bandwagon’ of that type of ideology. And we are seeing this significant revival of interest of Islamist-driven actors in the U.S. That violent Islamist threat to the Jewish community is probably on par with the white supremacist threat to the Jewish community in the U.S. right now in March of 2024.

CTC: There has been an explosion of antisemitic attacks in Europe since October 7, with attacks hitting an all-high time in the U.K.²² How closely do you keep tabs on the threat in Europe, and how can lessons learned in New York be helpful for the Jewish community in Europe? And how can lessons learned in Europe be helpful to you? At NYPD you had a lot of connectivity with the Brits and Europeans on the jihadi terror side of the ledger. What’s your interaction and dialogue with the Jewish community and the folks working to protect them in Europe?

Silber: I’ve always operated in my career in counterterrorism looking at Europe as a predictor of what’s going to come to the U.S. With Jewish security, it’s really no different. These organizations that we talked a little bit about earlier, the Community Security

Trust in the U.K. and the SPCJ in France and other similar type organizations, they've been dealing with violent threats against the community in a way that the U.S. never had to until October of 2018 and Tree of Life. So, we're talking on a regular basis to the Community Security Trust in the U.K., which is considered the gold standard of this type of Jewish security; we're talking to the newly formed Nordic Jewish Security Council, which covers Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, who have a similar mission that that we do. And we're also talking to similar organizations in Australia—Sydney and Melbourne who've got strong Jewish communities—also have community security organizations. And there's a free flow of both intelligence sharing because we're all, for the most part, looking at the English-language extremist sphere. And we're also discussing different innovations and technology, trying to share best practices where we can to make sure that every community has what they need. So yes, Europe remains a focal point. Anytime something happens in Europe, we're trying to learn what that might look like if you map it to the U.S.

CTC: What keeps you up at night?

Silber: I'd say two different scenarios. One is a replay of what happened in Buenos Aires in 1994: a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device, a truck bomb in front of a Jewish community center.^c Very much Hezbollah, Iran, their tactics and techniques. My concern for that type of action here in New York, that's one scenario that keeps me up at night.

The other is the lone active gunman that shows up at a house of worship, at a school during dismissal, something along those lines, motivated by either white supremacist or Islamist ideology and looks to carry out a deadly attack. So those are the two scenarios that I'm always trying and our team is trying to think about: How

c Editor's Note: "On 18 July 1994, 85 people were killed and hundreds more wounded in a Hezbollah-perpetrated bombing attack of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) building. This was the deadliest terrorist attack in Latin American history as well as against any Jewish target outside of Israel." "This week in Jewish history | Bombing at AMIA building in Buenos Aires kills 85 people and wounds hundreds more," World Jewish Council, July 18, 2022.

do we thwart that? How do we prevent that? How do we harden the target versus that threat?

CTC: How can efforts to protect the Jewish community in the United States be further strengthened?

Silber: The U.S. is different from European countries in that we're so decentralized whereas many European countries, they can create a program like this and it just covers the whole country. Here in the U.S., we've got lots of different players. We've got the Anti-Defamation League, we've got SCN, which is a national Jewish organization. We have the Community Security Service. We've got independent cities and federations with their security programs like New York. So, we're trying to weave this patchwork together so that everyone is coordinating, and everyone figures out what lanes that they should have so that they're not in each other's lanes. That's a work in progress. We're not there yet. From time to time, some of these organizations stray into the other lanes, and we haven't worked out the exact design of the architecture yet. But I'm hopeful that with renewed focus on it, we can figure that out.

CTC: What makes you most hopeful?

Silber: In response to these grave threats, the community, leadership, and organizations have rallied, have risen to the occasion, and are now creating the security architecture that we never had before in the United States in order to meet the moment. Our program is certainly an example of it, but there are other cities in the United States—take Boston or Los Angeles or Cleveland and Cincinnati—that are stepping up in similar ways, have already stepped up to create robust security programs in the U.S. Seeing those start to come to fruition does give me a sense of optimism that that the community is mobilizing.

The other thing that makes me hopeful is just the tremendous partnerships with law enforcement, both at the federal level and the local level, there's an openness to collaborate, partner, and share that I never would have envisioned as possible with a non-profit security organization by FBI, NYPD, and other organizations. And that's remarkable. That's another reason to think positively. **CTC**

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