

A View from the CT Foxhole: Deputy Chief David Kowalski, Commanding Officer, Counter-Terrorism and Special Operations Bureau, Los Angeles Police Department

By Paul Cruickshank

Deputy Chief David Kowalski currently serves as the Commanding Officer of the LAPD's Counter Terrorism and Special Operations Bureau. He is a graduate of the Senior Management Institute of Policing at Boston University, the Harvard Kennedy School of Government's Leadership in Crisis program, the Anti-Defamation League's Advanced Training School on Extremism, and the FBI's Leadership in Counter Terrorism (LinCT) in 2023. He serves as the Co-Chairperson of the Major Cities Chiefs Association Intelligence Committee, comprised of representatives from 78 police agencies in the United States and Canada. Prior to the LAPD, he honorably served in the United States Marine Corps. He holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Criminal Justice Administration from San Diego State University and a master's degree in public administration from California State University Fullerton.

CTC: Could you describe the trajectory of your career in counterterrorism and what for you have been the most important lessons learned?

Kowalski: I've been with the Los Angeles Police Department for nearly 29 years, but I have worked exclusively in the counterterrorism field for the past six years. Prior to that, I served in the United States Marine Corps, and I deployed in 1990 to Saudi Arabia, where I was part of Operation Desert Storm and the liberation of Kuwait. I mention that because for those that study the rise of foreign terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida, the seeds of that organization under Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri began with the United States' presence in the Middle East back then and their intention to make the United States their primary target.

With the Los Angeles Police Department, my formative years were focused on working street gangs in south Los Angeles and other tactical assignments. As I promoted, I became a Captain responsible for a geographic area of Los Angeles. I worked closely with a variety of community stakeholders and saw first-hand how terrorist attacks across the globe created fear in the different communities of Los Angeles. As incidents happened around the world, I wanted our police officers to be responsive through high-visibility patrols and outreach to schools, synagogues, or mosques immediately after an attack to quell any fear or concerns that they were the next target.

In 2019, I was assigned to our Counterterrorism and Special Operations Bureau as a Commander and primarily assigned to counterterrorism efforts for our department where I worked closely with the FBI Los Angeles office through our Joint Terrorism Task force to detect, mitigate, and disrupt potential terrorist plots and attacks. In 2021, I was promoted to Deputy Chief, and I now serve as the department's Commanding Officer of the Counter-Terrorism

and Special Operations Bureau. I've been exposed to a variety of different investigations with partnering agencies, and I have continued to expand my partnerships not just across the country but with international partners. We are all working together in the global war on terrorism.

The biggest lesson that I've learned is the importance of strong relationships. It's key to timely information sharing. While the relationships we have in law enforcement are vital, developing and maintaining relationships in the community and outside the law enforcement sphere is *pivotal* since they are the first line of identifying persons who might be inclined to become radicalized.

CTC: In the wake of the January 1, 2025, New Orleans terrorist attack, what is your assessment of the terrorism threat picture facing Los Angeles specifically and the United States more broadly?

Kowalski: One of the takeaways from the January 1st attack is that the radicalization of individuals to foreign terrorist organizations such as ISIS remains a priority for those in the counterterrorism arena. All cities should remain vigilant in their efforts to prevent the next attack. The everlasting threat of homegrown violent extremists becoming radicalized and inspired from propaganda promoted by foreign terrorist organizations cannot be overlooked or underestimated. The emergence of technology enables potential attackers to become more radicalized at an accelerated rate and mobilizing to violence with access to social media platforms, promoting terrorist propaganda. As we have studied with different mass attacks and disrupted plots, the mixing of ideological grievances that appear mutually exclusive and counterintuitive makes identifying the threat today more difficult as individuals often blend ideology from jihadism to racially motivated extremist behaviors. These characteristics often fall outside of the delineation between domestic and international terrorism, and serve as a customized ideology and a driver to potential violence.

We've also observed different flashpoints emerging over the course of the Israel-Palestinian conflict that have potentially inspired new generations of extremists motivated to support foreign terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas and plan their own version of an attack. The emergence of technology with social media platforms encouraging and promoting attacks on selected dates during this past war was another variable that law enforcement officials were challenged with. Even though we are seeing that that war is moving in a more positive direction, with the ceasefire and release of hostages, the grievances from this war remain a concern. As we analyze and assess each of these threats specific to Los Angeles, our primary objective is fortifying our prevention strategies to keep Los Angeles safe.



David Kowalski

CTC: When you think about the CT needs and efforts, how do those differ for Los Angeles than, for example, New York City? And how do they not differ? What are the similarities across all big cities and what are their divergences for LA specifically?

Kowalski: Counterterrorism efforts in Los Angeles share many foundational similarities with those in New York and other major U.S. cities. Both cities house globally significant infrastructure, such as financial institutions, airports, mass transit systems, bridges, utilities, and iconic landmarks. Each city is a tourist destination for people from all over the world, and each city hosts thousands of tourists each day. Keeping everyone safe is a priority we both share. Los Angeles and New York [are] two of the most ethnically diverse communities in the world, and our community outreach with our stakeholders is critical to keeping both of our cities safe. Each city relies on our communities to report suspicious activities and the relationship between the two agencies is outstanding. Information sharing between us occurs almost daily and that has assisted us in the disruption of several sophisticated criminal networks that have impacted both cities.

One of the biggest differences between Los Angeles and New York is the massive size difference in the areas. New York is more densely populated in a smaller geographic area, while Los Angeles' population is spread across a larger area. It can be challenging to proactively identify different threats across a larger region where multiple pockets exist for criminal and extremist activities. Los Angeles' sprawling geography and decentralized layout contrast with New York's dense, vertical urban environment. Los Angeles

is also geographically close to the Mexico border, which serves as a point of origin for possible extremist travel and the exploitation of human smuggling networks. Trafficking illegal narcotics, firearms, illegal chemicals, and humans are all opportunities to fund terrorism.

Los Angeles has other unique challenges. It is heavily tied to the entertainment industry, requiring unique protection strategies for high-profile events such as the Academy Awards. Los Angeles' frequent large-scale entertainment and sports events demand constant vigilance and tailored counterterrorism strategies. As one of the world's busiest ports, the Port of Los Angeles also serves as a potential target for various bad actors. Maritime security is critical to preventing smuggling and illicit cargo into our region. As a city known for its forward-thinking technology, the threat of cyber attacks on our entertainment, financial, and transportation systems is always a concern for us here. With Los Angeles World Airport being one of the busiest airports globally, aviation security is a top priority here for us and the Los Angeles World Airport police. Like New York, we're fortunate to have such great relationships to help us prepare for attacks. Our relationships with security leaders in the private sector is tremendous, and the relationship with the other agencies in Los Angeles serve as a force multiplier for being prepared for any scenario that we are faced with.

CTC: Last fall, there was a significant series of arrests in Los Angeles of gang members with ties to white supremacist groups.¹ What is your assessment of the REMVE threat in the Los Angeles area?

Kowalski: The threat of racially motivated violent extremists remains a top priority for us here in Los Angeles. A variety of domestic terrorism groups have increased their messaging on different platforms to target minority groups. With Los Angeles being one of the most diverse cities in the United States and home to so many different ethnicities, focusing on domestic terrorism groups to include white supremacists is critical. We are fortunate to work with stakeholders in the community who are committed to our mission of keeping all people in Los Angeles safe. This has served as a force multiplier on many levels for information sharing and reporting of suspicious activities across the region. Organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Federation are focused on combating extremism, and they serve as tremendous partners to law enforcement.

In October, Los Angeles participated in one of the largest take-downs of a domestic terrorism network in history that resulted in nearly 50 arrests of persons living in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. The Peckerwood criminal street gang was responsible for a variety of crimes over many years and are classified as a white supremacist group or a subordinate to the Aryan Brotherhood. This takedown is a testament to the partnerships we have here in Los Angeles between federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, and our efforts have directly disrupted one of the most violent white supremacist street gangs here in Los Angeles.

CTC: How do you anticipate that your office's focus, scope, and efforts may change with the new administration's intention to designate some drug cartels as terrorists? How could this change the toolkit with regard to the challenges?

Kowalski: With the new administration's policy changes still in its infancy, our department is working closely with our federal partners on where the focus will be as it relates to drug cartel enforcement. The current model works very well in Los Angeles. We participate in the High-Intensity Drug Traffic Area program, also known as HIDTA. It was created by Congress in 1988 with the passage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act. Our detectives work as task force officers, similar to the model used under the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force. Under HIDTA, the functional operation is administered by the Drug Enforcement Administration or DEA. It allows our task force officers the authority to enforce federal drug laws. With Los Angeles being one of the busiest hubs for drug trafficking, maintaining a strong presence in this program is critical for us to be successful in the disruption and interdiction of drug cartels operating in the Los Angeles region.

As transnational organized crime groups become more sophisticated in trafficking narcotics, additional options for prosecution would be beneficial to disrupting these groups. In terms of potentially changing the toolkit for prosecution, as we have seen in filing federal cases with a terrorism nexus, this could mean enhanced sentencing options for the leaders overseeing these drug cartels that could act as a deterrent to many drug cartels in the region.

CTC: Jihadi groups online have encouraged their supporters to use fire as a weapon. Given the devastating and ongoing fires in Los Angeles County, how are the LAPD and your counterparts in Los Angeles' fire department thinking about this issue?

Kowalski: Since January 7th, the entire Los Angeles region has been impacted by these fires. The Pacific Palisades and the Eaton fires are two of the most devastating wildfires Los Angeles has ever experienced. Thus far, 29 deaths have been reported. The estimated property loss is approximately \$250 billion. While we are investigating each of these fires to determine cause and origin, we are keenly aware that extremists have historically called for the use of arson in an attack. To assist us, we have asked the ATF to join us in investigating these fires. They have been a tremendous partner during this difficult time here in Los Angeles.

While the fires that have occurred in the region sometimes fall within different jurisdictional boundaries, the relationships between the Los Angeles Police Department, Los Angeles Fire Department, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and the Los Angeles County Fire Department have allowed us to share information as these investigations have progressed to determine if any patterns exist between these fires. We are fortunate that even before these fires occurred, the relationship between the LAPD and the LAFD has afforded us a great working partnership in responding to arson investigations. We have established joint protocols to rapidly respond to potential arson incidents which allow us to make an assessment if there is any type of terrorism nexus. With the evolving threat picture over the last few years of targeting critical infrastructure, fire as a weapon is attractive to these groups due to its simplicity, accessibility, and potential for significant destruction.

CTC: What type of concerns does the LAPD have about terrorist extremists' interest in emerging technology, especially the operational use of drones, 3D printing, and AI?

Kowalski: Staying ahead of emerging technology is one of the most challenging aspects in counterterrorism today and one of the primary reasons there is such a heightened threat environment. There have been multiple prosecutions nationwide identifying extremists' interest in the use of drones and 3D printing, including one recently in Tennessee where an individual motivated by racially motivated white supremacy ideology attempted to weaponize a drone against an energy facility.² This is consistent with the REMVE messaging encouraging the targeting of critical infrastructure and the use of drones as a weapon. This is not just limited to REMVEs, but across the ideological spectrum. The domestic terrorism landscape has also produced increased swatting and hoax bomb call threats to government facilities, houses of worship, and academic institutions over the past two years. Technology has provided bad actors with more ways to conceal their identities and make finding the source of the original calls much more difficult.

Outside of counterterrorism, we are also seeing the general disruptive aspect of drones complicating public safety efforts. In a recent incident, a drone operating in restricted airspace collided with a firefighting aircraft, causing that aircraft to be grounded and disrupting efforts to extinguish fires.³ The use of artificial intelligence is also growing and having a huge impact on the cybersecurity landscape. While artificial intelligence is being used by companies for legal reasons, it is also being used for nefarious reasons to include producing propaganda and digital content to support terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida and ISIS. For financial crimes, phishing attempts are much more convincing to potential victims, with the efficiency of artificial intelligence.

CTC: The LA area and California more broadly is home to many innovative companies. How does the LAPD approach private sector partnerships, and which partnerships are LAPD most proud of?

Kowalski: Doing this type of work and policing today requires all the tools and all the partnerships available to be successful and stay ahead of the evolving threat environment. Law enforcement augments its work through partners in both the public and private sectors. The LAPD considers itself an organization focused on continuous learning and eager to find the newest technology that will enhance and maximize the skills of our workforce. We draw from a variety of companies and partnerships that will allow us to prevent, mitigate, and interdict potential attacks over the horizon. The partnerships allow us to closely monitor and track potential threats with timely reporting of tips and leads and tools that allow our police officers to be more effective in their day-to-day crime fighting duties and stay ahead of a rapidly changing threat picture. Technology has afforded our investigators the ability to streamline investigations in a more efficient manner. The LAPD is proud of the relationships we have built with technology companies, global businesses, and nonprofit organizations who are committed to making our city the safest in the nation.

CTC: Can you talk about how the LAPD is deploying technology to help it in its counterterrorism mission? One example of such technology is a robotic dog named "Spot," which "recently conducted a successful operation against a barricaded, armed suspect" by identifying and picking up a weapon near the suspect allowing officers to make an arrest.⁴ Can you talk us

through this capability and how you are deploying technology to help you in your counterterrorism mission?

Kowalski: The Los Angeles Police Department strives to be at the forefront of emerging technology that will allow our officers to remain safe and minimize lethal encounters with dangerous suspects. Spot is a robotic dog that is manufactured by Boston Dynamics. We conducted research on this technology for almost two years, which allowed us to evaluate how it worked in other agencies and how our community would feel about us acquiring this technology. Los Angeles has a very detailed review process for acquiring technology that requires us to be transparent and to implement a policy that clearly defined instances where we would deploy Spot and the situations where we would not use it.

Spot is a game changer as it allows us opportunities to use a robot in dangerous situations to retrieve a weapon or assess a potential explosive safely, rather than place an officer in harm's way. Our officers who use this equipment are highly trained and technically savvy in its use. Spot, along with other technology such as drones, allows our incident commanders better situational awareness during a dynamic tactical incident to make the best decisions to apprehend a suspect in the safest manner possible. We are very restrictive in its use, and the approval process in every situation requires my approval before it is deployed at any incident throughout the city.

CTC: With the upcoming big sporting events that you're being hosted in Los Angeles, with the city hosting eight matches in next year's FIFA World Cup and of course hosting the 2028 Olympics, from the counterterrorism perspective, how are you and your department working to keep these sporting events safe?

Kowalski: We've been preparing for the 2028 Olympics for the past seven years. Each year, our preparation and development becomes more advanced. We work closely with all the agencies throughout the city, which includes our mayor's office, the fire department, our federal agencies, the emergency management department of the city, and it's a whole regional approach to making sure these games are successful.

We realize that the world's eyes will be on us in 2028, but as you mentioned leading up to that, we also have several other events that are going to impact Los Angeles: the World Cup, another Super Bowl, and ultimately the Summer Games in 2028. How we look at that from a counterterrorism perspective is from a variety of different levels. It starts with realizing that for many groups, this is a prime opportunity to conduct an attack to further their own grievances or ideology. We've also seen recent incidents in the past where lone individuals will make a statement, such as in Las Vegas on January 1st outside the Trump Hotel because of their political grievances along with mental health issues.⁵ So we realize that our preparation has to be foolproof. The relationships that we've already formed will serve us well. We realize that we're only three and a half years away from this event, and we're fortunate to have good leadership in our city. The foundation is set, and we'll be prepared to address any type of threat that may come forward as these games near.

We hosted the 1932 Olympics here in Los Angeles. We hosted the 1984 Olympic Summer Games, and now 2028. I think for many

of us, it's going to be the pinnacle of our career to be part of such a large event, and we want to ensure that it goes as planned. We've worked very closely with our partners in Paris this past summer. We have a dedicated entity within the department. It's titled the Strategic Planning Group, and it's led by a Commander. He and his team, we work very closely with [them] in preparation for all aspects of these Games and how it will impact the city. But certainly, from a counterterrorism point of view, we've had the opportunity to look at what worked in Paris and in lessons learned, and that's been very beneficial to us as we move into 2028.

CTC: And of course, as we approach these games, the threat environment is coming from more directions than ever before. And that's one of the big challenges. You can't just think about one or two or three threat vectors. You have to think about a whole panoply of threat factors.

Kowalski: Yes. And I think looking at the World Cup in 2026, I think it's such a large international event, but it's going to serve, for us, to really test our capabilities for 2028. When you look at a city and the impact of multiple events, we look at it as a positive because the sets and repetitions that we're going to receive from hosting these different events will only make us better as we fine-tune our preparation and our efforts for the Olympic Games.

CTC: When it comes to the counterterrorism challenge, what keeps you up at night? And when it comes to the response by the counterterrorism community, what makes you most optimistic?

Kowalski: You mentioned the series of events that Los Angeles will be hosting in the next several years, and being part of the counterterrorism team here in Los Angeles, we realize the magnitude of our responsibilities to be prepared for that. And we're doing that right now. We know that Los Angeles will be a primary target for both homegrown violent extremists and domestic terrorism threats who are committed to conducting an attack to further their ideology. The threats to Los Angeles and the rest of the country continue to become more sophisticated. Over the past six years working in the field, the threat environment has never been so diverse and changing, and we must remain ahead of how these threats can impact our cities.

Although the 2024 election cycle is behind us, the geopolitical tensions in the United States remain a concern, with a variety of anti-government sentiments serving as background for a person or group motivated to plot the next attack. The threat of weaponized drones as exhibited during the Ukraine-Russia conflict should concern all Americans. Evolving technology allows individuals to communicate undetected on encrypted platforms, and 3D printing allows for the production of weapons and weaponized drones that could cause mass casualties during an attack.

What I'm confident in is our intelligence sharing and strong partnerships between local, state and federal agencies. Our community partnerships will continue to be a force multiplier on investigating tips and leads that could prevent an attack. Both locally and nationally, we are able to gain and share intelligence, deconflict issues and work together at all levels to address any potential threats. The ability to intake suspicious activity reports, work tips and leads, utilize our open-source intelligence collection, and partnering with law enforcement will all prove essential as the

threat picture continues to change.

What we need to build is finding the right people to fill key counterterrorism positions, whether you're working local law enforcement, state, or federal, whether that's professional staff as analysts or frontline first responders, the role and our ability to focus on countering terrorism will continue for the next several years. I would just say we're looking for qualified people to be part of that challenge.

As our department prepares for the upcoming events through 2028, I am confident we will continue to build to meet these concerns, be prepared, and utilize our partner agencies at the federal, state, and local levels to assist in keeping Los Angeles safe, not just while we are on the world stage for major events, but every day as we stay ahead of the next major incident that could impact our communities. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 Josh Campbell and Cindy Von Quednow, "Dozens of suspected White supremacist gang members arrested in Los Angeles area in domestic terrorism investigation," CNN, October 2, 2024.
- 2 Editor's Note: See "Man Arrested and Charged with Attempting to Use a Weapon of Mass Destruction and to Destroy an Energy Facility in Nashville," U.S. Department of Justice, November 4, 2024.
- 3 Editor's Note: See Meredith Deliso, "Drone operator charged for hitting 'super scooper' plane during Palisades Fire: DOJ," ABC News, January 31, 2025.
- 4 Samyarup Chowdhury, "LAPD Defends Unleashing Robot Dog on City, Promises 'Spot' Will Never Be Weaponized," Knewz.com, October 4, 2024.
- 5 Editor's Note: See Tara Copp, Rio Yamat, Alanna Durkin Richer, and Colleen Long, "Soldier who blew up Tesla at Trump hotel left note saying blast was to be a 'wake up call' for US," Associated Press, January 3, 2025.