



# Back to the future on security alerts

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When the US Department of Homeland Security started in 2003, it created a color-coded alert system called the Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS) that became widely panned for its ineffectiveness. The five levels were considered too hard to manage (e.g., what was the difference between a significant risk, a high risk, and a severe risk?).



[http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/world\\_cities\\_terrorism\\_globe\\_2020\\_500x293.jpg](http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/world_cities_terrorism_globe_2020_500x293.jpg)

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In 2011, Janet Napolitano replaced the alert system with a two-level system

called the [National Terrorism Advisory System](http://www.dhs.gov/national-terrorism-advisory-system) (<http://www.dhs.gov/national-terrorism-advisory-system>) (NTAS). DHS noted, “The NTAS system effectively communicates information about terrorist threats by providing timely, detailed information to the public, government agencies, first responders, airports and other transportation hubs, and the private sector.”

Apparently, NTAS isn’t that effective because DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson [announced today](http://www.politico.com/story/2015/12/dhs-terror-alert-system-216484) (<http://www.politico.com/story/2015/12/dhs-terror-alert-system-216484>) that DHS will replace the NTAS. In the last four years, it hadn’t been used once because it required “credible” or “imminent” threats. After the terrorist attack in San Bernardino, Johnson stated, “I believe that in this environment, we need to get beyond that and go to a new system that has an intermediate level to it.”

We will see what DHS rolls out later this week, but it sounds like we are going back to something like the HSAS model. The bottom line is HSAS and NTAS were created for an al Qaeda environment in which our intelligence community would detect elements of big plots, triggering heightened alerts. With Daesh’s inspired-brand of terrorism, those systems are largely useless. What is the right solution, as al Qaeda hasn’t gone away? I’d suggest ditching the systems approach and just communicate to Americans and critical infrastructure owners when extra vigilance is warranted.

This article was found online at:

<http://www.aei.org/publication/back-to-the-future-on-security-alerts/>